

# Improvement of Health Care for the Poor in Split (Southern Croatia) during the First Half of the 19th Century

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## ABSTRACT

*The aim of this study was to investigate the health care available for the poor citizens of Split during the first half of the 19th century. Soon after being constructed in 1797, the Civic Hospital in Split founded by the Ergovac brothers for the needs of the poor was transformed into a military hospital. Consequently, caring for this social stratum was taken over by two inadequate shelters and later by a small civic hospital situated in the Split suburb of Dobri. The year of the application of Petar Ergovac to the supreme ruler for the transformation of the hospital building established by his family from a military to a civil institution was found, as well as the correct data regarding its return to initial idea in 1821. On the basis of the archival documents kept in the Archaeological Museum in Split and in the State Archives in Zadar, the work organization of the Civic Hospital in Split and the first stage of its change from a charitable to a public health hospital institution were presented. This study revealed the aspiration of the authorities in the first half of the 19th century to improve the health system of the city of Split.*

**Key words:** history of medicine, public health, history of hospitals, Civic Hospital in Split, 19th century, Split, Croatia

## Introduction

The first hospital in the city of Split (Spalato), situated in the province of Dalmatia, part of today's Croatia, was mentioned in the 14th century<sup>1,2</sup>. The rare and mostly charitable institutions which were erected in the course of subsequent centuries did not fulfill the needs of growing urban area, the increase in population of the lower social strata and the spreading of diseases. Although the construction of a Split hospital to service the needs of its poor citizens became a necessity, this aspiration was not realized until the 18th century<sup>3</sup>. The initiative for the establishment of such an institution at the end of Venetian administration (1420–1797) was taken over by the Ergovac brothers who were local, rich benefactors. The building of the Civic Hospital in Split, located inside the bastion Corner, was finished in 1797<sup>3,4</sup>.

The fall of the Venetian Republic brought the province of Dalmatia and the city of Split under the first Austrian rule (1797–1805)<sup>5</sup>. During this administration, the hospital in Split established by the Ergovac brothers was

used for the care of sick and wounded soldiers<sup>6,7</sup> while civilian patients were cared for in two inadequate shelters<sup>8</sup>.

Between 1805 and 1813, when Dalmatia was conquered by the French army<sup>5</sup>, the hospital in Split founded by the Ergovac brothers also functioned as a military institution<sup>8</sup>. The government temporarily located a civic hospital in space-deficient house which was situated in the Split suburb of Dobri<sup>6,8</sup>.

This situation in the Split health care system did not change until the beginning of the second Austrian rule in Dalmatia (1813–1918)<sup>1,2</sup>. The conditions of the Split hospital located in Dobri were described in the diary of Emperor Frances the First<sup>9</sup>. He kept this diary during his travel through Dalmatia between April 10, 1818 and July 3, 1818<sup>10</sup>. The ground-floor of Split hospital, very dirty and neglected, was reserved for the sheltering the poor during the night, whereas the first floor was intended for the patients who were segregated by sex. Persons suffer-

ing from venereal diseases, who were numerous in the Split region, were also admitted into this institution<sup>9</sup>.

The most important events for the treatment of the poor in Split during the first half of the 19th century were the return of the hospital established by the Ergovac brothers to its initial conception, i.e., to caring for the poor, and the beginning of its transformation from a charitable to a public health hospital institution. On the basis of the archival documents, such as »Report on the district of Split by the signed administrator for 1822«<sup>11</sup> and »Regulation for the poorhouses in Dalmatia« from 1827<sup>12</sup>, we reconstructed the attempts for initiating higher quality health services for the poor in Split.

### Transformation of the Organizational Structure of the Hospital Founded by the Ergovac Brothers

Even though the hospital in Split established by the Ergovac brothers was under military management at the beginning of the second Austrian rule in Dalmatia, Petar Ergovac, the only founder of this institution who was still living at that time, did not give up on realizing its return to servicing the poor citizens of Split, which was its original purpose.

A previously unpublished archival document, preserved in the State Archives in Zadar, reveals that a petition from Petar Ergovac for the transformation of this hospital building from a military to a civil institution was directed to the supreme ruler in 1816<sup>13</sup>.

Petar Ergovac died only one year after this application was formulated, and he was buried in the Church of Saint Clara in Split on April 27, 1817<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, his attempt was not ineffective because the hospital building founded by his family was return to civilian patients in 1821<sup>15,16</sup>. A restoration of this building was also planned in order to offer decent accommodation to the patients, beggars and foundlings<sup>13</sup>.

It is obvious that the Civic Hospital in Split had a most charitable character because it was indented not only for the treatment of patients, but also for the care of healthy poor who had difficulties making ends meet, along with foundlings who were situated in a separate building.

