

Famous medical doctors of Sombor in its history until the World War II

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SUMMARY

Sombor is a town in the northwest of Bačka, an area rich in culture. It was founded as a settlement in the 5th and the 6th centuries. There are many theories about the origins and name of the town. From the beginnings of the city and in the period when the town was under the Turks, the development of health care was poor. Especially during the period of the Turkish Empire, there was no cultural development in Serbian people. Educated doctors existed only in some western countries and the average lifetime of people in Sombor was 20-25 years. At the end of the 17th century, Sombor was freed from the Turks. Its first „improvised” hospital with surgeons, Sombor obtained at the beginning of the 18th century. On February 17, 1749, Sombor became a free royal town. Dr. Petar Miloradović arrived in 1770 as the first doctor. In 1778, the town got its first physician, Martin Peter Karl. The next city physician, Dr. Matthias Lotz introduced a new health code of conduct for the population, and Dr. Vasilije Maksimović introduced new rules in the conduct and organization of health care workers. The second half of the 19th century was marked by two doctors of Sombor, a physician, Dr. Đorđe Maksimović, who was the main initiator of the construction of the first Sombor hospital in 1880, and Dr. Milan Jovanović-Batut, who published a number of health-enlightenment magazines. Dr. Radivoj Simonović came to Sombor in 1896. The doctors' influence to life and development of Sombor was very important, and without them Sombor would not be the town it is today.

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INTRODUCTION

A small number of towns can boast with so many songs sung about them and so many paintings painted by the different artists. Sombor, deserved it, perhaps not by his, not so troublesome history, but by his rich culture. Today, Sombor is a town with population of 57 000 people, which is located in the northwest of Bačka, and it is the administrative center of the Western-Bačka district.

A "Historical problem" for this town is that nobody knows exactly when it was founded and how it got its name. However, there are several theories. According to the research of Milenko Beljanski, Sombor was first mentioned in 1360 under the name "Coborsentmihalj". Perhaps it was just the forerunner of the settlement in which the nobles gathered. The name Sombor was first mentioned in 1543. In that time, the city was under the Turks. The name is considered to be of the Slavic origin, and its simplest interpretation is that it is derived from the word "som" (catfish) and "bor" (pine) due to the large pine forests and abundance of catfish at that time. The second interpretation tells us that it was named after the Mongolian army commander Zombor. The third says about Slavic interpretation of the name Cobor. Dr. R. Simonović and Milenko Radivoj Beljanski may have provided the best interpretation. The word Sombor can be explained only in a Slavic language. The Slavs, together with the Avars and the Huns, came first to this territory in the 5th and the 6th centuries, settled in the forests near the Danube and made settlements between the swamps and the meander of the river Mostonga.

Sombor, from its foundation and throughout the 16th century

During the period from the foundation of the town, until the arrival of the Turks, the development of health care was very poor. The educated doctors were found only in some countries of the Western Europe, and the doctors in the Pannonian plain could be found only in brief visits of

the armies. At that time, a diseased person from Sombor could get help only from the self-taught people, herbalists, witchdoctors, and from the priests who shared advise and prayers. In these difficult living conditions, an average duration of life in Sombor was short, of only 20-25 years.

At the beginning of the 16th century, the entire Southern Hungary fell under the Turkish rule. Under the Turkish administration, Sombor was the center of the Turkish district, which covered 48 villages. This indicates that Sombor was even before the Turks an important center in this area. In the mid-17th century, a Turkish travel-writer Evlija Chelebi, wrote "in the broader part of the town, there are two secondary schools for students and six elementary schools for young children. Most residents are traders wearing their traditional clothes. They are very polite and brave". Even in this period, there is no written document of the existence of the health service organized by the society and the state. Knowing the political situation, it can be concluded that the society was divided into two different health cultures, one of the ruling Turks, and the other of the Serbian oppressed people. The fact is that the Turks were at a much higher level of health culture. There was a public bathroom related to Islamic religious regulations, and only the Muslims went there. The Turkish pasha had his own „hakims", people who were trained for medical treating. The oppressed Serbs, the „Vlach infidels" as they were called by the Turks, could not make any health and cultural progress, so they remained at the level of health care of before the arrival of the Turks. With the arrival of the Turks, there was the spread of the diseases, mostly syphilis, and there were outbreaks of abdominal typhus and spotted fever.

