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THE PRNJAVOR WOMEN FIGHT FOR THEIR MIDWIFE: PROFESSIONAL, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL CONTINUITIES FROM HABSBERG BOSNIA TO YUGOSLAVIA¹

Abstract: Researching regime change in Bosnia and Herzegovina means, especially for women's history, also asking about continuities. In 1918 when the new southslavic administration took over, it was preceded by a four years long wartime. After this very hard and cruel time span nothing was like before. I nevertheless argue that there were various continuities, principally for women, as I will show at the example of the former Habsburg's midwives. Firstly, a lot of midwives remained on the ground during the whole wartime from 1914 to 1918 unlike most Habsburg's physicians who left the country. Midwives in many places were still there when the new post-war administration took over. Previous attributions as members of the Habsburg administration got irrelevant when a midwife passed the difficult wartime with "her" women's community. Secondly, the relations between midwives and administration, established by the Habsburgs, prevailed and were adopted by the new administration of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. This relation can be traced in the paperwork and in surviving administrative techniques as the regular control of midwives' bags by the medical officer. The relation midwife-administrator served as a mediation to help establish the relation between the male administrators and the female habitants. It means the inclusion of women in "state". Thirdly, also the relation between local women and administration continued to be very

¹ This article was translated and edited by Babajalscha Meili and Sarah Hyde. I would like to thank Emily Greble for her support, Marion Wullschleger and the reviewers for their comments and helpful suggestions.

conflicting. At the example of the midwife Antonia Savić I can show both: how local women fought for their midwife and how women learned in Austro-Hungarian time their role, their rights and the ways to claim them. Finally, the local administration of Prnjavor had to adjust, women's solidarity and their correct and modern articulation won: the old midwife gained her work permit back.

Keywords: *continuities (cultural, social and professional), women's history, history of midwifery, history of modernity, paperwork, solidarity*

At the heart of my story is Antonia Savić, the midwife in Habsburg Bosnia who continued her professional work during and after World War I. My reading of the voluminous trial records from 1923 stored at the archives of the health department in Sarajevo (*Zdravstveni odsjek za Bosnu i Hercegovinu*) reconstructs parts of her life story.² This allows for a glance at how a decisive moment in the political history of Bosnia-Herzegovina had reverberations with the fate of Antonia Savić who is just one of many women – all Bosnian midwives had a similar fate.

Researching regime change, such as the one which occurred in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1918, inevitably gives rise to questions of continuity. After the breakup of the Habsburg empire in October, 1918, the new South Slavic administration of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes³ took over. Historians of the twentieth century regularly view this moment as a rupture. But, as Pieter M. Judson points out, 1918 did not engender a radical break with former imperial institutions, practices, and legal systems; “(...) *nor did Austria-Hungary's disappearance change people's lives.*”⁴ He argues that all successor states, although cultivating a nationalist rhetoric to artificially enlarge the differences with the collapsed Empire, “*could be considered little empires, given the ways they administered their populations, legitimized themselves, and conceptualized cultural difference.*”⁵

² I'm grateful to the archivist Mina Kujović who in 2010 drew my attention to this unusually comprehensive file.

³ The correct designation as of 29.10.1918 was “State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs” (*Država Slovenaca, Hrvata i Srba*). On 1.12.1918 it was renamed as the “Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes” was proclaimed (*Kraljevstvo Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*). On 28.6.1921, the Vidovdan Constitution was adopted and the name changed to *Kraljevina Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*. On 3.10.1929 it became the “Kingdom of Yugoslavia” (*Kraljevina Jugoslavije*), a politically redefined structure.

⁴ Pieter M. Judson: *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016 : 387.

⁵ Judson : 388.

This is particularly true for Bosnia and Herzegovina, a Habsburg region that was integrated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Various scholars have made similar arguments about the benefits of thinking of this moment through a lens of continuity, rejecting the idea that 1918 witnessed a deep caesura that affected all layers of the society.⁶

Coming in the wake of a four-year war, the regime-change in 1918 was a part of a transitional political and social era that began in the war and even pre-war time. As historians of social history have argued, we cannot only examine the war through the lens of disastrous destruction; rather, we must also explore its manifold productive effects, its “enabling spaces” that lead to social innovation, new knowledge and governing practices.⁷ According to this approach, old and new existed side-by-side during the transitional period.

Bosnia and Herzegovina certainly experienced such a long, multi-faceted transitional period. Starting with the annexation in 1908, the region found itself in a latent state of war.⁸ The “Balkan Crisis” and the Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913 broke ground for further radicalization along ethno-nationalist lines in the multicultural lands of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹ Then, World War I was marked by violent military action as well as shifting fronts across the country, with soldiers, prisoners, internees, deserters and refugees migrating across the hinterland in an example of one of the world’s first “total wars”. The entire population suffered from both the direct consequences of the war and the indirect ones - important losses in agricultural production, import bans, economic shortages.

During this decade of political rupture and violence, from 1908 until 1918, tensions between the ethno-religious groups of Bosnia and Herzegovina grew. Local political leaders, Habsburg bureaucrats, and various wartime military authorities

⁶ See: Emily Greble: «The Uncertain ‘Wilsonian Moment’ for Muslims in Yugoslavia: Reframing Historiographical Conversations through Minority Experiences,» *Passato e presente: Special forum on 1918*, forthcoming 2018; Stefano Petrunaro: «The Medical Debate about Prostitution and Venereal Diseases in Yugoslavia (1918–1941)», *Social History of Medicine*, 2017, hxx023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hxx023>; Carlo Moos: *Habsburg post mortem: Betrachtungen zum Weiterleben der Habsburgermonarchie*. Wien: Böhlau, 2016.

⁷ Heike Karge et al.: «Introduction», in *From the Midwife’s Bag to the Patient’s File: Public Health in Eastern Europe*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2017 : 16 et seq.

⁸ Judson : 390.

