Joseph Skoda (1805-1881)

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Joseph Skoda was born in Pilsen, Bohemia, to a locksmith, who lacked funds for the higher education of his three sons. Remarkably, each son acquired stature, respect and enviable position in the society, despite initial adversity. Joseph and elder brother Franz studied medicine. Franz advanced to public health officialdom and a Royal title. Younger brother Johann turned to heavy industry and founded the Skoda steelwork in Pilsen. The Skoda automobiles are his descendents.

Joseph was a leading clinician and teacher, of New Vienna School. He extended and promoted pragmatic value of physical examination, developed by physicians of the Parisian school. Skoda is best remembered for his percussion and auscultation of chest. His first and greatest attention was in auscultation of heart sounds and murmurs, both organic and functional. As a fitting monument to his service, Skoda gave the world a notable monograph. 'A Treatise on Auscultation and Percussion'.

Skoda sought mechanical basis for his findings, and believed that altered sounds were caused by changed physical properties of the afflicted organ, and were non-specific, unlike Laennec, who associated them with diseases. Auscultation phenomena were interpreted with acoustic laws. Percussion sounds were arranged in classes, according to the physical scale, from full to empty, clear to dull, non-tympanic to tympanic and high to deep. The well-known Skodaic resonance is from dull to tympanic. Today, this art is becoming obsolete, due to increasing reliance on better imaging techniques, rather than correlating them with clinical features. History and physical findings have assumed less importance, with the danger that investigations are treated and not the patient!

Skoda's lectures were given in German - a break from tradition. He proposed that students have to be instructed and given the opportunity, for direct observation of sick. He was more interested in diagnosing the illness than in the treatment. Therapeutic nihilism was the only critical path in search of valid findings, and probably benefitted the patient more than insults like bleeding, purgation, leeches, and cupping, customarily recommended in that era.

Skoda, a bachelor suffered from gout and died of heart disease, at the age of 76. He was an outstanding contributor, to the flowering Viennese medicine.