Sombor between 1687 and 1748

In the 17th century, the Ottoman Empire weakened, which was followed by the numerous fights for liberation. The people from Sombor participated in them. Serbian people enthusiastically welcomed their freedom after 150

years of Turkish oppression. Sombor was freed on September 12, 1687. In that war, Austria dominated until 1690, when, as a consequence of plague, there was a significant overturn. Because of the fear of the Turks, the great migration of Serbs led by patriarch Arsenije Černojević occurred, and larger settlements of Serbs in Vojvodina and Slavonia were founded. In the same year, Bunjevci arrived in Sombor. Later, people of Sombor participated in the famous Battle of Senta, and prevented the breakthrough of the Turks in Sombor. Hygienic conditions in the city and across the entire Bačka were catastrophic (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Battle near Senta, 1697 by Eisenhut Ferencz

The Turks left uneducated population exhausted by war, the town was dirty, and numerous diseases were spreading. Austrian military doctors, who the people of Sombor fought with during the liberation from the Turks, were true saviors and they improved a difficult situation of the people in Sombor. After that time, the colonization of European nations to Sombor occurred. In addition to the re-arrival of the Serbs who were already there, the Germans, Slovaks, Romanians, and many other European nations arrived, together with the colonization of the Hungarians on the territory of Vojvodina. Sombor became a city of multinational and multi-confessional character. In 1717, Sombor obtained the status of a „military town”, with the right to emblem, seal and a military hospital. Commander of the soldiers was a count Jovan Branković. With the status of a „military town”, Sombor also obtained the “town hospital”. That hospital was run by military doctors, and their names, unfortunately, remained unknown. The first surgeons who were mentioned in 1743 were Milutin Mainski and Peter Nemeth, and the first two midwives were Theresa Kirh and Sidonija Karapandžić.

A free royal town of Sombor between 1749 and 1848

After a number of pressures, finally on February 17, 1749, Sombor received the status of a “free royal town” (Figure 2). Since then, Sombor has been developing both culturally and economically, and in the year of 1786, it became the administrative center of the “Bačka-Bodrog County”. Under the influence of Avram Mrzović and his course for teachers, in

1816, that course grew into the school for teachers, which was of crucial importance for a number of Serbs from various parts of the occupied homeland. Sombor made progress in the field of medicine as well. A self-taught but with encyclopedic knowledge, Zechariah Orfelin (1726-1785) educated people through his books on health. In 1770, the Dutchman Van Sviten prepared a law who promoted the health organization in Austria, and throughout the Empire. He organized the health care and created regulations of the health services. An entire other part of the law was dedicated to the fight against the plague. The law also had a curiosity: each home with the doctor residing in it, had to plant a pine tree in front of the house, to make it easy for the illiterate to find and recognize it.

In 1770, Peter (Gavrilov) Miloradović, came to work in Sombor as the first physician, a Serb born in Novi Sad, who finished the faculty on the Protestant University in the German city of Halle (1768). He could not get a job as a “town physician” neither in Novi Sad nor in Sombor, and after two years of private practice he went from Sombor to St. Andrea where he got the job of the “town physician” (a short time later, he was briefly the “town physician” in Novi Sad).

In 1778, Sombor obtained its first town physician, Martin Peter Karl, who was a German. Just one year after he started his work, Sombor obtained the first hospital. It was not the hospital expected by everyone but just the adaptation of a rented house. Contributions that were given for the hospital were very low. In his notes, Dr. Martin described the level of health culture of Sombor at the time. His report said: “Both Orthodox people and Catholics are not aware of what the doctor is, and what the medicine is, they prefer sorcery led by instructions of spells and witchdoctors, and when they get ill, in order to save money, they torture themselves and die without any doctor’s help.” Dr. Karl, although being young, criticized surgeons in Sombor. He said surgeons caused more damage than they did well: “and should be punished lawfully and financially, and if mistakes were repeated again, they should be expelled from the town”.



Figure 2. Coat of arms of Sombor

After Karl’s death, his place was taken by Matthias Lotz, a doctor of medicine and philosophy, born in Vach in 1760, who held the position of a town physician until his death in 1844. Dr. Matthias left a significant trail in improvement of health, introducing some new rules in the life of

Sombor. He introduced the control of water in wells, requested that the garbage was not to be thrown on the streets, required the prohibition of grazing pigs in the streets of the town, exercised quality control of making bread, forbade the sale of immature fruit, advocated for the introduction of prohibition for barbers to perform venesection without the knowledge of physicians, etc.

