



Zsuzsanna Kossuth – the first volunteer nurse in Hungary and her activities in the War of Independence (1848–1849)

Žužana Košut – prva bolničarka Mađarske i njen rad za vreme Rata nezavisnosti (1848–1849)

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Introduction

The creator of nursing is considered to be a British nurse Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), who worked as a volunteer nurse in the Crimean War (1853–1856), she rescued and nursed the wounded, and later founded a school for nurses. In memory of her, May the 12th (her birthday) is celebrated as International Nurses Day. However, even before her, it was Zsuzsanna Kossuth (1817–1854) who devoted herself to nursing in more difficult conditions. Zsuzsanna greatly contributed to the development of health care and the recognition of women's work, but her name has almost been forgotten.

The participation of women in caregiving during the War of Independence

From the aspect of health care and patients care two important facts should be pointed out, at which the Hungarian health care during the War of Independence (1848–49) was far ahead of its time. The first is the activation of social self-preservation, the other is the use and evaluation of women's work. Both are related to the organization of field work, military hospitals, which mainly took place in Debrecen. Due to the chronic lack of bandages and hospital equipment, in 1849 the proposal to seek the help from the Association of Women volunteers was accepted. The wife of Lajos Kossuth*, who was the president of the Association,

gave a call to women and girls to gather bedding, linen, pillows to make them into bandages. Already, more women were included in work at hospitals in order to maintain purity, keeping the hospital kitchen clean, but also to participate in the care of the wounded. Officially, participation of women in caregiving became institutionalized after April 16, 1849, when the youngest sister of Lajos Kossuth, Zsuzsanna, was declared as the first national head nurse¹ (Figure 1).



Fig. 1 – Zsuzsanna Kossuth (1817–1854).

minister of the provisional government of Hungary. Known and recognized as a freedom fighter, one of the most prominent leaders of the 1848 Revolution.

*Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894), lawyer, politician, prime

Zsuzsanna Kossuth – family life and the first volunteer nurse engagement

The first volunteer nurse of Hungary, Zsuzsanna Kossuth was born on February 19, 1817 in Sátoraljaújhely, as the fifth child to the family of Laslo Kossuth and Karoline Wéber. The only son in the family, Lajos Kossuth, whose favourite sister was Zsuzsanna, were almost inseparable. As teenagers, in 1833 the family relocated to Pest, where they were supported by Lajos Kossuth. Through the delivery of government notifications Zsuzsanna was introduced to politics. Together with his brother in 1831 during a cholera epidemic, she organized care of the infected put in quarantine² (Figure 2).



Fig. 2 – Quarantine cholera.

In 1841 Zsuzsanna married the best friend of her brother, Rudolf Meszlényi, and during the same year Lajos Kossuth married his sister Tereza Meszlényi. Rudolf Meszlényi was a well-known lawyer and politician on the side of Kossuth. He accepted his wife's involvement in politics, for which the newly established National Protective Association gave an opportunity. They lived in a happy, balanced marriage, they had three children, two girls and one boy. However, the birth of the third child was preceded by a terrible tragedy. In January 1847 Zsuzsanna husband suddenly died¹. Zsuzsanna's deep sorrow was interrupted by the historical events and a lifelong desire to help his brother. She chooses a self-sacrificing profession, and takes care of the wounded during the War of Independence (1848–1849). She noted not enough nurses in the country, health care lacking, the equipment in the hospital very scarce and their number insufficient³. Zsuzsanna, her family and her mother run away from Budapest in January 1849. They found refuge in Debrecen, with Mihály Tóth[#], a Calvinist priest. At the suggestion of Zsuzsanna, the Association of Women Volunteers was founded to assist patients in military hospitals. For the president of the Association of Women the wife of Lajos

[#]Mihály Tóth, known revolutionary, friend of Petőfi, after the loss of the War of independence he was sentenced to more years in prison, because helped the Kossuth family.

