

## EATING HABITS IN THE TURN OF THE 19<sup>th</sup> AND 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY: EXHIBITION OF MENU CARDS AT THE SARAJEVO CITY MUSEUM

### KULTURA ISHRANE NA PRIJELAZU XIX. U XX. STOLJEĆE NA IZLOŽBI JELOVNIKA U POSJEDU MUZEJA SARAJEVA

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#### SUMMARY

*Through a selection of menu cards exhibited at the Sarajevo City Museum, this article looks into the eating habits in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (period before the World War I.)*

*These menu cards offer a specific overview of eating habits of all ranks of society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there are no essential differences between dinner tables of prelates and ordinary people.*

*The paper gives a short comparison of traditional eating habits in Bosnia and Herzegovina with nowadays eating habits, especially concerning the problem of obesity.*

**Key words:** menu card, eating habits, food/diet, turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Sarajevo City Museum

The Sarajevo City Museum has an unusual collection of nearly 4,000 menu cards from all over the world, dating from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the twentieth century. The menu cards had been

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collected by a waiter Ištvan (*Stjepan*) Mezo, who passed them on to the Museum just before he died [1].

Marking collector's birth and death anniversaries, the Sarajevo City Museum's curator, Ms Žanka Dodig-Karaman prepared an interesting calendar for the year 2002 and a well-received exhibition of menu cards.

The calendar brought twelve different menu cards, including Bosnian, Chinese, royal court, Sarah Bernard's, wedding reception, international conference, ship and Budapest hotel menus. The calendar was decorated with serving objects with a story of their own, such as *café au lait* cups used by Archduke Ferdinand Hapsburg and his wife on the day of their assassination. The calendar aroused great interest.

### MENU CARDS OF THE CITY OF SARAJEVO MUSEUM

Each menu card was ornamented with a special font or design such as flowers, little birds, fruit, owner's photograph, or with a little silver slipper or a poppy flower or cereals attached to the card. Some menu cards were mounted on a shell and some on an apple. These minutiae imply that much attention was paid to food serving and the pleasure of a shared meal.

Food selection was more modest than one would perhaps expect from the current perspective, whether it was a royal table or a formal dinner party of a 1907 international conference; a Sarajevo or a Vienna menu; a formal wedding reception or a 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary lunch. The number of courses varied between 12 and 16, including hors-d'oeuvre, soup, and the main course, dessert, juice and coffee at the end, or a glass of drink. Each meal was complete, sufficient, but not excessive.

Even a 1905 civilian camp weekly menu would keep within these limits.

It is a bit surprising that the menus were mostly written in the French language, which could give some hints about the dominance of French culture in the culinary world of that period.

Such care invested in menu card design, speaks about particular attention paid to food. Judging by the selected menus, people seem to have eaten more slowly and fast food was not yet in. Taking the broad picture, food such as that offered on the menus was central for any event or occasion, be it a dinner on an ocean-going ship on the occasion of American President Lincoln's birthday party, golden wedding anniversary, a lunch in



A menu card written on the inside of a shell, dating from 3 February 1877

*Jelovnik napisan na unutrašnjoj strani školjke 3. veljače 1877.*

honour of a renowned female opera singer, all these menus reflect a certain culture of food serving and table manners...

They all share a sense of moderateness and pleasure in food across different cultures, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, and may shed some light on how food was viewed at home. They complement well other sources such as national literature, folk songs, stories and poems. A famous book by Alija Lakišić [2] on traditional culinary art in Bosnia, which saw several editions, lists the usual menus across Bosnia and Herzegovina. A formal menu in Gradačac consisted of 30 dishes, bread and coffee excluded, as they were staple items. Herzegovinian urban menus usually counted no more than ten dishes, including soups and pitas as starters, roast meat as the main course, and sweets and sour cherry jelly as dessert. Again bread and coffee were taken for granted.

A Travnik dinner menu included twelve dishes:

1. Broths/soups (always served with bread)
2. Travnik-style meatballs
3. Travnik-style stuffed lamb



A wedding menu card dating from 23 October 1902 and a beer bottle from the Sarajevo brewery, 1903.

