

VIRUS

Beiträge zur Sozialgeschichte der Medizin

Band 17

Schwerpunkt: Medikalisierte Kindheiten. Die neue Sorge um das Kind
vom ausgehenden 19. bis ins späte 20 Jahrhundert

Herausgegeben von

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für den Verein für Sozialgeschichte der Medizin

Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2018



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Post-World War I Children's Healthcare in Slovenia as Experienced by Angela Boškin, the First Slovenian Nurse

Summary

This paper addresses children's healthcare in the first post-World War I decade in the area of present-day Slovenia. During a time when school physicians were returning from military service and paediatricians were becoming more active, the first Slovenian home care nurse Angela Boškin played a significant role in caring for infants and mothers as well as in organising and developing the home care service. By analysing her work, this paper will attempt to reconstruct the demanding post-war social conditions which required healthcare improvements for all children.

Boškin's work is distinguished by two key achievements: the establishment of the first Slovenian counselling service for mothers and infants in Jesenice in 1919 which Boškin achieved in cooperation with physicians, thereby laying the foundation for the social and healthcare work of home care nurses. In 1922, she established a children's shelter in collaboration with Dr. Matija Ambrožič in a rundown and overcrowded orphanage on Bohoričeva Street in Ljubljana that developed into the first childcare institution (Zavod za socialno higiensko zaščito dece), where she worked as the first professionally qualified nurse.

Keywords

children's healthcare, Slovenia, Angela Boškin, nurses, post-World War I period

Introduction

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, there was no organised systemic children's healthcare in the Slovenian provinces. Ljubljana only had two operating medical institutions, one small maternity hospital and a children's hospital that both provided treatment for the poor. Healthcare was predominantly funded by charity. There were no institutions for the protection of mothers and children. During and immediately after World War I, the importance of social care for all children grew, particularly in the light of the chaotic wartime conditions under which the number of single-parent families, non-functional families and orphans soared. After Carniola found itself in the immediate rear of the Isonzo Front or the lower part of the

South-Western Front between Austria-Hungary and Italy from 1915 to 1917, it received a part of the refugee children from the villages on the frontline as well. Therefore, this was also a time when children became an important object of social-medical care in the central part of the Slovenian territory. The present paper will primarily focus on children's healthcare in the years immediately following World War I – or more precisely, during the 1920s – in the territory of present-day Slovenia.¹ A time when Angela Boškin blazed a trail as the first home care nurse among the Slovenes.

After World War I, medical personnel was scarce, and according to Dr. Bogo Dragaš's recollections (1892–1970), no one was in charge of child protection and healthcare. Moreover, there was no auxiliary medical staff: "The changes that occurred in 1918 required the widest possible development of social-hygienic conditions, particularly the protection of mothers and children, but also modern social and health protection in general. We had nothing. Legislation was in total disarray. Practically no institutions of this kind existed and there were no auxiliary staff in the social and healthcare service. We had to start from scratch all over again [...]"²

Immediately after the end of the war, the first provincial government for Slovenia founded, within the framework of the new State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, a special department for the protection of youth under the Commission for Social Welfare. On 9 February 1919, the first government of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SHS) issued a decree on the establishment of the national Department for the Protection of Children. The said department initially operated under the aegis of the Ministry of Social Policy, which issued new rules and regulations on 1 October 1919. With this document, the Commission for Social Welfare in Ljubljana established the Department for the Protection of Children. Child protection became legally regulated in 1922, with the Law on the Protection of Children of 24 June 1922.³

Without question, the 1920s were a watershed period, both for the Slovenian and the Yugoslav healthcare systems. The most prominent figure in this regard was undoubtedly the physician Andrija Štampar (1888–1958), the greatest thinker and organiser in twentieth-century social medicine. The beginnings of organised hygiene service in the new Yugoslav state date to the period between 1919–1924, when the authorities began to tackle the unbearable hygienic conditions and introduce social-medical principles in health service. Štampar's main idea was that healthcare should be accessible across all population strata. From 1925 to 1930, hygiene institutes as well as the first health centres and children's clinics were founded throughout the state.⁴

1 The territory became part of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs after the disintegration of Austria-Hungary and subsequently the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes or the so-called First Yugoslavia.

