The contribution of Serbian doctors to the development of physical exercise in the Kingdom of Serbia

Doprinos srpskih lekara razvoju fizičkog vežbanja u Kraljevini Srbiji

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Key words: history of medicine; Serbia; world war I; military personnel; exercise.

Introduction

After gaining independence at the Congress of Berlin (1878), and the declaration of the Kingdom of Serbia (1882), young Serbian country began to develop strongly economically. Frequent and turbulent political changes during this period also caused some changes in cultural and educational life of the country. Many Serbian intellectuals then came back to free Serbia in order to transfer knowledge and experience from advanced and larger European countries.

During the 19th century, different forms of physical exercising rapidly developed in Europe. In Germany “Jans’ turners” gymnastics was practiced; in Sweden, the main method was “Ling’s system of health gymnastics”, while in England modern sport was expanding with the establishments of sport clubs; in France were organized associations in which the system of “Amoros training” was used, and in the Czech Republic and other Slavic countries was gradually introduced the “sokol” system of exercising 1.

All of the mentioned large systems of physical exercising were expanding their influence on other European countries, intertwining with each other, thus creating the most efficient system of physical exercising. These influences were coming to Serbia from the middle of the 19th century, through young intellectuals, educated abroad. With their return to Serbia they brought back experiences they had on physical exercising, often opening private schools or civil societies for physical exercising. These were mostly schools for adopting fencing, gymnastics or swimming abilities. By the 80s of the 19th century, the school with the most success and perseverance in the emergence and the development of physical exercising was “School of painting Steva Todorović”, which worked intermittently from 1857 to 1876.

Contribution of Dr. Vladan Đorđević to sports

Several years after the end of the Serbian-Turkish war in October 1881, the Serbian doctor, and at that time the chief of medical services at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Dr. Vladan Đorđević, advocated the establishment of a new association for physical exercising (Figure 1)2. He wanted the realization of that idea to get the widest support, so that the society can have the continuity the former societies could never be praised about having. Dr. Đorđević addressed, at the beginning of realization of the idea, Belgrade professors of gymnastics and fighting, namely: Stevan Todorović, Professor of physical exercise in “Realka”; Ferdo Mihoković, Professor of gymnastics and fighting at the Military Academy, and Ljubomir Ilić, Professor of gymnastics in Belgrade Gymnasium. He requested from them to teach the students without charge, to make the society able to pay for the services of teachers. When he received a positive response from the group of professors, Dr. Đorđević addressed the citizens with these words:

