

# KRONIKA<sup>2022</sup>70

IZREDNA ŠTEVILKA

## IZ ZGODOVINE EPIDEMIJ



70  
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## From the history of epidemics

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## Epidemic on school benches

A case of Spanish flu in 1918 central Slovenia

### ABSTRACT

*The Spanish flu pandemic is considered one of the greatest catastrophes in human history. In the period of 1918–1920, the disease infected an estimated 500 million people worldwide and, according to the most recent data, resulted in the deaths of 50 to 100 million. The second wave of the flu pandemic also reached the population of the Slovenian provinces between September and December 1918. Morbidity rates among pupils and teachers in Ljubljana and the wider central Slovenian area are one of the rare aspects of the epidemic that have to some degree been documented and directly point to the wide prevalence of influenza. The rates of school absenteeism varied between 16% and 75% of all pupils. The only public health measure to be implemented in Carniola during the epidemics was a one-month closure of all schools, first in Ljubljana and then in the most severely affected districts in Lower Carniola.*

### KEYWORDS

*Spanish flu, children, school, pandemics, epidemics, First World War*

### IZVLEČEK

#### EPIDEMIJA V ŠOLSKIH KLOPEH: PRIMER ŠPANSKE GRIPE LETA 1918 V OSREDNJSLOVENSKEM PROSTORU

*Pandemija španske gripe velja za eno največjih katastrof v človeški zgodovini. V obdobju 1918–1920 naj bi po vsem svetu zbolelo 500 milijonov ljudi in jih po zadnjih ocenah umrlo med 50 in 100 milijoni. Drugi val pandemije gripe je med septembrom in decembrom 1918 prizadel tudi prebivalstvo v slovenskih deželah. Obolevanje učencev in učiteljev za špansko gripo v Ljubljani in v širšem osrednjeslovenskem prostoru je eno od redkih dogajanj v zvezi z epidemijo, ki je do določene mere dokumentirano in ki neposredno kaže na veliko razširjenost influence. Delež učencev, ki so manjkali pri pouku, je bil v posameznih šolah različen, in sicer v razponu 16–75 % vseh šolarjev. Edini javnozdravstveni ukrep na Kranjskem med epidemijo je bilo enomesečno zaprtje vseh šol najprej v Ljubljani, nato pa še v najbolj prizadetih okrajih na Dolenjskem.*

### KLJUČNE BESEDE

*Španska gripa, otroci, šola, pandemije, epidemije, prva svetovna vojna*



The Spanish flu pandemic is considered one of the greatest catastrophes in human history.\* In the period 1918–1920, an estimated 500 million people worldwide contracted the disease. According to the most recent data, it claimed from 50 to 100 million lives, i.e. from three to five percent of the population at the time.<sup>1</sup> The flu spread in less than a year in three waves to almost every corner of the world. In the northern hemisphere it was first identified in spring and summer of 1918, followed by the second wave in autumn that year, and the last wave followed in spring of 1919. The death cases in the second wave of the flu, which lasted globally merely six months, were recorded in nearly all spheres of the population.<sup>2</sup> The epidemic claimed an estimated 260,000 civilian lives in Austria-Hungary.<sup>3</sup> The deadliest second wave of the disease started in the monarchy in September 1918, peaked in October and November, and then receded in December.<sup>4</sup> The flu epidemic, which some authors consider as the only true successor of the 14th century plague or “black death” epidemic, surprisingly faded rapidly into the background of the First World War collective memory as one of the last short episodes at its end. Physician Josip Tičar characterised it in his 1922 book entitled “Boj nalezljivim boleznim” (Fighting Infectious Diseases) as a “sinister companion of the Asiatic cholera and plague that threatened the widest populations of nations in their ubiquitous campaigns”.<sup>5</sup>

The gravity of influenza’s impact on the population in the Slovenian provinces is reflected in mass recordings of deaths in almost all Slovenian parish death registers. The deadly second wave of the flu reached this part of Austria-Hungary in September 1918 and subsided by December of the same year. Various contemporary indirect sources reveal the scale of infections and high mortality. Healthcare statistics on Spanish flu infections and mortality in Carniola, Steiermark, Carinthia and the Austria littoral are not known or have not been found, there are currently no estimates on the rate by which the populations in individual provinces were affected. The only Slovenian source-based study thus far is an undergraduate diploma by Nina Kalčič, who analysed the situation in the city of Ljubljana by researching death registers of Ljubljana’s parishes. She established that 403 people died in Carniola’s capital

from September 1918 to February 1919 (275 deaths were caused by influenza and 128 by pneumonia). Mortality in this region, and most likely also the infection rate, peaked in October 1918 when 63.77% of all Spanish flu caused deaths were recorded in the city. The most relevant conclusions by Nina Kalčič are that (1) the disease mostly affected young adults and children, (2) more women than men died, and that (3) the most noticeable categories were women aged 21 to 30 and children aged under 10.<sup>6</sup>

