



## Dr. Draginja Draga Ljočić – the first female doctor in Serbia

### Dr Draginja Draga Ljočić – prva žena lekar u Srbiji

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#### Ključne reči:

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#### Introduction

Draginja Draga Ljočić was born on February 22, 1855 in Šabac, Serbia and comes from a wealthy merchant family which experienced a great injustice <sup>1</sup>.

Civic life of Serbia at that time “was coloured” by Aromanians, capable merchants and craftsmen, who were distinguished by their wealth, language skills and ambition, so they differed from natives because they educated children and did not make traditional differences between male and female children <sup>2</sup>.

Draga's father, Dima Ljočić, fought for their family property, leading a multi-year lawsuit with a prominent fami-

ly from Šabac and then he was left without money for life. Since he had suffered the great injustice in life, he borrowed five thalers and paid the clerk to ring the bell. Answering the question asked by a citizen from Šabac: “Who died?”, Dima said: “Justice died and I am burying it today”. He was punished for this act and sentenced to 25 beatings. Once being a wealthy merchant, Dima Ljočić now became a poor “bunner” with the income of only seven thalers. In spite of having two sons, he decided to educate a daughter <sup>2</sup>.

This injustice done to her father determined future life of Draginja Draga Ljočić (Figure 1), who would persistently fight for the rights of women in medicine.



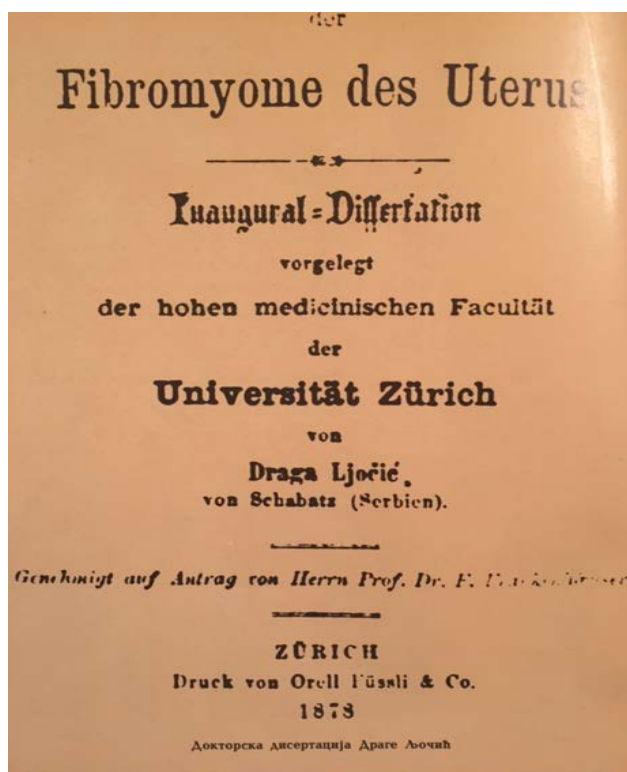
**Fig. 1 – Dr. Draginja Draga Ljočić – The Heroine of Medicine**  
(Photo: Šabacturizam.org Source: [www.svetplus.com](http://www.svetplus.com))

### Life, education, careers

Draga finished elementary school in her hometown. Her teacher, Persida Pinterović, recognized her as a gifted person, and enabled Draga to live with her in Belgrade, where Draga finished “Great school”. She had no doubts about the choice of the University. The only choice was “The University of Zurich”, since it was the only place in Europe in 1860s where girls were able to study. As an ambitious and hard-working woman, she was successfully studying, constantly struggling with severe shortages. Her brothers helped her occasionally, and since 1874 she had been using the scholarship of forty dinars per month, which the merchant Jevrem Pantić provided for good students in Šabac. Her diary revealed that later, she returned the money which had been borrowed during the studies<sup>3</sup>.

In June, 1876, because of her strong patriotic feelings, she interrupted the studies and as medical assistance joined the Serbian-Turkish war in which she got the rank of medical lieutenant. She was dedicatedly treating the wounded at the Military Academy and at Hospital in Svilajnac. She took part in the battle of Šumatovac<sup>3</sup>.

After the truce was declared in 1877, Draga returned to Zurich, continued the studies and by the end of 1878 successfully graduated. She wrote a final paperwork, i.e. a doctoral dissertation entitled “Contribution to the operational therapy of uterus fibromyoma” at the University of Zurich, which was published the same year in Zurich<sup>3</sup>, as shown in Figure 2.



**Fig. 2 – Draga Ljočić’s doctoral dissertation, “Contribution to the operational therapy of uterus fibromyoma”, The University of Zurich, 1878.**  
([www.srpskilegat.rs](http://www.srpskilegat.rs), [riznicasrpska.net](http://riznicasrpska.net))

At the age of only twenty-four she became a doctor of medicine, surgery, obstetrics and eye diseases, and later she opened a private consulting-room as a “doctor of medicine, obstetrics and eye diseases”. At that time, she was the first woman doctor in Serbia. Just then, her continuous and excellent fight for the equal rights of men and women in medicine began<sup>3</sup>.