“Allow me, for just a moment, to remind you of one circumstance, which in our humble opinion deserves our full attention, and this is a factor in the way the physical development is being nurtured today. No doubt you are, just like the undersigned, convinced that the gymnastics, when arranged systematically by age, sex and national customs, is one of the strongest, if not the strongest lever for improving the physical, and because of this, the moral health of the individuals and the entire nations. However, until now, there has been paid a poor amount of attention to that systematic way of physical exercising. Apart from the Military Academy, where this has been systematically done from the start of the school, and the Gymnasium which sometimes had, and sometimes didn’t have a gymnastics teacher. Although the name Gymnasium origins from gymnastics, there are barely...
three or four real gymnastics teachers in whole of Serbia, and even they have no place besides the academy to train their students. But even if gymnastics would be continuously done in all schools of Serbia, from elementary schools in villages to high schools in Belgrade, and if these schools had everything needed to do the physical exercises continuously and uninterrupted even trough winter, it still wouldn’t be enough for the gymnastics to benefit all the people as much as they can. The whole rural population engaged in commerce, crafts, arts and science, mostly spends their life after school with very little physical exercise, or spends it with one-sided physical strain ing, which are harmful to their health. In countries that are more advanced than our country, there are countless gymnastics affiliated societies with hundreds of magnificent Gymnasiums, where all the classes of citizenship have the opportunity and the resources to continue, for the rest of their life, the work they started at school, and to adjust it to every age, and to later occupation etc. There are countries, such as today’s Germany Empire, where the numerous gymnastics associations which compile a vast network are spread through all the countries the German people was torn to, and which haven’t only done a great job at improving the physical health of the entire nation, but were also useful to the ideas of civil community and its targets, because of their annual assemblies. For the entire 50 years of their practice, gymnastics associations of German people, have done, for the national mission, almost the same as the German school and literature. They have, by improving the physical strength of the people, at the same time worked on bringing together, mutual understanding and fraternizing of the most separated provinces of German people in terms of language, and life overall. This line of thought led to the belief that it would be about time to do some serious work on popularization of physical exercising and fighting in our country. By leaving it up to the administration of civil education to take care of gymnastics in schools, we reckon that the citizenship and the officialdom in Belgrade should take the initiative for the establishment of a large association for physical exercising and fighting, which would on one side give the opportunity to those who are no longer in school to use the benefits of physical exercising, and on the other side it would educate a large number of capable teachers of gymnastics, through which would this association be able to set up gymnastics associations in every city in Serbia. Since the professors and the gymnastics teachers in Belgrade stated their preparedness to be professors and teachers of physical exercising and fighting without pay, in the possible Belgrade gymnastics association, as long as society is unable to pay the experts for that, and since the High Government of His Majesty charmingly accepted this idea of establishing such a society in Belgrade, and promised their help to ensure social uprising, the necessary statutes for the establishment of association have been made, and the realization of this idea can now start."

With this letter, which to this day has a use value, Dr. Vladan Đorđević approached renewing and initiating physical exercising in the Kingdom of Serbia. Luckily for him, but us also, the starting of the “Belgrade Association for Gymnastics and Fighting” was successful, and experienced continuity. After the final establishment of the association in 1882 they changed its name to “Belgrade Gymnastics Association Soko”, with the acceptance of the “sokol” idea. An interesting fact is that the opinion of Dr. Đorđević, represented when he was sending letters to Serbian citizenship, shortly before forming the association, was transformed into a statute.

The aim of this association was: to work on improving physical strength and health of its members, by using physical exercising and excursions; to ensure the creation of similar associations in Serbia, and to stand in connection with them; to in addition to strengthening and toughening of the children of our country, spread awareness of the Serbian community, and in that way achieve the unification of the fragmented Serbhood in the best way, and as soon as possible .

With the change of the name, and the adaptation of “sokol” exercising, a part of the membership was dissatisfied with the change in the “course” of the association, so they founded a civil gymnastics association “Dusan the Mighty” in the following year of 1892. Members of the newly formed society were against accepting the Czech “Sokol” system of exercising, because it was, in their opinion, created by Czech as a resistance to germanization, while Serbia as an independent country did not have the need to induct such a system . Both associations got their branches in the Kingdom of Serbia, and the territory outside the kingdom that was inhabited by Serbian people, so that they soon formed alliances of these associations. Their work was independent until the final unification on February 2, 1910. This joint alliance of “sokol” associations, “Dusan the Mighty” worked vigorously on uniting all Serbian “sokolism”, essentially and in supporting parts: the suit, the sign, the salute, the slogan, the name, the song and the commands.

Dr. Vladan Đorđević did various functions in “Belgrade Association for Gymnastics and Fighting”, where he was president from 1889 to 1891. He was at the position of the vice president from 1886 to 1888. After the change of the associations name, at one period of the time, another famous Serbian doctor, Milan Jovanović Batut, found himself at the position of president, and held the presidency from 1896 to 1897. Because of his merits in the development of the Olympic thought, Dr. Jovanović was an honorary member of the Serbian Olympic Committee, in addition to the famous names of the social life of that time: Dr. Vladan Đorđević, industrialist Đorđe Vajfert, retired General Boža Janković, university rector Sima Urošević and others. Participation of Serbian “sokols” from the Kingdom of Serbia along with Serbian “sokols” from Vojvodina, Slavonia, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Croatia on second Croatian rally in Zagreb on August, 12–16 1911, meant a great deal to the development of the whole Serbian “sokol” movement, and the realization of the common desire to live in one country. Confirmation of the importance of gymnastics for a nation, (in the proclamation he specifically spoke of the German people) which Dr. Vladan Đorđević stated in his address to the citizens materialized after 30 years in the Serbian nation. In the year of 1881 the Serbs were without a single association for physical exercise, and after thirty years of work in the field of physical exercise, the same people appeared united on the “Svesokol” rally in Zagreb. The energy that Dr. Vladan Đorđević invested at the startup of physical exercise in Serbia was beneficial, and gave big profits.