⁹ For the remainder of this paragraph: Greble 2018; Ferdo Hauptmann: *Die Österreichisch-ungarische Herrschaft in Bosnien und der Hercegovina 1878-1918: Wirtschaftspolitik und Wirtschaftsentwicklung*, 251-256; *Die Habsburgermonarchie und der Erste Weltkrieg*, hg. Helmut Rumpler (Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918, Band XI, Teil 1 und 2). Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2016.

(both nationalists and imperial) manipulated these tensions. After the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie in 1914, for example, the Habsburgs escalated their relentless anti-Serbian propaganda. Physical attacks against Serbs, their goods and lands ensued, legalized by the laws of war.¹⁰ Violence against Serbs contributed to retaliatory violence against Muslim and Croat groups. Yet, compared to other similarly structured areas in the Balkans with multi-religious populations (Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Macedonia), in which ethnic violence turned into modern ethnic cleansing, Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the very violent war and post-war period, remained religiously and nationally mixed. Some scholars believed this to be the result of forty years of Habsburg imperial politics and policy.¹¹

Analysis of continuity in moments of political rupture is particularly relevant for historians interested in women's history and especially the meaning of regime-change for women.¹² In this article, I argue that various forms of continuity related to women existed, as I will show on the example of the midwife Antonia Savić. I will interweave the reconstruction of her life story with the question about continuity. This allows me to show three different forms of continuity related to women in the time period discussed here, i.e. before and after 1918. First, many Habsburg midwives remained on the ground during the entire war from 1914 to 1918, in contrast to most Habsburg physicians who left the country.¹³ Second, the bureaucratic and professional relationship between midwives and the Habsburg administration continued through and after the war, and was formally adopted by the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. This particular relationship left traces behind in the paperwork it produced - in its formal and technical execution as the regular control of the midwife's bag by the medical officer. The Habsburgs had professionalized midwifery. For the fledgling state, the official role of midwife-administrator became the key to establishing, for the first time, a direct relation-

¹⁰ Marko Trogrlić: «Die südslawische Frage», in: *Die Habsburgermonarchie und der Erste Weltkrieg*, 965-1015; Michael Schwartz: "Ethnische Säuberungen" in der Moderne: Globale Wechselwirkungen nationalistischer und rassistischer Gewaltpolitik im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2013 : 275 et seq.

¹¹ Schwartz : 277.

¹² This differs from the history of feminism or history of organized women's movements, but is still inspired by Johanna Gehmacher, Natascha Vittorelli (Hg.): *Wie Frauenbewegung geschrieben wird*. Wien: Löcker 2009.

¹³ All of the five female doctors employed at the time remained also and were taken on by the new administration: Barbara Martin: Rosalie Sattler-Feuerstein und Rachel Weissberg – die beiden letzten von Österreich-Ungarn in Bosnien-Herzegowina eingesetzten Amtsärztinnen (female physician), www.scribd.com, August 2017; Dies.: Zur Tätigkeit von Kornelija Rakić als Amtsärztin in Bosnien-Herzegowina (1908-1918): eine Spurensuche, www.scribd.com, October 2017.

ship between male bureaucrats and female inhabitants. Midwives, in other words, transformed from health professionals to a new kind of professional employee, and women's healthcare shifted from the private sphere of the home to a matter of state. Thirdly, by exploring continuity through the lens of midwifery, we gain access to the voices of many illiterate women and we see how these women found agency in a transforming system. In this article, by focusing on the story of the midwife Antonia Savić, we can see how, under Habsburg rule, women had learned about their rights and the proper ways to claim them and, subsequently, how in the postwar years they stood up in support of a midwife, who was barred from exercising her profession. In many ways, Antonia Savić's life and career path is typical for Habsburg midwives. It does, however, stand out inasmuch as the records are very comprehensive and have been preserved in great detail to this day.

Antonia Savić, Early Life

At the center of my story is Antonia Savić, a midwife in Habsburg Bosnia who continued her professional work during and after the war. She was born in 1859 or 1860 in Mrkopalj in the Croatian section of the military borderlands.¹⁴ She was the first-generation midwife who had obtained a midwifery diploma at the beginning of the 1880s.¹⁵ Presumably through her husband, she also had the right of residence in Otočac, where they had two children. After her husband's premature death, as a 22-year-old widow, Antonia Savić enrolled at the Zagreb Midwifery College for a five-month training program. She completed her training successfully in 1882, five years after the college's inception.¹⁶ Savić's professional development was typical for a midwife at that time. Like many midwives, she was a widow who completed a training course in the hope of being able to care for herself and her children. Having obtained her diploma, Antonia Savić returned to Mrkopalj for three years to exercise her newly acquired skills. This indicates that the municipality had paid for her training course fees. Such a grant usually

¹⁴ Arhiv Bosne i Hercegovine (ABH), Zemaljska vlada (ZV), 1899, 52-9/11. Janjić and Savić 1898. Information on the year of birth varies. In the files from Bugojno it is 1860, those from Sarajevo 1859.

¹⁵ Reconstruction of Antonia Savić's life story as well as explanations on "Habsburg's midwives" are based on the research for my dissertation entitled «Habsburgs Hebammen in Bosnien-Herzegowina» (defended in 2017 at the University of Zurich).

¹⁶ Maksimović Jovan / Maksimović Marko: «From the "Art of Cutting the Umbelical Cord" by Dr. J. B. Lalangue to the "Midwifery" by Prof. Dr. A. Lobmayer and Prof. Dr. F. Durst», *Acta med-hist Adriat*, 12, 2014, 385-412.

meant the grant recipient was required to work for a certain period of time (usually three years) in a place determined by the administration.¹⁷ In Savić's case, this was her place of birth. Other women explicitly asked to be sent anywhere but to their place of origin, thus allowing women a space of professional and personal agency.¹⁸ Having completed the mandatory three-year term, Savić's midwifery diploma allowed her to look for work anywhere in Habsburg territory. She went to Sarajevo, a very attractive spot in the 1880s for job-seekers of all kinds.¹⁹ In Sarajevo, on 18 September 1885, she received a work permit to exercise her profession independently.²⁰

The historical records allow only for an indirect reconstruction of these formative years of Antonia Savić's professional life. The relevant historical recordkeeping begins in 1898, after new administrative procedures had been introduced with the midwifery reform.²¹ Under the new rules, all midwives were registered by political authorities and subject to regular controls by medical officers.²² As a result of the reform, which required midwives to register themselves if they intended to practice their profession legally, midwives formed a professional group within the Habsburg administration. Thus, the year 1898 constitutes a caesura, especially for a history of women in Habsburg Bosnia-Herzegovina, as it is the year in which historical recordkeeping concerning the first major professional organization of women began.