Proper identification of deaths from death registers is onerous due to the designation of the disease. In Ljubljana’s St. Jacob parish, for example, the flu had been designated as Spanish influenza, Spanish disease, Spanish hoarse disease, influenza pneumonia and pneumonia, the latter being frequently the direct cause of death in influenza patients.<sup>7</sup> The Ljubljana Provincial Hospital’s death register contains death cause entries like pneumonia as an influenza complication, employing terms such as “Spanish” pneumonia and “Spanish” pneumonia bilateralis.<sup>8</sup>

The official infection and morbidity statistics are unknown since influenza was not classified by the Austro-Hungarian healthcare legislation as one of those infectious diseases that physicians were required to collect and report data on systematically. There is no mention of influenza in Article 1 of the Fight Against Communicable Diseases Act of 14 April 1913 (Zakon o zabrambi in zatiranju prenosnih bolezni), which contained a reporting obligation for seventeen infectious diseases.<sup>9</sup> During the epidemic, the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of Public Health (Ministerium für Volksgesundheit) did introduce a reporting obligation for all pneumonia cases as well.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, doubtful whether such data were actually being collected in the provinces, considering the end of the war and the imminent disintegration of the state. In any case, no such data has been found yet.

This is hardly surprising since until 1918, influenza was perceived throughout the world as a harmless infectious disease. There are at least three known epidemics in the 19th century: in the years 1830–1831, 1833 and 1889–1890, the latter being the first to be more accurately recorded. Although the last epidemic claimed at least 250,000 lives in

\* The article was summarily presented at the 38th conference of the Association of Slovenian Historical Societies (Zveza zgodovinskih društev Slovenije) – History of Education (Zgodovina izobraževanja), held at Ravne na Koroškem, 30 September 2016. The article in Slovenian language was published in *Kronika* 65, 2017, No. 1, pp. 67–76.

<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Mueller, Updating the Accounts, p. 105; Opdycke, *The flu epidemic of 1918*, Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Crosby, *Influenza*, p. 810.

<sup>3</sup> Schmied-Kowarzik, *War Losses (Austria-Hungary)*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Tičar, *Boj nalezljivim boleznim*, p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> Kalčič, *Španska gripa ali »Kadar pride žito v dobro zemljo [...]«*, pp. 30–31; Kalčič, *Španska gripa*, p. 259. According to Miha Likar’s estimates, Spanish flu claimed more than 60,000 lives on Yugoslav territories, see Likar, *Usoda nalezljivih bolezni*, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> NŠAL, ŽA Ljubljana – Sv. Jakob, Vital records (matične knjige), M 1891–1920 (transcript).

<sup>8</sup> NŠAL, death register duplicate for the Ljubljana provincial medical parish, the parish office of the Ljubljana Provincial Hospital, year 1918. On pneumonia as a death cause of influenza patients see Zupanič Slavec, *Razvoj javnega zdravstva*, p. 227.

<sup>9</sup> Code of laws, year 1913, No. 67.

<sup>10</sup> SI AS 33, reg. 17/8, fasc. I. 1918, No. 35067.

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Letnik 1913.

# Državni zakonik

za

## kraljevine in dežele, zastopane v državnem zboru.

Kos XXXII. — Izdan in razposlan 25. dne aprila 1913.

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Vsebina: **Št. 67.** Zakon o zaobrabi in zatiranju prenosnih bolezni.

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**67.**

### Zakon z dne 14. aprila 1913. l.

o zaobrabi in zatiranju prenosnih bolezni.

S pritrditvijo obeh zbornic državnega zbora  
zaukazujem tako:

#### I. Poglavje.

#### Poizvedba bolezni.

§ 1.

Bolezni, ki se morajo naznaniti.

Bolezni, ki se morajo naznaniti v zmislu tega zakona, so:

1. škrlatica,
2. difterija (davica),
3. abdominalni legar,
4. griža (disenterija),
5. epidemsko otrpnenje tilnika,
6. porodniška mrzlica,
7. legar z marogami,
8. koze,
9. azijska kolera,
10. kuga,
11. recidivni legar,
12. gobavost (lepra),
13. egiptiško vnetje oči (trahom),
14. rumena mrzlica,
15. vrančni prisad (črtnica),
16. smrkvost,
17. steklost, ter če koga ugriznejo na steklosti  
bolne ali steklosti sumne živali.

Ako nastopi v prvem odstavku ne oznamljena  
bolezen s pojavi ali v razmerah, zlasti v zdraviliščih,  
zavodih in internatih, da se je bat, da bi se razširila  
nevarno ali v večjem obsegu, se lahko ta bolezen  
z ukazom obč. za določeno dobo ali za okoliše,  
ki se oznamujejo določno, podvrže dolžnosti na-  
znanila.

§ 2.

#### Naznanjanje.

Vsak primer oboleclosti na bolezni, ki se mora  
naznaniti, smrt osebe, ki je imela tako bolezen,  
ter vsaka sumnja take oboleclosti ali take smrti se  
mora nemudoma naznaniti občinskemu predstojniku  
tiste občine, v koje okolišu biva bolna ali bolzni  
sumna oseba, ali je umrla, z navedbo imena, starosti  
in stanovanja bolne ali umrle osebe in kolikor  
mogoče z navedbo imena bolezni. Gola sumnja po-  
rodniške mrzlice ne osnuje dolžnosti naznanila.  
Razentega se lahko z ukazom obč. ali za določen  
čas ali za določne bolezni, ki se morajo naznaniti,  
zaukaže, da se primeri, ki se morajo naznaniti in ki  
se tičejo učenca, učne osebe ali šolskega uslužbenca,  
naznanijo šolskemu vodstvu.

