



Austro-Hungarian Women's Activism from the Southern "Periphery" Across Ethnic Lines

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Through the examples of Adél Nemessányi, Milica Tomić, Jelica Belović-Bernadžikovska, and Nafija Sarajlić, four women activists, public workers, and writers from the southern "peripheries" of Austria-Hungary who belonged to different ethnic groups, this paper examines the complex local, regional, and trans-regional aspects of women's awakening and organizing in the Dual Monarchy. While none of these four women belonged to any associations that demanded political rights for women, their public work and activism, which took multiple forms, greatly contributed to the improvement of women's public image, education, and social status in their own time, leaving an imprint on future generations. Through both the personal and professional lives of these remarkable women, we can discern connections that transgress ethnic, regional, and national boundaries and also reflect international developments in the fight for women's rights. This ethnically varied sample of exceptionally educated women pioneers from parts of the Dual Monarchy that would later become Yugoslavia demonstrates what women were able to accomplish despite an overall conservative social environment.

Keywords: women's rights, regional and trans-regional developments, feminism from the "periphery"

Introduction

Women's activism in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was a complex phenomenon. While this activism has been relatively well studied in relation to the main centers, with by now iconic figures such as Rosa Mayreder in Vienna or Rózsa Schwimmer in Budapest, the efforts and lives of women from the "peripheries" remain lesser known, although in recent years there has been an uptake in research in this direction. Through the examples of Adél Nemessányi, Milica Tomić, Jelica Belović-Bernadžikovska, and Nafija Sarajlić, four women activists, public workers, and writers, this article argues that the definition of activism—particularly for this generation of women who lived around the time of the international First Women's Movement and labored toward improvements in women's social position, education, and public presence in their respective communities—must go beyond political activism understood in the narrow

sense of forming political associations and demanding political rights. The contributions of women like Nemessányi, Tomić, Belović-Bernadžikowska, and Sarajlić offer a more complex picture that helps us understand the local, regional, and trans-regional facets of women's awakening and organizing in the Dual Monarchy.

All four women were born and/or worked in the southern parts of the Monarchy which after World War I would become the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929), and they belonged to different ethnic groups. Adél Nemessányi (1857–1933), an ethnic Hungarian, and Milica Tomić (1859–1944), an ethnic Serb, were both educated in various cities of the Monarchy, and they both lived and worked in Novi Sad/Újvidék¹ in Vojvodina (then part of Southern Hungary). Jelica Belović-Bernadžikowska (1870–1946), an ethnic hybrid, was educated internationally and active across various regions of the Monarchy, including Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and eventually Novi Sad. Only Nafija Sarajlić (1893–1970) was both educated and lived all her life in her native Sarajevo. Tomić and Belović-Bernadžikowska were the most connected across ethnic and national lines, both through their literary work and political activism. They were multilingual, and although they collaborated and/or corresponded with feminists and intellectuals of other nationalities and internationally, they embraced a Serbian nationalist position.² Nemessányi and Sarajlić stayed out of the strictly defined arena of political activism. However, they both contributed in their respective locations to women's emancipation through their work as educators and writers.

Novi Sad's Multiethnic Early Feminist History

In a 2007 article published in the Novi Sad-based Hungarian-language periodical *Létünk* (Our Existence), local historian Ágnes Ózer approvingly notes the rise of an interest in studying women's history in her city. However, she bemoans the fact that until recently, this interest had focused on Serbian women only: "Such research [Novi Sad women's history] never delved into this question from the point of view of Novi Sad's multiethnic, pluri-religious, and multicultural reality."³ Thanks to Ózer's and other feminist-minded researchers' pioneering

1 Novi Sad is the Serbo-Croat name of the city, Újvidék the Hungarian. Both are still used officially today in Vojvodina.