Vladan Đorđević was born in Belgrade on November 21, 1844. He finished the Gymnasium in Belgrade, and medicine in Vienna, where he specialized surgery. At first he worked as military doctor, then the Head of the Surgery Department of the Military Hospital, and later as chief of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the personal physician of King Milan Obrenovic (1854–1901). In the Serbian-Turkish wars, from 1876 to 1878, he was the head of the military corps, and in the Serbian-Bulgarian War in 1885, he was the chief of the High Command Medical Corps. Dr. Đorđević is one of the founders of the Serbian Medical Association (1872) and the Serbian Association of the Red Cross. In addition to professional medical papers, he wrote dramas, short stories and historical papers. He died on August 31, 1930.

**Contribution of Dr. Vojislav Subotić to sports**

Vojislav Subotić was the son of the Serbian poet and politician Jovan Subotić. He was born in Novi Sad in 1859. He finished the elementary school in Zagreb, while his gymnasium studies began in Sremski Karlović and ended in Novi Sad. He began his medical studies in Vienna, but he cut them short to take part in the Serbian-Turkish War in 1876–1878. As a volunteer he took part in the battles on the Drina. After having participated in the war, he continued his studies in order to be promoted to doctor at the age of 22.

He began his practice in Zemun in 1884 when he was appointed city physician and the primary doctor. He later founded the first surgical department of the Zemun hospital. During the Serbian-Bulgarian War, still as a Zemun surgeon, he entered the Kingdom of Serbia and treated the Serbian wounded. At the invitation of Serbian Medical Corps, although a young surgeon, he opened a surgical department in Belgrade in 1889, in former Palilula Hospital (now the building of the Serbian Medical Association). In the year of 1907 a new general hospital on Vracar was built, and the first head of the Surgical Department was Dr. Vojta Subotić. The same year he organized the first meeting of the Serbian surgeons, and in 1911 he organized the Congress of the Yugoslav surgery which was attended by 132 participants. In wars from 1912 to 1918 Dr. Subotić worked as a military surgeon. In the Balkan Wars, he worked in the background, in Belgrade, where the wounded were arriving from the battlefield. During the World War I he worked as a reserve medical colonel in Belgrade, and then in Niš. Not wanting to fall into slavery, he evacuated over Albania, even though his health condition was difficult because of the stenocardia attacks, which followed him throughout the rest of his life. Feeble and weakened, he no longer had his surgical department, so he went to Paris and London, where he worked (1916–1918) at interial commission as our delegate, using his many acquaintances in international medical circles. In London he delivered a lecture on epidemic typhus in Serbia 1914–1915.

In 1916 he constructed a rail for immobilization of the thigh, and showcased it at the Paris Academy of Medicine, because of which, among other important favours to our medical services, he got elected member of the Paris surgical association in 1916. In early 1918 he returned to Corfu and made himself available to the Minister of the Military, from where he went to Thessalonica. There he was offered safe work in the background of Salonika front, but he refused. He asked to work on the front and chose the Second Army, under the command of Marshal Stepa Stepansavić, and he worked there with his students. The experience of Dr. Subotić and his advices often helped in saving a large number of seriously wounded. When he crossed the Salonika Front with his students and colleagues, he worked in “field surgical hospital” in Dragomance near Bitola.