Dolžnost naznanila nastopi, čim oseba, ki je  
dolžna podati naznanilo, ve, da gre za primer, ki ga

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(Slovenski.)

*Fight Against Communicable Diseases Act of 14 April 1913*  
(Code of Laws for the kingdoms and provinces, represented in the State Assembly, 1913).

Europe – more than all previous 19th century cholera epidemics combined –, it was mostly harmful to the elderly. Influenza was therefore perceived as a harmless inconvenience.<sup>11</sup>

Studying the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic in Slovenian provinces presents a challenge not only due to incomplete and poorly preserved healthcare documentation, but also due to complex geopolitical circumstances in 1918/1919. The epidemic outbreak coincided with the end of the First World War combined with the disintegration of Austria-Hungary and the establishment, first, the State of Slovenes,

Croats and Serbs, and, subsequently, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

**“Almost all teachers and students contracted the disease”<sup>12</sup>**

The extent to which the Spanish flu was present among students and teachers is one of the few documented developments during the epidemic that provides direct insight into the scale of the disease, at

<sup>11</sup> Crosby, Influenza, p. 809.

<sup>12</sup> SI ZAL LJU 401, OŠ Zvonka Runka v Ljubljani, Kronika šišenske osem razredne deske ljudske šole v Ljubljani, school year 1918/1919, MF 25.

least in central Slovenian area. As elsewhere in the world, school children were one of the most affected population groups.<sup>13</sup> Various sources confirm mass infections of children in schools across Ljubljana and other Carniolan districts. Apart from the preserved school chronicles for the First World War period, the epidemic data can also be found in individual school publications and preserved school records.<sup>14</sup> Documents evidencing the presence of the flu among school children and youth in Carniola have also been preserved in the Ljubljana Provincial Government archives, mostly in the form of district administration reports.

It follows from the article Healthcare in Ljubljana (Zdravstvo v Ljubljani), which is essentially a report of city physician's office from the end of October 1918, that it was precisely the population of school children where physicians first noticed that the flu is highly infectious: "[...] *The influenza is very contagious, perhaps as much as measles, a disease that almost everyone has contracted in their lives. This infectious property has been demonstrated in the case of the present epidemic, in particular among school children, where one infection created a hot spot among classmates, from which the disease spread to others in such a manner that the surge of infections in every school was perceived in just a few days. Within a few days, numerous primary and secondary school pupils, up to a third or even half of children in almost every class, were absent*".<sup>15</sup> The same article reports several thousand infections in Ljubljana during the last three weeks of October 1918. The following categories dominated the statistics: children aged under 10, youth aged 10–20 and adults under 30. Infections of the elderly were exceptional.<sup>16</sup> The impact of influenza on patients of the same age groups, as demonstrated by death register data collected by Kalčič, transposed into mortality.

Specific data on developments in Ljubljana schools, collected by the local city physician at the beginning of October 1918 also demonstrate a high number of patients among school children.<sup>17</sup> However, since schools did not report to the physician in a uniform manner, it is not possible to establish the number of school children who fell ill. It is, nevertheless, possible to calculate the share of children at Ljubljana primary schools who fell ill on 2 and 3 October 1918, since the report for these schools includes data on the number of all pupils for the school year 1918/1919. Accordingly, in the first few days of October there were 1.252 Ljubljana primary school

pupils who fell ill, which represents 29.7% of the total (4.217). The share of pupils absent from schools varied across schools in Ljubljana between 16 and 75%.

Although data<sup>18</sup> for individual schools in Ljubljana were not collected systematically, their publication is relevant since they demonstrate the exceptionally large scale of infections during the epidemic:

- Ist state general upper secondary school: 3 October, 167 students absent, half of the students in some classes, otherwise 16–20%;
- IInd state general upper secondary school: 2 October, 27% students absent, in class II.c over half, II.b one third, in other classes some students;
- German general upper secondary school: 3 October, 75% (of 18 students) of IIIrd grade students absent, 30 students of 142 total students absent;
- Male teachers' lycée: 3 October, 32 students absent, one third in IInd grade, above half in grades III and IV;
- City female teachers' lycée: 1 October, 42% students absent;
- Primary school: 44% pupils absent.

Primary schools on 2 and 3 October 1918:

- Ist city boys' school: 151 of 595 pupils absent (25.4%);
- IInd boys' city school: 119 of 566 pupils and 3 teachers absent (21%);
- IIIrd boys' city school: 86 of 217 pupils and school master ill (39.6%);
- IVth boys' city school: 44 of 226 pupils ill (19.5%);
- German boys' city school: 107 of 237 pupils (45.1%) and 2 teachers ill;
- Slovenian girls' city school: 286 girls of 975 absent (29.3 %) and 8 teachers ill;
- German girls' city school: 302 of 631 children (47.9%) and 5 teachers ill;
- Boys' primary school in Šiška: 63 boys of 354 absent (17.8%);
- Girls' primary school in Šiška: 94 of 416 girls absent (22.6%).