2 She is included in the Croatian encyclopedia under "Belović-Bernadžikowska, Jelica."

3 Ózer, "Adalék," 40. All translations from non-English sources are by me.

work in this field, the approach to women's history in Novi Sad and in Vojvodina more generally began to shift, most notably with the publication of the 2006 volume *Vajdasági magyar nők élettörténetei* (Life stories of Vojvodina Hungarian Women), edited by Svenka Savić and Veronika Mitro.⁴ In her foreword, Gordana Stojaković acknowledges the work of mostly middle-class and some aristocratic women whose contributions to women's emancipation in Vojvodina she deems as important as the work of organized women's associations. "Adél Nemessányi⁵ was one such woman," she writes, "the first principal of the Novi Sad Public High School for Girls and the founder of the Maria Dorothea association."⁶ Since this publication, there has been a revival of research interest in the life and work of this important Hungarian Novi Sad-based early feminist.

While Nemessányi's most important achievements regarding the advancement of women's education are linked to Novi Sad, where she was laid to rest at the age of 76 in the tomb she shares with her parents in the Protestant section of the Futog Street cemetery,⁷ she was born and subsequently studied in cities further north in the then Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy. Nemessányi was born in 1857, in Liptószentmiklós in Upper Hungary (today Liptovský Mikuláš in Slovakia). She received her education in the town of her birth and later continued studies in Pozsony (Bratislava) and Budapest. After passing her teacher's exam in Budapest in 1876, Nemessányi moved to Székesfehérvár, to the south of Budapest, where she taught at the Girls' School. A certificate issued about her achievements in Székesfehérvár in 1884 highly praises her work and knowledge. She is said to have been greatly respected both by her pupils and their parents, as well as the larger community, for teaching German and for founding the Youth Library.⁸ That very same year, then 27-year-old Nemessányi was named principal of the Novi Sad Public High School for Girls (Újvidéki Állami Polgári Leány Iskola), and she moved to the southern periphery of Hungary, where she would spend the rest of her life. According to Ózer, this Hungarian-language high school became Nemessányi's "life achievement."⁹ She was held in high esteem as principal, and the school's reputation grew, attracting more and more girls.

4 An earlier version of this publication came out in Serbo-Croatian in 2001.

5 While different spellings of the name (Nemassányi, Nemešeni) can be encountered in various publications, the correct form can be deduced from the birth certificate published online in Stojaković, "Adel Nemešeni": Adela Nevena Nemessányi. I therefore use this spelling throughout this article.

6 Stojaković, "Tények," 12.

7 Stojaković, "Adel Nemešeni."

8 Ibid. Stojaković wrongly calculates her age in 1933 at 96.

9 Ózer, "Az újvidéki."

While in 1883–84 there were 63 pupils, by 1901–1902 their number more than tripled, reaching 221.¹⁰

Nemessányi's skills as an educator and administrator were noted already during her lifetime by Menyhért Érdujhelyi in his monograph *Újvidék története* (History of Novi Sad), published in 1894 (reprinted in 2002). Érdujhelyi mentions the multiethnic student body at Nemessányi's school, which was attended not only by Hungarian but also by a significant number of ethnic German and Serbian girls.¹¹ He attributes the school's popularity and success to its excellent administration. Érdujhelyi's assessment of Nemessányi's skills as an educator and administrator are corroborated by Vasa Stajić in his 1951 study *Građa za kulturnu istoriju Novog Sada* (Materials for a cultural history of Novi Sad), in which he mentions two secondary schools for girls in Novi Sad: the one run by Nemessányi and the secondary school for Serbian girls. Stajić notes that Nemessányi's school attracted more interest. Her school functioned with only two female teachers and one class, whereas the Serbian high school had three classes, four male teachers, one female teacher, one adjunct male teacher for music, and one adjunct female teacher for French. Nevertheless, Nemessányi's school had nearly twice the number of pupils (61 compared to 38).¹² Thus, despite the higher staffing and more classes offered, the Serbian secondary school still did not attract as many pupils, likely due to the better reputation of Nemessányi's school.

The other successful area of Nemessányi's activities was the founding of the Novi Sad branch of the Mária Dorothea Egyesület (Maria Dorothea Association) in 1891.¹³ According to Érdujhelyi, the "association's soul and president is Adél Nemessányi,"¹⁴ and it operated within her school.¹⁵ Érdujhelyi describes the goals of the association as furthering ideas pertaining to women's education, including women's self-education, and raising a general interest in girls' education through lectures and reunions. He gives 101 as the total number

10 Stojaković, "Adel Nemešenji."

11 Érdujhelyi, *Újvidék története*, 360.

