HISTORY OF MEDICINE

UDC: 61-05::[796:061(091)
DOI: 10.2298/VSP150401095V

Contribution of Dr. Laza Popović to the development of Serbian and Yugoslav Sokol movement

Doprinos dr Laze Popovića razvoju srpskog i jugoslovenskog sokolskog pokreta

Vladan Vukašinović*, Sladjana Mijatović*, Violeta Šiljak†, Saša Veličković‡, Dragan Strelić§, Miroslav Stevanović‖

***Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia; †Faculty of Management in Sport, Alfa University, Belgrade, Serbia; ‡Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Niš, Niš, Serbia; §Military Academy, University of Defence, Belgrade, Serbia; ‖Institute for Sport and Sports Medicine of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, Serbia**

Key words:
history, 20th century; physicians; famous persons; sports; serbia.

Ključne reči:
istorija medicine, xx vek; lekari; slavne ličnosti; sport; srbija.

Introduction

Doctor Laza Popović (Figure 1) was born in Sremski Karlovci in July 1877. He finished primary school and Serbian Orthodox Gymnasium *("Velika gimnazija Karlovačka")* in Sremski Karlovci. Then he studied and graduated medicine in Vienna, where he acquired the title of the Doctor of General Medicine. While studying he made friends and spent time with South-Slav students: the Czechs, Poles, Slovenians, Croats and others. During these meetings he was especially thrilled by the ideas, organisation and programme activities of the "Soko" society he was presented by the Czech colleagues.

Fig. 1 – Dr. Laza Popović, founder of the Sokol gymnastics association.

In university students that could act only through cultural and literary associations and through their youth assemblies, new hopes were awaken in their efforts to better address issues of vital interests of the Serbian people in the territories under the administration of Vienna and Budapest. Thus, in the city Karlovci, the youth initiated the idea of establishing a kind of an association in which they could gather. In the beginning, these were ideas about the formation of fencing, football, or gymnastics association, originating because of the previous efforts of famous physicians Laza Kostić, Jovan Jovanović Zmaj and Milan Jovanović Batut to spread the idea of gymnastic exercising in the aim of "improvement of public health of the nation" [1].

Laza Popović – A founder of Serbian Sokol Associations under the Austro-Hungarian rule

Attracted by the romantic enthusiasm of the youth of Karlovac, young physician Laza Popović, after returning to Sremski Karlovci from his studies, professional, but also handsome, approachable, with a reputation in his native town and the surrounding area, found himself right in the midst of the storm. He quickly gained great trust and popularity, especially among the progressive nationally oriented youth that accepted his idea to establish the Sokol gymnastics association, *ie* "Belgrade Soko Gymnastics Association" (1892), which existed in the Kingdom of Serbia. He was suggested this idea by his patient, Joseph

Correspondence to: Dragan Strelić, Military Academy, University of Defence, 11 000 Belgrade, Serbia.
E-mail: dstrela@yahoo.com

Kraus, the Czech, who also made it possible for the Czech members of the Sokol to send him instructions.

This was how "The Serbian Soko" was founded in Sremski Karlovci on January 19, 1904, the work of which was soon approved by the authorities. This was the beginning of wide acceptance of Popović's exceptionally devoted engagement to "spread the Sokol idea throughout the Serbs, for national gathering and awakening of freedom of the Serbs under Austro-Hungarian authorities". This was what he himself wrote about later: "I believe in the Serbian national thought ... this thought will emerge as a storm and carry us all with its sudden irresistible force. This thought of the Serbian folk, the content of which are unification, liberation and progress of the whole Serbian nation, will become the natural leader of all our thoughts, and will lead us to victory" [2].

