

**THE CHILDREN'S CLINIC OF THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE OF COMENIUS  
UNIVERSITY IN BRATISLAVA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD AND THE ACTIVITIES  
OF RELIGIOUS SISTERS**

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The beginnings of systematic health care for the child population in Slovakia date back to the 19th century. Under the influence of the Enlightenment ideas of the Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746 – 1827), who devoted himself to the issues of upbringing and teaching children, while placing the main emphasis on formal education and considering moral education to be the most important in the entire pedagogical system, charitable women's associations aimed at helping children, gradually began to emerge. The philosophical views of Pestalozzi, who was based on the teachings of J. J. Rousseau and German philosophy, influenced the views on upbringing also among members of the young aristocracy in Hungary. It also included countess Theresa Brunsvik (1775–1861), who established the first children's nursery in the Habsburg Monarchy in 1828 and in Bratislava in 1831. The Bratislava Women's Association was founded on the initiative of the countess in 1830. This institution, with the help of Count František Zichy and other benefactors, mainly helped orphans and abandoned children (Kapellerová, Kovács, 2005, p. 10-11).

The persistent poor health of the child population also prompted initiatives from the Bratislava city council. At a meeting of the city council in 1853, a proposal was submitted to establish a children's hospital, which was implemented in the following years and the hospital was opened in 1857 (Brdlík, 1997, p. 131). However, the increase in hospitalized children and inadequate premises limited the provision of adequate professional care, thus, in 1867 the hospital moved to more suitable premises in the infirmary on Dunajská Street. However, this was only a temporary

solution. The need to build a new hospital facility was also recognized by the central authorities and local government representatives, who were confronted with the consequences of insufficient care for the youngest generation. Over the following years, a sufficient building fund was gradually created for the construction of a new hospital, which was opened in 1894. Excellent equipment and professional medical care placed the Francis Joseph Children's Hospital in Bratislava among the most modern health facilities in the Hungarian Kingdom. Nursing care was provided by the sisters of the Congregation of the Most Holy Savior (Latin: *Ordo Sanctissimi Salvatoris*). The sisters of this congregation were dedicated to the care of the sick, the care of children, and the provision of assistance to the elderly. In 1896, Archduchess Isabella requested their services from their Superior General Mother in Vienna. Shortly afterwards, four sisters from Vienna arrived and took over the care of children in the Bratislava children's hospital (Karabová, 2010, p. 177).

A new stage in child care began after the end of World War I. The consequences of the war accelerated concerns about the future and health of the child population. The large number of children suffering from malnutrition, high morbidity, and mortality of infants from nutritional disorders, respiratory diseases, high morbidity, and mortality of older children from tuberculosis and infectious diseases opened a new circle of problems that the newly established Czechoslovak Republic also had to deal with. Child malnutrition was not the only problem that public health experts pointed out. Cases of infectious diseases were increasing, mortality was rising, and birth rates were falling. A significant milestone was the establishment of the Faculty of Medicine of the Comenius University in Bratislava in 1919, which enabled the education of a new generation of doctors and created the conditions for research in medical sciences (See: Beniák, Tichý, 1992; Gogola, 2019, p. 86-88).

The Children's Hospital in Bratislava became one of the most important teaching bases of the newly established Faculty of Medicine of Comenius University. From the first academic year, intensive educational, but also scientific and research activities were carried out there (Soznam prednášok a soznam osôb ..., 1921, p. 13). Its head was Professor J. Brdlík (1883–1965), who had extensive experience gained at the Children's Clinic of Charles University in Prague. The Berlin school of Professor Czerny had a great influence on his professional growth (Falisová, 2010, p. 110). In his research, he initially studied serotherapy for diphtheria and prophylaxis of diphtheria with anatoxin, and during his time in Bratislava, he studied epidemic encephalitis and infectious intestinal diseases, which were among the most serious diseases of the time. After arriving at his new workplace, he began to pay great attention not only to therapeutic but also to preventive care for children (Ibid.). Special attention had to be paid especially to infants. The infant mortality rate, which was a sensitive indicator of the country's health and social conditions, was very high in Slovakia. For example, in the years 1920–1922, out of a thousand live-born children, more than 180 died within one year (Svetoň, 1970, p. 258). However, in some districts, the rate was much higher.

The Children's Clinic of the Faculty of Medicine of Comenius University played an important role in ensuring professional care for the youngest generation. Professor Brdlík made a significant contribution to the development of paediatrics in Slovakia. Given the high morbidity, especially among infants, he expanded the hospital's bed capacity by building a new infant pavilion, which was put into operation in the early 1930s. It was the only modern infant pavilion in the entire Czechoslovakia.

The care of children at the clinic was unthinkable without nursing staff. The number of hospitalized children increased significantly, and the shortage of nurses was partially solved by signing a contract with the Congregation of the Most Holy Savior, which undertook to provide additional religious nurses for the children's clinic (National Archive of the Czech Republic ...). After Professor Brdlík left for Prague, the management of the children's clinic was taken over by doc. MUDr. Alojz J. Chura, who was a pioneer of modern paediatrics in Slovakia and served as the head of the Children's Clinic from 1933 to 1945. Due to the increase in the number of child patients, the new head requested permission from the Ministry of Health to hire additional 17 religious nurses.

The new infant pavilion accommodated 40 infants and 18-20 mothers. The negative aspect was that some departments had at least four nurses on day duty but only one on night duty. However, it was questionable and very difficult, as Professor Chura put it, whether one nurse assigned to night duty could handle the treatment and feeding of children. The nurses also performed physical therapy, worked in the clinic's laboratory, kitchen, laundry, ironing room, etc. One nurse ensured the admission and bathing of new paediatric patients (NACR, ...). The head nurse's competence included supervision of organizational work, inventory management, and medical supplies. Doc. A. J. Chura, in a letter addressed to the Ministry of Health in Prague, requested permission to recruit only religious nurses. He justified the request by saying that the nuns approached their work very responsibly, were extremely selfless, disciplined, and unlike lay nurses, received a much lower salary. Some of them had also completed a special course in Vienna focused on caring for infants (Ibid.). The children's clinic continued to struggle with a shortage of nursing staff. Given the demands of the service for the youngest patients, the superior of the sisters of the Congregation of the Most Holy Savior employed at the Children's Clinic in Bratislava asked the management of the state hospital to assign four nuns to help. She stated in the request that the nurses at the Children's Clinic worked all day with the sick and in the kitchen. The work of nurses, especially in the ward where children with infectious diseases were hospitalized, was associated not only with difficult and responsible service but also with the risk of infection (Ibid.). The nurses had only half a day off and even after night duty they would return to work at three o'clock in the afternoon. The high level of work commitment and minimal rest after a long and demanding service also affected their health. The highly humane and selfless work of the religious sisters took a heavy toll.

The head of nun's congregation warned that, because of exhaustion, the sisters often fell ill and had to be replaced by new ones (Ibid.).

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