About this hospital, Marshal Stepa Stepansavić said: “This hospital, thanks to unique organization and improvisation of all kinds of things, responded best to its task. It will serve as a model and a historic lesson in history, on how a field surgical hospital should look.” Dr. Vojislav Subotić gained a reputation of an associate war surgeon, with his reports and accomplishments in work, because he was the initiator and the carrier of the epoch of modern surgery in our country. He was not randomly chosen at that time for a member of the Association of War Surgeons of USA and England.

The idea for the establishment of the Faculty of Medicine came back in 1898. But it was only after the World War I ended, February 20, 1920, that administrative functioning of the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade started. For the Dean of the newly formed Faculty was elected Professor Dr. Milan Jovanović Batut, and the first vice dean became Professor Dr. Subotić. In the following year, 1921, he was elected Dean.
For his contribution to the medical science and surgical practice, Dr. Vojislav Subotić received for life the highest awards, medals and recognition. In addition, he was a member of the German, the French, and the International Surgical Association, Pest Medical Association, and a member of the Paris Academy of Medicine. Dr. Subotić died in December, 1923 in Belgrade, at the age of 64.

In addition to the immeasurable contributions to Serbian medicine Dr. Subotic was a great representative of the idea of physical exercise. On May 1, 1897, he founded the fight association “Serbian Sword” with the aim of propagating the knightly sport, fencing and saber combat. One of the founders and the first teacher in the association was Sarl Duse. From 1891 he was engaged as a Professor of combat at the Military Academy of Belgrade. Professor Duse finished the Brussels School of Fencing (Ecole Normale de Escrime) founded in 1885 in Brussels, Belgium and was the first in Serbia to begin training students by the French method. The association was aimed exclusively to the development of fencing among young people, and gave the best competitors to army and the public from 1898 to 1909. “Serbian sword” owned a very beautiful and arranged gym, where competitions were often organized. A great lover of fencing was also Dr. Vojislav Subotić. He was, in addition to Dragomir Nikolajević, Bogoljub Dinić and Sublieutenant Aleksandar Josifović, one of the best students in the Association “Serbian sword”.

The photographs from the personal archives of Colonel Nikolajević, about a century old, show the trainings in which teacher Duse and his students, Dr. Subotić and Captain Nikolajević participated (Figure 2). With his participation in one of the oldest associations for physical exercise in the Kingdom of Serbia, Dr. Subotić made a significant contribution to the general popularization and acceptance of physical exercise among Serbian people. Thanks to the work of the fight association “Serbian sword” and the engagement of Dr. Vojislav Subotić, among others, it has come to an increased interest of the youth in the sport of fencing.

Fig. 2 – Teacher Sarl Duse (left), Vojislav Subotić (middle) and Dragomir Nikolajević (right).

Contributions of Dr. Laza Popović to sports

Dr. Laza Popović was born in 1877. After finishing the Serbian Orthodox Great Gymnasium in Sremski Karlovci he studied medicine in Vienna, where he was promoted to general practice doctor in 1901. During his studies he met a significant number of colleagues from the Czech Republic, who introduced him to the idea of “sokol”. The “Sokol” association in Sremski Karlovci was founded on his initiative on February 19, 1904. He was the founder and editor of the “Serbian Soko” magazine, which was published from February 1907. The magazine was printed in Serbian monastic print shop in Sremski Karlovci. Although it was the gazette of “sokol”, it also gave information about all Serbian associations of physical exercise. The editorial board striving to make the relations, between the knightly associations “Dusan the Mighty” and “Sokols”, better. When reporting on the activities of the Belgrade’s “Dusan the Mighty”, it is emphasized:

“There was a large audience from the most elegant and high Belgrade circles present, and there were also many Sokols, thus documenting their desire to maintain fraternal relations between the two gymnastics associations.”