### The Civic Hospital in Split as a Charitable Institution in 1822

The archival document entitled »Report on the district of Split by the signed administrator for 1822« (»Relazione Sopra il Circolo di Spalato dal sottoscritto amministrato pell' Anno 1822«), kept in the Archaeological Museum in Split, presents a detailed account of the economic, social and cultural conditions in the district of Split<sup>11</sup>. Although this document is unsigned, some authors believe that it was written by Henrik Reha<sup>17,18</sup>, the district governor of Split and the government counselor<sup>19</sup>. During his administration, which lasted between the end of 1816 (or the beginning of 1817) and 1823, the

Split Gymnasium and Archaeological Museum were founded, and a cemetery outside the city on Sustjepan had been under construction<sup>17,18</sup>. Reha died in Split and was buried in the Church of the Blessed Virgin on December 29, 1823<sup>20</sup>.

Along with a description of the conditions in Split, the report dated December 31, 1822, also reveals the activities of charitable institutions which are important for an understanding of the organization of the Civic Hospital in Split (Figure 1).

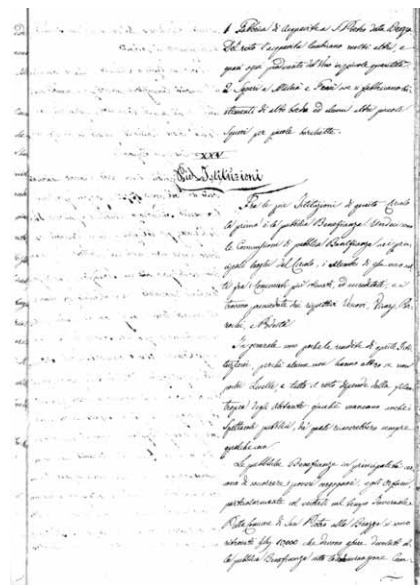


Fig. 1. The beginning of the report about charitable institutions in Split district for 1822.

The eleven Commissions of Public Charities, presided over by bishops, vicars, parish priests and city heads, were situated in the principal settlements of Split district. The revenues of these institutions were small because some of them only accrued a small number of rents, while other contributions were due to the charity of the inhabitants. The Public Charities mostly offered assistance to the poor and orphans, particularly by providing clothes for the winter.

The competent Commission of Public Charity, presided over by a local head, supervised the poorhouses in Split, which included the hospital and foundling home in the city. The members of this commission were eminent citizens who worked free of charge.

Furthermore, this report describes Split Hospital as a beautiful and comfortable building which was partly accommodated for the admission of both male and female patients since it had been recently returned from its long military use to its original civil function. Thirty inpatients, mostly prostitutes suffering from venereal diseases who were compelled to undergo medical treatment, usually dwelt in this hospital. Consequently, the inhabitants were still hesitant of this institution as only poorer individuals entered it. The municipal physician, the sur-

geon, the male and female custodians and a chaplain were charged to keep the order and maintain the cleanliness of the hospital. Because of the deficiency of a house for the poor, the Split Hospital also functioned as a shelter for this social stratum.

At that time, the foundling home in Split was not connected to the hospital building and it did not accept parturient women or newborn babies. Immediately after being secretly or publicly admitted, the foundlings were given away to wet-nurses in a village. These children were treated well while a definite sum of money per month was given to each wet-nurse, but when these benefits were stopped, the foundlings were mostly abandoned<sup>11</sup>.

### Organization of the Poorhouses in Dalmatia

The Civic Hospital in Split located inside the bastion Corner can be found on a magnified portion of a map of Split drafted by Vicko Kurir in 1826. The hospital building was consisted of western, northern and eastern wing, while the southern side was closed off by a wall (Figure 2)<sup>21</sup>.

The work organization and business activity of the poorhouses situated in the province of Dalmatia, which includes the Civic Hospital in Split, were provisionally systematized by the »Regulation for the poorhouses in Dalmatia« (»Regolamento per gli Ospizj della Dalmazia«), preserved in the State Archives in Zadar<sup>12,22</sup>. The concept of the poorhouses implied the hospitals and foundling homes in this province, as well as the home for parturient women which only existed in the city of Zadar<sup>12</sup>.

The activity of this regulation started on November 1, 1827. Its aim was to manage all the poorhouses in Dalmatia in a proper and uniform manner<sup>22</sup>. Ultimate control over these institutions belonged to the government, which fulfilled this task through their competent district offices. Except the supervision of the district physicians, the poorhouses were inspected by the municipal administrations. Moreover, the management of a poorhouse was entrusted to the director and the controller who both shared an equal responsibility for the work.

According to a contract for medical and surgical assistance, municipal physicians and surgeons were obliged to offer their services to poorhouses which did not employ physicians and surgeons full-time. If the assistants were

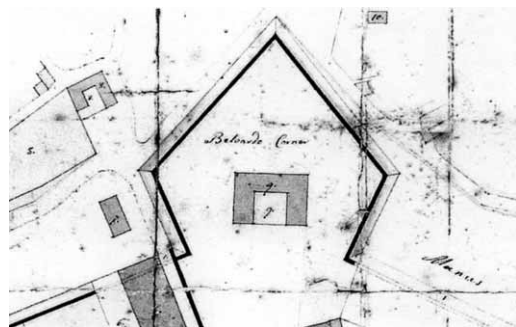


Fig. 2. Civic Hospital in Split located inside the bastion Corner in 1826.

available at the hospitals, they helped the physicians and surgeons in their duties. Each hospital also had the required number of attendants and nurses.