Kossuth was elected. Near their house a warehouse was opened where they gathered equipment and underwear for hospitals⁴.

Appointment for the head nurse of all the military hospitals in Hungary

Lajos Kossuth, after being appointed as the Governor, on April 16, 1849, appoints Zsuzsanna as the national head nurse of all the military hospitals in Hungary and at the same time lays down the responsibilities and obligation of commanders to hospital nurses, which through a letter is delivered to the General Görgei and Kossuth's sister "...Zsuzsanna, now I declare you as the head nurse of all the military hospi-

tals, giving you the power and support to take two nuns with our funding, that will help you to do everything at the hospitals (except for medical care), what you think is useful in the purpose of taking care of the wounded. In order for your efforts and investments to be as successful as possible, I'm inviting and ordering all government bodies, and leading doctors that they have a civic duty to facilitate and assist the implementation of all your actions..." The letter of Lajos on the declaration of the head nurse, that appeared in the bulletin, caused a negative reaction of the military commanders and doctors, because they did not understand its true meaning².

Zsuzsanna after her appointment, by the President of the Women's Association, launched a campaign to prepare bandages. At that time there were not enough bandages for the wounded, Zsuzsanna through the newspapers called for help from all women and girls, asking them to tear clean cloths, and prepare dressings from them. Zsuzsanna was given the responsibility to organize the entire military medical system in Hungary. The National Sister Office was put under the supervision and management of the head nurse, which was located in Debrecen, in the building of Trade. The function of the institution was to keep records of nurses, coordinate issues of national importance. There was also the central storage of all hospitals in order to collect, store and distribute the necessary equipment for hospital care, which they also organized. In stock they kept supplies needed for the hospitals (bed, linen, blankets, underwear, dressings), while the

medical equipment and medicines were kept separately. Zsuzsanna after declaring, in April 1849 invited all the directors of the military hospitals: "...please let me promptly notify you of any shortcomings that have emerged in the hospitals, which are essential in patient-care, diet and sanitation services, as to get them eliminated as soon as possible ..." Based on the responses, she organized work, *eg* in April 1849 the delivery of 125 medical sets to the hospitals was organized⁴.

Invitation to all girls and women to voluntarily join nursing and helping

Also, in May 1849, using newspapers she invited all girls and women to voluntarily join the profession: "... do not wait until the official letters or the publication of regulations, but look for the nearest hospital and help. If you notice that in the hospitals scarce material is in disrepair immediately consult the nearest civilian authority or municipal authorities and report on the need for the urgent procurement procedure for necessary hospital supplies, if the situation demands, even through requisition "...if by authorities, hospital director, or staff notice inappropriate attitude towards your volunteer work, please contact me immediately, to replace them as soon as possible with worthier workers. Grouped by cities, neighborhoods and split each working day, but every minute, even in your dreams take care of those who fight for our freedom..."⁵ (Figure 3).



Fig. 3 – Helping to wounded.

Her work was a great help in the health sector. Its success was largely helped by the support and trust of Ferenc Flór, president of Medical Center of the Ministry of Defence. Zsuzsanna received authorization to be superior to women volunteers who were answering to provide care.

In April 1849, György Klapka, Deputy Minister of Defence, by decree provides strengthening of the labor force of military hospitals, "...hospital commanders are obliged to accept the voluntary work of women and girls, and on their training will be taken care by the doctors..." In May 1849 the Regulation of Ferenc Flór appeared in a bulletin, "...until the newly developed regulations for care are not officially anno-

unced, it should be known that all military commanders, and doctors are obliged to act on the orders of the head nurse, provide support, and comply with its orders related to hospital care..."⁶.

However, it must be noted that in April–May 1849 the inclusion of women in clinical work was still only at the developmental level, in life completely.

