

**ISSUES IN NURSING SCHOOLS IN TODAY'S SLOVAKIA IN THE 1930S  
OF THE 20TH CENTURY**  
**PROBLÉMY OŠETROVATEĽSKÝCH ŠKÔL NA ÚZEMÍ DNEŠNÉHO SLOVENSKA  
V TRIDSIATYCH ROKOCH 20. STOROČIA**

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#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** During the time of the First Czechoslovak Republic, public healthcare went through complex developments. The individual regions of the state were very different, this greatly influenced the social conditions in the republic and was also reflected in the healthcare system, where the importance of nursing and nursing staff gradually increased.

**Objective:** The objective of the study is to highlight the problems experienced by nursing schools during the first Czechoslovak Republic.

**Methods:** The study was prepared using a direct historical method, applying a synchronic approach and comparative method.

**Results:** Nursing schools struggled with inadequate equipment. This included a lack of textbooks, variation in the content of theoretical and practical instruction, deficiencies in the language skills of the students and legal issues. These were highlighted at conventions attended by certified nurses and conferences for representatives of the nursing schools. At these, they considered it necessary to jointly address and seek synergies to solve the problems that affected both the church and state nursing schools. They had intensive discussions on practical education, the principles and timing of practical instruction and the establishment of teaching stations to allow students to practice. Despite agreement between representatives of the nursing schools at the Turčiansky Sv. Martin conference in 1937, the next conference planned to take place in Brno was not held.

**Key words:** Nursing in the First Czechoslovak Republic. Nursing education. Church nursing schools.

#### ABSTRAKT

**Úvod:** V období prvej Československej republiky prešlo verejné zdravotníctvo zložitým vývojom. Jednotlivé časti štátu boli značne rozdielne, čo vo veľkej miere ovplyvňovalo spoločenské pomery v republike a odzrkadlilo sa aj v zdravotníctve, kde postupne vzrastal význam ošetrovateľstva a ošetrovateľského personálu.

**Cieľ:** Cieľom štúdie je poukázať na problémy, ktoré mali ošetrovateľské školy v prvej Československej republike.

**Metóda:** Štúdia je spracovaná priamou historickou metódou s využitím synchronného hľadiska a komparatívnou metódou.

**Výsledky:** Ošetrovateľské školy bojovali s nedostatočným materiálnym vybavením vrátane učebníc a s odlišným priebehom teoretickej a praktickej výučby, ako i s nedostatkami v jazykových zručnostiach študentiek a v právnej oblasti. Tieto problémy boli predložené na zjazdoch diplomovaných ošetrovateľiek a konferenciách reprezentantov ošetrovacích škôl. Na nich považovali za dôležité spoločne riešiť a hľadať súčinnosť pri

riešení problémov, ktoré sa rovnako týkali cirkevných aj štátnych ošetrovateľských škôl. Intenzívne diskutovalo o praktickom vzdelávaní, zásadách i časovom rozdelení praktických cvičení a zriadení vyučovacích staníc na vykonávanie praxe. Napriek dohode predstaviteľov ošetrovateľských škôl na konferencii v Turčianskom Sv. Martine v roku 1937, ďalšia konferencia plánovaná v Brne sa už neuskutočnila.

**Ľúčové slová:** Ošetrovateľstvo v prvej Československej republike. Ošetrovateľské vzdelávanie. Cirkevné ošetrovateľské školy

#### INTRODUCTION

Public healthcare underwent complicated developments during the first Czechoslovak Republic. There were significant differences between the regions of the country, the most striking were in territories of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus. This greatly affected the social situation in the Republic and was reflected in all spheres of society, including healthcare.

Thanks to the Ministry of Public Healthcare and Physical Education (hereinafter MPH&PE), the importance of nursing and healthcare personnel in the healthcare system gradually increased throughout the time of the first CSR. It became an indispensable part of the dynamic modern life of the 1920s and 1930s (Tóthová et al., 2024). This gave rise to several nursing schools, although initially they were only operated by religious societies. However, to solve a number of issues related to public healthcare, a considerable amount of money was required, yet not enough was provided (Falisová, 2006). The status and finances of the territory of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus was partially solved by a new system of decentralised authority in 1928. After signing the Munich Agreement and subsequently the Vienna Award in 1938, the CSR gave up widespread border areas to Nazi Germany and Horthy Hungary, and as a consequence the Republic lost several hospitals and major nursing schools.

