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In Memory of Dr. Elizabeth Ross

Sećanje na dr Elizabetu Ros

To the Editor:

Following the outbreak of the First World War, the first humanitarian medical missions arrived in Serbia from the allied and neutral countries' Red Cross Societies [1]. These Red Cross doctors and medical staff expressed great dedication and enthusiasm [2].

Kragujevac was one of "the main hospitalization centres for the wounded Serbs and prisoners of war". Early in 1915, four foreign medical missions arrived: English (located in the tents in Upper Park, with a capacity of one hundred beds), Russian (located at the Military Hospital, one of the two units of the Slovenian charity, with 18 members), Scottish (located in the school endowed by Milovan Gušić; the building was turned into a civilian hospital, thanks to Dr Elsie Maud Inglis; today the building is Radoje Domanović Elementary School) and French, to vaccinate Serbian soldiers and prevent an epidemic, already present in the vicinity of Kragujevac, from spreading. Due to poor medical care, the epidemic affected the rural population, and tents with basic medical equipment were placed at various points along the Kragujevac–Topola–Mladenovac road [3].

Late in 1914, another enemy, deadlier and more ruthless than the Austro-Hungarian soldiers, attacked Serbia. Within only a few months, 35,000 soldiers, between 100,000 and 200,000 civilians, and about a third of the medical staff [4] died from typhoid in Serbia.

When the epidemic escalated, Serbia requested assistance from the Allies. Many countries, including Great Britain, France and Russia, helped Serbia by sending medical missions (200 doctors and 500 nurses), materials and equipment necessary to combat the typhoid fever epidemic. Elizabeth Ross, a young medical doctor of Scottish descent, was among them (Figure 1). She had volunteered and arrived in Kragujevac, where she cared for about 1,000 patients [5].

Elizabeth Ross was born in Tain in 1878 into a progressive, wealthy, adventurous family. Her father was a banker, one of the directors at the Bank of Scotland in London. Her brother David worked for many years in Japan with the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. She had four sisters, one of whom was a professor of mathematics and science, and spent many years in India. Another sister was a secretary for an explosives company in Glasgow. Her third sister was also a qualified doctor, working in York. Her fourth sister became a farmer[6].



Fig. 1 – Dr Elizabeth Ross (graduation portrait) (http://www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk/image/?id1=2845&id2=1129022825&p=4)

Elisabeth Ross studied at the College of Queen Margaret and graduated in 1901, as one of the first women in the United Kingdom with a degree in medicine. After graduation, she briefly worked as a physician in Tain, before she became a medical officer for the Island of Colonsay. Contemporaries described her as an adventurous, open-minded, courageous woman, who did not allow anything or anyone to prevent her from carrying out her intentions. She travelled and studied the medicine of ancient Persia (now Iran), and in 1910 she accepted a post as a doctor onboard a ship, and travelled to India and Japan. She was the first female naval doctor in Great Britain [7].

Dr Ross spent most of her career in humanitarian missions in Persia and then in Serbia. When she heard about the horrors faced by Serbia, she applied as a volunteer and came to Serbia in mid-January 1915, under the patronage of the Russian government. The French and the British did not allow women to volunteer, not even at the fronts where their own armies fought, and Elizabeth Ross asked for Russian