The beginning of the "Serbian Sokol" of Karlovci was not easy at all because of the resistance in various circles. However, Popović's dedication to the development of the Sokol gymnastic association, and, first of all, awakening of the Sokol spirit of the youth of Karlovci, would make the young Sokol association of Karlovci become the centre and the source of the Serbian Sokol movement in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in just a year, and to found the "Serbian Sokol parish of Fruška Gora" in Sremski Karlovci (1905). Doctor Laza Popović made connection with the Czech, Croatian, and Slovenian Sokol associations, and since he was a gifted speaker and writer, he began publishing his first Sokol articles in the papers "*Branik*" (Defender), "*Srbobran*" and "*Omladinski glasnik*" (Youth Gazette). The outcomes of his written words spread as rapidly as a flame throughout Srem, Bačka, Banat, Slavonia, and western Croatia. He promoted the idea that "exercise, mass meetings and public appearances of the Sokol are the most important elements of the Sokol movement to achieve health – both physical and spiritual, strength and patience, a strong will to withstand the strain and tension in life, when being faced with sacrifice and pain" [1]. Besides exercising, he stressed the importance of fostering sociability of members, advocated for freedom, unity and brotherhood, but also for the suppression of political and party influence, chauvinism and bigotry [3].

Since the foundation of "The Serbian Sokol", Popović was always voted the head of the association, and he managed to increase the number of members of all categories. He made friends with many of them who were to become his close associates, especially Nikola Maksimović and Milan Teodorović. He chose excellent gymnasts among the young members who were enthusiastic about the Sokol idea, seeing the future leaders of the Sokol in them. In a short period of time, according to "The Serbian Soko", with his associates, Popović helped founding of 30 new associations in Šid, Novi Sad, Zemun, Vukovar, Ruma, Sremska Mitrovica, Korenica, Pakrac, Stara Pazova, Vinkovci, Inđija, and Zagreb.

The contribution of Laza Popović to education and spreading physical exercise among Serbian youth

This enthusiastic physician initiated work everywhere, founded the Sokol reading room with a library and an archive in Karlovci and Sokol libraries in villages in order to make rural population literate, introduced the Sokol lectures on playgrounds, during events and parties, and also initiated the establishment of "The Peasant Sokol", sent the best members to leadership courses in Prague. A great interest in the work of Sokol could be felt among students and theological youth that respected him infinitely. Female divisions were also established. Many theologians from Karlovac joined the Sokol then. He organized associations for joint appearances at *slet* (a mass gymnastics festival). At the First Croatian all-Sokol jamboree (*slet*) (1906) around 200 Sokol members took place, and since then all Serbian Sokol members acted as a national entity. At the Second Croatian all-school *slet* in Zagreb (1911), there were 762 exercisers, while the *slet* in Prague (1907) and the First Slavonic *slet* in Prague (1912) involved over 1,000 members and 585 exercisers in a separate Serbian exercise [2].

Dr. Popović was open for cooperation, and therefore accepted the idea of Tihomir Ostojić, a high school teacher from Novi Sad, known for promoting gymnastics practicing to include the Sokol *slet* in the programme on the *Vidovdan* (June 28) gathering of people in the monastery of Ravanica on Fruška gora. Since 1905, several thousands of people from Srem and Bačka and the Sokol members had gathered in Ravanica. On *Vidovdan* gatherings, in addition to *slets* exercises, there were heroic and traditional folk games, gymnastic competitions in running, jumping, throwing stones from shoulder. Besides, there were speeches about *Vidovdan*, one of the most important Serbian holidays; poetry was recited to remind the gathered of the Serbian Kosovo heroes, Prince Lazar and Miloš Obilić. The famous "*Vidovdan slet* exercise" was often seen, performed during the *slet* in Prague in 1912 [2]. This national symbolism – the connection of *Vidovdan* and the Sokol movement was not broken until the start of the World War II.

Dr. Popović, having acquired the highest reputation among prominent Czech officials of the Sokol, took advantage of a great friendship with Dr. Joseph Shiner, the head of the Czech Sokol community in Prague, after several unsuccessful attempts to mediate in reconciling the two rival Belgrade gymnastic currents in the Kingdom of Serbia. Thus, the Sokol association "Sokols" and civil gymnastics association "Dušan the Mighty" – "Dušanovci", with its associations, united into a single "Union of Sokol associations "Dušan the Mighty" (1910), to which King Peter I Karađorđević of Yugoslavia and the patron of both associations, Prince Đorđe Karađorđević both contributed. That prevented further disputes and led to better relations and the development of the Serbian Sokol movement [4].