At the time of Matthias Lotz, Mihaly Rafaelus von Gelley worked as a physician of Bačka-Bodrog County. He was born in 1763 in a noble family in Olasisepešeg. In Vojvodina, he is remembered as a participant in the suppression of the „plague of Irig” (1795-1796). In Sombor, in 1797, he conducted a vaccination of a large number of children, which was performed one year before the discovery of vaccination by Edward Jenner. He wrote a book: “The primary understandings of a dreadful, smallpox mortality and a safe and mild form in vaccinated people”. The book was printed in Novi Sad, and it was the first medical book printed in Vojvodina. The improvement of health care was continued when a new town physician, Dr. Vasilije Maksimović, was appointed. The progress of his work was in the field of medical staff and medical services’ improvement. Dr. Vasilije Maksimović was born in Ridica (a village near Sombor) in 1808. He finished his primary and high school in Sombor, after which he graduated philosophy in Szeged, and finally medicine in Budapest. As soon as he started his work, he suggested that in any murder case, it is obligatory to request an autopsy, and that the doctor or the surgeon had to be paid for their service (that was not the case before). In all suspected infanticide, he required the performance of the water test; he tried to prohibit the sale of medicines without prescription. In 1846, he wrote the instructions for health workers of Sombor. These instructions were based on legal grounds where the regulations were separated in details dealing with the obligations of physicians, wound-treating physicians (surgeons), midwives, etc. At the same time that year, upon his initiative, the town bought another land with their existing buildings for the hospital needs. Dr. Maksimović was shortly working as a town physician when he was officially dismissed because of the “lack of commitment in the fight against cholera outbreak” (that is hard to believe if we keep in mind the things stated above). The facts are different. It was the year 1848 when, as a Serb, out of political and national reasons, he was undesirable for the place of the town’s physician, especially if we know that his new hospital served well the Serbian rebels. Dr. Maksimović was re-appointed after the rebellion was settled, but this time, he was the physician of the County, and worked at that position until his death in 1868. Dr. Maksimović was not the only great doctor in the territory of Sombor. It would be unfair not to mention the work of Dr. Konstantin Pejičić. Dr. Konstantin Pejičić was born in Borovo (Slavonia) in 1802, educated in Vinkovac, Sremski Karlovac and Pozsony (Bratislava). He will be remembered by the fact that after his graduation in 1830, he translated his doctoral dissertation on treatment of the poor from Latin into Serbian. It is considered the first original Serbian medical work, and the first South-Slavic social medical study. In Sombor, he worked for a short time, and his knowledge was used all the way from the Pest, Sremska Mitrovica, Sremski Karlovci, to Pančevo. During his stay in Sombor, he wrote a book that was intended for laymen in case they could not reach the doctor. He was an active participant in the Serbian national movement 1848-1849.

Sombor during the revolution 1848-1849

A relatively quiet period was disturbed in 1848, the time of the Hungarian Revolution. In that revolution, the Serbs and the Hungarians were unable to find a common path. In February 1849, Sombor was for two weeks under the military authorities of the self-proclaimed territory of the “Serbian Vojvodina”. After these riots, another calm period appeared with numerous social and cultural developments in Sombor like printing, library, foundation of the Serbian singing society, grammar school, theater, etc. These cultural institutions were the true symbol of Sombor who stood out among other cities. The town worked very slowly on building of a hospital, so it continued to use the old or rented houses. It was even obvious that the town authorities invested more in construction of a prison than the hospital. The appointment of Dr. Đorđe Maksimović for the town’s physician was crucial for the construction of the Sombor hospital. Dr. Đorđe Maksimović (1838-1881), one of two sons of Dr. Vasilije Maksimović, was a true successor of his father’s work. The only problem as always, was money. Dr. Đorđe Maksimović formed a committee with 13 other prominent citizens of Sombor, and as a result, a hospital construction started on 24th November 1873. In 1880, after a long period of construction, Dr. Đorđe Maksimović’s dream came true. The hospital was built and it began with patients’ hospitalizations. Briefly, Dr. Đorđe Maksimović had the honor to be the first director of the town’s hospital. At that time, in Sombor, two other excellent doctors left their trace, Dr. Milan Jovanović – Batut, and Dr. Jovan Paču (Figures 3 and 4).