12 Stajić, *Građa*, 165. The numbers refer to a report from 1877 quoted by the author.

13 On the national level, the founder of the Hungarian Maria Dorothea Association was Mrs. Gyula Sebestyén (née Ilona Stetina, 1855–1932) in 1885. According to Attila Nóbik, it became "one of the most important cultural organizations representing women's interests." Nóbik, "Feminization," 8.

14 Érdujhelyi, *Újvidék története*, 329.

15 Stojaković, "Tények," 11.

of members.¹⁶ The association further helped organize female teachers.¹⁷ Although not a political women's association, it can certainly be considered a forerunner of the latter, along with other early women's associations in Hungary that promoted women's employment and fought for their professional and educational rights.¹⁸ For all these efforts to develop girls' education and raise women's social status through four decades of pedagogical work, in 1913 at a public ceremony in Újvidék, Nemessányi was awarded the Emperor's Gold Cross of Merit, the highest recognition bestowed upon a public sector worker in the Monarchy. In his laudation, the mayor underlined that Nemessányi chose the "most difficult and bumpy career," but that as her life's goal she had followed "the highest calling ... the care for the nation's most precious treasure and hope," namely, the "education of the Hungarian youth." In her response, Nemessányi emphasized her modest and quiet ways in approaching her teaching career while extending the merit of the award to her colleagues who labored in the field of girls' education.¹⁹

What transpires from the above exchange at Nemessányi's award ceremony is the dominant discourse surrounding acceptable and desirable female behavior and roles in society. The link between women's work as educators for the sake of the nation is made clear. As a matter of fact, nineteenth-century and, in some cases, already eighteenth-century feminism in Hungary and in other parts of East Central Europe often used the argument of the necessity of furthering women's education for the benefit of the nation.²⁰ In the case of Nemessányi, the distinguished award to honor her work in this direction is an obvious proof of appreciation and approval by the highest authorities. Nemessányi's response corroborates the ideal of womanhood at the time: modesty and a quiet demeanor. We can assume, however, that her work and professional success required other, more "masculine" qualities as well, such as persistence and assertiveness, and that her work as an educator of girls in itself was a break with traditional feminine roles. She chose to live an independent life and became a highly successful professional in her field at a time when school principals were mostly men.

16 Ibid., 330.

17 Ózer, "Az újvidéki."

18 Schwartz, *Shifting Voices*, 20–21.

19 Ibid.

20 See Schwartz, *Shifting Voices*, 36–37; Schwartz and Thorson, *Shaking the Empire*.

If we look at Nemessányi's pedagogical articles, we find further evidence that she was far from simply accepting and fitting into the dominant social norms and expectations placed on a woman and a female teacher. The fact alone that she was, according to Attila Nóbik, one of the only two female teachers to publish in the Hungarian periodical *Család és iskola* (Family and School) already speaks volumes.²¹ Nóbik attributes this fact to her status as principal, which bestowed a relative level of power upon her. In her article published in *Család és iskola* in 1889, Nemessányi praises the advantages of public over private education with the argument that public education often has to correct what home education and upbringing fail to accomplish. At the same time, Nemessányi criticizes the shortcomings of public education and argues for better private education for children of both sexes.²²

In her article “Néhány szó a tanítónő munkájáról s díjazásáról” (A few words about the work and remuneration of female teachers), which was published a year later in the periodical *Felső Nép- és Polgári Iskolai Közlöny* (Higher Elementary Schools' Bulletin), Nemessányi specifically discusses the position of female teachers. She refutes some arguments put forth in an earlier article by a certain János Vécsey. The latter defended lower pay for female teachers, basing his arguments on commonly held contemporaneous stereotypes regarding female teachers' and women's work in general, namely, that such work was allegedly easier and that more money in a woman's pocket would only lead to her choosing a more vain and luxurious lifestyle. In her skillfully formulated counter-arguments, Nemessányi convincingly demonstrates the exact opposite. Not only does a woman teacher spend as much time and effort on her work as her male counterpart but she also spends as much if not more time on her professional development. Being excluded from the male clubs and casinos, where male teachers can exchange ideas, female teachers have to acquire the same information and knowledge from multiple sources (which is not only more costly but also more time-consuming), such as membership in diverse professional organizations and subscriptions to various professional journals. Regarding Vécsey's argument about the “double-dipping” of married female