## OBJECTIVE

The objective of the study is to point out the issues that nursing schools had in common in the first Czechoslovak Republic (hereafter CSR), regardless of whether they were state or religious schools. The issues mainly included a lack of textbooks, the need for a unified curriculum and number of hours for both theoretical and practical education, and, in the territory of Slovakia, a lack of knowledge of Slovak and last but not least, the absence of legal regulations that would precisely determine the curriculum to be followed at the existing nursing schools in the Czechoslovak Republic.

## METHODS AND SOURCES

### Archives

When researching for and preparing our study, we used archival materials obtained at the National Archives in Prague, the Archives of the Security Forces of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic in Prague, as well as the Slovak National Archives in Bratislava, the Archive of the Order of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent in Nitra and the Archive of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross in Trnava.

### Used archival documents

Preserved archival documents of the Provincial Office in Bratislava stored in the Slovak National Archives helped to write the study, along with the documents on the existence of the Nursing School of the Daughters of Charity in Košice and the state hospital in Košice from the National Archives in Prague, *Kronika ošetrovateľskej školy milosrdných sestier Sv. Kríža* (the Chronicle of the Nursing School of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross) and contemporary press including all existing volumes of *Československá nemocnice* (Czechoslovak Hospital) periodical. What concerns the Archives of the Security Forces of the Ministry of the Interior, we used archival materials on individual personalities from among nursing school teachers.

### Methods

An inductive method was used in the submitted study in order to achieve generalised findings. At the same time, it was possible to use a direct method to obtain historical facts by direct study of the sources. When the researched material allowed it,

we used a comparative method, while applying a diachronic perspective to track the historical development in its natural chronological progression.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The slow and uneven development of nursing education was a consequence of a specific vision within the responsible bodies. The decisions they made were initially affected by the generally low level of prestige of the nursing profession in society. Until 1938, there was no department in the MPHaPE in Prague which governed the education of nurses. Nevertheless, as many as nine schools were founded during this period, six of which were religious schools and three were lay schools. The motivation for the foundation of these schools came from both government circles and directly from the Vatican – from the head of the Catholic Church. After his appeal three schools were founded in Czechoslovakia between 1933 and 1936 (in Hradec Králové, Brno and Košice).

The majority of schools were established in the 1930s, after a rather lengthy delay. A significantly smaller number of schools were established in Slovakia in comparison to the Czech lands. Two schools were founded in Slovakia, whereas five were established in Bohemia and Moravia. The first schools to provide nursing education were established by religious orders. The Order of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross in Chomutov founded a German nursing school in 1925. The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross in Bratislava started a nursing school in Bratislava in 1932 and the Order of Saint Francis of Assisi in Opava managed a Czech-German nursing school from 1925. The Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul began operations in Košice in 1932. The only secular schools were the Czech State Nursing School and the German State Nursing School, both in Prague, the school at the Milan Rastislav Štefánik Institute in Turčiansky Sv. Martin, the Masaryk State School in Prague and the nursing school in Moravian Ostrava, governed by the Czechoslovak Red Cross (hereinafter the CRC). Between 1920 and 1931, the Nursing School in Prague was also administered by the CRC (Andělová, 1933).

Specialised training for healthcare personnel became one of the primary tasks necessary for an improvement in the state of health of the population.

The need to increase the number of female graduates from nursing schools created natural pressure on the foundation of additional nursing schools which, for instance, did not exist in, what is today, Slovakia until the end of the 1920s. Based on archival documents and the specialist contemporary press, in terms of nursing education, there were common issues which could be found in all the nursing schools in the CSR. They had various different curricula, a different number of hours allocated to theoretical and practical subjects and there was no unification of the textbooks in use. For some subjects there was not even a textbook. The situation in the nursing schools had also been complicated for a long time by the absence of any regulations that would precisely determine the curriculum that should be followed at the nursing schools in the CSR.

Considering the situation with the availability of textbooks, let us mention that *Učebnica pre pôrodné asistentky (A Textbook for Midwives)* was published in 1933. The authors of the textbook were MUDr. František Pachner, the Head of Gynaecology and Obstetrics at the Ostrava Regional State Hospital and JUDr. Richard Bébr, Head of the MPHaPE. The authors justified the publication of the textbook through the need to prepare professionally trained midwives to halt the current practice of the time, that 90 % of births happened at home. This was the first time that such a comprehensive curriculum, to meet the educational needs of certified nurses, had been prepared. Therefore, in 1932, prof. Adolf Měska decided to publish a specialist textbook, *Základy ošetrovatelství. Úvod do nauky ošetrovatelství (Basics of Nursing. Introduction to Nursing Education)*. He published it to improve the education of nurses. Měska also commented on the need to publish appropriate and unified textbooks in 1935. He believed all schools should teach a unified curriculum and to achieve this, it was necessary to prepare sufficiently high quality textbooks.