4 October:

- District school of crafts: approx. one third of students ill in both classes;
- Trade course at the girls' city lycée: 15 girls absent;
- Ursulines' schools, internal and external: in certain classes half or third of students absent, in others a large number of girls;
- The Lichtenthurn school: 16 absentees in VIIth grade, in other classes a total of 55 absentees;
- The German school curatorial school: 2 teachers and 66 children ill;
- German private school for boys: 42 of 143 children absent;

<sup>13</sup> Phillips, Influenza pandemic, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Children in other Slovenian provinces contracted the Spanish flu as well. In Carinthia, for example, there were 26 students infected at the Prevalje school, all of whom recuperated. See Doberšek, *Vpliv socialnih razmer*, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 31. 10. 1918, No. 256, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, 1918, box 944, No. 33040, No. 33268.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



- The German Schulverein school in Sp. Šiška: 16 of 95 children absent.

### Suspension of classes

The only official public healthcare measure in Carniola in relation to Spanish flu mass infections were school closures or class suspensions, first in Ljubljana and subsequently in other schools as well. Although the press reported mass infections of school children in Ljubljana already at the end of September,<sup>19</sup> the local city physician, based on the said inquiry, ordered on 3 October the suspension of classes first in fifteen schools in Ljubljana, and subsequently on 5 October in additional seven schools. Classes were initially suspended until 15 October,<sup>20</sup> and after which, due to the “widespread presence of influenza and long convalescence of patients”, the Ljubljana city administration in agreement with the imperial-crown Provincial School Council ordered a closure of all secondary as well as public and private primary schools and kindergartens until 3 November 1918.<sup>21</sup> The suspension of classes was reported on by the press, e.g. *Slovenski narod* and *Učiteljski tovariš* (the publication of Yugoslav teachers in Austria): “All primary and secondary schools in Ljubljana will be closed until 3 November due to the Spanish disease that is spreading very rapidly in Ljubljana.”<sup>22</sup> Also, the start of classes at the schools for advanced crafts was postponed to 10 November due to the “widespread Spanish flu”.<sup>23</sup>

Classes were not suspended in Ljubljana only but also in schools of other districts in Carniola. On the basis of school data, several districts reported mass infections in individual towns to the Provincial Government in Ljubljana. The Črnomelj district administration reported that in schools in Bojanci<sup>24</sup> and Metlika only one third of pupils attended classes on 4 October. Child infections were particularly numerous there, with some severe cases accompanied by pneumonia. Two teachers and 20 pupils fell ill.<sup>25</sup> The press reported that schools in the surroundings of Črnomelj remained closed on 12 November since “classes are impossible in the near future [...]”.<sup>26</sup> Classes resumed on 21 November in this district.<sup>27</sup> The “Spanish” disease also caused school closures in Krško.<sup>28</sup>

Press articles and numerous reported school closures in the Novo mesto district are a reflection of the high impact of the disease in that district as a whole. Press article authors noticed that in Novo mesto the influenza killed mainly women, while in (Dolenjske) Toplice it spread predominantly among children and younger women. The “Spanish” disease also spread through remote municipalities and villages. They criticized school supervisors that allowed children from infected homes to continue going to school.<sup>29</sup> There were reports from Novo mesto that the flu was ubiquitous, with mass infections in certain families. Senior district physician Ivan Vaupotič reported that the disease had been widespread among primary school children and that there are cases among upper secondary school students as well. Accordingly, he ordered on 7 October that the upper secondary school and primary school be closed immediately.<sup>30</sup> The upper secondary school was closed on 9 October, initially until 23 October, which was subsequently prolonged to 7 November.<sup>31</sup> Classes at the boys’ primary school resumed on 11 November.<sup>32</sup> Physician Vaupotič demanded that the school in Sv. Peter by Novo Mesto (Otočec) in this district be closed since 190 of 249 pupils contracted the disease, i.e. 76.3%, as well as both clergymen and the teacher.<sup>33</sup> On 11 October, three schools in Šmihel by Novo mesto were also closed. In this town, 66 (46%) pupils at the boys’ primary school, 42 (91%) pupils at the girls’ school, and 40 (42%) students at the secondary school fell ill.<sup>34</sup> In the four-level primary school in Trebnje the physician diagnosed 34% infections among a total of 322 pupils. By visiting them individually, he confirmed that they all contracted the flu.<sup>35</sup> On 16 October, the school in Žužemberg was closed, where 79 of 346 children fell ill,<sup>36</sup> as well as the one in Vavta vas, where 66 of 101 1st grade students fell ill, while classes were suspended in the II<sup>nd</sup> and III<sup>rd</sup> grade because the senior and junior teacher contracted the disease.<sup>37</sup> On 17 October, the school in Toplice was closed because more than half pupils fell ill.<sup>38</sup> A day later, the school in Gabrje in Brusnice municipality was closed, not only due to the flu, but also scarlet fever and dysentery.<sup>39</sup> In the second half of October, schools in the following villages were closed: Orehovica, Spodnja Nemška vas, Selo, Zagradec, Stopiče,

<sup>19</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 30. 9. 1918, No. 223, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, 1918, box 944, No. 33040, No. 33268; *Slovenski narod*, 3. 10. 1918, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, 1918, box 944, No. 34024.