21 Nóbik, *A pedagógiai szakajtó*, 58. Nóbik further notes that no church or state-run pedagogical magazines featured any woman authors. The only notable exception among those he examined was *Nemzeti Nőnevelés* (National Women's Education). It was not only the sole pedagogical periodical run by a woman editor (Gyuláné Sebestyén Ilona Stetina) but it also featured a high number of female authors, reaching 40 percent by 1891 (57).

22 Nemessányi, “A magántanítás előnye” quoted in Nóbik, *Gyermekek*, 18.

teachers, Nemessányi convincingly demonstrates the opposite, stating that married women in the profession are few and far between (she herself remained single). The point on which she agrees with Vécsey is that female teachers with children of their own should leave the profession, as they would not be able to respond successfully to the demands of this double burden.

Nemessányi's attack on the gender double standards of her time becomes particularly obvious when she defends the necessity for female teachers and women more broadly to dress fashionably while still keeping necessary decorum. Striking a humorous tone, she contends that while there may be some vain younger women in the teaching profession, vanity is by no means limited to the female sex: "there are plenty of dandies among our male colleagues who pay meticulous attention to ensure that each and every piece of their clothing follow the latest fashion."²³ She goes one step further in her thinly veiled attack on the gender double standard when she dismantles the stereotype of the old-fashioned (commonly referred to as the "old maid") female teacher who is ridiculed for her unfashionable clothes. With a touch of irony, Nemessányi acutely pinpoints that, unlike what society preaches as the desirable "modest" female behavior, in reality, the well-dressed girls attract all the attention: "the well brought-up, demure young girl may wish to ponder how much the highly praised theory diverges from practice."²⁴

Nóbik rightly comments that such tone in a pedagogical article by a female teacher was rather unusual for the time. The Hungarian pedagogical journals under his scrutiny lacked any sign of a struggle for the equality of female teachers. The dominant tone was one of adapting and fitting in, not one of fight. Thus Nemessányi, while leading a lifestyle that on the surface fit the mold of the appropriate behavior for a woman and female teacher, distinguished herself not only with her extraordinary accomplishments in a traditional, still very patriarchal society but also with the tone of her articles. For these reasons, Nemessányi can be called an early feminist in the overall rather conservative society of Southern Hungary in which she lived and worked for many decades.

During the same period, women of other ethnicities were also active in Novi Sad. Milica Tomić, Nemessányi's coeval, was born in Novi Sad/Újvidék in 1859 and died there at the age of 85 in 1944. Her name is relatively well known today

23 Nemessányi, "Néhány szó, 284, quoted in Nóbik, *A pedagógiai szakcsajtó*, 60.

24 Ibid.

in the history of early Serbian feminism,²⁵ although she still has not received her due recognition. She came from a prominent Serbian family originally from Croatia. Her father was Svetozar Miletić, a respected Serbian politician and intellectual who served as mayor of Novi Sad on two occasions. Svetozar Miletić is recognized as one of the leading figures in the Serbian nationalist fight in the Habsburg Monarchy.²⁶ Milica thus grew up in a family where she was sensitized to the burning issues of her time, “in an atmosphere of national and political strife.”²⁷ As the daughter of an enlightened family, she received her education in Novi Sad, Pest, and Vienna and was fluent in several languages. She became politically involved already at the age of 18 due to her father’s arrest. She was even granted an audience with Emperor Francis Joseph and facilitated her father’s release. In 1844, she married another Serbian nationalist, Jaša (Jakov) Tomić, who became the founder of the Narodna slobodoumna stranka (People’s Freethinker Party), which would later become the Radikalna stranka (Radical Party).²⁸ He was imprisoned for six years in 1890 for a “crime of honor,” i.e. killing an earlier love interest of his wife.²⁹ He became editor of the journal *Zastava* (Flag), the “most influential daily within the Serbian community in Austria-Hungary,”³⁰ in which Milica also published some early political writings. Both Milica’s father and husband were progressive men when it came to women’s rights, and they supported women’s education and emancipation.