At that point in time, Antonia Savić had already been living in Kaiserstrasse 2 in Bosnia-Herzegovina's capital for 13 years with her two children.²³ Her job allowed her to provide for herself and the children. Many others, women and men, felt ambivalent toward her, as was the case for many first-generation midwives.²⁴

¹⁷ ABH, Zajedničko ministarstvo finansije (ZMF), 1910, K. 19, 3531. Midwifery report.

¹⁸ ABH, ZV, 1899, 52-9/32. Appeal of Sofia Radić.

¹⁹ See the plenty of letters of application: Historijski Arhiv Sarajevo (HAS), Gradsko poglavarstvo grada Sarajeva (GP), 1879 and 1880.

²⁰ ABH, ZV, 1899, 52-9/11. Summative register of midwives, Sarajevo. Registering in a place as a midwife, a work permit was issued automatically – an intentionally simple procedure installed with the aim of facilitating the hiring of missing health care personnel for the Habsburg administration's officials and their families.

²¹ HAS, Biblioteka, Naputak za babice (primalje) u Bosni i Hercegovini, no. 67.637/I ex 1898.

²² On reform, see: Sara Bernasconi: «The Material Side of Modernity: The Midwife's Bag in Bosnia and Herzegovina around the Turn of the Century», in *From the Midwife's Bag to the Patient's File* : 97-116.

²³ ABH, ZV, 1899, 52-9/11. Summative register of midwives, Sarajevo.

²⁴ About ambivalence: Sara Bernasconi (2018): «Genre et administration: les sages-femmes habsbourgeoises en Bosnie-Herzégovine / Gender and Administration : Habsburg's mid-

First, she was foreign to the city and spoke a slightly different dialect. People easily understood her in Sarajevo but still, her speech singled her out as a foreigner. Second, she came under attack for being unfamiliar with the latest medical advances. From the point of view of the administrators in 1900, the training program she attended at the Zagreb Midwifery College in 1882 had offered a limited introduction to asepsis and disinfection at birth. By the end of the 19th century, knowledge and know-how in this particular field was dated in imperial peripheries as soon as it was introduced, since medical advances in the centers of the empire were moving quickly.²⁵ It was this topic also which gave rise to a first conflict between Antonia Savić and the supervising government commissioner of the city of Sarajevo in 1904.²⁶ The commissioner accused her of quackery, explaining that she “*had received her midwife’s diploma in pre-antiseptical times*”. Disinfection and the specter of puerperal fever dominated the political discourse by which the government’s attempts to tighten the administration’s control of midwives and women giving birth were legitimized.²⁷ In the end, a measure was imposed on 45-year-old Savić who had to complete a “course” at the state hospital on theoretical concepts of cleanliness and antisepsis. Its relevance in terms of the situation in the countryside and the needs related to the healthcare settings Savić was exposed to in her daily work was not very high.

Further away from Bosnia’s capital, in peripheral Bugojno in Central Bosnia, the experience of midwives such as Antonia Savić were highly appreciated by locals.²⁸ Savić arrived in Bugojno in 1911.²⁹ Whereas Sarajevo’s bureaucrats focused on medical training, in the provinces, practical knowledge was admired. In 1911, the medical officer in charge of professional inspection for the county of Travnik seemed outright enthusiastic about Savić, describing: “*(...) The midwife, an expert in her field, profoundly exquisite skills, in service clean, antiseptic.*” In Bugojno, too, Antonia Savić continued to work independently, which meant that she did not have a fixed basic income like municipal midwives. The municipal

wives in Bosnia-Herzegovina», *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* (Special Issue: Le genre dans l’espace (post-)ottoman / Gendering the (post-)Ottoman space), no. 48, (forthcoming).

²⁵ See the annual publication “Jahresbericht über die Fortschritte auf dem Gebiete der Geburtshilfe und Gynäkologie”, first published in 1888.

²⁶ ABH, ZV, 1904, 47-1/10. Complaint against the midwife Antonia Savić.

²⁷ Bernasconi 2017 : 100 et seq.

²⁸ On Bugojno from 1878 until 1918: Samija Sarić: *Bugojno i njegova okolina (Donji Vakuf, Prusac, Gornji Vakuf i Kupres) u vrijeme Austro-Ugarske uprave (1878–1918)*. Sarajevo 2009.

²⁹ For the quote in the following sentence also: ABH, ZV, 1912, 105-7/2. Summative register of midwives, Travnik.

administration, however, would usually compensate her for assisting poor women giving birth. Apart from that, she depended on good relations with wealthy families that were able to pay her for her services.³⁰

In the middle of the First World War, in 1916, Antonia Savić arrived to Prnjavor.³¹ There she met Katarina Šušković Janjić who had been employed as the municipal midwife for about ten years. From the beginning, the two women were rivals - a situation that would escalate over time. After a few months, the municipal midwife Janjić closed ranks with the district physician Maoro Lefković and accused Antonia Savić of acting beyond her powers. They said she had turned around a dead baby and pulled it out by its legs, that she had treated farmers for various ailments, and that she had been involved in abortions. Antonia Savić immediately countersued the two of them, receiving widespread support from a group of influential female citizens who denounced Janjić's behavior during the war, accusing her of smuggling and regularly abandoning her "place of work".³² Furthermore, they claimed the municipal midwife, as well as the district physician, were inept obstetricians. The complaints were followed by a judicial inquiry, which did not result in a judgment. The amnesty, which was granted shortly after the war, reset the conflict to zero.