On February 26, 1879, Draga Ljočić required a permission from the Ministry to work as a doctor of medicine but got rejected, despite the fact that at that time there were only 79 doctors in Serbia, mostly foreigners. Because of the intermise of Dr. Vladan Djordjević, the Chief of Health Department, amenable minister assented. It was decided that Draga Ljočić should pass the civil service examination. If she showed enough knowledge, medical practice would be allowed to her. The Committee gathered was made up of Doctor Vladan Djordjević (envoy of Duchess Natalia), and Doctors Mladen Janković, and Djordje Klinkovski. Dr. Draga Ljočić was asked theoretical and practical questions in anatomy, physiology, prescribing of medicaments, gynecology, obstetrics and internal medicines. Some of the questions were: “What are you going to do in a crossbirth, when one arm of the baby fell out?”, “What opiates do you know?” “What are the poisons that people are most often poisoned by, and what are the antidotes?” The Commission went into detail to find a single mistake. She successfully answered all the questions.

According to the conducted protocol, the exam was held on April 6, 1879 in the City and District Belgrade Hospital. Having passed the exam and showed that she obtained the necessary medical knowledge completely the same as male doctors, she got the right to start private medical practice, but not the opportunity to work in the civil service, on the grounds that women did not serve the army<sup>4</sup>.

At that time higher education of female children was not usual and desired. Nevertheless, Draga Ljočić refused to live in accordance with the rigid principles of the “Balkan time”, rejecting dogmas and prejudices of the surroundings. She acquired the highest education and deservingly became the first woman doctor – a Serbian and Yugoslav the Heroine of Medicine<sup>5</sup>.

When she later became a member of the Serbian Medical Society, due to serious health problems, she went to the sanatorium in Crimea, near Yalta, where she was being treated for a while. Only on July 6, 1882, the new minister Milutin Garasanin appointed her at the position of a medical assistant in the General State Hospital, the largest acknowledged treatment centre in Serbia at that time. Almost the entire 1883 was the turning point in the private life of Dr. Draga Ljočić. She married Mr. Raša Milošević, one of the founders of the People's Radical Party, thus breaking another prejudice of her time by keeping her maiden name. Shortly after getting married, she got a daughter. After that, the hardest days of her life followed. Raša Milošević was politically sentenced to six years in prison, while Draga stayed alone with the baby, burdened with many worries and troubles. Working very hard in medical practice in many different ways, she tried to pro-

vide material existence for her family, enduring difficult days of Raša's imprisonment with dignity <sup>2</sup>.

During 1885, while the Serbo-Bulgarian war was going on, the discrimination against women doctors was decreasing. Dr. Draga was working then as the only doctor in three Belgrade hospitals: General State Hospital, the Infectious Disease Hospital and the Hospital for the Wounded, located in the Great School in Belgrade, headed by Professor Josif Pančić <sup>5</sup>.

The war defeat on Slivnitsa led to the change of the political climate in Serbia, and convicted radicals were pardoned and released. Draga's husband returned to the family home on January 1, 1886. At the end of the same year, they got another daughter. Dr. Draga and Mr. Raša Milošević had four daughters – Radmila, Spomena, Zora and Olga <sup>2,5</sup>.

### The fight for equal rights with men

In December, 1886, the minister promoted Dr. Draga to an assistant doctor, but her rights were still not the same as the rights of her colleagues. She was affected by this injustice and discrimination, so she addressed to the minister demanding equal rights with men in the service. She suffered another humiliation afterwards, for she was required to show her transcript of records and diploma, which normally was not the custom in any doctors' promotion. She was asked to show the graduation exam certificate, which was impossible to enclose, because at that time, when Dr. Draga finished Higher School for women, graduation exam did not even exist in Serbia. The requested opinion of the Chief of Health Department about Dr. Draga's request was negative. Even the complaint to King Milan or to the State Council did not help to overcome the injustice. As a response to her request she was fired <sup>2,6</sup>. The dismissal did not harm her reputation because patients had recognized a good person and a good doctor inside her long time before that. She continued private practice and part-time work in the Department of Monopoly. During 1904, she founded the "mother organization" with Sara Karamarković in order to reduce infant mortality and to take care of abandoned children. Thanks to her perseverance and dedication, the organization moved into a building in Studentska Street in Belgrade, where "Home for the foundlings" was later opened. Without any material compensation, Dr. Draga was treating students of vocational schools. To earn money, she worked in the factory of tobacco and matches for more than thirty years. Her diary entries disclose that among these workers she was the favourite and they called her "our mother" <sup>6</sup>. Dr. Draga was the first president of the Society of Belgrade Women Doctors which was established in 1919/1920 and which was very active in raising funds for the construction of the first hospital for women and children; it was planned that only female doctors would work in that hospital. The Scottish Women's Society provided assistance, but the construction of this hospital was slow, because the resources were financially low. Afterwards, the hospital was named Dr. Elsie Inglis – Memorial Hospital, in honour of the brave doctors of the Scottish Mission <sup>6</sup>.