The influence of Laza Popović on the unity of all the Serbian Sokol Associations

Popović worked tirelessly for the unity of all Serbian Sokol associations. He initiated the meeting of representatives of all Serbian Sokol associations in Zagreb in 1911, where "The Union of Serbian Sokol associations" was formed [5]. This union, with its president StevanTodorović, did

not recognize national borders of that time. Soon, the mentioned union, thanks to Popović who was a member of the Presidency of the Union, joined in the All-Slavic Sokol Association (1910). The Association comprised 1,300 Sokol associations with 140,000 members – Czechs, Slovenians, Croats, Poles, Bulgarians and Serbs [6]. Popović was not satisfied with that, but continued writing and collecting new members; he proposed Belgrade as the centre of the Serbian Sokol movement. "Karlovac can never be Serbian Prague", he used to write, as well as: "Conditioned by large fragmentation of the national entity into several parts, our national position became unnatural, so that it obstructs and suffocates any general work of the people." These words were later cited at court – the "high-treason" process in Zagreb, where he was charged and convicted [7].

At the end of 1911 and the beginning of 1912, the center of the Serbian Sokol movement moved from Sremski Karlovci to Belgrade, because the Sokol organization had already strengthened significantly in the free and independent Kingdom of Serbia, with a large number of Sokol associations and experts and with the support of the state. The proposal of Dr. Popović and the Sokol members from Karlovac was brought out of love and faith in the future of Serbia.

This Popović's gesture was generous and visionary, as if he had known that soon, when the First Balkan War began, the Austro-Hungarian authorities would prohibit the operation of "The Serbian Sokol". The position of the Serbian Sokol movement became even more difficult because some of the members went to Serbia to fight for the Serbian cause as volunteers. Just before the beginning of the First World War, the establishment of the Yugoslav association in Zagreb, the members of which would be Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian associations, was initiated and negotiated. And Popović spoke to the youth of Sokol with enthusiasm: "This is the beginning of that majestic poetry, which will follow the national rebirth, liberation and union" [2]. But the union did not occur because of the fateful *Vidovdan* shot at Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. The long-time aspirations of the Sokol members for union were to be sealed with blood on the Salonika Front.

The assassination in Sarajevo happened in the moment when the Sokol members of Karlovac and numerous guests were on the *Vidovdan slet* in the Monastery of Ravanica in Fruška Gora. The gendarmerie immediately drove them away; somewere arrested, and several frontmen were executed. The main leader of the "Serbian Sokol", Dr. Laza Popović, together with another 50 members, was arrested and charged with treason, which was not the first time for him because he had been already charged in 1910. During a short trial in Zagreb, Popović, eloquent and dignified, successfully defended not only himself, but the idea and the Serbian Sokol movement, so the prosecutor dropped the charges, and Laza was sentenced to 14 months of severe imprisonment for disruption of public peace (1915) [1], due to which his physician diploma was taken away from him by the Vienna University.

In trials of both Banja Luka and Sarajevo, 56 members of the Serbian Sokol of the Bosnia-Herzegovinian province were charged because of their work in the Sokol association and their attempted secession of Bosnia from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (in September 1915). A total of 97 of the accused were found guilty of high treason – 16 were sentenced to death and the others to severe imprisonment (April 1916). The indictment alleged that some mentioned collaboration with Dr. Popović [8].

After World War I, on *Vidovdan*, during the First Sokol Assembly in Novi Sad (June 28, 1919), in the presence of the highest state representatives and delegates of the "tribal "Sokol members, the united "Sokol Association of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes" was declared [9] and the fundamental principle of "*One country, one nation, one Sokol movement*" was proclaimed.