The “Sokol” association of Sremski Karlovci organized on the regular basis the Vidovdan “Sokol” rallies where “sokols” from all of Serbia would gather. At the second “Svesokol” rally in Zagreb in 1911, at the initiative of Dr. Laza Popović, the Alliance of Serbian “Sokol” associations, which disregarded the country borders at that time, and gathered all the Serbian “Sokols” in one alliance, was established.

When the World War I begun, Dr. Popović was accused, along with a group of “sokols” from the Austro-Hungarian territory, of high treason by the Austro-Hungarian state and was sentenced to fourteen months of imprisonment. In the same process also were sentenced Dr. Srdan Budisavljević (head of the Serbian “Sokols” in Zagreb) to eight months in prison, Milan Metikosa (the leader of the Kraina
region) to ten months of prison, Milan Todorović (the leader of the Fruska Gora region) to six months in prison, and Duro Gavrilović (the leader of the Serbian “Sokols” in Zemun) to thirteen months in prison. The indictment charged them, with the development of political ideas in the “Sokol” Society, a connection with the “National Defense” organization, and action towards planning of the annexation of a part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to the Kingdom of Serbia. After the conviction, the University of Vienna took away Dr. Popović’s diploma. After the war ended, he was promoted again in Prague in 1918. With the end of the war he became the chief physician and the head of X-ray laboratory in Zagreb hospital. He was the first president of the Society for Radiology, founded in 1927.

Dr. Laza Popović, with his persistent effort in “sokolizm”, influenced the acceptance of the “Sokol” ideas, and the development of the fraternal and national sense of the “sokol”, from the territory of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Kingdom of Serbia, and countries overseas where Serbs live. Although he was not involved as a physician in the medical service in the army of the Kingdom of Serbia, he made a significant contribution and gave encouragement to the Serbian “sokols”, to join the army of the Kingdom of Serbia in the Balkan Wars, and World War I, and thus support the joint Serbian and “sokol” thing. For the mentioned reasons, Dr. Laza Popović found himself in the company of doctors from the Serbian military medical service, who have made outstanding contributions to the development of physical exercise to the end of World War I.

Contribution of Dr. Miloš Borisavljević to sports

Dr. Miloš Borisavljević was born in Ivanjica in 1855. He went to school in Ivanjica and Kragujevac, and finished medicine in Moscow. He spoke and wrote in Russian, French and German. Miloš Borisavljević belonged to the generation of Serbs who had participated in several wars. At the age of 20, he gained his first war experience as a scribe at the headquarters of the Užice brigade, on Javor, in the Serbian-Turkish Wars 1876–1878. With the decree of King Milan Obrenović he was admitted for a military doctor, in 1883, and served as the head of the military hospital in Kruševac, Kragujevac, Niš and Zaječar. Towards the end of the 19th century he became the director of one of the oldest medical institutions in Serbia, the Military Hospital in Niš. From 1901 to 1904 Dr. Borisavljević was the chief of the Army of the Kingdom of Serbia. From 1902 he partied in the Balkan Wars, and later in World War I. Although he was already in the sixth decade of his life, he shared with the army the sweet fruits of victory, but also the bitter fruit of defeat and the exhausting retreat through the Albanian mountains.

He was the active member of the Serbian Association of Red Cross since 1885. At the last meeting of the Association before World War I, on July 11, Dr. Borisavljević was elected President. After the retreat of Serbian Army to Corfu, as the President of the Serbian Association of the Red Cross he sent a famous proclamation to friends of Serbian people in the whole world:

“The history of the world does not remember a greater tragedy, than the one the Serbian people have suffered. In an unequal battle, Serbian army, while defending, and soaking every inch of their country with their blood, had to leave their homeland. The people have drunk even that bitter cup of temptation stoically, and the Serbian soldiers, naked, hungry, cold and haggard, haven’t, even then, betrayed their allies. Serbian association of Red Cross was left without any resources, to be able to continue to provide human and Christian support, and therefore we are asking for help from everyone who has Serbian cause and Serbia in their heart.”