2 Bogo DRAGAŠ, *Zgodovina in delo sestristva v Sloveniji, od prevrata do leta 1934* [The History and Work of Nurses in Slovenia, from the Upheaval to 1934] (Ljubljana 1938), 9. The booklet was published by the Institute for the Health Protection of Mothers and Children in Ljubljana. Bogo DRAGAŠ, *Zavod za zdravstveno zaščito mater in otrok v Ljubljani* [Mother and Child Healthcare Institute in Ljubljana] (= *Zdravje v Sloveniji*, II. knjiga, II. del, Ljubljana 1938), 3.

3 DRAGAŠ, *Zavod*, see note 1, 3.

4 France URLEP, *Andrija Štampar, njegov čas in Slovenci* [Andrija Štampar, His Time and the Slovenes], in: Zvonka Zupanič Slavec, ed., *Razvoj javnega zdravstva na Slovenskem v času med prvo in drugo svetovno vojno* [Public Healthcare Development in Slovenia between World War I and II] (Ljubljana 2005), 23–30, here 24–25. Cf. Željko DUGAC, *Like Yeast in Fermentation. Public Health in Interwar Yugoslavia*, in: Christian Promitzer / Sevasti Trubeta / Marius Turda, eds., *Health, Hygiene and Eugenics in Southeastern Europe to 1945* (Budapest–New York 2011), 193–232. Andrija Štampar was an internationally recognised expert and an important actor in the foundation of the World Health Organisation (WHO) after World War II.

In Slovenia, the social-medical principles and the public health system known as the Štampar model were introduced by the physician Ivo Pirc (1891–1967), one of the first Slovenian hygienists and specialists in social medicine, who ran the Institute of Hygiene in Ljubljana (founded in 1923) from 1924 onwards. Until World War II, this institute managed to open over twenty health centres with clinics (including children's clinics) across the then Slovenian territory, which was administratively organised into the Drava Banovina.⁵ This set the foundations of primary healthcare service, which evolved during the post-war period into the system that we know today.

The first organisation that assumed responsibility for the protection of children after the war was Queen Mary's Home for Children and Mothers, at the initiative of the paediatrician Matija Ambrožič (1889–1966). In 1923, the Ministry of National Health founded the Institute of Social Hygiene for the Protection of Children in Ljubljana headed by Matija Ambrožič himself subsequently renamed Institute for the Health Protection of Mothers and Children in 1928. The said institute comprised a children's polyclinic, a counselling service for mothers, the School of Hygiene for Mothers, and the Centre for Mothers and Infants.⁶ The state school polyclinic and the School of Children's Nursing commenced their operations in 1924, both as the first of their kind in the then Slovenian territory. The year 1926 saw the opening of the Counselling Service for Mothers and Infants in Trbovlje and the first Slovenian health centre in Lukovica.

The main health problems in the Slovenian area after World War I were a declining birth rate, a high infant mortality rate, tuberculosis, which was especially prevalent among the rural population, and four widespread infectious diseases: diphtheria, typhoid fever, scarlet fever, and dysentery. Measles were common among schoolchildren, and a minor smallpox epidemic broke out in 1921. Only half of the population had access to healthcare and a large proportion was not educated about and unconcerned with maintaining hygiene.⁷ School chronicles for the Ljubljana area reveal that the local physician Mavricij Rus introduced systemic smallpox vaccination in 1919. Between 1926 and 1936, 50,000 children were vaccinated against scarlet fever and 75,000 against diphtheria. Efforts were also made to introduce compulsory vaccination in the districts that were most affected.⁸

In the aftermath of World War I, when few school physicians returned from their military service and other paediatricians were becoming more active, Angela Boškin played an important role in providing care for infants and mothers and organising the work of home care nurses. The aim of this paper is to reconstruct—through the work of Boškin—the demanding post-war social conditions which necessitated an improvement of healthcare for all children.

5 Zvonka ZUPANIČ SLAVEC, Dr. Ivo Pirc (1891–1967) in razvoj javnega zdravja na Slovenskem (1923–1941) [Dr. Ivo Pirc (1891–1967) and the Public Healthcare Development in Slovenia], in: *Zdravstveni vestnik* 81 (2012), 163–171, here 163.