Besides conventions for certified nurses (compare Zprávy/News, Československá nemocnice, 1932) the representatives of the nursing schools met at national conferences. The first conference of representatives of the nursing schools took place in Prague from the 29<sup>th</sup> September to 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1934. The main topic was the education of “*adolescent nurses*”. Other topics discussed included the need for prior education as a prerequisite for admission to nursing school, a probationary period, the school

curriculum, the allocation of time for theory and practical instruction, textbooks and other aids. Fides Dermeková, the specialist headmaster of the Nursing School of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross in Bratislava, mentioned the introduction of a so-called *preliminary year*. It was intended to be a probationary period to provide time for practical preparation and a boarding school education under the Superiors of the schools and professionally trained nurses in hospitals. Attention was to be paid to the ethical make up and gentleness of a future nurse, regardless of whether they were lay candidates or nuns. This was to be followed by two years of theoretical and practical education (Dermeková, 1934). Dermeková also presented her requirement that all students should board at nursing schools, this was expected to develop the capacity of the student for self-denial and renunciation for the benefit of the patients. Emilie Ruth Tobolářová (1932), President of the Society of Certified Nurses, also supported the need to link nursing schools and a boarding school education. She believed that a nursing school did not only provide professional training but also focused on shaping them into good listeners. A nurse was supposed to have integrity and, in her opinion, that could only be achieved through an education at a boarding school. Such training and monitoring of their upbringing was only possible through this form of education.

During the first years of operation of the nursing schools in Slovakia, students with a lack of knowledge of Slovak was also a significant problem. The Nursing School of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross in Bratislava responded to this by opening a Slovak language course in 1934. The course was led by Sapientia Kubalová and was attended by all the nuns and students of the nursing school (Dermeková, 1934). The issue of education in the Slovak language and the poor level of student language proficiency was related to the state of education and culture in Slovakia (Zacharová In Kudláčová, 2016), however, it might also have been related to the location of the school, Bratislava was trilingual for a long time. German and Hungarian were also spoken in Bratislava and it was only after the establishment of the CSR that Slovak begin to predominate.

The second conference of representatives of the nursing schools of the CSR took place between the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> October 1935 in Chomutov. The

conference was attended by representatives of the nursing schools from Chomutov, Opava, Bratislava, Košice, Turčiansky Sv. Martin and Prague. Representatives of the MPHaPE, the CRC and the Society of Certified Nurses were also present. The topics for discussion again included the curriculum of the nursing schools – proposals for the individual subjects, the determination of final examinations after the completion of the first year, preliminary education and continual professional development courses for certified nurses. An analysis of the nursing school curriculum provided evidence of differences between nursing schools, not only in the allocation of time to theoretical subjects, but especially in practical study. The practical education depended on the type of hospital, department and clinic. If the hospital which the nursing school was attached to did not have a particular department, for example, psychiatric, paediatric, gynaecological, etc., then the practical education of students in that subject could not be carried out in the facility (Dermeková, 1935).

The issue of the lack of unity was solved at the conference by conducting a survey to obtain the detailed curricula of all subjects from all nursing schools. Then, the average number of hours was allocated to each subject. Each nursing school was then assigned subjects for which they were supposed to prepare teaching materials. The teaching hours allocated to theoretical subjects was a total of 448 hours and the respective allocation of hours for practical training was 93 hours. The preparation of teaching material for the individual subjects was assigned to the nursing schools in the territory of Slovakia as follows: The Nursing School of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross in Bratislava was to prepare the teaching material for Anatomy, Physiology and Hygiene; The Nursing School in Turčiansky Sv. Martin was to prepare the teaching material for Dietetics, Pharmacology and Pathology; The Nursing School of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent in Košice was to prepare the teaching material for Surgery, Gynaecology, Obstetrics, Massage and Physical Therapy (Kronika ošetrovateľskej školy milosrdných sestier Sv. Kríža/ Chronicle, 1931-1943, a separate type-written record).