What is so intriguing about the conflict in Prnjavor is how the female citizens used the argument that during the war, the municipal midwife had not been at her place of work when she was needed. The municipal midwife is portrayed as a woman of great business acumen (*žena "trgovačkog duha"*) who procured a carriage, horse, a lad, a tent and goods to trade them elsewhere instead of coming to see women when they were in distress.³³ Luckily, so they wrote, they

³⁰ The ratio of municipal and independent midwives, "private midwives" as they were called at the time, was roughly 1:1. The Health System in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1878–1918, with two illustrations and maps, published by the national government for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo 1903, 18–29.

³¹ For the entire paragraph: ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor. I can only assume that this change has to do with the course of the war.

³² Rising prices and the black market posed huge problems to the population, see: Anton Schmied-Kowarzik: «Die wirtschaftliche Erschöpfung», in: *Die Habsburgermonarchie und der Erste Weltkrieg*, Band XI, Teil 1, 528 et seq.

³³ "Pokraj ovog liječnika postoji opštinska primalja Katarina Šušković, žena „trgovačkog duha“, koja se je tečajem ovih ratnih godina sa svojim osobitno obljudljebnim švercom istakla toliko kao da je i nema među nama kada je trebamo, t.j. ona je nabavila kola, konja, momka, napravila šator, nabavila razne robe i svake nedjelje, šverca te pazarnih i vašarskih dana između narodnih skupova i zborova po Prnjavoru i okolnim selima svoje službeno vrijeme trgovini i švercu posvećivala tako, da smo mi primorane bile da u našoj nuždi zovemo drugu ali srećom kud i kamo viještiju i sposobniju primalju gđu. Antoniju Savić, kojoj nam na predlog

had Antonia Savić by their side, who in the end proved to be more competent, too. Savić continued to serve the community through the end of the war and into the postwar era.

Midwives Providing Continuity

How many midwives were there in Habsburg times who, like Antonia Savić, stayed in Bosnia-Herzegovina after the war? How many were there at all in the country? Such were the questions the newly founded health department in Sarajevo (*Zdravstveni odsjek za Bosnu i Hercegovinu*) was concerned with in the early 1920s. The regional branch was set up as a sub-division of the central (Yugoslavian) ministry of public health (*Ministarstvo Narodnog zdravlja*) in Belgrade. Upon its inception, it was formed on the highest administrative level as a central entity, as was the case in many other successor states of the Dual Monarchy. After the huge losses caused by war and epidemics, health issues had become a priority for the future. Social hardship after the war could not be addressed locally anymore; the aim was to implement countrywide measures instead. The health offices and health councils, formerly scattered on lower administrative levels, had been pursuing local strategies. Their efforts were not coordinated by a trans-regional ministry because such a ministry had not existed. All of these individual entities now had to join forces. Accordingly, they were busy building internal administrative structures.

It is against this backdrop that, in 1921, the health department in Sarajevo requested all the district capitals to submit the number and names of the remaining midwives. The request fell on deaf ears. Only two counties - Banja Luka and Travnik - provided some incomplete data, rendering a systematic analysis impossible.³⁴ In the middle of 1921, the request was issued a second time, asking for an accounting of midwives and all other medical staff, including doctors and dentists.³⁵ This time, a list was compiled.³⁶ The resulting midwives' list contained 102 names, i.e. roughly the same number of midwives as in Bosnia

ovdašnjeg g. liječnika i spomenute opštinske primalje Šušković ovdašnje sreska odnosno okružno načelstvu u Banjoj Luci zabranjuje u našoj nuždi dragocjenu pomoć.” ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

³⁴ ABH, ZOMNZ-11, 1921, 3888. List of midwives. Data from the counties of Bihać, Mostar, Sarajevo and Tuzla are missing.

³⁵ ABH, ZOMNZ-23, 1921. List of all doctors, midwives, dentists.

³⁶ For the remainder of the paragraph: ABH, ZOMNZ-23, 1921. List of all doctors, midwives, dentists. Dates are not recorded in the files.

in 1900.³⁷ Comparing the names on the list with those of 1913 and 1914 respectively, it becomes evident that more than half of the midwives had stayed in the country.³⁸ The majority who remained had stayed in the same town.

The compulsory registration constituted an intended regulatory action and thus is reminiscent of the midwifery reform of 1898. As had been the case with the reform, it went far beyond merely counting the number of practicing midwives, it required a meeting between the supervising medical officer and the respective midwife. In 1898, each midwife was registered and then received an introduction to the new regulations and professional practices.³⁹ After completion, she received a midwife's bag free of charge. Henceforth, the midwives were obliged to present their bags and have them inspected regularly, making sure to refill substances such as disinfectants or aseptic cotton. Next to its original function as a container for the tools a midwife needed to do her job, the bag also became an administrative instrument to control the midwives. The bag's condition (proper or dirty) came to signify - pars pro toto - the midwife's methods, the midwife in general since the bag represented her. This administrative practice had been introduced with great success and was continued until the end of the Habsburg administration without any changes made, even if the model of the bag changed in 1906 and the regulations were adjusted accordingly. Furthermore, the inspection of the bag was reactivated in 1921 once again. This time, the order didn't come from the central administration, instead the bureaucrats at the district level reactivated an old technique. They registered not only the name of the respective midwife, but added a description of her bag's condition.⁴⁰ This indicates that the administrators' knowledge dates back to Habsburg times, that they knew of the procedures in place at the time and therefore had first-hand experience of that time. They considered this administrative routine a useful tool, which provided stability in insecure times.

The reports on the bags were also used deliberately to specific ends even after the war, and this is something Antonia Savić's story tells us, too. With the midwifery reform in 1898, the description of the bag's condition had already been turned into a proxy to assess the qualifications of the respective midwife, i.e. the midwife herself. These means of assessment could be used in a positive manner to report that a midwife did her job as cleanly as she kept her bag. But it could also be used – as we are about to see – to slander a midwife, in our case Antonia Savić.

