

# A portrait of Dr. Milenko Petrović (1884-1950)

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## SUMMARY

*Dr. Milenko Petrović was one of the very distinguished physicians in the history of the city of Sombor, who significantly contributed to the development of healthcare in Vojvodina. His father Dimitrije was a professor in the High Teacher training school in Sombor, a recognized writer, and a politician of his epoch. Dr. Petrović was born in Sombor in 1884, where he was educated and finished grammar school. For medical studies he moved to Budapest as a boarder of the famous Tekelianum, and graduated in 1908. He started specialization in surgery, but being a great patriot he voluntarily recruited in the Serbian army to fight in Balkan liberation wars against Turkey. For his excellent work as a war surgeon he obtained many recognitions. After completing specialization in surgery in Debrecen, he returned to his native city Sombor, where he intended to practice as a physician, but because of the outbreak of World War I he was mobilized and sent to the front in Galicia. After the war he returned to Sombor where he was immediately nominated for the chief county physician and then begins his fruitful many years' work on the establishment and promotion of the healthcare in Sombor and its broader territory. As the chief county physician he initiated the foundation and construction of the hospital in Sombor, because of high mortality rate among children and spreading of contagious diseases like tuberculosis and trachoma. The construction of the hospital was completed in 1925 and Dr. Petrović was appointed its first director and this duty he performed for many years till the World War II in 1941. Under his management the hospital in Sombor became one of the best quality hospitals in the country and gave a big contribution to the promotion of health of the inhabitants of Vojvodina. In spite of his extensive duties in the hospital, Dr. Milenko Petrović was very much engaged in social work as the president of library Laza Kostić, in the Soko association, Fire brigade, Rotary club, and he was a collaborator in the Red Cross, Adriatic guard, and in the Church community. Since 1930 he worked as a professor of hygiene in the High Teacher-training School, just like his father. He was arrested and persecuted not only during the World War II, but after the war as well by communist authorities, because he was regarded as nationalist, monarchist, and anticommunist. He died unrecognized in 1950, and now finally came the time for objective evaluation and recognition of his valuable professional work.*

**KEY WORDS:** Famous Persons; Physicians; History of Medicine; History, 20<sup>th</sup> Century; History, 19<sup>th</sup> Century; Serbia  
Non MeSH Milenko Petrovic

Dr. Milenko Petrović is one of the eminent physicians and public and social figures of the city of Sombor who significantly contributed to the development of healthcare in Vojvodina, in addition to Dr. Radivoje Simonović and Dr. Đorđe Lazić whose work has been well documented. He was a boarding student of famous Tekelianum, a surgeon, and a volunteer in Serbian army during the First Balkan War (Figure 1) (1).

He was born in a patriarchal family of the Petrović that originates from the district of Valjevo. During the massacre of the Serbian dukes in January 1804 the family moved to southern part of Hungary (Pančevo). After his father Dimitrije – Mita was appointed as a professor of the Teacher training school in Sombor in 1871, the family settled there and Dimitrije transferred the knowledge to future teachers for twenty years (2). Dimitrije Petrović, a recognized writer and scientist, was elected two times for the member of the literary board of *Matica srpska* and he reviewed its publications. Like Jovan Jovanović Zmaj and Polit Desančić, he was also elected into the Serbian national church council. The mother of Milenko Petrović, Draginja Beljak was a daughter of the priest from Gospic. She became parentless when she was seven and the priest from the parish in Glina became her guardian. After elementary school she attended Low Teacher training school in Pakrac and then the High Teacher training school in Sombor where she married

professor Dimitrije Petrović. After having two daughters, the couple got a son Milenko in 1884.