After this appeal of Dr. Borisavljević and the Serbian association of Red Cross in exile, live actions were let to help collect contributions in money, clothing, hospital and medical supplies for the wounded Serbian soldiers, refugees, prisoners…

Dr. Borisavljević sent another call for help just after the War in 1918. This time also, the support from all over the country, and from foreign countries did not lack. At the meeting of the Serbian Association of the Red Cross in 1921, they changed their name to the Red Cross Association of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and Dr. Borisavljević wished best of luck to the new management in the future work.

This true patriot and enthusiast for the Serbian cause, did not spend his valuable time exclusively on the purposes of the military medical service and the work in the Serbian Red Cross association, but also in the development of the “Sokol” movement in the Kingdom of Serbia.

The annexation crisis that followed the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina into Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, in October 1908, sparked a national discontent of Serbian people, who started to gather and unite around this problem. The joint demonstrations were attended by the members of the “Sokol” movement and the members of the knightly societies “Dušan the Mighty”. Certainly. This political crisis accelerated the realization of the unification of the “Sokol” Association and the Knightly Society “Dušan the Mighty” into the union of “Sokol” association “Dušan the Mighty”. Final unification into one association took place in early 1910, and at the second assembly of the union of the “Sokol” Society “Dušan the Mighty”, in February 1911, medical services Lieutenant Colonel Miloš Borisavljević was selected for one of the vice presidents. The assembly elected the honorary president Steva Todorović and Dr. Miloš Borisavljević for the official representatives of this union in the “Svesokol” Alliance of the Slavs. At the same meeting it was decided that the members of this union can also be the members of the Olympic club. At the assembly of the Belgrade “Sokol” Association “Dušan the Mighty”, in January 1910, instead of the former president Steva Todorović, the managerial position went to Dr. Miloš Borisavljević. All the above-mentioned functions in Belgrade or the Federal Association “Dušan the Mighty” confirm the high level of respect Dr. Borisavljević enjoyed among the members of the association. Participation in the development of physical exercise in the Kingdom of Serbia confirms the versatility of the medical Colonel Miloš Borisavljević.

Conclusion

After gaining independence at the Congress of Berlin (1878), and the declaration of the Kingdom of Serbia (1882), started the strong economic development of young Serbian country. In addition to the economic, there was also a noticeable cultural development, which was most often encouraged by the Serbs educated in advanced countries of Europe. As Serbia moved toward full independence, various societies for physical exercise appeared. Societies that appear in the first three decades of the second half of the 19th century were not able to maintain their continuity. From 1881 a significant role in advent and development of physical exercising among Serbian people was taken by Serbian doctors. As highly educated persons they recognized the importance of physical activity from the health point of view, but also the positive aspects of socialization and the national gathering in the societies of physical exercising. The establishment of the “Belgrade Association for Gymnastics and Fighting”, initiated by Dr. Vladan Đorđević in late 1881 was the initial energy that produced more federations and a large number of societies for physical exercising in the next 30 years. The participation of Vojislav Subotić in the development of the “Serbian Sword” Association gave a lot of energy in the emergence and the development of the sport of fencing among Serbian people. Dr. Miloš Borisavljević held high functions in the united association of Serbian “Sokol” Society “Dušan the Mighty”, while Dr. Laza Popović was a leader of the Fruska Gora region, and one of the most important figures in the initiation and the development of “sokolism” among Serbs in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. For all the persons whose contributions were analyzed in the text, it is characteristic that they were great patriots, as they proved by their participation in several wars as members of the military medical services. Dr. Laza Popović was not it the medical services of the Serbian Army, but he proved his patriotism with great zeal that costed him imprisonment by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Their high positions in the Serbian society helped the realization of various sports ideas and content, popularization of physical exercise, and the overall national liberation that was realized within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovens.

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Received on September 9, 2013.
Revised on September 20, 2013.
Accepted on September 21, 2013.