Her zealous efforts to monitor trends and the developments of European medicine and to implant them into Serbian medicine were clearly visible. She translated the book "Raising small children" from the Russian language which was dedicated to mothers, because bringing up children depends on their knowledge, as even society and nations do. Dr. Draga was interested in developments in gynecology and obstetrics, so she translate an article from the French medical journals in the journal "Serbian Archives of Medicine" in 1885.

Dr. Draga was 57 years old and of poor health when Balkan wars broke out. Nevertheless, without sparing herself, she worked day and night at the clinic for the public and the poor, as well as in the hospital of Belgrade benefactor Nikola Spasić. In the diary she kept, she clearly expressed her eternal disagreement with the current views on the status and fostering of women doctors. She struggled with the Balkan non-understanding of women and women doctors in the society all her life. She participated in the creation of the Women Medical Society after the World War I and in the establishment of the Women Hospital on Dedinje. When the World War I began, her family retreated to Nis, where she unselfishly continued working at hospital. As the war progressed, her husband Raša and daughter Radmila crossed Albania, went on Corfu, and then on the Salonica front. Dr. Draga with three daughters went from Niš to Thessaloniki, then to Athens, and from there via Rome and Nice they arrived in Lausanne. Throughout the war, she was engaged in humanitarian work, organizing sending packages to our prisoners in German and Hungarian camps <sup>1</sup>. For the sacrifice and courage in offering health care to soldiers and civilians in Serbian liberation wars during 1876–1878 and 1912–1918, Dr. Draga Ljočić was awarded with the Order of St. Sava, 4th class in 1904, and the Gold Medal for Diligent Service in 1913 <sup>7</sup>.

In her diary, Dr. Draga often wrote that the colleagues rarely respected her in terms of professional work. Through her continuous and diligent work, she was trying to show that the expertise and knowledge had nothing to do with gender differences (she was called a feminist, through political struggle for the emancipation of women) <sup>8</sup>.

After the Balkan Wars and the First World War, she returned to Serbia and only then she got her title a "real doctor". At the end of 1924 she was retired <sup>9</sup>.

A few words about the Diary – it consists of three parts: the description of life in Belgrade and two travel books, one about going to Šabac and Bosanska Gradiška, and the other about the travel to Crimea. The diary of Dr. Draga is clearly understandable and it is a valuable source of information for making the whole picture of the life of this remarkable woman, as she speaks about herself, her world and her time <sup>10</sup>.

Why do we mention her today? You will certainly conclude that this is from justifiable, essential and humane reasons for the overall and better medical being of today. Much earlier unjustly neglected and not always professionally respected, Dr. Draga Ljočić succeeded in fighting for her personal rights, but a much greater significance of her historical

way is the fact that she cleared the way to her female colleagues and to all women doctors to be.

Because of all the facts previously mentioned, Europe admired the famous, brave Serbian woman, the first female doctor, a woman officer in the Balkans and the fourth lady in the Old World with a medicine university degree. After Dr. Maria Zibold, who was a major, Draga Ljočić was the second Serbian medical officer, which was very rare at the time <sup>11</sup>.

Today, a reminder to us (Forgotten Serbian women), she encountered many obstacles in her life and professional struggle, in war and in peace, but her enterprise, endurance and strength won in the end.

### Conclusion

Professional contribution of Dr. Draga Ljočić to, at that time, not very developed Serbian medicine is immense, and for even greater admiration is the contribution of Draga's life fighting and all her life's work for the actualization of women's rights.

She died on November 5, 1926 at the age of 71, in her house in Topčider in Belgrade. She was buried in Belgrade and known as the first woman doctor in Serbia or the Heroine of the Spirit. It is believed even today that she had only one flaw – she was not a man.

Fortunately, Dr. Draga Ljočić has her descendants, who with love and pride cherish the memory of their great and courageous mother and grandmother, still today after 161 years. Her daughter Dr. Radmila Milošević was also a highly regarded physician in Serbia and a participant in the wars of 1912–1918.

Today, Health Care Centre in Šabac proudly bears her name, as she was the first woman doctor in Serbia and the most interesting woman in the modern Serbian history.

On September 29, 2017 the bust of the first female doctor in Serbia, Dr. Draginja Draga Ljočić, was erected by the Serbian Medical Society (Figure 3).



**Fig. 3** – The bust (monument) of the first female doctor in Serbia  
(*wikimedia.org*)

Today, there are so many young female doctors and female students in the Serbian Armed Forces. This paper, as part of the history of medicine, should „enlighten“, like a lighthouse, the female medical population and the professions of all women, who have not been familiar with the Heroine of Medicine so far.

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