On May 14, 1849 Ferenc Flór gives the following statement: "...the proposal of the national head sister, hospital care will be performed by women, however due to the large number of hospitals we believe that we will not have them in sufficient numbers, and we propose to all directors and commanders of hospitals that due to the said experiment do not fire those who already work there and have enough skills, but to liberate them from field service and let them be exclusively in hospitals, since gentle female hands are not always enough for performing tasks that require greater physical strength..."

...And to men, too

In May 1849 within the Association of Women was established the Department for the Care of Patients, whose members were actually involved in hospital work. Public information increasingly showed that these women enthusiasts, dedicated to nursing and helping, achieved great success and great reputation throughout the country. Zsuzsanna favored inclusion of women in clinical work, however, accepted the need for male labor, so for example in June 1849, when General Joseph Schweidl, chief commander of Pest, requested medical personnel to a military hospital, Zsuzsanna taking into account the current situation still suggested male workers³.

The health service developed a precise itinerary for Zsuzsanna, which included monitoring of faraway hospitals, especially those with no official figures, or known to be in difficult situation and to be under difficult circumstances. As a co-leader, Ignác Barna was appointed, as the head physician, although Lajos wanted nuns as escorts because they had experience in patient care, however, in the organization of the hospital they would not be able to make appropriate recommendations for improvement.

Zsuzsanna's effort to open and organize new military hospitals

The head nurse of Hungary collected a lot of personal experience, tirelessly traveling around the country. As a result of its work during the summer 1849, 172 military hospitals started to work. She personally nursed the wounded, and offered them spiritual support. Careful attention was reflected even in housing. She drew attention to the patients from the same village to be located in the same room. Not only did they nurse the Hungarian wounded soldiers, but also the Austrian troops, not taking into consideration the current war conflicts. The wounded remembered that "they were nursed with maternal tenderness by Zsuzsanna"² (Figure 4).

Travelling across the country not only to check the functioning of hospitals, but also to provide a proposal for ope-



Fig. 4 – Nurses in military hospitals.

ning new hospitals where necessary, correctly indicated by schools and other buildings that could, if necessary, be used for care of the wounded, in addition, to deal with the issues related to trapped patients, sticking to the profession that she voluntarily chose to the end. Before the end of the war, she visited many hospitals, toured the rooms of seriously wounded, and in addition there was a cholera outbreak which reduced to half the number of wounded who survived. The situation was hopeless, all the efforts of doctors and nurses seemed insufficient because of the insufficient amount of bandages, medicines, and even food².

After the conquest of Pest, Zsuzsanna is back, and invests huge amount of work and organization for the establishment and equipment of the central military hospital in Budapest, which often had the problem of acquiring the provisions from the military and civilian authorities. In the military hospital there was already a great number of women working, approximately in the same numbers as paid defenders and civilian medical workers. Training of voluntarily reported female doctors was performed at hospitals, there was no centralized training.

In June 1849 due to the large number of Austrian and Russian troops, the government counted on the submission of Pest and Buda, and the defenders withdrew to the southern parts of the state. The main task of Zsuzsanna was to transfer the wounded to the southern part of the state for opening of the new hospital. Zsuzsanna did all the necessary steps to transport the wounded, however, she recognized that the seriously injured would not have survived such a trip. Recalling all the women: "...to accept the wounded in their home, that they cherish, preserve and treat them, to keep them alive so that they can experience and rejoice in the freedom for which they fought for..."

To realize all of this, she chooses three voluntary women: Júlia Szekáts, Amália Balogh, Karoline Foszter – and sends a letter to all the directors of the hospitals that on the request of the said women they are obliged to give up all military casualties for appropriate care³.

She managed to organize for the soldiers who could not be accepted in civilian homes, to be located in the hospital in Buda. Poor families that embraced the wounded soldiers were given "tax for the care of" a private fund of the Kossuth

family (the total amount of funds were the salaries for two hundred soldier). In Szeged voluntary women gathered in large numbers, but the problem appeared to be the contradictions between the doctors and nurses of the hospital. Also, she had a huge help with relocation, equipping and relocating the hospital from Pest⁵.