Milenko Petrović graduated from Grammar school in Sombor in the school year of 1901-1902. He was enrolled in *Tekelianum*, an institution for Serbian students of the University of Budapest (1,3). It was the institution that gave boarding to the best intellectuals of former Hungary and Croatia. He completed studies of medicine in 1908 and specialized surgery in the main hospital of Debrecen (4). Parallel with his studies he attentively followed the events in Sombor and Serbia. When he became aware the war of the Balkan alliance against Turkey was about to break out Dr. Milenko Petrović, like his schoolmate Veljko Petrović and 500 students from southern Hungary, left the hospital in Debrecen and volunteered in Serbian army. This act of his was inspired by his liberal traditions and concern for the outcome of the national struggle. Dr. Milenko Petrović was appointed as a surgeon in the Main military hospital in Kragujevac by the military command of the Šumadija division. His duties were to treat and take care of wounded and sick Serbian soldiers. The young surgeon was deeply shaken with severely wounded soldiers who were sent to the hospital after the battles in Tetovo and Kumanovo in October and November of 1912. He did the best to his knowledge to save those when there was a hope for healing. When the truce was announced on

Arch Oncol 2010;18(4):153-5.

UDC: 355.088:615-051(497.113 Sombor)

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Received: 03.12.2010

Accepted: 06.12.2010

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Figure 1. Dr. Milenko Petrović

November 30, he returned to Debrecen to complete his specialization. Dr. Sreten Kovačević, a personnel officer of the military corps, and colonel Milan Andrejević, a commander of the Šumadia division, wrote the military discharge report dated December 4, 1912, that Dr. Milenko Petrović manifested a true surgical capacity during his service. He was a devoted and conscientious physician who treated wounded and sick soldiers gently and tenderly (5, 6).

His superiors in Debrecen reproached him for choosing Serbian side in the Balkan war, and judged his choice as nationalism. However, they could not underestimate his professionalism and at the end of his specialization he was given a certificate, which translated from Hungarian said: "As a secondary physician he was several times delegated to act as a chief of the hospital ward by the Head of the Hospital. He did his tasks impeccably with conscientious work, diligence, and professional skills, achieving great success. Chief of the ward, Dr. Imre Fraher and Head of the hospital Dr. Čikoš, January 8, 1914." (5).

Upon his return to Sombor, Dr. Petrović decided to start private medical practice. However, his work was stopped due to the outbreak of the World War I in 1914, and he was sent to the front in Galicia. Again he faced enormous human tragedy which confirmed his opinion that wars in general were anticivilizational, inhuman, and tragic and he remained pacifist to the end of his life. While he was on leave he got married with Sofija, a sister of his friend Kostika Popović, future senator in royal government.

Dr. Petrović was appointed as a delegate to the Great National Assembly held in Novi Sad on November 25, 1918, which pronounced the separation of Banat, Bačka, and Baranja from Austro-Hungarian monarchy and their union with the Kingdom of Serbia. Unfortunately, he could not attend the meeting because he was not in the position to leave Galicia earlier than April 19, 1919. A respectable physician Dr. Milan Jovanović Batut suggested Dr. Petrović to be engaged as the chief physician in the county. This was the post Dr. Petrović occupied when King Aleksandar Karađorđević visited Sombor on the third anniversary of the liberation of Sombor by Serbian army on July 3, 1914 (7). As the chief county physician he initiated the foundation and construction of the hospital in Sombor, because of high mortality rate among children and spreading of contagious diseases like tuberculosis and trachoma. After the announcement of the marriage between the King and Rumanian Princess Maria, he suggested to name the hospital after their names as their wedding gift. His idea was accepted by both Dr. Slavko Miletić (a son of the Serbian leader Svetozar Miletić) and Dr. Suster, a chief for the public health affairs. The construction of the hospital began on November 8, 1923 and it was finished on May 24, 1925. The opening ceremony of the hospital was attended by the King's delegate admiral Prica, Dr. Slavko Miletić, Minister of Public Health, and Dr. Andrija Štampar. Foreign physicians were also present: Dr. Zafirelid from Greece, Dr. Kise and Dr. Predbernon from France, Dr. Fenti from England, Dr. Donhofer from Hungary, Dr. Abl from Germany, Dr. Frezenius from Holland, Dr. Holman from Belgium, and Dr. Benkin from Bulgaria. Dr. Fenti and Dr. Pretbernon were volunteers in Serbian army at the Salonika front. The guests visited all hospital wards and the collection of Dr. Radivoje Simonović who was a personal physician of Laza Kostić, a poet. A banquet honoring the guests was organized by Vlada Manojlović, the great county prefect of Bačka. Dr. Milenko

Petrović was appointed the first director of the hospital and he was on this duty till 1941.