<sup>22</sup> *Učiteljski tovariš*, 18. 10. 1918, No. 22, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 18. 10. 1918, No. 241, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, I. 1918, box 944, No. 32139.

<sup>25</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, No. 33103.

<sup>26</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 12. 11. 1918, No. 267, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, No. 37496.

<sup>28</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 31. 10. 1918, No. 256, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 7. 10. 1918, No. 229, p. 5; 12. 10. 1918, No. 235, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, No. 33231.

<sup>31</sup> *Dolenjske novice*, 10. 10. 1918, No. 41, p. 163; 7. 11. 1918, No. 45, p. 179.

<sup>32</sup> *Dolenjske novice*, 7. 11. 1918, No. 45, p. 179.

<sup>33</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, No. 33781.

<sup>34</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, No. 33780.

<sup>35</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, No. 34073.

<sup>36</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, No. 34563.

<sup>37</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, No. 34564.

<sup>38</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, No. 34862.

<sup>39</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, No. 34863.

Ambrus, Dobrnič, Brusnice, Hinje (by Žužemberg), Bela Cerkev, Soteska, Gornja Sušica and Žvirče (by Žužemberg).<sup>40</sup> School closures in the Novo mesto district continued in the beginning of November, for example in Mirna Peč where classes were erratic and poorly attended.<sup>41</sup> The next schools to be closed were the ones in Št. Lovrenc – where the teacher fell ill as well –, in Črmošnjice and Dol. Karteljevo – where 70% of students fell ill –, and in Prečna, where “absenteeism was high and classes almost impossible”.<sup>42</sup> School closures continued in November, in Dvor and Podgrad on 9 November. In the latter, only one tenth of pupils attended classes.<sup>43</sup>

All schools except the upper secondary school were closed in the city of Maribor as well. In the beginning of October it was established that the flu had been particularly widespread in schools. Until 5 October 140 students fell ill in the Maribor general upper secondary school, as many as 20 per class in some classes.<sup>44</sup> The Maribor city council decided on October 19 to suspend classes in all primary and secondary schools and kindergartens until at least 27 October.<sup>45</sup>

Press articles reveal that due to the epidemic schools were being closed elsewhere around the Slovenian provinces. In Prague, all German and Czech schools were closed (initially between 7 and 20 October and subsequently until 4 November), while classes at the Prague University were postponed until 21 October.<sup>46</sup> In Budapest, schools were also closed on 4 November “*due to the widespread Spanish disease*”.<sup>47</sup> The mayor of Vienna closed all primary and secondary schools on 7 October, the city also closed all theatres and cinemas simultaneously.<sup>48</sup> According to the currently prevailing view with regard to the influenza epidemic, schools in Vienna were closed too late.<sup>49</sup> In certain cities like Seckau in Steiermark schools remained closed until the end of that year.<sup>50</sup> There were mass infections of students and teachers also in Graz where 40% infections were reported for certain schools, and in some schools as many as half of the teachers fell ill. Consequently, schools in that city were closed as of 9 October, initially for three weeks and later until 4 November. According to the offi-

cial announcement of the Graz city council, classes resumed only after all anti-influenza measures were lifted, i.e. on Monday 11 November. All public and private kindergartens, primary schools, secondary and upper secondary schools, craft schools, religious classes and dancing schools were closed in Graz. Children plays were also prohibited.<sup>51</sup> The press reported on school closures in Linz,<sup>52</sup> Villach<sup>53</sup> and Trieste, in the latter from end of October until at least 15 November.<sup>54</sup> In Klagenfurt, schools were closed at least until 4 November,<sup>55</sup> while both primary schools in Voelkermarkt were closed as well.<sup>56</sup> At least from 11 to 26 October, schools were closed in Istria,<sup>57</sup> they closed in Zagreb on 10 October, and a day later in Osijek and Sarajevo.<sup>58</sup> Of course, classes were erratic due to other reasons as well during the First World War. In Ljubljana it was difficult to organise classes due to the large concentration of troops in the city. It follows from school chronicles of certain schools in Ljubljana that schools organised classes during the war according to adapted curricula either only in parts of schools or in entirely different buildings, or even more buildings simultaneously, because larger school building were occupied by troops and military hospitals.<sup>59</sup> Classes were interrupted due to other infectious diseases, for example in September 1918 due to dysentery and scarlet fever in certain villages in Dolenjska (Biška vas, Zabrdje, Stan and Stara gora).<sup>60</sup> All schools in Vienna were closed between 14 December 1918 and 7 January 1919 due to the heating coal shortage.<sup>61</sup>

### Back to school

The world changed dramatically for school children during the one-month forced holiday. While they left classrooms of Austro-Hungarian schools at the beginning of October, they returned to classrooms of the new Yugoslav state. During the suspension of classes due to the Spanish flu epidemic, the First World War ended, Austria-Hungary disintegrated and the new State of SHS emerged. Nevertheless, life continued in those turbulent times despite the epidemic, as evidenced *inter alia* by school chronicles. The chronicle of an eight-grade boys' primary school in Šiška in Ljubljana reports that,

<sup>40</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, Nos. 35446, 35447, 35448, 35527, 35528, 35529, 35668, 35912, 36039, 36040, 36041, 36042, 36043, 36044.