³⁷ In 1923, the number of midwives was still the same, 102. ABH, ZOMNZ-71, 1923, 5370. List of midwives 1923.

³⁸ ABH, ZV, 1914, K. 302,105-5. Ausweise über die praktizierenden Hebammen.

³⁹ For the remainder of the paragraph, see Bernasconi 2017: 99 et seq.

⁴⁰ ABH, ZOMNZ-11, 1921, 3888. List of midwives.

Antonia Savić, The Dispute

In 1921, the year which not only brought the compulsory registration of all midwives but also the proclamation of the kingdom on the basis of the Vidovdan Constitution, the death of King Peter I Karađorđević and the succession of his son Alexander I, the old conflict in Prnjavor between the two midwives rumbled on.⁴¹ The dispute between the municipal midwife Janjić together with the district physician Maoro Lefković on the one hand, and the independent midwife Antonia Savić on the other, implicated almost half of the community as well as surrounding villages. The district physician Lefković claimed he now had detailed evidence to prove Antonia Savić was guilty of quackery and carrying out abortions. Allegedly, the illegal activities mainly took place in the villages, where Antonia Savić was posing as a doctor and not just healing gynecological disorders, the doctor said, but “*everything she could lay her hands on*”.⁴² The suspicion of abortion was used again, as it seemed there was a concrete case: the lawsuit by a tax officer from Prnjavor, Franjo Czerkovski, whose wife Rosa Czerkovski was treated at the hospital in Banja Luka in 1921. The woman, who was very ill, had testified saying, when asked, that the midwife Antonia Savić had come to see her about four or five months earlier, using a black, twisted metal iron wire on her internally. It was alleged that other ladies, too, had confirmed that the midwife had applied her “arts” on many women, leading the district physician to the conclusion that she was carrying out abortions with this dangerous instrument.

Almost at the same time the municipal midwife Ljubica Janjić also filed a lawsuit against Antonia Savić. In it she describes how Savić and her daughter would actively wait for pregnant women in front of the church and recommend they go and see a midwife on a monthly basis if they wanted to give birth easily. “(...) *Especially poor peasant women and the Galicians, easily frightened, they tell each other from a very young age, see, dear, that is the midwife, she can tell by looking at your cheeks what ails you.*”⁴³ She alleged that Savić was

⁴¹ For the entire paragraph: ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁴² “... nego liječi sve što njoj u ruke pada.” ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁴³ “... sa svojom bez zanimanja kćerkom, koja njoj služi kao kakvi špijun ide od kuće do kuće da sazna gdje ima koja žena u drugom stanju, da brže preporuču svoju mater, i ženu sirotu uplaši i kaže e draga moja viste trudna jelde? i ja to vidim da ste jako oslabila, što Vam je? trebalo bi da dodjete mojoj mami da Vas pregleda, može bit da Vam se diete okrene i onda posliem 6 mjeseci treba i mora svaka žena trudna da dodje svaki mjesec mojoj mami na pregled ako hoće da sretno rodi a to isto uradi i kad žene iz crkve izlaze pa ih tako dočeka osobito jadne

also taking in women at her apartment to heal them. She had treated “wild flesh” (“divlje meso”)⁴⁴ inside the uterus of a woman from the countryside by keeping her inside her apartment for eight days and injecting herbs into her uterus. This, allegedly, proved that she was lying, as “wild flesh” was a very grave illness, which required complicated surgery for treatment. Yet Savić, according to Janjić, was telling everyone that her father, her husband and herself had been doctors.

The midwife Savić was again confronted with these accusations and rejected all of them except for the one whereby many women from the countryside came to see her: “It is true that many peasant women come to see me, most of the time because of pregnancy and also because of the falling of the womb, and so I raised their wombs for them with a metal ring.”⁴⁵ The descensus of the uterus as well as of other internal organs of the lower abdomen (bladder, rectum) was a problem which occurred often with the local women at the time and was the result of hard physical labor and numerous pregnancies. Roza Czerkovski had suffered from it, too, and had not been pregnant in a long time.⁴⁶ In her deposition, she said that she had heard that the midwife could readjust the womb, making it possible to conceive again. After letting her take several hip baths in salt water, the midwife had inserted a ring and after a short period of time Roza got pregnant again. The midwife had confirmed it, when she had called on her in November because she had been nauseous. As she was sick again later, she had called the doctor Maoro Lefković, who had then proceeded to scrape out her uterus and sent her to hospital because he thought the midwife had given her something to provoke an abortion. This had not been the case, Roza said, she had instead been wanting to get pregnant.

After that, the district physician Maoro Lefković used the strongest argument he had against the midwife: He writes: “The bag of midwife Antonia Savić is not in order, in particular because the container with the Lysol is empty and dried out which shows that she does not use the Lysol.”⁴⁷ He reported it had been brought

seljanke, i galicjanke, lahko uplašiti, one od mali kažu jedna drugoj e vidiš draga to je babica ona od malo pozna na obrazu ikome šta mu fali.” ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁴⁴ I think that we have to imagine this to have been something similar to nowadays’ cancer.

⁴⁵ “Istina je da mi dolaze seljanke većinom zbog trudnoće i zbog ispadanja materice te sam im ja materice podizala i prsten metala.” ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁴⁶ For the remainder of the paragraph, see the remainder of the hearing of Roza Czerkovskis. ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁴⁷ “Predlaže se s tim izvještajem, torba babica Antonije Savić nije u redu osobito da sude sa

to his attention that the midwife Savić was boasting she had been working as a midwife for 30 years already without ever using Lysol.⁴⁸ The ensuing court inquiry showed this to be wrong. The pharmacist Mihail Finkelštajn testified on 16 April 1921 that he had run out of Lysol about three months ago because he had given everything to the municipal midwife.⁴⁹ The order he had placed in advance had not arrived yet when Antonia Savić also asked to refill it. He was thus unable to give her any. Furthermore, he added, he had heard that she was accused of treating people. He could not confirm it; no one had ever come to see him with a prescription she had given.

