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The White Plague

When you are in the country, my dear, and you hear the bells ring for a young woman, then ask: 'Was it tuberculosis?', and if they answer no, then you'll know she has miscarried.

(Sremac, 1940: 59).

The paper analyzes the phenomenon of the white plague in the area of Slavonia which was present from the middle of the 20th century to the beginning of the World War II. It was a time when the serfdom in Croatia ended and major changes occurred in the farming production, and with that also on the social and cultural plane. With the transition from the barter to the monetary economy changes occur in all segments of life including the attitude towards the children. In the changed circumstances, when a large number of children seemed undesirable, women adopted the practice of abortion with appalling consequences to their personal health. The paper presents all the judgments of values shown by the authors who wrote about this phenomenon and how during time the reasons for birth control changed according to the economical, social and ideological changes.

Keywords: birth control, white plague, depopulation, abortion, Slavonia

Introduction

The subject of this paper is the phenomena of the white plague, which was, in Croatia, most prominent in the area of Slavonia¹. *The white plague* is the term for the phenomenon of the drastic reduction in the number of newborns per family (to one or two), which is usually

¹ This paper was read at the Gesundheit und Hygiene II, Science conference, Schlaining, Austria, 2004.

characteristic for industrialized nations. The issue of the white plague has manifested itself in the period between the middle of the 19th century to the beginning of World War Two. It was the time in Croatia when serfdom was ended and when significant changes in the field of farming occurred, and because of these, changes in the sphere of culture and society. These turbulent changes spelt the end of the farming cooperatives and the patriarchal values that came from that way of life and subsistence. The growing influence of modernization and the urban values it brought is reflected in all segments of life. The organization of new families and their values are a significant focus of this research. We will see how the reasons for birth control changed according to the changes in the society and the economy. This research throws light on the white plague and its consequences in the lower strata of society, the peasant families and communities.

When the Turks left at the end of the 17th century, the process of colonization and planned development began in Slavonia. At the end of the 18th century the Austrians formed the Military Frontier, which made migrations from different source areas possible. The first official Austrian censuses and descriptions after the liberation from the Turkish realm show the aftermath of war. A great number of earlier villages disappeared or was abandoned, destroyed and burned. A greater part of arable land was unattended, and the houses were huts protected with mud. The native population returns from the refuges already in the 17th century. About the population itself there are censuses by names from the years 1698 and 1702. They name people of different confessions: Catholics, Orthodox, non-unionists and Greek catholic, by nationalities naming Croats, Hungarians, Rascians, Walachs and Germans. By their residence they are natives or immigrants, mainly from Bosnia (Sršan, 2000: 11). Owing to the birth rate and immigration, the demographic growth in Slavonia was significant².

The average family in the 18th century Slavonia was small, between 7 and 8 members, which is far fewer than we would expect in a cooperative. In 1869 the average number of inhabitants per house was 6, but in 1880 it was 5 (Gross Szabo, 1992: 36). In the civilian Slavonia, when we focus on the number of members and the affluence, the cooperatives reached their peak in the 19th century, just before they began to break up. Because of the legal environment the cooperatives were bigger and lasted longer.

In the 19th century, the exploitation of woods and the mining industry made a start in Slavonia, as well as the growing of wheat for the European market. In line with the new orientation in economy, money started to pour into the family purses in many ways. The new money was reflected in clothes embroidered with gold and silk, better houses and housing circumstances, richer nutrition and generally improved living conditions. The Slavonian family then faced a new problem: how to avoid the break-up of the family property by ways of marriage and dowry. In the time of turbulent

² Of the estimated 64 500 inhabitants in 1698 (Gelo i Krivošić acc. to Supek, 1995/1996: 261), up to 265 641 inhabitants in 1785, and 332 478 in 1847 (Kesslerl acc. to Supek, 1995/1996: 261).

economic and social upheavals, the survival of the cooperatives in the 19th century was, according to many researchers of the life in the cooperative, the result of the drive to keep and secure the family fortunes. But in Slavonia another strategy appears: having fewer children (Supek, 1995/1996: 262).

On the basis of the research of the contemporary families, taken between the two world wars in the territory of Yugoslavia, Vera Stein Erlich arrives to the conclusion that almost everything inhuman and cruel in the family relationships came with the advent of the monetary economy. (Stein Erlich, 1971: 459-460). The civilian and militarized Croatia and Slavonia, according to the censuses were areas where marriages occurred earlier in life. Before 1848 there were often marriages between 15 year old boys and 14 year old girls, but that was forbidden after the census in 1851 (Gross, Szabo, 1992: 5). Earlier marriages were common in rural areas at that time, and induced by the breakup of cooperatives, because the division of communal property was counted on. A family had better chances of acquiring a larger portion of the communal property if the sons were married. The statistics that covered the number of children per marriage in civilian Croatia and Slavonia for 1856 and 1857 shows 3,4 children per married couple, while the average for the Monarchy was 4.4 (Gross, Szabo, 1992: 27).