Popović later wrote about this: "My people are on the first place, and everything is for my people; all the rest is on the second place. In this great first and true love, the whole Sokol movement will burn to the end. When I felt, learned and saw after the war that my people have two names, but are the one, the embodiment of my thoughts on the national unity of the Serbs and Croats is my Yugoslav idea, and my Yugoslav Sokol movement as I first cried it out and in one swing forged it from January to June 1919 [10]."

In the following years, Popović participated and contributed to resolving numerous issues of the new Sokol organization: the changes of the organization's name ("The Yugoslav Sokol Association" in 1920; "The Union of Sokols of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia" in 1929), solving organizational problems in reconstruction of activities of the united association, promoting ideological, aesthetic, human and educational values of the Sokol movement, as well as developing patriotic, dynastic and state-building qualities of each individual, especially the Sokol children and youth, as well as overcoming misunderstandings and problems because a part of the Croatian Sokol movement tried to leave the union. His views on the pernicious influence of politics on the Sokol movement were very open and unambiguous. Here are a few of his messages to the members of Sokol, which are beyond time:

"The Sokol movement and everyday politics neither have, nor can have any connection. First and foremost, we have to determine the fact that one of the main and fundamental principles of the Sokol idea is: full and absolute freedom"; "The Sokol division is a pure, imminent, passive consequence of our political division and political orientation, our political struggle..."; "Many Yugoslav politicians believe that the Yugoslav Sokol movement is an ordinary circus...monkey business"; "First and foremost, cleansing the Sokol membership from all who are not dedicated to the Sokol idea and from politicians!...; "The future culture and Sokol historians will not believe, when they come across and read, what was left after the "Sokol battle" to lie and rot in our country"; "Let the members of Sokol keep their flag clean and unspoilt by anything dirty!"; "In the idea of Sokol, there is not and there must not be any religious, tribal, or class differences [11]!"

Publicist and editor of Sokol journals

Journalistic and editorial opus of Dr. Laza Popović is also extremely rich. In addition to very impressive speeches

at public meetings, that inspired others with his enthusiasm in the Sokol idea, he left a voluminous writer's mark not only in Sokol, but also in other papers, inviting people to join the Sokol movement, spreading the idea of the unity and strengthening of the Serbian people. But his patriotism was not strictly national. He worked closely with the Czech, Slovenian and Croatian Sokols. Thanks to romantic, but strong and vital ideological and propaganda style, he touched feelings of a great number of the Sokol members. In 1906 he founded the "The newspaper for the matters of the Sokol" – Serbian Sokol, which he edited and published in Karlovac. Later, that newspaper was united with the Belgrade newspaper "Serbian Sokol Herald" (1911). Laza edited and prepared the paper in Sremski Karlovci (up to 1914), while it was published in Belgrade; at that time he also wrote in "The Serbian Knight" (1904–1914). After the First World War, he wrote and edited "The Sokol Herald" (1919–1929). His articles were published in the Sokol papers "Soko of "Dušan the Mighty" (1925–1929), "Sokol Gazette" (1930–1941), "Eagle Eye" (1936–1941), as well as the Sokol yearbooks, calendars, memorials and jubilee almanac. It is interesting that he published his first works, stories and short stories while he was a student in the Mostar magazine "*Zora*" (The Dawn) in "*Bosanska Vila*" (Bosnian Fairy) and "Literary South" (up to 1918). He also wrote about thirty articles and literary criticism in "*Brankovo kolo*" (1913–1914) and in "New Europe"(1921–1926), of which he was an editor for a while. He was also the editor of "Serbian Folk Poems" in Zagreb.

The scientist and the Professor of the University

After the war, since 1918, Laza Popović had his permanent residence in Zagreb. That same year, in the Sokol of Prague, he was promoted once again by returning him the degree of general practitioner. At the end of 1918, he became a consultant physician and the head of the Roentgen Laboratory of the Charity Hospital (*Zakladna bolnica*) in Zagreb. At the Faculty of Medicine, the University of Zagreb, he was elected an associate professor in 1921 and full professor in radiology in 1931. In 1935 and 1936 he was the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine. He was the first president of the Association of Roentgenology founded in Zagreb in 1927. He dedicated the last ten years of his life, between 1931 and 1941, to science and teaching career at the University of Zagreb. As an outstanding Serb, a Yugoslav and the member of Sokol, he had to flee from Zagreb to Belgrade in 1941. He died in May 1945 at the age of 67. He was buried at the Military Cemetery in Belgrade, but his wife Sofija (née Jeftić) transferred his remains to Zagreb in 1947.