*Jelovnik s vjenčanja direktora Sarajevske pivovare g. Reitera, 23. listopada 1902., i boce Sarajevske pivovare iz 1903.*

4. Travnik-style *sarma* (vegetable leaves with minced meat and rice stuffing)
5. Fresh beans with meat.
6. Either *kebab* or Bosnian-style stew instead
7. Travnik-style stuffed peppers
8. *Burek* - a meat pie
9. Travnik-style *bamija* - an okra stew or *sogan dolma* - onions with meat and rice stuffing - or another dish in sauce
10. *Baklava* (a rich, sweet pastry made of layers of phylo pastry filled with chopped walnuts sweetened with sugar syrup or honey) or *hurmašice* (date-shaped pastry made with sugar syrup), sometimes *ružice* (phylo pastry sheets, drawn butter, and walnuts with sugar syrup).
11. Travnik-style *prijesnac* (a spinach pie with cream and milk) or another dish in sauce
12. *Paluza* - a thin starch-and-honey jelly - or rice pudding instead

The meal would end with coffee and a chibouk, hookah, or cigarette.

A traditional dinner menu in Sarajevo included the following dishes:

1. Lamb broth/soup
2. *Kebab*
3. *Burek* – meat pie with buttermilk
4. *Sarma* (vegetable leaves with minced meat and rice stuffing)
5. *Ekemk-kadayf*
6. *Bamia*/okra stew
7. Spinach pie
8. *Sogan dolma* - onions with meat and rice stuffing
9. *Razvaruša* – sweet pastry with sugar syrup
10. Meatballs in sauce
11. Chicken pilaff (with buttermilk)
12. *Zerde* - honey rice dessert
13. Rice pudding
14. Stewed fruit (various)
15. Coffee, hookah, chibouk.

It is interesting that the famous Gazi Husref-bey's soup kitchen (*imaret*) in Sarajevo - intended for the poor, chance travellers, and Gazi Husrefbey's madrassah students - also offered a menu, however modest. Usually it included staple wheat broth, rice pilaff with boiled meat, and *zerde* (a rice dessert).

In Mostar there was a special menu for the evening meal sent by a bridegroom to bride's parents, the so-called "mother-in-law's evening meal". It included *yaprak* (vine leaves with minced meat and rice stuffing), rice pilaff, cabbage and meat stew, roast meat, meat pie, cheese pie, spinach pie, and *baklava*.

There are also traveller menus (*brašljenica*), fast-breaking menus (for meals to break fasting over Ramadan), picnic menus, evening party menus, or countryside/peasant menus.

The Exhibition of Selected Menu Cards paid due attention to these under-represented historical documents that witnessed lifestyles of the past and told much more of the eating habits across cultures than we could imagine.

## MENU CARDS AND THE BOSNIAN FOOD CULTURE

To understand their richness, we need to know certain aspects of eating and general culture in Bosnia. First of all, these menus were designed for a larger number of guests who were served at one or at several dinner tables at the same time. Food was served on a low round table, which would be placed in the middle of the room and taken away immediately after the meal. Each person had their own serviette and, of course, their own cutlery.

Generally, food was eaten from one plate. Thin food such as soups, stewed fruit, sour cherry jelly, rice pudding, and the like were scooped up with a spoon only once from a joint plate. Other food was picked up by hand, usually only one piece or a mouthful. This is why a menu would consist of so many courses. Salty and sweet dishes were served alternatively, but never in large quantities.

As washing hands before a meal was both a religious and cultural obligation, basically there was no fear of infection.

All these dishes are recorded in literature, folk songs, deeds, and oral tradition, but menus came with the Austro-Hungarian administration, when serving food approached the European practice. Regardless of these changes in table manners and in eating habits, sharing a meal remained central to Bosnian custom. In particular, it was observed during the month of fasting, Ramadan, when guests were invited to share the evening meal called iftar.

Meal was shared by all, and only the head of the household could get one separate meal, but it was always the food prepared at home (usually a lunch to be eaten at work). Meals were served at a specified time, always with all family members present and all food prepared at home.

This means that food was healthier, additive-free, prepared from untreated local whole ingredients in season the way that best suits the human organism.

## EATING HABITS NOW AND THEN: OBESITY AS MAIN INDICATION

Undoubtedly, poor families ate much less in earlier times. Having the experience of the Sarajevo under siege in the 1990s, we can now say that eating was much healthier and certainly did not pose the risk of obesity. During the 1992-95 siege of Sarajevo, fats and sugar were in short supply,



A menu card with two women dancing, dating from 7 September 1911 and a woman's purse from Stjepan Mezo's collection.

