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Classics in Oncology

Moriz Kaposi, M.D.

Michael Braun



This photograph is reprinted from Bluefarb SM: Kaposi's Sarcoma, 1957. Courtesy of Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, Springfield, Illinois.

Ms. Braun is Executive Editor of *Ca*.

Long before his death in 1902, Moriz Kaposi was regarded as a preeminent exponent of the world-renowned Viennese school of dermatology. Building on the work begun by his father-in-law, Ferdinand Hebra, who had founded and chaired the Department of Dermatology at the University of Vienna, Dr. Kaposi developed to a high standard two facets of the new discipline—clinical dermatology and dermatohistopathology. He won wide acclaim also for his abilities as a teacher and as a speaker at international meetings.

Dr. Kaposi lived and worked during the “golden age” of Viennese dermatology. On the death of Dr. Hebra, he became chairman of the department in 1881—an appointment announced in an Imperial Resolution signed by the Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria. Subsequently, the first dermatologic societies in Europe were founded, and, in turn, the early congresses of dermatology were held, in which Dr. Kaposi played many key roles.

In 1872 Dr. Kaposi first described a condition he called “idiopathic multiple pigmented sarcoma of the skin,” eponymously designated Kaposi's sarcoma at the suggestion of Köbner (Koebner) in 1891. While Dr. Kaposi agreed to this designation at the time, 20 years later he changed his mind and called the disease “sarcoma idiopathicum multiplex hemorrhagicum”—a name he believed more accurately described the condition and the source of pigment in the lesions.

Dr. Kaposi is known for a number of other works as well—a thesis on “Syphilitic Changes of the Mucous Membranes of the Mouth and Upper Respiratory Digestive Tracts,” and treatises on lupus erythematosus, erythema multiforme, rhinoscleroma, the mycoses, and others. Ultimately he published some 110 works, including a textbook on dermatology co-authored with Dr. Hebra.

He was a member of the Imperial Order of Emperor Leopold and a “Hofrath”—Imperial Counselor. He had been named an officer of the Legion d’Honneur of France and a corresponding member of the Académie de Médecine de Paris. He was also a member of many other national and international dermatological societies.

Moriz Kaposi was born Moritz Kohn on October 23, 1837, in the regional trade center of Kaposvar on the river Kapos in southern Hungary. He attended local schools for his elementary and early secondary schooling, then moved to Pozsony (Pressburg, Bratislava) to complete the remaining years of his gymnasium education. He then enrolled in the Medical School of Vienna University in 1856 and graduated as doctor of medicine in 1861, doctor of surgery in 1862, and master of obstetrics in 1866.

Before Kohn/Kaposi joined Dr. Hebra, he worked in the surgical department of the Vienna Allgemeines Krankenhaus (General Hospital), in a private hospital, and in a sister department of dermatology to that of Dr. Hebra’s. He became associate professor in 1866 and, under Dr. Hebra, a professor in 1875.

In 1871 Dr. Kaposi officially changed his name because, he explained to colleagues, he feared being confused with at least five other physicians who practiced locally and who had the same surname—one of whom also had the same given name. Therefore, he took the name of his birthplace in its adjective form—Kaposi, pronounced with the accent on the first syllable, as in his native Hungary. He also had always preferred to spell his first name Moriz, rather than Moritz, as was done in common German usage.

A story is told of Dr. Kaposi’s relationship with his father-in-law—the famous Dr. Hebra—that when the young man asked what the dowry of Martha Hebra would be, Dr. Hebra said he would give his future son-in-law six of Dr. Hebra’s wealthiest patients afflicted with intractable psoriasis to care for from then on!

The mature Dr. Kaposi was well known in Viennese society and was friend to many in the artistic community. Martha Hebra Kaposi posed for the sculptor Kundmann, and the resulting stone statue of a woman later crowned Dr. Kaposi’s tomb.

In addition to his native Hungarian, Dr. Kaposi was fluent in German, French, and English. He was much sought after as a speaker, although colleagues feared his caustic tongue.

A contemporary, Dr. Weidenfeld, who delivered an emotional eulogy on Dr. Kaposi’s death in 1902, called Dr. Kaposi “a good human being,” but also one who was a sharp critic.

Weidenfeld, who also credited Dr. Kaposi with the discovery of xeroderma pigmentosum, marveled that Dr. Kaposi was known to use “just a few medicaments” in his practice. “I trust myself,” Dr. Kaposi was said to have told a congress, “to treat all the skin diseases with five agents; it is the ‘Why’ that is important.”

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