The third conference of representatives of the nursing schools took place in the premises of the Order's nursing school in Opava on the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1936. During the conference, Professor Vilém Hons

of the nursing school of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross in Bratislava made critical comments on the ongoing issue of textbooks which were still not available. Not only did they not exist, but their publication was problematic; due to their cost and the low number of nursing schools in the CSR. Discussion topics included practical instruction, the principles and scheduling of *practical training*, the establishment of *teaching stations*, and keeping records of students and their assessments. Practical instruction was supposed to be carried out in the internal, surgical, paediatric, infant, gynaecological and obstetric wards. Some of them were to be carried out under the supervision of staff with pedagogical training. In the departments/wards where practical instruction was to take place, at the so-called practice stations, students were to be observed by nurse instructors who were intended to assess them. The practice stations were only intended to be in those hospitals which had the necessary specialist department for the practical instruction of the students. A single certified nurse instructor could only supervise a maximum of two students. For this reason, it was proposed that the students should practice at the practice stations first and then in the departments or clinics. In the first year, students were to have 10 weeks of practical instruction and 46 weeks in the second year. It was also proposed that each school should have a written report on the practical performance of each student, which would be considered for their final examinations (transcription of conference content, record in *Kronika ošetrovateľskej školy milosrdných sestier Sv. Kríža/ Chronicle*, 1936).

The last conference of representatives of the nursing schools in the CSR was held in Turčiansky Sv. Martin on the 30<sup>th</sup> September 1937. The main topics of the conference included the ongoing issue of the publication of unified textbooks for nursing schools, even though some textbooks already existed, such as *Tělověda* (Biological Anthropology) by Weigner, *Fyziologie* (Physiology) by Karásek, *Náuka o potravinách* (Food Science) by Podzimková or *Náuka o nemocích* (The Science of Diseases) by Secmanová (data from *Kronika* (Chronicle), excluding first names of authors). The conference participants had different opinions on, inter alia, whether the content of the textbooks was supposed to be at a university or high school level. Subjects of discussion also included the status required for the assignment of an authorisation to nursing

schools, the preliminary education of nursing school students, the cancellation of short-term courses, the introduction of partial examinations, the organisation of continual professional development courses for certified nurses and the working and social conditions of professional nurses.

The conference participants were interested in organising courses for the continual professional development of nurses. They were to be organised by a professional association – the Society of Certified Nurses. The purpose of the continual professional development courses was mainly the specialist education of nurses and only certified nurses could attend. The proposal for the government regulation of the working and social conditions of professional nurses was submitted. The transcript of the fourth conference of representatives of the nursing schools at Turčiansky Sv. Martin can be found in the Chronicle of the Nursing School of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross (record in Kronika/Chronicle form 1937).

At the end of the conference, based on a proposal from Dr. Pavlík, the director of the nursing school in Brno, the conference participants agreed that the next conference would take place in the nursing school in Brno in cooperation with the Moravian-Silesian Division of the Czechoslovak Red Cross. Unfortunately due to events related to the Munich Agreement and Vienna Award, that led to large parts of the Republic being taken over by Hitler's Germany and Horthy Hungary, the conference did not take place. In the context of the conference proposals, later on the Nursing School of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross began to keep detailed records of their students in the *Katalóg ošetrovateľskej školy milosrdných sestier Sv. kríža v Bratislave (The Catalogue of the Nursing School of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross in Bratislava)* (Štátny archív, fond Ošetrovateľská škola v Bratislave/ State archive, file Nursing school in Bratislava).

## CONCLUSION

Several issues were identified at the conferences attended by representatives of the nursing schools that they considered sufficiently important for them to address together, seeking to cooperate in solving them. As part of the educational activities of nursing schools, these issues were present at almost all nursing schools in the CSR, regardless of whether they

were state or religious schools. Critical shortcomings in all schools included a lack of textbooks, as well as inconsistencies in the allocation of time to both theoretical subjects and practical instruction. The representatives of the religious schools preferred their students live in boarding schools so they could take charge of their ethical education and ensure their orientation towards thoughtfulness. Various topics were the subject of intense discussion at the conferences, they included practical instruction, the principles and scheduling of practical training and the establishment of teaching stations where they could practise. Despite an agreement between the nursing school representatives at the conference in Turčiansky Sv. Martin in 1937, the next conference, which was planned to take place in Brno in 1938, did not happen. After the Munich Agreement of September 1938 and the Vienna Award of November 1938, Czechoslovakia lost a large amount of territory. Both agreements were designed to ensure peace in Europe, however, in healthcare, it resulted in the loss of a lot of general public hospitals, as well as other hospitals and several other medical facilities. Religious order nursing schools in Opava, Znojmo, Ústí nad Labem and Košice (Slovakia) were part of the territory surrendered along with two thousand nurses.

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