In addition to many duties in the hospital, Dr. Petrović was engaged in social and cultural activities. He was a president of the *City library*. He supported the purchase of the portrait of Laza Kostić, a former president of the library, and the election of Veljko Petrović, Vasa Stajić, Petar Konjević, Đura Protić, and Dr. Radivoje Simonović as honorary members of the library. He gave his support for the building of the monument to the assassinated King Aleksandar (it was finished in June, 1940); he approved the contribution to help undeveloped areas and the donation to the Center for blind persons in Zemun; in addition, he supported the building of the monument of Svetozar Miletić in Novi Sad and approved the appeal of *Studentska matica* from Novi Sad to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of death of Đura Jakšić in the premises of the library (9).

Dr. Milenko Petrović supervised the works for the recovery from the flood in 1926; he managed the activities of the association *Sokolsko društvo* and supported the construction of its building in Byzantine style, 1925. He was the president of the Fire brigade, Rotary Club, and a collaborator in the Red Cross, Adriatic guard, and in the Church community. Since 1930, he worked as a professor of hygiene in the *High Teacher-training School* and helped talented but poor students (2).

Although he belonged to the circle of the elite middle class intellectuals he was natural and friendly in his conduct. He spoke and read in foreign languages but he knew how to restrain his knowledge and his upper-class breeding. He inherited from his parents the goodness, integrity, and respect towards the tradition and traditional customs. He observed religious holidays, especially the day of St. Michael the Archangel the conqueror of the Satan, which was his *Slava* (his family patron saint) (5). On April 6, 1941 the bombers roared over Sombor on their flight to unprotected Belgrade. The bombs were thrown on Sombor railway station and its premises. All civilian and military casualties were medically taken care of. Because of the threat of the military attack from Hungary, Magyar high officials, railroad employees, postmen, teachers, and other left Sombor and the city was panic-stricken. Military detachment did not succeed in maintaining the connection with the command of the troops and withdrew from Sombor too. The lawyer Leo Deak, leader of the Hungarians in Yugoslavia, organized the national guard which disarmed the retreating Yugoslav army and prepared to welcome the *honvéds* on April 12, 1941. Dr. Milenko Petrović was dismissed from the hospital and then arrested in November. His schoolmate Leo Deak whose family doctor was Dr. Petrović helped his liberation from imprisonment. However, this act was held against Dr. Petrović after the war. After his release from the prison, Dr. Petrović, with the assistance of the Bishop of Bačka, took care of the health of Serbian detainees in the concentration camp in Sarvar. At that time, there was a massive execution and taking away of people to forced labor and in concentration camps in Sombor (5, 10).

Sombor was liberated on October 21, 1944 and Dr. Petrović was again engaged as a physician in the public hospital. He retired on May 1, 1950. Three weeks after his retirement Dr. Petrović passed away on September 1. Dr. Petrović received numerous recognitions for his longtime work and contribution to the society and nation. On December 8, 1912 he was awarded the order of St. Sava of the fourth degree by the Military Minister

of the Kingdom of Serbia; on October 24, 1913 he was decorated with the Order of the Serbian Society of the Red Cross, which was under the auspices of his Majesty the King Petar; on March 1925, he was awarded the Order of the white eagle of the third degree by the Ministry of Health for his contribution to the impeccable functioning of the hospital in Sombor. After the World War II, all recognitions and orders awarded to Dr. Petrović before the war were underestimated regardless their importance. Communist leaders labeled Dr. Petrović as bourgeois nationalist, monarchist, and anticommunist (10). Although depressed and lonely, Dr. Petrović would always light up on the thought that the hospital in Sombor would be there regardless the time to come. Together with the hospital, his work and efforts that were built into its foundation and functioning would remain forever.

*This paper is published in Serbian language in the Medicinski preglad journal, issue 2008;LXI(11-12):647-50. We have obtained permission for its publishing in English language translation, with note that the names of foreign origin are given in accordance with the rules of the Serbian transcription.*

#### Conflict of interest

We declare no conflicts of interest.

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