Nonetheless, on 3 February 1921, Antonia Savić was disqualified from exercising her profession as a midwife.⁵⁰ Until the conclusion of the judicial inquiry, she was not allowed to work anymore and she was forced to hand in her bag. This measure, too, shows how closely connected midwife and bag were. In this very critical situation, Savić, however, could rely on a very particular kind of support. We will come to this in the third part of her story.

Discontinuities of Paperwork

After the war, the administration was not only lacking data, it was most of all lacking paper. At the time, this influenced how the administration as well as the government went about their duties and it also has had repercussions until the present day, with incomplete coverage of the war and post-war period in the historical archives. My frustrating search for traces of Habsburg midwives in the archives of the Republic of Srpska in Banja Luka in 2010 did not produce any results because in the Krajina region the new administration had to reuse files from Habsburg times after 1918 for lack of any other paper, writing on the back to put down their own records. This very legitimate strategy at the time of paper shortage means that nowadays the registry listing the files of the years between 1878 and 1918 still exists. The actual documents, however, cannot be retrieved

lizola je prazno i suho, što je znak da lizola neupotrebljuje.” ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁴⁸ “Ja mislim da su svi moji navodi dovoljni da se protiv ove babice strogo postupa, koja se hvali, da je već 30 godina babica a da nije ni jednoč Lysola upotrebila.” ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁴⁹ For the remainder of the paragraph also: ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁵⁰ For the entire paragraph: ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

as they only remain in the archive of the successor authority as the unsystematic back pages of files covering the years between 1918 and 1922.

Paper shortage, as well as the lack of adequate paper, such as pre-printed forms, did not prevent district bureaucrats and medical officers from filling them out anyway (see figure 1). In many places, the old forms had all been used, but new ones had not yet arrived. The district administrator and physicians still remembered what they had looked like in Habsburg times and recorded data by filling in imaginary columns and tables, sometimes without separating the information by lines, on any kind of piece of paper they could possibly make available. In the case of the compulsory registration they knew exactly which data to provide and how to record it. In such a manner, on 8 February 1921, the district commissioner of Prijedor produced some kind of table on the back of a handwritten note, recording data on the two midwives who worked there at the end of 1920.⁵¹

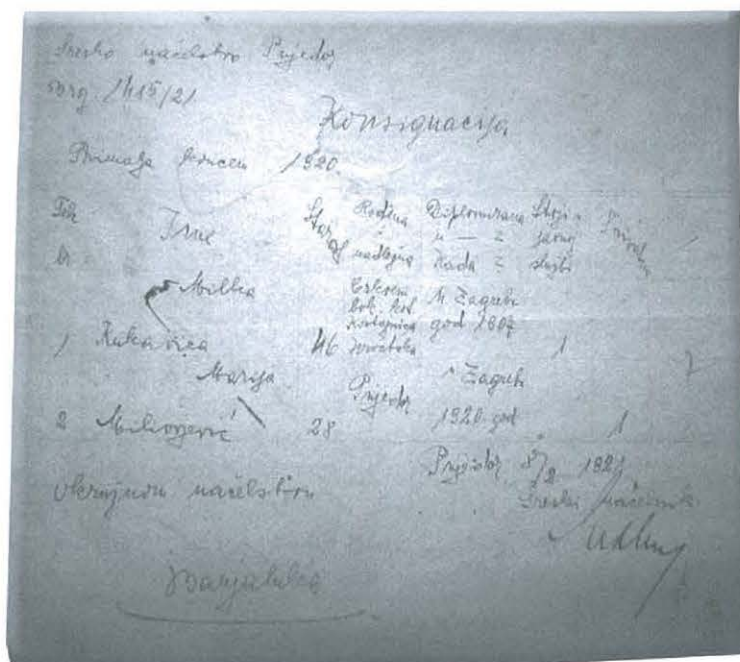


Figure 1: List of midwives, file ABH, ZOMNZ-11, 1921, 388.⁵²
Photo by Sara Bernasconi.

⁵¹ ABH, ZOMNZ-11, 1921, 3888. List of midwives.

⁵² I would like to thank the Arhiv Bosne i Hercegovine, especially Sandra Bilet ić for the permission to reprint the above image.

But even after the health department in Sarajevo had printed new Yugoslavian forms, the documents still reflected Habsburg practices and knowledge.⁵³ Even on higher levels in the hierarchy - in terms of the paperwork - not much was changed. Administrative documents (later files) consisting of loose or bound pages were still kept in a sheet of paper. This practice had been introduced by the Habsburg administration and it seemed to have proven successful. The sheet of paper was strictly formalized, containing various pre-printed subdivisions and fields. Clearly visible at the top of the first page was the name of the department in charge: the health department of Sarajevo. The language used for the new sheets of paper was Bosnian, written in Cyrillic instead of German. Everything else remained identical: the arrangement on the page, the individual fields, and even the pre-printed titles, which had literally been translated.

In 1922, another form surfaced again after several years: the “summative birth register”.⁵⁴ The summative birth register reports on the births assisted by a midwife, which have taken place in a particular period and it is based on data recorded in the birth tables. Filling in birth tables and the summative birth register requires an encounter between midwife and medical officer - the re-appearance of the summative birth register proves that such encounters took place. The pre-printed forms of the summative birth register were in 1922 the same as they had been before the war. This does not allow the conclusion that administrative practices remained exactly the same. Especially considering that in the administration’s annual report of 1918, written in 1921, it was noted that in those places where officials had left their posts before their replacements arrived, information was missing.⁵⁵ What we can conclude from this paperwork, however, is that, firstly, in places where continuity in terms of personnel existed, large parts of the administrative technique was retained and continued to be applied despite the destructive force the war otherwise had - in the worst case by “filling in forms without forms”. Secondly, both material (forms) and immaterial culture (knowledge) contributed toward a transfer of knowledge and knowhow, even after rupture had resulted in discontinuity. The administration of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, during the initial years of its existence, drew upon Habsburg institutions and practices for expertise and continuity.