Some anthropologists are of the opinion that the phenomenon of the white plague in Slavonia can be explained by Slavonia's colonist outlook in the 18th century, which caused a rapid growth of population, and then when the limits of growth and wealth were reached, Slavonia saw a drastic limitation of population growth. While other regions of Croatia were areas with strong emigration, and the population was stabilized by men leaving their villages, the family in Slavonia was kept at bay thanks to an internal factor, i.e. by women controlling their procreation. (Supek, 1995/1996: 261).

The position of the women and children in the cooperative

The data on the deliberately induced miscarriages can be found in the responses to a poll administered by the Croatian-Slavonian economic society (Društvo gospodarsko hervatsko – slavonsko) among its members in 1850. Since 1848, when ban Jelačić ended serfdom by his decree, polemics were fought in public about the cooperatives as economic organizations, and the spirit of the cooperative as an ideology. Those kinds of discussions persisted into the 20th century. Most authors who wrote on the topic were of the opinion that the cause of all evil in the countryside was the collapse of cooperatives.

But there were different opinions as well. Declaring the life in cooperatives as very immoral and economically inefficient, Ivan Štefani, a member of the society, says, among other things, "But, as much as possible, they try with any power and means to prevent women from having numerous children, because if they become a widow burdened with children they will be unwanted, and since many chores are asked

from them, they neglect their children, and cannot find a husband for the same reason. So to prevent birth, they take all kinds of bogus 'medicaments', and perform other 'procedures' just to get their children out of the womb, and often die in birth" (according to Rihtman-Auguštin, 1984: 39).

It is not clear from this description if the women decide on abortion³ by themselves or is it forced upon them by the community, but it is obvious from the quote that abortion is a common course of action, and a very dangerous procedure, as many fatalities show. Josip Lovretić deals with the difficult situation of the widow in a cooperative family 50 years later in his monography on the folk life and customs in Otok (a village near Vinkovci). Lovretić was a priest, born in Otok in 1865. In the chapter that deals with the relations in the family, he writes: "A woman who has many children, doesn't get a bigger share than the one who has none. A widow with seven children gets 25 forints, and a woman with no children, gets 50 forints if she's with her man. How will the one with seven kids clothe her seven children, if she has to tarry and work at home like other woman, and by the time she bathes and washes their faces, and washes and repairs their clothes, the day has passed" (Lovretić, 1990: 258).

In the ethnological and anthropological literature that deals with the issues of cooperatives, it is always pointed out that in a patriarchal society a woman is evaluated on the basis of her productive and reproductive abilities and that restricting birth is contrary to the ideology of a cooperative. Children are the treasure of a cooperative. If a widow wished to remarry or return to her parents the cooperative rarely cedes children to her because they were "acquired" within the cooperative. The social security of the children, the elderly, the disabled and those unable to work was guaranteed in a cooperative. Although people still lived in the cooperatives in the 19th century Slavonia, the following quote goes against the usual assumptions on the desirability of a greater number of children. The author points out that before there were lots of kids in the houses, but today: "There are mothers who tell their son: 'while I'm among the living, you'll not marry her. I have nothing against her, but she came out of a pack, and will give you one'" (Lovretić, 1990: 256). From the published data we can see that the foundations of the cooperative patriarchal life in Slavonia were shaken even before the end of serfdom and that the cooperative system didn't deliver the security that was normally expected of it.

About the almost inhumane conditions we find out again from Lovretić's descriptions. When we take into consideration that he was a priest it is surprising how openly he was describing the female side of life in the cooperative, especially pregnancy, birth and abortion. Although Lovretić often mentions female solidarity in the coop-

³ The medical historians who dealt with the issue of abortion, think that the practice of performing abortions in the area of Croatia spread during the Turkish conquests. There was a law in the sultan's palace that all women except the sultan's first wife had to abort their child or kill it immediately after abortion. The abortions were performed by a special order of midwives which were called kanli-hebe (bloody midwives). It seems that the custom spread to other harems and into the lower strata of society (Bazala, 1933: 12-13).