*Jelovnik oslikan likovima dviju žena koje plešu i ženska torbica iz zbirke Stjepana Meze.*

people ate less, and meals were simpler and healthier. People soon lost weight, which was not only the consequence of stress, but also of healthier diet. However, many regained weight once the things were back to normal, or even exceeded the former pre-war weight.

Today, special menus for an occasion such as wedding receptions are no longer printed, and restaurant daily menus are all uniform and downright boring. Does this suggest that we are abandoning the tradition of delighting in shared meals? This tradition of sharing meals is fading away in Bosnian homes as well, except in Muslim families who practice fasting and share their evening meals with relatives, friends, and acquaintances or in the Jewish community who observe traditional Saturday gatherings.

Menu cards tell next to nothing about table manners, but a lot can be inferred from tradition, literature, and personal experience. Traditionally, households would prepare extra food in case a visitor or a chance traveller

A menu card with white tulips dating from 24 April 1912 and a woman's purse from the Museum's Austro-Hungarian collection.

Jelovnik s bijelim tulipanima od 24. travnja 1912. i ženska torbica iz austro-ugarske kolekcije Muzeja.



should show up. This was believed to be a sign of good fortune and prosperity. On special occasions, wealthier families would lay separate tables for the poor.

Many religious communities have preserved the custom to say a joint thanksgiving before a meal, but this too is giving way to the modern lifestyle, at in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unfortunately, thanksgiving is not observed at schools, kindergartens or other places where meals are shared, unless the occasion is religious.

The menu cards exhibited at the Sarajevo City Museum call for an ethnographic and scientific follow-up. One interesting aspect is the psychological benefits from shared meals and the other is the use of local, seasonal ingredients.



Shared meals, family meals in particular, are a way of socialising that may help to prevent mental disorders, especially in high-risk populations such as children, pregnant women, workers, elderly persons, migrants, and chronically sick persons.

Today we speak of healthy dieting and its significance in preventing a number of diseases. Ingredients that are used today differ from those used before. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, food was prepared from produce grown at home. Today we have a lot of imported food ingredients. The media advertise exotic ingredients and food prepared from them, as these are found on the dinner tables of the rich, famous, media-exposed personalities. Clearly the message they send is in contrast with the WHO recommendation “Local production – local consumption”.

“Let food be thy medicine, and let thy medicine be food”, says Hippocrates. Today we know that whole cereals are desirable in the diet of a modern man, as they protect from heart and blood vessel diseases, and malignancies. Cereals grow well in Bosnia and Herzegovina and should make the economic basis of our agriculture [4].

The menu cards exhibited at the Sarajevo City Museum suggest that meals were not excessive. Judging by the photographs from these times obesity was not nearly a health issue as it is today. Investigations carried out in the Sarajevo Canton in 2001 showed that 60.8% of respondents had a normal body weight; 6.39% were underweight; and as many as 26.0% were obese [5, 6]. The latest available information suggests that as many as 41% of the adult population are overweight and 21.5% are obese. However, personal estimations do not always agree with actual measurements [7]; 61.2% of respondents believed to have a normal weight, 6.2% believed to have a lower weight than normal, while 32.4% believed to have a higher weight than normal. Even in the obese respondent group, about 25.0% believed to have normal weight, or below the normal.

In addition, the consumption of fruit and vegetables by adult population is very low: fruit is eaten by only 27.2% on a daily basis, and vegetables by only 21.4%. Only 15% of adult population do physical activity more than once a week [7]. Higher education seems to correlate with better dieting, while under-nourishment does not seem to be a problem. However, obesity is [8]! We now know that obesity is a serious health risk associated with cardiovascular diseases, which are one of the leading causes of death in this country.

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## SAŽETAK

*Preko jelovnika, izloženih u Muzeju Sarajeva, članak obrađuje kulturu prehrane u Bosni i Hercegovini u drugoj polovici XIX. i početkom XX. stoljeća (razdoblje prije Prvoga svjetskog rata). Jelovnici na svoj način upućuju na kulturu prehrane svih društvenih slojeva Bosne i Hercegovine i nema bitnih razlika između trpeza crkvenih velikodostojnika i običnih ljudi. Uz to, daje se i kratka usporedba tradicionalne kulture prehrane u Bosni i Hercegovini i današnjih prehrambenih navika, posebice s obzirom na problem pretilosti.*

**Ključne riječi:** *jelovnici, kultura prehrane, hrana, prehrana, prijelaz XIX. u XX. stoljeće, Muzej Sarajeva*