

Friendship

Fine rain in a windy day was not an obstacle for us to visit last October, on the occasion of the 5th Congress of the Balkan Union of Oncology, Kalemegdan, the Beogradian fortress.

Our hostess, the enthusiastic and great friend Dr Ljiljana Vučković-Dekić, turned the silent castle to a sound reminder of the Serbian history.

Among other monuments it was again a church - for the third time in Beograd - *Saint George of the Castle*, that gave us a great surprise. After Saint Savas' temple, the world's biggest - 70 meters high - church in Orthodox Christianity, and the Beograd's cathedral with the two huge *Taxus bacata* trees instead of the usual cypress trees as guards of the main entrance, this small church in the castle was extraordinary.

Instead of trees, two bronze statues, real-size

soldiers, one of a medieval Serbian soldier - the other of a Serbian soldier of the World War I, were the most realistic guards I had ever seen in a church. Inside the church Dr Dekić asked us to look at the roof where excellent frescos of Byzantine/Serbian style caught our eyes, but being not prepared for the unexpected, we bypassed at first glance, the two chandeliers. They looked very typical, but a closer look revealed a very unusual synthesis. At each of the four corners of the chandeliers, an authentic long sword pointed at the top, trimmed with a chain of real bullets. Statues and chandeliers were made of war material to remind World War I.

With this occasion, Dr Dekić sent us her historical comments on the tragedy of the Serbian people during World War I.

A doctor who treats and cures history

"Friendship has to be cherished and cultivated, and in this each of our old friends has to have the most important place of honour"
Montaigne

Recently, on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the terrible year 1915, an extraordinary book appeared in Serbia [1]. This book is aimed to remind our generation of medical people, the majority of those women, who risked their freedom and sacrificed their lives for the health of other people - in this case, for a small nation that suffered very much during the World War I.

Any war is a disaster - the World War I was the greatest disaster in the whole history of human race; that is why it is remembered as the Great War. In this war, more than half of Serbian male population, from 18 to 60 years of age, perished outright. It is estimated that Serbia lost over 1, 25 million lives - more than third of the whole population of old Serbia [2]. It was a true demographic collapse: the small Serbian nation faced the risk of extinction.....

Among other war disasters, particularly dreadful was the typhus epidemic. Horrible ciphers inform that, during January-February 1915, only in Belgrade 50-100 people died each day. This epidemic ravaged Serbia - it took more than 300,000 of civilian lives.

Upon the appeal of the Serbian Government, several medical missions were sent to Serbia. Legendary Dr Elsie Maud Inglis, the founder of Scottish Women's Hospital, led a group of doctors, nurses and VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) volunteers, who hurried to help "the gallant little nation and its soldiers" when such help was badly needed [3]. Many of these women died during the epidemic of typhoid fever. Let's mention Dr Elisabeth Ross and five of her nurses and volunteers, who came in Kragujevac on Christmas 1915, when the epidemic was in its heights, and who were victims of this terrible illness.

Not only Scottish women were part of this mission. Many Russian, Australian, Canadian and American doctors and nurses gave their competent help not only during the year 1915, but also before and after that.

Among the very first humanitarian missions that came were two Greek missions - that of the king of Greece (led by Dr Trifocos), and the one of Red

Cross of Greece, which consisted of six doctors (led by Dr Nomicos) and many nurses. The first mission arrived in Serbia as early as in September 1914 [4]. Later, Greeks gave shelter to Serbian soldiers also on their own territory. A great majority of soldiers who had arrived to the Greek islands Kerkyra (Corfu) and Vido after a terrible retreat through Albania (so-called Golgotha of Serbia), were in a miserable state. For example, out of 8000 young soldiers that started retreat towards Greece, only 320 were considered as healthy upon arrival to Kerkyra. The small nearby island Vido, which housed ill soldiers, soon became unable to bury so many corpses, and the surrounding sea became the so-called Blue Cemetery for Serbs.

At the end of the Great War, the 3rd Greek division contributed to the liberation of Serbia. During war operations and during the epidemic of Spanish fever, 385 Greek soldiers died. They are buried in the Greek soldiers' cemetery, next to the Serbian soldiers' cemetery, in the small town of Pirot, in the south of Serbia. This is (at least, it was) the largest Greek cemetery outside Greece. Soon after the end of the Great War, a monument was erected at this place. It symbolizes the friendship between two nations, which has been lasting uninterrupted for many centuries – a rather rare case in the Balkans.

Dr Vuković' book is the result of 25-year work, during which period the author has accrued as many documents, letters, and press articles as possible. This book is dedicated to the memory of “the deeds of all members of various international medical missions, which represent a superb achievement of humanity, so far unsurpassed in history” [5]. Throughout the whole book dominates the author's feeling that this memory has been fading, against which he decisively opposes. That is why the Ambassador of Australia in

Belgrade (1988) John Hoyle described Dr Vuković as “a doctor who treats and cures history”. I agree with Dr Vuković that every and each people mentioned in his book deserves to be remembered – and to be paid tribute on the occasion of this year, 90 years after that disastrous year 1915 – and that is why and how this article was born....

References

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