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mediation. She was a doctor at the First Military Hospital in Kragujevac, the city heavily affected by the typhoid epidemic in 1915. Dr Ross must have known where she was going, but nothing could prepare her for the horrors of the epidemic in Serbia in those months. Serbia had 409 doctors at the beginning of the Great War, and most of them were assigned to the army (doctors in the Serbian employment, foreigners who came to Serbia in the initial months of the war, mostly contractors from Russia and Greece) [8]. Dr Elizabeth Ross arrived after a coded dispatch, sent by Dr Elizabeth Solto, reached the Scottish Women's Hospital headquarters in Britain. Serbian censorship, at the behest of the government, did not allow mentions of the epidemic, but dispatches stressed a demand for infectologists, epidemiologists, and nurses trained to care for febrile, infected patients. Dr Ross first went to Niš, and late in January of 1915 she volunteered to go to the Kragujevac hospital for typhoid patients, instead of to the Scottish Women's Hospital that was set up nearby. When she arrived at the First Reserve Military Hospital in Kragujevac, converted to typhoid patients' treatment facility, terrible scenes shocked her. There were only 200 beds in the hospital, with a large number of patients, so that two patients were lying in the same bed. There were not enough nurses. At the time of the typhoid epidemic, Kragujevac was justifiably called the "City of the Dead". The doctors and other medical staff were desperately trying to cope with typhoid, which was spreading incredibly fast. Treating the patients day and night, Dr Ross weathered the heaviest wave of the epidemic. Despite the horrible conditions and the belief that it would be very difficult to avoid contagion, she continued her work. "She knew she really hadn't much of a chance of surviving because typhus was rife and they didn't know at that time what caused it" [8]. In Kragujevac, she worked in the environment where doctors and nurses were lying sick among the patients, or had already passed away. In spite of this, she was ready to accept the risk. Unflinchingly, she worked round the clock. Clearly visible was her devoted effort to follow the course of European medicine and to implement it in the treatment of the Serbian people. Just a week after arriving in Kragujevac, Dr Ross began to feel the first signs of typhus. She continued working as long as she could stand on her feet. "All around her was collapsing, she was watching it with her own eyes, aware that the same fate was awaiting her; but in spite of the requests and admonitions to spare herself a bit, she fearlessly continued her work until the end. She was still braver in the disease, quietly lying, severely ill, in a very modest ward. The only thing she regretted was not being able to administer aid to our sick soldiers for longer", wrote her colleague and Head of the Kragujevac Hospital, Dr Dimitrije Antić [9].

After 13 days of fighting the disease, Dr Elizabeth Ross died. It was February 14th 1915, on her 37th birthday. During the First World War, 22 British women lost their lives to typhoid in Serbia, attempting to aid wounded and sick soldiers [10].

Dr Elizabeth Ross was buried with all military honors in the city cemetery in Kragujevac, in February of 1915 [11]. Two of her colleagues in the British humanitarian missions, Lorna Ferris and Mabel Dearmer, repose next to her. There is an epitaph at the monument to the courageous British lady: "Here lies Dr Elizabeth Ross", and underneath it says in Cyrillic script "You gave your heart to the people of Serbia" [12] (Figure 2).



Fig. 2 – Gravestones of Dr Elizabeth Ross, Lorna Ferris and Mabel Dearmer in Kragujevac, Serbia (image courtesy of Aleksandra Tomić)

In memory of her heroism, the compassion she had for the Serbian people, and the ultimate sacrifice she made for them, the youth field unit of the Red Cross (established in 1986), as well as a street in the centre of Kragujevac, bear the name of Dr Elizabeth Ross. Traditionally, on 14th February each year, on the day of her death, the representatives of the city of Kragujevac, the British Embassy, the Red Cross and other organizations and associations, lay wreaths at the graves of the three British women, and commemorate these courageous humanitarians whose work and sacrifice are deeply respected in our historical and cultural tradition. On the centenary of her death, on 14th February 2015, her memorial plaque was uncovered in the courtyard of the Red Cross in Kragujevac [13]. Today, over a hundred years later, her grave is visited by the youth of the city of Kragujevac and all patriots, who cherish the memory of the brave and dedicated heroine of medicine, with love and pride (Figure 3).



Fig. 3 – The youth of the city of Kragujevac pays tribute to the heroines of the First World War in Serbia (www.srpskilegat.rs, riznicasrpska.net)

The personal and professional contribution of Dr Elisabeth Ross to the Serbian history and medicine is immense, and her life's struggle and life's work are even greater, and deeply admired [14, 15].

This paper was written as a contribution to cherishing the memory of Dr Elizabeth Ross, the heroine of medicine who gave her heart and her life to the Serbian people.

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