erative it seems it doesn't apply to pregnant women and mothers with small children. Female solidarity comes into play when abortion is performed, which we will get to later in the paper. The author too realizes the difficult position of the pregnant women. They perform all chores just as everyone else. "People don't care about a pregnant woman, they mock her, they don't help her but they bother her. A woman, when she gives birth, gives birth in a room, where the rest of the family lives. She is in pain, and the pitiless people won't get out of the room, and while she is suffering, they mock her and say ugly things. And every one of them is cursed not to conceive again. When a woman has a child, and then gets out of bed, she is made to work. A woman with five kids, head to ear high next to each other...When the kids rise out of bed, she quickly clothes, washes, combs and feeds them, leaves them to someone, and puts the cradle on her head and carries the youngest one in the field. Early in the morning she's already tired. She comes to the field last. Those who came before her sit in the shade and rest. They won't start working until everyone has gathered. ... Then she sees how others live like girls, and she lives like a slave, so she says to herself: 'What use having kids; I've had enough of that burden and not being spared by anyone'. You often hear in the village: 'I'd rather be covered with earth than bear another'" (Lovretić, 1990: 257-258).

Why did such an attitude towards a woman with a larger number of children develop? From the descriptions we get the picture that people in a way condemn a pregnant woman and wish her to suffer for having a baby. There is no one who would offer her moral support, let alone physical help. From that we deduce that the reason for limiting births is the difficult position of women and children in the family. Rage and resistance against the current situation can be felt, and so too the wish to change it even if it means to pay the price with one's own life. But women had it hard before, and yet we don't find data indicating that birth control was a common occurrence.

In the sources from the 18th century abortions are not yet mentioned. A. M. Reljković who in 1762 wrote a critical review of the circumstances in Slavonia under the title "Satyr or the wild man" mentions many negative customs, from *kola* to *mobe*, but he never mentions abortion, i.e. "the white plague". He says though that woman cast spells ('perform magic') to postpone their first birth in order to remain "young and beautiful" (Reljković, 1916: 111).

Lovretić also states that the female quest for beauty and youth is responsible for the white plague: "Women want to be young and beautiful, so they think that the beauty and youth will last if they don't give birth. They stay in bed every now and then, two or three times a year, and think that they are still young and beautiful. Women want to dance and be merry when they're young. And if one has children she can't move..." (Lovretić, 1990: 258). Further down I will reflect on the "easy and carefree" life of women with a small number of children.

The data for Slavonia at the end of the 19th century witness about a widely used custom of performing abortions known as the white plague. In the press of that age we read that the white plague is to blame for some areas in Slavonia being deserted. This

phenomenon points to an unusual authority of a woman on decisions about progeny which is in turn connected with her role in the family's subsistence. But the patriarchal characteristics are still present. Often it is the mother-in-law who determined how many kids her young daughter-in-law could have (Sremac, 1940: 50; Supek, 1995/1996).

The changes in the social-economic relations in the cooperative

Dowry

Usually dowry is listed as the most significant factor of women's non involvement in the cooperative economy. In the 19th century Slavonia, even before the end of serfdom in 1848 dowry or *osobac* is mentioned as the woman's individual property within the cooperative. It was written about as a new fact. It consisted of land, cattle and money. In the earlier archives it is not even mentioned that a woman in cooperatives or peasant families in general brings dowry into a marriage. It was an aristocratic or urban custom. What a bride brought was a few textile products which showed her qualities as a future housekeeper and sometimes some furniture, which would be called *djevojačka sprema* or *ruho* (robe). When the monetary economy permeated into the countryside, besides her productive and reproductive abilities the size of her dowry rises in significance. In this way, within a patrilinear household where property was transferred from the father to the son, there existed a parallel line of inheritance from the mother (or both parents) to the daughter. Dowry thus created economical differences among the nuclear families within the cooperative, thus contributing to its dissolution (Supek: 1995/1996).

Most authors who idealized the cooperatives claim that the dowry or *osobac* was the guiltiest culprit for the ending of the cooperative life. But the ethnographical archives from the 19th and the 20th century provide information in abundance which shows that the individual property was always in a defined relationship with the communal. That property was not out of reach of the community control. Individual property began to undermine the cooperative only when the forces which controlled the collective behavior disappeared and when the economic relationships with the society in general, which connected the individual and the communal economic interest, were broken (Rihtman-Auguštin, 1984: 166).

When they were serfs, the peasants couldn't give away the land as dory, because they didn't own it. When the cooperatives began to dissolve, the communal property was shared among the individual owners, and all the children had equal claim to it. The regions of Croatia which got drawn into the global economic relations later, showed a significant resistance to the issue of dowry even after the appropriate laws