⁵³ For the entire paragraph: ABH, ZOMNZ-37, 1922, 1532. Annual report of the counties Bihać, Sarajevo, Banja Luka.

⁵⁴ ZOMNZ-44, 1922, 6566-22. Summative birth register.

⁵⁵ ABH, ZOMNZ-37, 1922, 1532. Annual report of the counties Bihać, Sarajevo, Banja Luka.

Continuities of Solidarity

The centerpiece of the midwife Antonia Savić's file is the letter of support from the women of Prnjavor (see figure 2). That letter was written at a time when Antonia Savić had reached a nadir in the ongoing judicial inquiry against her; at a time when she was barred from working, her bag having been taken from her. The women of Prnjavor submitted the letter of support to the local city administration. Bearing the required stamp, it was structured as an appeal: "*We, the undersigned, kindly request the municipal authority and the district office to hear our appeal; we ask the municipal authority and the district office to inform the doctor to leave our resident midwife, Miss Savić, in peace.*"⁵⁶ They wrote that she was a good, hardworking and particularly competent midwife. She served them at any time of the day and night to their utmost satisfaction, whenever they would send for her. They, as they called themselves, were the female citizens ("*gragjanke*").⁵⁷ They needed their midwife, who had always remained with them, even during the war. She had always come to see them, whether they had been able to pay her or not. They were not willing to let go of her and this is why they were asking for her to be allowed to exercise her profession again. Otherwise, they were determined to appeal to the government.⁵⁸ 76 signatures were affixed to the letter. An annex, an additional page without address or stamp, contained the following text: "*Women from Herzegovina, on this day, we have come together in the name of Miss Savić, because to us she is an excellent and diligent midwife.*"⁵⁹ 22 more signatures in untrained and clumsy writing followed, together with almost 200 signs; crosses and points. The back of the page contains their explanation: "*These crosses and points are for those who cannot write.*"⁶⁰

⁵⁶ "Molimo najponiznije mi dole podpisane gradsku općinu i kotarski ured da nam uvaži ovu našu molbu, mi molimo da gradska općina i kot. ured obavjeste, g. doktora da pusti u miru ovd. babicu gđu Savićku ...". For the entire paragraph: ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁵⁷ The entire sentence reads: "... because to us, the female citizens, she is a good, hardworking and particularly able..." ("pošto je ona nama gragjankama vrlo dobra, vredna i potpuno vješta"). ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁵⁸ It was called national government (Zemaljska vlada) from 1919 until 1921. Before, from 1918 until 1919, it had been called "Narodna vlada narodnog vijeća Slovenaca, Hrvata i Srba u Bosni i Hercegovini", afterwards, from 1921 until 1924 "Pokrajinska uprava za Bosnu i Hercegovinu".

⁵⁹ "Hercegovke! I sve se žene udružuju k ovima u ime gospogje Savić da je za nas izvrsna i točna primalja." ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁶⁰ "Ove križaljke i tačke to su one koje nisu pismene." ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

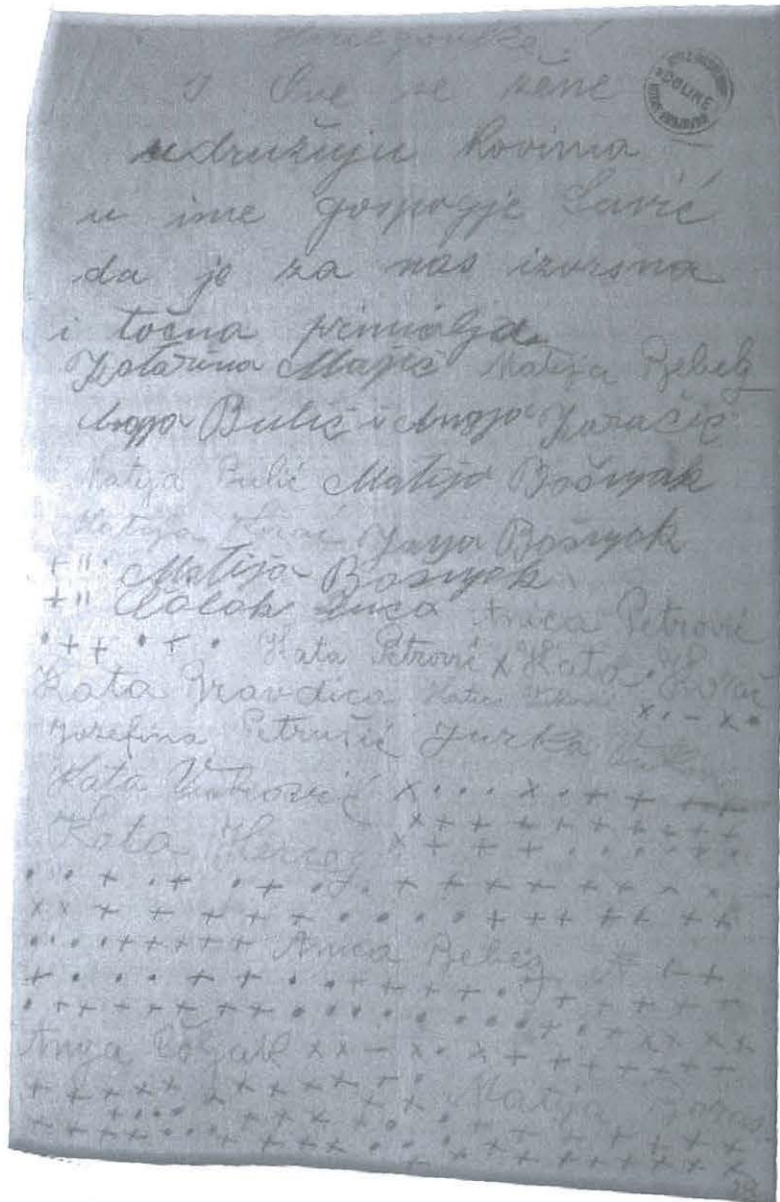


Figure 2: Support letter for the midwife Antonia Savić in Prnjavor, file ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279.⁶¹ Photo by Sara Bernasconi.