Conclusion

Because of its ideology, the Sokol movement was an important factor in achieving national unity and liberation of the enslaved South Slavic peoples. Members of the Sokol movement had an important place in these goals. A Serbian physician, writer, social and the Sokol movement, Dr. Laza Popović, found himself on this path. Numerous data related to his organizational operations and patriotic behaviour have confirmed that the majority of authors who have written about the idea of the Sokol movement, justifiably considered him the spiritual leader of the Serbian, as well as the prominent constructor (ideologist or a visionary) of the Yugoslav Sokol movement. In the beginning, his charismatic nature attracted, gathered and popularized this gymnastic organization, in the role of a long-year Sokol leader, he tirelessly spread the idea of the need for national gathering, strengthening and cultural revival of the Serbian people under the Austro-Hungarian rule. He later promoted the unity of Yugoslav peoples, fought against the political influence in the Sokol movement and damaging national phenomena. He also influenced the development the Sokol idea as the founder, editor and writer of articles in Sokol journals. Numerous difficulties he was exposed to because of his social and sports work, national feelings and patriotism in the turbulent times in which he lived, did not diminish his enormous contribution to the Sokol movement. Looking at his versatile work in the Sokol movement, from this distance in time, we can conclude that the name of Laza Popović is inseparably linked to the history of the Sokol movement of Vojvodina, Slavonia, Bosnia, Dalmatia, Southern Serbia, as well as the Kingdom of Serbia, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

REFERENCES

1. *Petrović JV*. Origin and Development of "Serbian Sokol" in Sremski Karlovci until 1914. Fizička kultura 1987; 41(5): 327−33. (Serbian)
2. *Brozović A*. The Beginning of the First Sokol Movement. In: *Brozovic A*, editor. Sokolski zbornik; 1934−1935. Beograd: Sokolski savez Kraljevine Jugoslavije, 1935. p. 135−48. (Serbian)
3. *Dimić Ž*. Memories on the Karlovac Sokol Movement: 1904-2014. Sremski Karlovci: Sokolsko društvo; 2014. (Serbian)
4. *Vukašinović V*. Sokol Movement in Smederevo, Anniversary: 101 year of the Sokol Movement and 128 years of gymnastics (1885-2013). Smederevo: SIA; 2013. (Serbian)
5. *Medaković D*. The Serbs in Zagreb. Novi Sad: Prometej; 2004. (Serbian)
6. *Todorović S*. The Association of Pan-Slavic Sokol Movement. In: *Obradović SI*, editor. Sokolski godišnjak. Beograd: Savez sokolskih društava Dušan Silni; 1912. p. 35−7. (Serbian)
7. *Dragić M*. Sokolska župa Beograd. In: *Brozović A,* editor. Sokolski zbornik. Belgrade: Savez Sokola Kraljevine Jugoslavije; 1930. (Serbian)
8. *Brozović A*. Soko Members before the Court. In: *Brozović A,* editor. Sokolski zbornik. Belgrade: Savez Sokola Kraljevine Jugoslavije; 1935. p. 131−2. (Serbian)
9. *Ilić S, Mijatović S*. History of Physical Culture of the Principality and Kingdom of Serbia. Belgrade: Faculty of Physical Culture; 2006. p. 584−5.
10. *Popović L*. My Thoughts on the Sokol Movement. In: Brozović A, editor. Sokolski zbornik. Belgrade: Savez Sokola Kraljevine Jugoslavije; 1930. p. 213. (Serbian)
11. *Popović L*. Again on the Sokol Movement. Nova Evropa 1926; 14(1): 7−14.

Received on April 1, 2015.
Accepted on July 3, 2015.
Online First May, 2016.