6 DRAGAŠ, Zavod, see note 1, 5–9.

7 Zvonka ZUPANIČ SLAVEC, *Razvoj javnega zdravstva na Slovenskem med prvo in drugo svetovno vojno* [Public Healthcare Development in Slovenia between World War I and II] (Ljubljana 2005), 69. Cf. Ivo PIRC, *Zdravje v Sloveniji*, Vol. II, *Zdravstvene prilike in delo higijenske organizacije v Sloveniji 1922–1936* [Healthcare Conditions and the Operation of Hygienic Organisation in Slovenia] (Ljubljana 1938).

8 ZUPANIČ SLAVEC, *Razvoj*, see note 6, 73–74.

Angela Boškin

Angela Boškin (1885–1977) spent her childhood in the village of Pevma pri Gorici. In 1905, she moved to Vienna, where she helped her brother with the housework and his store. While in Vienna, she admired the work carried out by women in blue uniforms, the so-called blue nurses who were professionally trained caregivers, and she took up studies to become a professionally trained caregiver herself in 1912. Boškin's education was theoretical and practical, i.e. bedside training. She worked in the neonatal unit of the Viennese maternity and gynaecological clinic Wertheim (named after Dr. Ernst Wertheim), where she made quick progress.

After two years of training, Boškin became the personal assistant to the gynaecologist Dr Wagner for one year. During World War I, she remained in Vienna, where she first worked in the convalescence unit of a military hospital and then in the sanitary unit of the Swedish Mission in a Red Cross hospital from 1915 until 1917. In 1917, she was appointed head nurse in one of the reserve military hospitals in Vienna. In the same year, Ms. Boškin was the only Slovene to attend a course at the social healthcare school and obtain the title of Welfare Nurse (Fürsorgeschwester) or home care nurse. Initially, she wanted to work in health services combating tuberculosis. However, influenced by the lecturers at the said school, Boškin ultimately decided to dedicate herself to social care and healthcare for mothers and children. She was particularly influenced by the paediatrician Leopold Moll, who advocated a new, so-called social orientation and founded the Centre for Child Protection and Youth Welfare in Vienna (Konsortium für Kinderschutz und Jugendfürsorge), and the chair Anny Tausche, who lectured



Figure 1: Angela Boškin in Vienna (Institute for the History of Medicine, Medical Faculty, University of Ljubljana).

on the methodology and technology of open protection for infants and small children. After successfully completing her training in 1918, she was directed to work as a welfare nurse in Trieste. However, because Austria-Hungary disintegrated, she never worked in Trieste and moved directly from Vienna to Ljubljana. Here she was at first unable to find proper work because there were no social or healthcare institutions and the work in hospitals was being performed by nuns.⁹

“I plucked up the courage and started by making home visits”

On 3 February 1919, Angela Boškin started working in the industrial area of Jesenice as the first welfare nurse in Slovenia, largely owing to Alojzija Štebi, the supervisor at the Department of Youth Welfare under the Commission for Social Welfare of the National Government in Ljubljana at the time. Mrs. Štebi was a known public worker, an active socialist and a feminist, who above all promoted the healthcare of mothers and children as well as the social and healthcare protection of workers.¹⁰ The situation was most desperate in workers' settlements, where the poor and especially children were dying in great numbers because they were particularly affected by the conditions of war, extreme poverty, and disease. For this reason, Mrs. Štebi tried to find work for Boškin in an industrial environment and finally succeeded in Jesenice. On 27 January 1919, the National Government of SHS in Ljubljana issued its first decree on the appointment of a welfare nurse. Boškin was granted an apartment in the hospital of Jesenice's Brotherhood Relief Fund, together with lighting, heating, and food, as well as a monthly pay of 300 crowns.¹¹

In an interview,¹² Boškin described the aftermath of the war as a period in which people were starving, disease was rampant, and no means of transportation existed: “I plucked up the courage and started with making home visits.”¹³ She recalled having to earn people's trust because they were not used to that kind of assistance. This also meant establishing a lot of personal contact and making countless door-to-door rounds. She visited pregnant women and

9 Cita LOVRENČIČ-BOLE, Naša prva medicinska sestra Angela Boškinova [Angela Boškinova, Our First Medical nurse], in: *Zdravstveni obzornik* 3/3 (1969), 123–130, here 123–124.