Dr. Milan Jovanović – Batut was born in Sremska Mitrovica in 1847, where he finished elementary school. He finished high school in Sremski Karlovci, and the Faculty of Medicine in Vienna. After that, he came to Sombor, where he worked until 1880. Batut did not randomly choose Sombor. This town was already well known within the South-Slavic circles. In Sombor, at that time, there was the teachers’ college, which gave a number of intellectuals. Batut left his trace continuing works of Dr. Konstantin Pejičić. He started the first South-Slavic hygienic and enlightening journal the „Health” printed both in Cyrillic and Latin letters. The aim of this journal was to awaken the consciousness of the unlearned people in promoting health, based upon some comical criticism of some bad health customs of our people. From Sombor, he went to Cetinje where he served as a chief medical for the prince Nikola. Finally, he came to Belgrade in 1887, where he became a high school professor. He is one of the founders of the Faculty of Medicine in 1919, where he was the first professor in the Department of forensic medicine and hygiene, and he was the first Dean of the Faculty. He died in Belgrade in 1940 as a celebrated and a very famous doctor and scientist.

Dr. Jovan Paču was born in Aleksandrovo (Subotica) in 1847. He was another doctor who spent a lot of time moving from one place to another, so from 1881 to 1886, he spent one part of his life in Sombor. Medicine was not his only love. Besides politics, music was his main interest. He was the student of the great composer Bedrich Smetana in Prague. When he came to Sombor in 1881, the city was already well known as the cultural center of the Serbs. He was a friend of a writer Mita Popović, and he composed some of his famous folk songs. He regularly moved in political circles within Svetozar Miletić’s movement, and on the medical side, he will be remembered as a doctor who treated students without any fee.



Figure 3.
Dr. Milan Jovanović – Batut



Figure 4. Dr. Jovan Paču

Sombor on the verge of the 20th century

In 1887, Sombor got Dr. Chikash Bene for mayor. He changed the appearance of Sombor, and gave the town the looks it has today. The effluents of the Mostonga river were finally brought into order, the streets were better paved, the horse omnibus from the railway station to the hotel and the buses to neighboring towns were introduced. The most important of all was the beginning of planting of hackberries in the streets and squares, making the area greener in the form of numerous parks (Figure 5). He was not a doctor, but he left traces in Sombor health. He formed the county treasury for social security and before the World War I he founded the anti-tuberculosis dispensary. Dr. Chikash Bene, was a lawyer born in Doroslovo (a village near Sombor) in 1853. He left an indelible mark in the appearance and pride of Sombor, which received one more name, the "Zelengrad" (green town).



Figure 5. The area in front of the county government building during the landscape works

In 1896, Dr Radivoj Simonović came to live and work in Sombor (Figure 6). Dr. Radivoj Simonović was born on 17th July 1858, in village Ledinci. Father Stevan and mother Draginja had five adult sons and one daughter. Radivoje, Svetislav, and Milan were medical doctors, Milutin and Mladen were lawyers, and their daughter got married in Vinkovci. It should be noted that the brother of Radivoje, Dr. Svetislav Simonović was also a famous doctor. Upon the advice of Jovan Jovanović Zmaj he went to Montenegro where he became a court physician of King Nikola. In Cetinje he met king Petar I Karađorđević. Later king Petar asked him to become his doctor at the court. Also, Dr. Svetislav Simonović followed him as a doctor in two Balkan wars and in the World War I.



Figure 6. Dr. Radivoje Simonović

Dr. Radivoj Simonović completed primary school in Sremska Kamenica, high school in Novi Sad, and medicine in Vienna. He started as a military doctor serving in the today's Czech Republic. After that, he was sent to Bosnia and Herzegovina, then in Trieste, where Dr. Simonović decided not to be a military physician any longer. When he was 38, in 1896, he came to live in Sombor, in which he stayed until his death. Dr. Simonović, beside his medical vocation, was interested in many other things. He was a health educator, a pioneer of mountaineering and photography, a journalist, a writer, a geographer, an entograph, a patriot and a humanist. The popular nickname "Ruso of Sombor" was given to him by the writer

