
Prologue

*Si puo? Signore, Signori*¹—as we present this book to the reader, we are reminded of a story about the Moravian composer Leoš Janáček. It is said that one day he came into a bookstore in Brno demanding “that history of the Bohemian brewery.” Perplexed and not knowing about the existence of such a book the apprentice consulted the owner of the establishment. The proprietor, familiar with the maestro’s sense of humor, thought only for a short while and then pulled out from the stacks a four-volume biography of Bedřich Smetana by a Czech musicologist known for his tendency to cover auxiliary material at great depth. After the maestro left the store, the proprietor explained to the astonished apprentice that Janáček alluded ironically to the fact that the musicologist devoted much of the first volume of his biography to the history of Bohemian beer brewing because several generations of Smetana’s ancestors happened to be brewers.

The present book is not about brewing beer—but booksellers beware: If customers ask for treatises on Aristotle, the history of Europe, or the life of Silesian peasants, they might be referring facetiously to our book, for we deal with these topics to an extent that some readers might find disproportionate. We do not apologize for casting our nets so broadly for we intend to catch fishes that might have eluded other biographers. We use the broad approach, for example, to point out that Mendel really starts where Aristotle left the subject some 2,000 years ago and thus give the proper perspective on the achievements of both Aristotle and Mendel. Or, to drive home the message that Mendel was neither of German, Austrian, or Czech nationality, as various writers claim depending on their own nationality, but a Silesian. Suspecting that you might not know much about Silesia, we try to give you a taste of the complexities involved in the formation of present-day European nations. This particular chapter also serves to demonstrate the falsity of the assumption that language-based nationality classifications always mirror the genetic compositions of the nations involved. And the third case of our broad net-casting—the detailed incursion into Mendel’s youth and his peasant roots—is meant to dispel

¹ “By your leave, Ladies and Gentlemen.” Tonio in Ruggiero Leoncavallo’s *I Pagliacci*.

the common perception that his rustic origin has disadvantaged his intellectual development. We argue, on the contrary, that it endowed him with a healthy dose of rationality, which made him immune to the Romantic fever of the century into which he was born. It enabled him to see through the Romantic haze and thus to keep his feet firmly on the ground, when all around him others were engaging in flights of fancy. Alas, the same endowment alienated him intellectually from the establishment with the result of a nearly total lack of reaction to his discovery.

We think that the three words we have chosen for the title of our book—solitude, humbleness, and genius—characterize Mendel best. By “solitude” we do not mean isolation in terms of social interactions for Mendel’s behavior showed no such tendency. On the contrary, his colleagues at the Abbey in which he lived and the schools in which he taught, as well as the student whom he taught all perceived him as a congenial and amiable person. It was through his research that he had ended up being alone, without a single person who could understand the direction on which he set out. This solitude, which lasted for the last 30 years of his life, was exacerbated by social isolation in his last decade, and then continued, after his death, until the end of the century. It looked as if the world would never learn about his discovery.

On Mendel’s humbleness agree all those who had known him and whose testimony has been recorded. Their characterization of Mendel is not a mere charity to the deceased *à la de motuis nihil nil bonum* (of the dead nothing but good) for it is supported by all the facts we know about his life. Indeed, the long neglect of his discovery supports Mendel’s humbleness best. There are historians who argue that had Mendel been cognizant of discovering the laws of heredity, as they are now commonly attributed to him, he would have said so and would have advertised vigorously his discovery. Since he does not mention any such laws and does not even use the word “heredity” in his main works, he was, according to these historians, apparently unaware of the significance of his results. These modern-day critics, living at times which consider self-promotion a virtue and invasively malignant advertisement a good thing, do not seem to understand that Mendel was brought up in a family in which the dictum “self-praise stinks” was part of their moral code. He therefore must have had an aversion toward dishonest generalization of what his data revealed. It was his humbleness that restricted his interpretations to what his data actually demonstrated.

Finally, by “genius” we do not mean the Romantic vision of a demonic individual bearing his head above the clouds and uttering bits of wisdom to the commoners as if casting pearls before swine. Mendel was not at all of this type; his genius was cryptic, hidden to the extent that none of his contemporaries might have thought of him as being a genius. Indeed, some of the historians mentioned above deny Mendel being a genius and try to present him instead as a lucky fumbler who did not know what he was doing and by chance arrived at results whose meaning he did not fully grasp. This, however is a minority view held by scholars who apparently have only a superficial knowledge of Mendel. By contrast to them, all scientists who have read Mendel’s *magnum opus* have been awe-stricken by it and hold it for a work of a genius. We expand on all these points in the text at the appropriate places.

To appreciate fully Mendel's contribution and the greatness of his genius it is necessary to understand what he did, how he did it, and to view his work in the context of what was known and believed in his time. It is for this reason that in this book we place so much emphasis on providing the necessary backgrounds and contexts wherever they might help to understand the issues involved.

A few *technical comments* regarding this book: The text of each chapter is divided into sections and subsections, which will enable readers to choose parts they want to read and others they might want to skip. Nearly all *figures* are hand-drawn by N.K. They are either original or based on old anonymous prints; where the author of the original is known, proper attribution is given. An additional figure (Fig. S1) appears as *supplementary material* online and can be downloaded from <http://extras.springer.com/2013/978-3-642-35253-9>.

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