10 Darinka DRNOVŠEK, Alojzija Štebi, borka za pravice žensk in mladine [Alojzija Štebi, a Fighter for Women's and Children's Rights], in: Nataša Budna Kodrič / Aleksandra Serše, eds., *Splošno žensko društvo 1901–1945* [General women society] (Ljubljana 2003), 188–209. Cf. Suzana TRATNIK, Alojzija Štebi, in: Alenka Šelih et al., eds., *Pozabljena polovica: portreti žensk 19. in 20. stoletja na Slovenskem* [The Forgotten Half: Portraits of Women in the 19th and 20th Century Slovenia] (Ljubljana 2007), 193–196. At the end of 1918, Alojzija Štebi entered into civil service at the Commission for Social Welfare of the National Government for Slovenia. She was one of the main initiators for the founding of the Mothers' and Children's Home. She gave lectures on the protection of children and youth in Ljubljana, Maribor, Trbovlje, and elsewhere. The abstracts of her lectures were published in the magazines *Ženski svet* and *Gospodinski koledar*, as well as in a few Ljubljana dailies. In 1924, she published the brochure *Zaščita zanemarjenih otrok in mladine* [Protection of Neglected Children and Youth]. Cf. Irena SELIŠNIK / Ana CERGOLO PARADIŽ, *Delovanje žensk od karitativnosti do socialnega dela* [Women Activities from Charity to Social Work], in: *Socialno delo* 55/5–6 (2016), 181–193, here 187–188.

11 LOVRENČIČ-BOLE, Naša prva, see note 8, 125–126.

12 Angela Boškin – poti k ljudem, a documentary portrait, RTV 4, 2008, see: <http://4d.rtvlo.si/arhiv/dokumentarni-portret/21083325> (last accessed on 10 October 2017).

13 Ibid.

mothers with infants in destitute industrial and mining places such as Koroška bela, Javornik, Sava, and Jesenice, taught them about general hygiene and proper infant and child care, and assisted in providing social assistance to individuals.¹⁴

Boškin's first field report that was preserved from this period was drawn up in February 1919.¹⁵ In this report, she describes horrendous living conditions and extreme poverty. Many families struggled due to the absence of fathers who had either been killed or gone missing during the war. Furthermore, people were massively affected by tuberculosis and suffered from great hunger. Children were developmentally delayed, infants were languished, and families experienced severe shortages of milk: "Milk is the scarcest; one has to walk for hours to reach farmers who will only sell it in exchange for sugar and such. But where can one find sugar? Families with six, eight children go a whole month without a drop of milk."¹⁶ She urged the National Government to ensure a supply of condensed milk from the English support programme for the industrial areas. At the end of the report, she also noted that infant welfare without family welfare was not possible: "[...] and one has nothing within reach to be of assistance. There are even no medicines in the pharmacy."¹⁷

A support scheme for the poorest in a new state without clearly demarcated borders was yet to be established. Amidst such circumstances, making home visits empty-handed was not an easy task. People would let her into their homes feeling perplexed, not used to seeing infants and small children receiving that kind of attention. Boškin also visited wealthy farmers who aided her in providing food and facilitated the Women's Charity Society distribution of aid to the deprived. She fought against post-war poverty and overall backwardness to the best of her abilities, which often felt like a drop in the sea.¹⁸

Boškin organised lectures on hygiene, protection against infections and especially infant care. With Mrs. Štebi's support for her idea of founding a counselling service for mothers and infants, she organised the first counselling service in the Jesenice kindergarten, which opened on 3 August 1919. The centre was supplied with crates of condensed milk, cacao and clothes from the international Red Cross aid programme and made arrangements to employ a female attendant. Boškin introduced baskets with essential hygienic accessories and basic linen for birthing mothers. In this way, she set the foundation of the social and health care work of home care nurses.¹⁹