Tomić’s activism in relation to women’s political rights, however, took off only at the beginning of the twentieth century. While Nemessányi’s work centered around women’s education and the raising of their social status, Tomić, likely due to her early sensitization to the Serbian national question and her involvement in Serbian nationalist circles, was more focused on women’s political rights. In 1905, she founded the circle Poselo Srpkinja (Social gathering

25 In 2018, a little-noticed monograph about Tomić was published under the title *Milica Miletić Tomić – Pouke i polemike*, edited by Vera Kopić (Savez feminističkih organizacija (re)konekcija, 2017). It contains a selection of Tomić’s writings published in various periodicals.

26 In 1939, the city of Novi Sad erected a monument to Svetozar Miletić on the main square in front of City Hall. The monument is the work of famous Croatian-Yugoslav-American sculptor Ivan Meštrović. *Grad Novi Sad*, April 6, 2009. <https://novisad.rs/lat/spomenik-svetozaru-mileticu>.

27 Dojčinović and Pantelić, “Early Modern Women,” 129.

28 Schwartz and Thorson, *Shaking the Empire*, 72.

29 Noizz, “Ljudi ne prestaju” states that the murder was the result of a shooting incident. According to Pantelić, Milinković, and Škodrić, it was death by stabbing. *Dvadeset žena*, 19.

30 Dojčinović and Pantelić, “Early Modern Women,” 129.

of Serbian women), later renamed Posestrima.³¹ This circle was closed to men. Only women could attend, which in itself was a feminist statement, namely, the creation of a "safe space" and a reading room for women. While the members performed some traditionally female activities, such as knitting, they also discussed many pertinent questions. In 1910, they had 96 members, a number that tripled to 300 by 1919 (the activities stopped during World War I). Politics was very much a part of these discussions. Posestrima put together a library that collected books and periodicals. This circle thus became an important driving force behind Serbian women's emancipation and modernization in Vojvodina.³² Moreover, it also maintained a fund for charitable donations for the poor and the sick.³³ Its profile was thus emancipatory, political, and charitable at the same time.

Tomić closely followed the fight for women's rights in Hungary and other countries, and she became an ardent supporter of female suffrage. In 1911, she founded the progressive women's magazine *Žena* (Woman) and served as its editor, becoming the first Serbian woman in such a role.³⁴ The magazine existed until 1921 with a pause during World War I. Initially, the topics discussed concerned women's education and their social position in Serbian society to give more and more space to discussions of women's suffrage and political rights. In 1911, Tomić published a major article in reaction to what she called a step back rather than a step forward regarding Serbian women's education in Vojvodina, namely the majority vote passed by the Serbian National Church Assembly (Srpski narodno-crkveni sabor)³⁵ to cancel their financial support for Serbian girls' secondary schools.³⁶ This decision took immediate effect for the secondary schools in Sombor (Zombor) and Pančevo (Pancsova), but implementation was postponed for another two years for the school in Novi Sad following a petition signed by 5,000 Serbian women and presented by the Dobrotvorna Zadruga Srpkinja Novosatkinja (Novi Sad Serbian Women's Philanthropic Association).

31 A term difficult to render in English, it is sometimes translated as "blood sister." In Serbian culture, people can select a close friend who is not a blood relation as an elected brother or sister ("pobratim" and "posestrima").

32 Dojčinović and Pantelić, "Early Modern Women," 130.

33 Pantelić et al., *Dvadeset žena*, 20–21.

34 Ibid.

35 These assemblies were held regularly in Karlovac near Novi Sad, and were the most important political institution of Serbs living in the Monarchy.