<sup>41</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, No. 36445.

<sup>42</sup> SI AS 33, 17/8, Nos. 36446, 36447, 36522, 36523.

<sup>43</sup> SI AS 33, Nos. 36906, 36907.

<sup>44</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 5. 10. 1918, No. 228, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> *Grazer Tagblatt*, 17. 10. 1918, p. 2; *Marburger Zeitung*, 20. 10. 1918, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Grazer Tagblatt*, 6. 10. 1918, p. 2; *Slovenski narod*, 12. 10. 1918, No. 235, p. 4; 19. 10. 1918, No. 243, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 20. 9. 1918, No. 215, p. 3; 19. 10. 1918, No. 243, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> *Grazer Tagblatt*, 8. 10. 1918, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Biwald et al., *Spitäl, Lazarette, Hygiene, Wohlfahrt*, p. 300.

<sup>50</sup> *Grazer Tagblatt*, 12. 12. 1918, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> *Grazer Tagblatt*, 6. 10. 1918, p. 2; 10. 10. 1918, p. 2; 27. 10. 1918, p. 11; 10. 11. 1918, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> *Grazer Tagblatt*, 10. 10. 1918, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Grazer Tagblatt*, 17. 10. 1918, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 12. 10. 1918, No. 235, p. 4; *Grazer Tagblatt*, 11. 10. 1918, p. 3; 15. 11. 1918, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Grazer Tagblatt*, 12. 10. 1918, p. 3; 18. 10. 1918, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Grazer Tagblatt*, 20. 10. 1918, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Delić, *Vijesti o španjolskoj gripi*, pp. 177–178.

<sup>58</sup> Hutinec, *Odjeci epidemije “španjolske gripe”*, p. 231.

<sup>59</sup> See Šimac and Keber, *Patriae ac humanitati; Učiteljski tovariš*, 15. 11. 1918, No. 26, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> SI AS 33, reg. 17/8, fasc. 1918, No. 30004.

<sup>61</sup> *Učiteljski tovariš*, 13. 12. 1918, No. 28, p. 9.





*Image of the Spanish influenza as a Spanish woman with a fan (Kurent, 16. 10. 1918, No. 6, enclosed).*

although the school was closed on 29 October – a day before the proclamation of the new national government in Ljubljana – due to the Spanish flu epidemic, children and teachers attended the solemn procession through Ljubljana.<sup>62</sup> More than 30,000 people attended a large patriotic manifestation at Ljubljana's Congress square.<sup>63</sup> The event was attended by pupils and teachers of the 1st girls' primary school as well. "Dressed for the festive occasion, the girls gathered at 8am in school. They all wore Slovenian ribbons, holding small Slovenian flags in their hands."<sup>64</sup> Although it has been demonstrated that mass gatherings after the armistice contributed to the spread of the Spanish flu across Europe, that cannot be claimed for the 29 October event in Ljubljana. The Spanish flu and pneumonia mortality rate peaked in Ljubljana already mid-October and then

plummeted towards mid-November.<sup>65</sup> Considering diverse forecasts on the resumption of classes in Carniola, it is probable that not all schools resumed classes on the same day, and it seems that, in addition to the epidemic, it was the complex political circumstances at the time that affected substantially the resumption of classes. The department of education and religion published in the 9 November edition of the newspaper *Slovenski narod* that classes will resume at secondary schools and the lycée as soon as possible, while classes at primary schools will "continue according to local conditions".<sup>66</sup> Classes probably resumed at most schools in mid-November since the press reported on 14 November that "school classes are to be resumed these days in all schools". Classes resumed at both lycées and the national school for crafts in Ljubljana on 18 November.<sup>67</sup>

The influenza epidemic was exhausting for much of the school population, considering also the spe-

<sup>62</sup> SI ZAL LJU 401, OŠ Zvonka Runka, school chronicle of 1918/1919, MF 25.

<sup>63</sup> Perovšek, *Za Državo Slovencev, Hrvatov in Srbov*, p. 207.

<sup>64</sup> SI ZAL LJU 372, 1st girls' primary school in Ljubljana, school chronicle of 1918/1919, MF 22.

<sup>65</sup> Kalčič, *Španska gripa*, image 2, p. 260.