Admission into the hospital was not considered final until the physician identified the existence of an illness and the necessity for hospitalization. On the other hand, the management of a poorhouse had to establish the financial status of the sick because the maintenance and treatment of very poor individuals was a burden on the institution. The patients could stay in the hospital only for the period of time, strictly defined, which was necessary for their recovery.

In dubious and epidemic cases, as well as in extremely serious situations, the physicians and management of the poorhouse consulted with district and local physicians in order to agree on the best treatment and to take any emergency measures.

The foundling homes in Dalmatia accepted poor illegitimate children in order to care for them and to raise them until they reached the age of twelve. The prioresses of these institutions offered any possible assistance to the foundlings and controlled the activities of the wet-nurses<sup>12</sup>.

### Discussion

The present study revealed the organization of health care for the poor in Split during the first half of the 19th century. Soon after being constructed in 1797, the Civic Hospital in Split founded by the Ergovac brothers for the needs of the poor was transformed into a military hospital<sup>3,4,6,7</sup>. Consequently, caring for this social stratum was taken over by two inadequate shelters and later by a small civic hospital situated in the Split suburb of Dobri<sup>6,8</sup>.

Previous scholars of the Civic Hospital in Split differently dated the year of the return of the hospital founded by the Ergovac brothers from a military institution to its initial conception<sup>8,23–25</sup>. On the basis of the materials preserved in Split University Library, which refers to the reports of the National Committee to the Dalmatian Parliament, we argue that this hospital returned to admitting civilian patients in 1821<sup>15,16</sup>.

The description of this hospital in 1822 presents its specific character as an institution which still gravitated more towards charitable rather than medical duties. It was not only its clientele that contributed to this fact, but also its spatial organization. However, while the Civic Hospital in Split served the needs of the poor and of prostitutes, this does not imply the admission of psychiatric patients who were obviously still neglected and even often stigmatized<sup>11</sup>.

The transformation of the organizational structure of the Civic Hospital in Split from a charitable to a public health hospital institution started in 1827 with the beginning of the activity of the »Regulation for the poorhouses in Dalmatia«<sup>12,22</sup>.

According to this regulation, sick poor were treated in the hospital for a predetermined bed capacity without

charge, but they had to prove their financial status by presenting the appropriate certificates. Persons affected by incurable diseases were not admitted into this institution, except those suffering from tuberculosis and hydrops. Patients who were too weak to leave the hospital until their strength returned were also treated, as well as those who were destined to die soon.

This limited bed capacity was not applicable for sick prisoners who were sent to the hospital by political or judicial authorities, and for psychiatric patients who were guarded, cared for and treated until it was possible to transfer them to an appropriate institution.

Moreover, sick persons who were not poor and who could guarantee the payment of their expenses were

also admitted to the hospital when it had enough beds available.

Excepting the segregation of the sexes, the patients were accommodated into the most appropriate rooms in consideration of their diseases.

It is evident that the hospital was no longer intended to be a shelter for the poor, because those who had no financial means to support themselves after their recovery and discharge were recommended to be treated by the Institutions of Public Charities<sup>12</sup>.

This regulation presented a great advance in the organization of the work of the Civic Hospital, as well as a better method to carry out the care and medical treatment of the citizens in Split and its surroundings.

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## POBOLJŠANJE ZDRAVSTVENE SKRBI SIROMAHA U SPLITU (JUŽNA HRVATSKA) TIJEKOM PRVE POLOVINE 19. STOLJEĆA

### SAŽETAK

Cilj ovoga rada bio je istraživanje zdravstvene skrbi siromašnih građana Splita tijekom prve polovine 19. stoljeća. Ubrzo nakon izgradnje 1797. godine, Civilna bolnica u Splitu koju su osnovala braća Ergovac za potrebe siromaha pretvorena je u vojnu bolnicu. Stoga je zbrinjavanje ovog društvenog sloja preuzeto u dvama neadekvatnim skloništima, a kasnije u maloj civilnoj bolnici smještenoj u splitskom predgrađu Dobri. Pronađena je godina zamolbe Petra Ergovca vrhovnom vladaru za transformaciju bolničke zgrade koju je utemeljila njegova obitelj iz vojne u civilnu instituciju, kao i točna datacija njenog povratka inicijalnoj ideji 1821. godine. Na osnovu arhivske dokumentacije koja je pohranjena u Arheološkom muzeju u Splitu i Državnom arhivu u Zadru, prezentirana je organizacija rada Civilne bolnice u Splitu i prvi pomak u njenom preoblikovanju iz dobrotvorne prema javno zdravstvenoj bolničkoj instituciji. Ova je studija otkrila težnju vlasti tijekom prve polovine 19. stoljeća za poboljšanjem zdravstvenog sustava u gradu Splitu.