Boškin collaborated with Dr. Frančišek Kogoj (1866–1937), the physician in the Jesenice district, who instantly recognised her enormous contribution to health services and was also one of the first doctors who identified the role of a nurse as an invaluable profession in the social-medical protection of mothers and their children. As a socially compassionate person, Dr. Kogoj had attached extreme importance to the social and health care activities performed

14 Ibid.

15 Arhiv Republike Slovenije (ARS), AS 64, fond Poverjenišva za socialno skrbstvo, Oddelek za socialno politiko, šk. 64, Poročilo skrbstva za dojenčke in matere na Jesenicah za mesec februar z dne 27. februarja 1919 [February Report of the Infant and Mother Care Service in Jesenice, 27 February 1919].

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 LOVRENČIČ-BOLE, Naša prva, see note 8, 126.

19 Ibid., 127.

both by the counselling service for mothers and infants and the home care unit from the very beginning.²⁰ Moreover, on Boškin's proposal, he also started to perform regular check-ups of infants and receive and make home visits to people she referred him to.²¹

Ljubljana

After returning from Vienna in 1921, Dr. Matija Ambrožič set out to establish unitarian social paediatrics in his homeland as well. His guiding principle was that child protection and health-care should not be left to the mercy and sympathy of a few individuals, but rather taken on by society as a whole. As a clerk in children's healthcare in Ljubljana's health division, he was able to undertake the organisation of the preventive and social welfare for children, which was still fairly underdeveloped. Knowing that he would only be able to achieve his goal with the assistance of professionally qualified nurses, he invited Angela Boškin to Ljubljana. But even before that, he sent the nurse Vika Kecelj to learn from her and ultimately take the position of Ms. Boškin in Jesenice.²²

In 1922, Ms. Boškin moved to Ljubljana to establish a children's shelter in the overcrowded and rundown orphanage on Bohoričeva Street, where ninety children were under the care of only two nuns. At first, she separated the children according to age and then sent schoolchildren to a children's shelter on Streliška Street and ill children to a children's hospital. The children were dirty and malnourished. Ms. Boškin introduced order and a regular diet, cleaned them of lice and scabies, and made sure that the building was clean. Initially, she did everything by herself, but she was later joined by Tončka Šiffner, Ana Kurent, and Marija Gril.²³ These were the beginnings of the first childcare institution (Zavod za socialno higiensko zaščito dece), which, as has been mentioned in the introduction, commenced its operation on 9 July 1923 headed by Dr. Matija Ambrožič. Ms. Boškin was transferred to the institution in 1923 as the first professionally qualified nurse, soon to be followed by others. With the founding of the institute, however, the doctor and nurses also had to face a reactionary mentality. Many known and influential individuals considered this "novelty" unnecessary and too costly. They accused the leadership of taking excessive care of neglected children and maintained that maternal instinct was enough for women to take care of their children and that they did not need any advice.²⁴

Owing to the increasing need for professionally qualified nurses, the Nursing School was founded on 18 August 1923 under the name "Institute of Social Hygiene for the Protection of Children" (Šola za sestre pri zavodu za socialno-higiensko zaščito dece v Ljubljani), which

20 C. B., Dr. Frančišek Kogoj, prvi zdravnik posvetovalnice za otroke v Sloveniji [Dr. Frančišek Kogoj, the First Physician of the Child Counselling Service in Slovenia], in: *Obzornik zdravstvene nege* 3/3 (1969), 138. See: www.obzornikzdravstvenenege.si/1969.03.3.138 (last accessed on 10 October 2017).

21 LOVRENČIČ-BOLE, Naša prva, see note 8, 127.

22 N. J., Prof. dr. Matija Ambrožič [Prof. dr. Matija Ambrožič], in: *Obzornik zdravstvene nege*, 3/3 (1969), 131–133, here 131. See: <http://www.obzornikzdravstvenenege.si/1969.03.3.131> (last accessed on 10 October 2017). In 1926, Matija Ambrožič left for Belgrade, where he first established the Centre for the Health Protection of Mothers and Children and later also the Paediatric Clinic.