<sup>66</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 9. 11. 1918, No. 265, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 14. 11. 1918, No. 269, p. 5.

cific context at the end of First World War in which most of the population faced prolonged shortages of food and other basic necessities. It appears from the press articles that the Spanish flu epidemic contributed to an enhanced general care for the health of children. Consequently, when schools in Ljubljana resumed classes, there were appeals in the press to introduce morning-only classes due to health reasons in particular. Due to the alternating morning and afternoon classes, children needed to “walk four times through muddy and snowy streets and soaked their already poor shoes, and freeze four times in poor clothing”, which impacted their health negatively. “The youth is already suffering much due to poor nutrition, only to be now exposed to unnecessary frost as well.” In parallel, schools would be heated once daily only and aerated thoroughly in the afternoons.<sup>68</sup>

### Death among students and teachers in schools in Ljubljana

School chronicles of certain schools in Ljubljana contain *inter alia* data on the deceased students and teachers. Since influenza-related mortality statistics do not exist neither for Ljubljana nor for individual Slovenian provinces, these individual cases cannot be placed in a wider statistical context. Without statistical data, the comparison of mortality between different population groups is not possible. Nevertheless, the data are valuable since they demonstrate that death was present among students and teachers in many schools. At the Polje school, 6 of the second, fifth and sixth grade died during the epidemic between 5 October and 14 November. The teacher died as well. “Teachers and pupils followed the teacher to her premature grave where the headmaster gave a farewell speech in the name of teachers and students [...]”.<sup>69</sup> At the first girls’ primary school there were 300 infected pupils and 8 teachers, but they recovered by the beginning of November.<sup>70</sup> The Prule school chronicle states that health was not particularly good in 1918 since pupils contracted especially the Spanish flu that caused 3 deaths of pupils in the first, third and fourth grade.<sup>71</sup> At the school in Zalog by Ljubljana, 47 pupils and a teacher contracted the disease, and a second grade pupil died.<sup>72</sup> At the current Valentin Vodnik school, one second grade pupil died.<sup>73</sup> At

the school in Šentvid, 5/6 of children fell ill and the Spanish disease “claimed some victims among school children”.<sup>74</sup>

At the Ledina school, one pupil of the 4th grade died of the flu and two of dysentery. “Pupils laid flowers on the grave of their prematurely deceased colleagues and followed them together with their teachers with the school flag to their final resting place at Sv. Križ. The 1st city school joins their parents, relatives and friends in mourning.”<sup>75</sup> It is noted in the minutes of teachers’ conference at the 3rd boys’ city primary school (Vrtača) that the cruel Spanish disease did not spare this school. “On 15 October, it took our senior teacher colleague who worked here for 7 years and one month. He was a calm and kind man and our dear colleague [...]”.<sup>76</sup> At the Spodnja Šiška school, almost all teachers and pupils fell ill during the epidemic as well.<sup>77</sup>

Among the most affected schools was the Sv. Stanislav school in Šentvid, where almost 200 pupils and many teachers fell ill, of which five students, one teacher, the prefect and the sister of mercy died. The newsletter of this religious school contains a precise report: “The Spanish disease broke out in the school at the beginning of October and spread extremely rapidly, although initially it did not seem dangerous. But then in the afternoon of 6 October a 4th grade pupil [...] suddenly died. On 7 October a 5th grade pupil [...] died in the Ljubljana provincial hospital. On 10 October a first grade pupil [...] died. On the same day, a 5th grade pupil [...] died. On 11 October in the morning God summoned professor [...] to eternal rest. On the same day the prefect [...] died after 1 pm. On 16 October a 5th grade pupil [...] died. The last victim of the mighty Spanish disease was the sister of mercy who died on 8 December.”<sup>78</sup>

Teacher and student infections during the epidemic were also recorded in *Učiteljski tovariš* that published obituaries of the deceased Slovenian teachers and reports on the deceased family members of individual teachers. Regrettably, certain reports on the death of teachers and their family members during the epidemic do not mention the cause of death. While these cases may well be attributed to the flu, dying of other causes was not uncommon during the war.

<sup>68</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 19. 11. 1918, No. 273, p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> SI ZAL LJU 391, OŠ Edvarda Kardelja Ljubljana Polje, school chronicle of 1918/1919, MF 24.

<sup>70</sup> SI ZAL LJU 372, 1st girls’ primary school in Ljubljana (at sv. Jakob), school chronicle of 1918/1919, MF 22.

<sup>71</sup> SI ZAL LJU 370, OŠ Prule, school chronicle of 1918/1919, MF 21.

<sup>72</sup> SI ZAL LJU 367, OŠ Zalog pri Ljubljani, school chronicle of 1918/1919, MF 21.

<sup>73</sup> SI ZAL LJU 230, OŠ Valentina Vodnika, school chronicle of 1918/1919, MF 19.

<sup>74</sup> SI ZAL LJU 406, OŠ Franc Rozman Stane, Ljubljana Šentvid, school chronicle of 1918/1919, MF 27.

<sup>75</sup> SŠM, collection of documents, folder OŠ Ledina, Yearly report of the 1st city six-grade primary school in Ljubljana in the wartime year 1918/1919.

<sup>76</sup> SI ZAL LJU 233, OŠ Vrtača, 3rd city boys’ primary school in Ljubljana, Minutes of the 2nd regular teachers’ conference of 27 November 1918.

<sup>77</sup> SŠM, collection of documents, folder of the school in Sp. Šiška, school chronicle of 1939.

<sup>78</sup> XIV. Newsletter of the religious upper secondary school of sv. Stanislav in Št. Vid by Ljubljana on the school year 1918/19, p. 16–18. Šimac and Keber, *Patriae ac humanitati*, p. 151.