⁶¹ I would like to thank the Arhiv Bosne i Hercegovine, especially Sandra Biletić for the permission to reprint the above image.

Adding the number of crosses and points to the approximately 100 signatures, this brings the number of women expressing their support for the midwife Antonia Savić to about 300. It is not only the number of signatures which is impressive. Prnjavor counted at that time about 1500 inhabitants, this means that these 300 women accounted for about half of its female population.⁶² Apart from their numeric strength, what is even more striking is the fact that women who cannot write their own names used the correct administrative instrument to express themselves. The women of Prnjavor undertook efforts in support of their midwife with the help of new and modern means: a written appeal. They used the appeal to express their opinion and formulate their requests. An appeal had to be signed off personally. The crosses and points show that the women were well versed in the functioning of modern administration; that they had knowledge of the administration's written means of communication and expression and that they trusted it and believed in it. Furthermore, they also knew how to express support. They were supposed to make a simple sign or have it made by someone else to express their consent. By using crosses and points, they modified the appeal to adapt it to their own circumstances.

It is possible that the women of higher social ranks, such as those close to the administration or wives of officials, knew the procedures well. The appeal begins with the address "*Women of Herzegovina!*" and "*on this day we have come together...*" Apparently, the women had convened a meeting and possibly, at this meeting, the better-informed women explained the course of action to the women who could not write and convinced them to take part. The appeal is written in a style similar to spoken language. The expression in the first-person plural - "*Miss Savić (...) to us she is an excellent and diligent midwife*" - at once includes the speaker as well as the audience. The language reveals a collective, "the women of Prnjavor", whose members expressed solidarity both among themselves and also with the midwife. If someone had written the letter from an outside perspective pursuing a descriptive-testifying intention, then such an author would have opted for a formulation such as "*the women testify*", "*the women state that*", using the grammatical third-person plural. The letter instead does not describe a situation from a distance; it actually constitutes the situation itself.

The women did not fear that the action might have negative consequences for them. Those women who made crosses and points could not be easily identi-

⁶² Under Habsburg rule, from 1878 until 1910, Prnjavor's population grew by roughly 69%, an increase of 769 people to 1876 citizens. I assume that the emigration of the officials and workers who had moved to Prnjavor before as well as was the war casualties meant that the number of inhabitants was considerably lower than in 1910. Iljas Hadžibegović: *Bosanskohercegovački gradovi na razmeđu 19. i 20. stoljeća*. Sarajevo 1991, 31, 71–73.

fied, but the women of higher social standing did expose themselves with their names. The district's health official recognized twenty names among the written signatures.⁶³ He failed at discrediting the letter by arguing that said women were not capable of bearing children anymore or had never even borne children.

Looking at the aforementioned crosses and points more closely, I think it's possible to argue that they may be more than representations.⁶⁴ They may also reveal affiliations. There are two kinds of crosses: straight, standing crosses, I believe to be catholic; others resemble an "x"; these might represent orthodox crosses. The points instead could indicate Islamic, or maybe simply non-Christian affiliation.⁶⁵ Scholarship is divided on the question regarding the point in time at which women from Bosnia and Herzegovina started equating their religious affiliation with political identity is still being discussed controversially. Under Ottoman rule, religious affiliation did have public law consequences (military service, tax liabilities, etc.), for Austria-Hungary, it also impacted administrative procedures.⁶⁶ In any case, being represented by a cross or a point was depending on context. In front of the assembled community of women from different religious communities in Prnjavor, a woman became a woman represented by a cross, whereas as a member of her own circles, she was just a woman or someone's woman. Identity crucially depended on circumstances.

Conclusion

The women of Prnjavor won. Antonia Savić's bag was returned to her and she was allowed to exercise her profession again. This entry from 1923 is the last information the file of Antonia Savić contains. The fact that the municipal midwife Katarina Šušković Janjić fell seriously ill had contributed to this turn of events, too.⁶⁷ Pressure from local citizens, female and male, was mounting and the local authority, who had spearheaded the law suit, were forced to act. Throughout this

⁶³ ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

⁶⁴ I thank all the members of the DFG network "Sozialfürsorge und Gesundheit in Ost- und Südosteuropa im langen 20. Jahrhundert" for the openminded discussions on how to interpret sources, which got me on to this track.

⁶⁵ In 19th century, the symbol of the star with a crescent represented both the Ottoman Empire as well as Islam.

⁶⁶ Wolfgang Göderle: *Zensus und Ethnizität: zur Herstellung von Wissen über soziale Wirklichkeiten im Habsburgerreich zwischen 1848 und 1910*, Göttingen 2016 : 213 et seq.

⁶⁷ For the entire paragraph: ABH, ZOMNZ, 1923, k. 89, 18.279. Antonia Savić, Prnjavor.

time, Antonia Savić continually requested that her instruments be returned to her. Finally, on 29 October 1923, she received confirmation from the health department in Sarajevo that she was no longer barred from exercising her profession.

The letter of support the women from Prnjavor wrote in favor of Antonia Savić represents a survival of modern means, originally introduced by the Habsburg administration, that continued into the early Yugoslav period. The women of Prnjavor correctly and successfully made use of a state-provided administrative tool by adapting it to their situation with the aim of protecting their midwife and claiming what they considered to be their right. Regardless of war, misery and destruction, and despite nationalism and regime change, continuity, which extends through the decisive year 1918, becomes visible/ evident. In some places like Prnjavor midwives personally assured continuity, but they were not the only ones to guarantee it. On paper I found traces of modern material and immaterial culture bridging discontinuity caused by war. At the periphery, paperwork and administrative procedure could provide stability – even when the central administration changed. Leading us to the furthest margins of society, the episode about Antonia Savić teaches us finally how deeply modern communication culture took root in Bosnia during Habsburg times. The women of Prnjavor and their commitment to their midwife show us how modern means and ways of communication continued in post-Habsburg Yugoslavia.