The War lost and Zsuzsanna unjustly accused

After losing the War for Independence, the family Kossuth was forced to emigrate, they were on the run (four women and nine children). On the way the youngest son of Zsuzsanna died, being only 18 months old. In the north, they were first captured by the Russians, and put under house arrest. With another 12 refugees they lived together in one room, under inhumane conditions: slept on the ground sprinkled with straws, between damp walls, so Zsuzsanna got sick with tuberculosis. A few weeks later, at the request of Julius von Hajnau, the Russians handed Zsuzsanna to her mother over to the Austrians, but after a year and a half they were forced to return to Budapest, which was soon followed by the trial to the head nurse. Zsuzsanna was accused for the greatest sin, for high treason.

At the hearing, very impressively, she logically proved that during the war she did only what was right, and her duty and mission were "nursing the sick and where she could she eased the suffering of victims ...". The investigating judge was confused. Then he looked at the paper in front of him and underlined in red color by a pen: "greatest penalty should be applied". However, the Austrian military officers who were treated in the Hungarian hospitals came to her defense, claiming that they got the same care and concern as the Hungarian wounded: "This woman, we owe our lives to her, she did not see the enemy in us, but the people who suffer, nurtured us and helped us..."¹.

Released, continues to develop patriotism

Thus, the first head nurse was cleared of all charges. Although advised to leave the country, she still stayed, believing that the Hungarian people were waiting back of her

brother, and being his sister she could not escape. During the exile of Lajos Kossuth, Zsuzsanna assumed the role of mediator and messenger between her brother and his friends, using letters to inform him about the political developments. To support the family, Zsuzsanna was forced to take disciplines that she took care of, but she also helped the prisoners.

Later she opens an educational home to teach history and Hungarian language, and intensively develop patriotism in her students. In 1851, Austrian authorities prohibited this institution. Despite all the measures of the government, in December 1851 Zsuzsanna was still involved in the planning of conspiracy, hoping to bring back his brother, Lajos from exile and to organize an internal uprising against the Austrians⁴.

Prison, exile, illness and early death of Zsuzsanna Kossuth

However, the conspiracy was revealed, Zsuzsanna arrested and threatened with jail again, and also ill with tuberculosis. In a very difficult position she was moved to Vienna to the hospital for prisoners, where with the help of the American Embassy she managed to free herself. The charges for conspiracy luckily could not be proven, and provided that all members of the family Kossuth leave territory of the Habsburg Empire and that she would never return to Hungary, she was released. First she emigrated to Brussels, very sick, but she learned sewing and opened a sewing's shop, which was maintained by the family. She worked tirelessly to leave some heritage for her children, so she raised her daughters to work and be independent. However, due to the frequent harassment of the Austrian Embassy, she was forced to leave Brussels, and in 1853 received permission to emigrate to America, to New York. Difficulties, torture and constant struggle exhausted her and on June 29, 1854 died being 37 years old. Zsuzsanna Kossuth was buried in New York. We hope that the time will come when her remains reach Hungary, the country for which she sacrificed her life and where she always wanted to return.

“... It was an immense consolation that I could defy the storm, share the misery, to fight and be tortured in this country, which is bleeding. I was happy when I wiped my tears, when I eased the burden on the poor of heart. My torments I hardly felt.... They drove me from my home country, which is suffering, I did not have the opportunity to fall on my knees and bow to her, to say goodbye. And it was not my fault...”⁷.

The sculpture of Zsuzsanna Kossuth in Budapest is shown in Figure 5.



Fig. 5 – The sculpture of Zsuzsanna Kossuth.

Conclusion

Ideas, moral values, hard work of Zsuzsanna are today's foundation for nursing. To pay tribute to her, secondary medical schools in Szeged and Eger bear her name. In recognition, for respect and as gratitude to Zsuzsanna Kossuth and those who choose the medical profession, the Hungarian parliament declared the 19th of February the day of health workers in Hungary.

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