

Mendel Family

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Johann Gregor Mendel, Native of Silesia

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Johann Gregor Mendel, a Catholic priest and biologist, the founder of the science of genetics, was born on 20 July 1822 at No. 58 Hynčice (German *Heinzendorf*). The village is in the Czech Republic today, but in the 19th century, it belonged to the Austrian part of Silesia. It is only 20 km., as the crow flies, from the town of Příbor where Sigmund Freud was born 34 years later. Příbor, as well as Hynčice, are parts of the Nový Jičín district today.

On the day of his birth the infant was baptized *Johann* in the nearby parish church in the village of Vražné (previously Dolní Vražné, German *Groß-Petersdorf*). Later, as a member of the Augustine order, he accepted the second name of *Gregor*.

Johann was the second child in the German-speaking family of a farmer, Anton Mendel, and his wife, Rosina née Schwirtlich. The father, the owner of a farm, an ardent fruit-grower and bee-keeper, was his son's first teacher. He taught him the basics of fruit-growing and gardening which was typical of Mendel's native region.

Johann received elementary education at the Hynčice school. A well-known horticulturalist, parson Johann Schreiber, who had baptized him, had a great influence on the young boy. Mendel left the Hynčice elementary school at the age of 11 for the Catholic school in Lipník nad Bečvou and, later, for the grammar school in Opava. He passed graduation examinations with excellent marks in 1840 and decided to continue his studies at the Faculty of Philosophy of Olomouc University. Meanwhile, his father became crippled in an accident and had to retire. He left the farm to live with his daughter Veronika. Funds for Johann's studies were reduced. Mendel's sister Terezie is given the credit for his being able to complete studies in Olomouc. She gave up part of her inheritance for him.

One of Mendel's professors persuaded him to enter the Augustine Monastery of St. Thomas in Staré Brno (part of the city of Brno beginning in the 1850s) in 1843. This decision decided Mendel's future. St. Thomas Monastery was a center of science at the time.



Gregor Mendel (1822-1884)

As a member of the order, Johann studied theology for three years, and at the same time attended lectures in farming, fruit-growing, and viticulture. Afterwards, he served as a priest for a short time. But as early as 1849, he started his career as a high school teacher of physics and science, first in Znojmo, then in Brno. A short break in his pedagogical career came in the beginning of the 1850s when he was sent by the order to study at Vienna University. Mendel stayed there for five semesters and was fortunate enough to become a student of many distinguished scientists of the time, including a great Austrian physicist, Ch. J. Doppler. Mendel's pedagogical career ended definitively in 1868 when he was elected a prelate and the abbot of his monastery.

As early as 1855, he started his famous experiments with cross-fertilization of peas in the monastery



garden. These led to his formulating three laws of heredity. The results of his experiment were published for the first time in 1865. As the abbot, he had bee hives built at the monastery and started researching animal heredity as well.

Johann Gregor Mendel died on 6 January 1884 and was buried in the monastic mausoleum in the Brno Central Cemetery. His work fell into oblivion for some time. It was re-discovered at the turn of the 20th century, mostly due to the efforts of a famous Dutch botanist, Hugo de Vries.

Mendel's native village has not forgotten its native son. They unveiled a memorial tablet to him close to his native house as early as 1902. This tablet with a German inscription still exists. Another tablet with an inscription in Czech and Latin was placed on his native house in 1965 (see photo). The house looks much as

it did when Johann's father Anton financed its renovation. This tablet was unveiled when a little museum was opened in Mendel's native house on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the first publication of his theory.

At the St. Thomas Monastery on Mendel Square in Brno there is a branch of the Moravian County Museum which is called the Mendelianum. There we find Mendel's experimental garden. A statue of J.G. Mendel was erected in front of the monastery more than eighty years ago. It was built with public contributions, some of them collected in the United States.

Another memorial tablet with Mendel's relief is on one of the Olomouc University buildings where he studied (see photo). Moravia and Silesia have not forgotten their fellow countryman.

Birth Record of Johann Gregor Mendel

Name of child: Johann Mendel
 Sex: male
 Birth status: legitimate
 Date of birth: 20 July 1822
 Place of birth: Hynčince ("Heinzendorf"), house No. 58
 Father: Anton Mendel, farmer ("Bauer")
 Mother: Rosina, daughter of Martin Schwirtlich, small-holding tenant farmer ("Gärtner")
 Midwife: Katharina Teichmann of No. 35
 Date of baptism: 20 July 1822 at Dolní Vražně ("Groß Petersdorf")
 Priest: Johann Schreiber, parish priest
 Godparents: Karl Jutscher, farmer ("Bauer") (illiterate); Julianna Walzel, wife of a farmer ("Bauer") (illiterate)
 Birth Register: Roman Catholic parish of Dolní Vražně, vol. 1821 to 1838, p. 6.
 Deposited at: Zemský archiv Opava, Inv. No. 1087 Od-III-6
 Remarks: The record is in German, in the old script. Many sources incorrectly give Mendel's birth date as 22 July.

Translated by Miroslav Koudelka

Sources:

- Kalus, Jaromír, Jiří Pernes, and Vladimír Tkáč. *Muzea na Moravě a ve Slezsku* (Ostrava, 1988).
 Matalová, Anna. *Mendeliana* (Brno, 1990).
 Orel, Vítěslav, and Anna Matalová. "Katalog k expozici J.G. Mendel a jeho vědecká práce v souvislosti s vývojem poznání na Moravě" (Brno, 1976).
 Schindler, Alois. "Gregor Johann Mendel und seine Ahnen," in *Unser Kuhländchen*, I. (Nový Jičín, 1911).
 (County archives in Opava, Vital Register Collection, sign. 01-III-6, Birth register of Dolní Vražně, fol. 6.)



Memorial tablet to Mendel in Olomouc "The founder of genetics Gregor Johann Mendel, studied at the Philosophical Faculty of Olomouc University 1840-1843" (Photo: Jiří Ošanec)