Jovan Skerlić because, although settled in Sombor, he could not be kept in one place. He was traveling and tirelessly moving through the entire territory of the former Yugoslavia. There was no mountain that he had not visited, from Fruška Gora, which he climbed as a child, Herzegovina and its mountains, where he was as a soldier, or Lika. Mountain Velebit was the most impressive mountain for him. He climbed it even ten times. He climbed the other mountains as well: Triglav, Durmitor, Dinara. He claimed that walking in the mountains is the best treatment for his rheumatism. Besides the climbing, he had another talent, photography. His photos were important geographical, biological, ethnographic and hiking heritage, published not only in his books here in Serbia, but his pictures found their place all over Europe in various encyclopedias. It is considered that there are about 15,000 photos, some of which are kept at the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences and some of them are at the universities of Graz and Vienna. He was a close friend with Laza Kostić (he was his personal physician), and Dr. Jovan Cvijić, who encouraged him in the scientific processing of knowledge in geography and ethnology, and he was a member of the "Matica Srpska". Dr. Radivoj Simonović played an important role in the improvement of health, wrote a couple of publications, continuing what was left behind Dr. Konstantin Pejičić and Milan Jovanović – Batut. Sombor became an integral part of the Kingdom of Serbia on November 13, 1918. During the period after the World War I, the town stagnated. The status of the county and a free royal town was abolished, and at that time, Novi Sad definitely became the center of Bačka and Vojvodina. It was about then, that Dr. Radivoj Simonović wrote „Memorandum of Baranja”. This memorandum was sent to the Peace Conference held in Paris, with the request for the Baranja (Bajski triangle) to become a part of the Kingdom of Serbia, because that was the free will of the people who lived there. This was already done with the other parts of Vojvodina. Next to Dr. Radivoj Simonović, two other doctors worked in Sombor after the World War I.

Dr. Milenko Petrović, born in Sombor in 1884, was a son of a famous scientist, poet and professor, Mita Petrović. He completed high school in Sombor, and medicine in Budapest. During the First Balkan War, as a great patriot, he went back to Serbia and participated in the military operations with the Serbian "Division of Šumadija" as a military surgeon. For many years, Dr. Milenko Petrović worked in Sombor as a doctor. Besides that, he was the president of the Serbian town library, the principal of the "Sokol Society", and an active member of the Red Cross. He was the county's physician, the founder and the director of a new large hospital in Sombor. Nevertheless, the end his life was miserable. He was persecuted and tortured by the fascists, and he spent most of the World War II in a concentration camp. The misfortune of Dr. Milenko Petrović continued even after the war, because he was persecuted and arrested by the communist authorities. He died unrecognized in 1950.

Dr. Nada Čović-Grdinić was born in 1885 in Srbobran, where she completed primary school. She went to the Girls high school and a grammar school in Novi Sad, and finally the Faculty of Medicine in Budapest. Then she passed a specialist exam and became the first woman surgeon in Serbia. She came to Sombor in 1919, where she worked as a surgeon. In 1932, Dr. Nada Čović-Grdinić became the president of the Sombor Red Cross and collected voluntary contributions for the purchase of the Red Cross building. She was also a town physician. During the World War II

she proved herself to be a good military surgeon of the Red Army, especially in the battle of "Batina". She worked as a teacher and was the first principal of a three-year-long "State school for nurses". She died in 1973. People remember her as a caring and humane physician.

After the World War I, at the time when Dr. Milenko Petrović was the county physician in Sombor, the authorities started planning the building of a larger hospital. The opportunity occurred in 1923 when the royal couple of the king Aleksandar and a Romanian princess Marija, renounced their marriage gift given by the people of Sombor and even donated an additional sum of money in order to build a new hospital. In that honor, and the honor of the birth of the prince Petar II Karađorđević, a new hospital in Sombor was designed in the form of a Cyrillic letter "П" (P). With some later contributions, it was furnished and finished in 1925 (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The hospital in Sombor, 1925

CONCLUSION

As we can see from the above stated, the history of the town of Sombor and the history of health were constantly in cohesion and virtually inseparable. Regardless the fact that the work of doctors in Sombor was to heal and improve the health conditions of the population, they also altruistically worked on improvement of the entire town in all its segments. The medical doctors' contribution was enormous in all social, political and cultural sectors of the society, and sometimes their influence was crucial. Many wise men say that "history is the teacher of life" and reading about the medical doctors of Sombor we may say that they were the real teachers of how a doctor should behave and how their knowledge, effort, will, and status can change their environment to better.

Conflict of interest

We declare no conflicts of interest.

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