23 LOVRENČIČ-BOLE, Naša prva, see note 8, 128.

24 Ibid.

was headed by Dr. Matija Ambrožič and initially provided one-year courses. During the first year of its existence, the school received twenty students, fourteen of which completed their training, including Angela Boškin, whose training in Vienna was not officially recognised.²⁵ She also lectured at the same school on home care nursing in 1926, which was also the year that she was transferred to the newly founded counselling service for mothers and children in another Slovenian mining and industrial centre – Trbovlje.

Trbovlje, Ljubljana, Škofja Loka

Angela Boškin also encountered acute poverty, socially neglected children, and prostitution among minor girls in Trbovlje. In addition to making home visits, she lectured on hygiene and infant care at Trbovlje's housekeeping school and ran an agency that provided mothers with material assistance in the form of vitamins, milk, fish oil, underwear, and soap: "Mothers working in mining colonies trusted her and, following her advice, took their infants outside for fresh air and sun, as well as endeavoured to provide their children with the best possible care and nutrition."²⁶ Boškin took part in rallies and women's gatherings as a staunch advocate of women's rights to education and vocational opportunities. After thirteen years of working in Trbovlje, she was summoned to the Institute of Hygiene in 1939 and assigned to organise travelling exhibitions across the countryside, within the framework of which she lectured and screened two films on the protection against tuberculosis and the dangers of alcohol.²⁷

Her last work post was at the health centre in Škofja Loka, where she was active in protecting mothers and children and the anti-tuberculosis services. She remained here until the end of World War II. Her diploma that she had obtained in Vienna and her command of the German language enabled her to continue her work during German occupation. During these years, she worked as a radiologist because the German authorities did not trust her with mother and child-care, which was performed by the female representatives of the NSV, Hitler's organisation of National Socialist People's Welfare (Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt). They organised counselling services for children in the surrounding villages, which Boškin visited under their escort. The war years exhausted her; she retired in 1944 and returned to her home village of Pevma pri Gorici, where she lived for the rest of her life.²⁸

25 DRAGAŠ, Zgodovina, see note 1, 24, 28–29. Since its establishment and until 1927, the school provided one-year training courses, between 1927 and 1931 two-year courses and from 1931 onwards three-year courses. The majority of students at the Nursing School were from rural families, families of lower state officials and railway employees as well as workers and tradesmen. From 1924 to 1934, most certified nurses (out of 105 graduates) worked in children's social-medical institutions, health centres and hygiene institutes. Many of them got married and abandoned the vocation as a medical nurse.

26 Irena IVANČIČ LEBAR, Zgodovina zasavskega zdravstva [The History of Healthcare in Zasavje] (Trbovlje 2008), 47.

27 LOVRENČIČ-BOLE, Naša prva, see note 8, 129.

28 Ibid., 130. Cf. Irena ROŽMAN, Angela Boškin: prva medicinska sestra in socialna delavka v Sloveniji in Jugoslaviji [Angela Boškin: the First Medical Nurse and Social Worker in Slovenia and Yugoslavia], in: Alenka ŠELIH et al., eds., Pozabljena polovica: portreti žensk 19. in 20. stoletja na Slovenskem [The Forgotten Half: Portraits of Women in the 19th and 20th century Slovenia] (Ljubljana 2007), 202–206, here 205–206.

Conclusion

Angela Boškin was the first professionally qualified Slovenian nurse and the pioneer of home care in both Slovenia and Yugoslavia. Even though she devoted her entire professional life to the social and healthcare protection of children and the establishment of home care service, her work is mainly distinguished by two achievements. First, the establishment of the first Slovenian counselling service for mothers and infants in 1919 in Jesenice, with which she laid the foundation of the social and healthcare work of home care nurses. Second, in collaboration with Dr. Matija Ambrožič, she established a children's shelter in 1922 that developed into the first childcare institution (*Zavod za socialno higiensko zaščito dece*), where she worked as the first professionally qualified nurse. In 1969, she received the Golden Emblem of the Nurses and Midwives Association of Slovenia. In the same year, she also received the Order for National Merit with silver rays, a token of recognition conferred by the then President of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito.

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