## Conclusion

On the basis of the Ljubljana Provincial Government documents, the available chronicles and materials of schools in Ljubljana, as well as various press reports, it can unequivocally be concluded that the Spanish flu was widely proliferated within the school population in the central Slovenian area. Almost one third of primary school students in Ljubljana fell ill in the first few days of October. The share of students who were absent due to the disease in individual schools in Ljubljana ranged from 16 to 75% of all students. The data on infections in individual schools, despite being fragmented and gathered sporadically, clearly confirm not only the existence of the epidemic among students and teachers in Autumn of 1918, but also across all population layers at that time. School closure was one of the public health measures that existed in Austria-Hungary and the only one that Carniolan authorities implemented. In the same period, schools were closed in most neighbouring Austro-Hungarian regions and cities as well. However, since the influenza had been widespread already in the last week of September, it appears that this measure was implemented too late in Carniola.

The world changed dramatically during the involuntary vacation for school children. While schools were closed due to the Spanish flu epidemic, the First World War ended, Austria-Hungary disintegrated, and the new State of SHS emerged. The awareness of the mass infections and deaths during the epidemic rapidly faded away amidst the condensed developments at the end of the First World War. The epidemic remained forgotten also as part of the collective memory of the First World War.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Additional articles about Spanish flu in Slovenian provinces were published in *Acta Histriae* review 28, 2020/1: Katarina Keber, "O španski bolezni, hripi posebne vrste". Ljubljanska izkušnja s pandemijo španske gripe ["On a Spanish Disease, a Specific Type of Flu". Experience with the Spanish Influenza Pandemic in Ljubljana], pp. 41–58; Urška Bratož, Vojna, lakota in bolezni: Po sledeh španske gripe v Kopru [War, Famine and Disease: Tracing the Spanish Influenza in Koper], pp. 21–40 and Miha Seručnik, Pandemija Španske gripe med Kranjsko in Istro – Možnosti in omejitve digitalnih pristopov [The Spanish Influenza Pandemic Between Carniola and Istria – Possibilities and Limitations of Digital Approaches], pp. 1–21.

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## POVZETEK

### Epidemija v šolskih klopih: primer španske gripe leta 1918 v osrednjeslovenskem prostoru

Pandemija španske gripe velja za eno največjih katastrof v človeški zgodovini. V obdobju 1918–1920 naj bi po vsem svetu zbolelo 500 milijonov ljudi in jih po zadnjih ocenah umrlo med 50 in 100 milijoni oz. od tri do pet procentov takratne svetovne populacije. Bolezen se je skoraj povsod po svetu v manj kot letu dni razširila v treh valovih. Na severni polobli so jo prvič zaznali spomladi in poleti leta 1918, drugi val bolezni je zajel ves svet jeseni tega leta, zadnji val je sledil spomladi leta 1919. Za Avstro-Ogrsko velja ocena, da je epidemija influence zahtevala okrog 260.000 življenj civilistov. Drugi, smrtonosni val bolezni se je v monarhiji začel septembra leta 1918 in svoj višek dosegel v oktobru in novembru ter upadel decembra istega leta.

Raziskovanje epidemije španske gripe leta 1918 v slovenskem prostoru otežujejo poleg pomanjkljive in slabo ohranjene zdravstvene dokumentacije tudi zapletene geopolitične razmere v letih 1918/1919, saj je epidemija izbruhnila ob samem koncu prve svetovne vojne, ko je hkrati prišlo do razpada Avstro-Ogrske in nastanka najprej Države SHS, nato Kraljevine Srbov, Hrvatov in Slovencev. Obolevanje učencev in učiteljev za špansko gripo je eno od redkih dogajanj v zvezi z epidemijo, ki je do neke mere dokumentirano in ki neposredno kaže na veliko razširjenost te bolezni v slovenskem prostoru. Na ljubljanskih ljudskih šolah je bilo npr. v prvih dneh oktobra leta 1918 bolnih 1.252 učencev oz. 29,7 % vseh šolarjev. Izpad učencev pri pouku je bil v posameznih šolah različen, in sicer v razponu od 16 %–75 % vseh šolarjev. Edini javno-zdravstveni ukrep na Kranjskem med epidemijo je bilo enomesečno zaprtje vseh šol najprej v Ljubljani, nato še v najbolj prizadetih okrajih na Dolenjskem. Ljubljanski mestni zdravnik je zaradi množičnega obolevanja učencev in dijakov pouk prekinil 3. oktobra 1918, nato je 12. oktobra ljubljanski mestni magistrat skupaj s c. kr. Deželnim šolskim svetom odredil zaprtje vseh srednjih, javnih in zasebnih ljudskih šol in vrtcev do vključno 3. novembra 1918. Večina šol je s poukom spet začela sredi novembra. Za šolajoče se otroke pa se je svet med enomesečnimi prisilnimi počitnicami temeljito spremenil. Če so v začetku oktobra zapustili učilnice avstro-ogrskih šol, so se sredi novembra vrnili v šolske razrede nove jugoslovanske države.



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