36 Tomić(a), Milica Jaše, "Naše više devojačke škole," 374. The form of Tomić's name used is that of the genitive case of a woman's family name based on her husband's first and last name, in this case Jaša Tomić, which becomes Jaše Tomića in the genitive. This is a reflection of a deep-seated patriarchal gender structure in which the woman's name essentially states that she is the property of her husband.

In her criticism of this decision, Tomić lists the progress and efforts made in the past 40 years to further women's education (citing, among other prominent promoters of such rights, her father, Svetozar Miletić), and she outlines the dominant arguments in this process that linked the necessity of women's education to the Serbian national cause. "The question of higher education for the female youth is a question of cultural and hence also political survival and evolution of the Serbian nation."³⁷ With Miletić's words, she insists on the importance of these schools to allow for the education of Serbian girls in their home country rather than sending them abroad so as to preserve their national feelings and educate them to become good Serbian patriots and defenders of their national traditions that they would pass down as mothers to their children. Despite her patriotic feelings and engagement, in other publications, Tomić was critical of the backward position of Serbian women in Hungary. She attributed this backwardness to Serbian patriarchal culture, poor hygiene in the lower classes, superstition, and other factors which, taken together, led to high mortality rates within Serbian families.³⁸ Ultimately, however, she stayed true to Serbian national values and cautioned against a takeover by "foreign, particularly western, customs," which would have led to a "neglect of one's own folk tradition ... one's own nation."³⁹ At the same time, she was equally critical of the impact of the long Ottoman occupation on the Serbian nation, and she recommended striking a balance between these foreign influences with the ultimate goal of refining but not neglecting one's own culture and customs.⁴⁰

The magazine *Žena* reported regularly on women's activism in other countries and in other parts of the Dual Monarchy in particular. By 1912, the focus became women's suffrage. Thus the April 1, 1912 issue contained a number of short reports over several pages: one on the fight for women's suffrage in Austria;⁴¹ one summing up the arguments in favor of women's suffrage by Countess Teleki (known also by her pen name, Szikra) in Budapest;⁴² another one about women's fight for suffrage in Russia;⁴³ one about Sweden;⁴⁴ another

37 Ibid., 371.

38 Stojaković, *Znamenite žene*, 52.

39 Dojčinović and Pantelić, "Early Modern Women," 132.

40 Ibid.

41 "Pobornice za žensko pravo glasa u Austriji," 247.

42 "Grofica Teleki o ženskom pravu glasa," 247–48.

43 "Biračko pravo ruskom ženskinju," 248.

44 "Žensko pravo glasa u Švedskoj," 248.

one about England;⁴⁵ and even one about China, where women had just acquired the right to vote.⁴⁶ The report about Countess Teleki includes information about countries where this right had already been granted, citing Norway, Finland, several US states, and Australia. The same text announces the 7th Congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, which would be held the following year (1913) in Budapest.⁴⁷ We can see that Tomić and her editorial team were very much interested in promoting information regarding women's voting rights in their own country, which at the time was still Hungary, as well as in other states worldwide, with an emphasis on those that had already granted such rights or were about to (such as Sweden). This focus reflects Tomić's political ideas beyond the Serbian national cause, and can be considered a shift to a more radical feminism in Vojvodina, even if the tone in which these feminist ideas would be formulated in future articles of the journal was at times tempered so as to please a wider readership.

Two more issues of the magazine also published in 1912 (June and September) featured major articles on women's suffrage. While the September issue praises the work of Hungarian women's organizations, in particular the activism of the Budapest-based Feministák Egyesülete (Feminist Association), the June issue, in an article titled "On Women's Right to Vote," reports extensively on the visit by prominent Budapest-based feminist and leader of the Feminist Association, Rózsa (Rosa or Rosika) Schwimmer to Novi Sad as part of a large assembly organized jointly by the Serbian Radical Party, the Social-Democratic Party, and the Hungarian Independence Party.⁴⁸ The meeting was held bilingually in Hungarian and Serbian. Tomić, who corresponded with Schwimmer, notes that while both the Serbian Radical Party and the Social-Democratic Party included women's suffrage in their program, the Hungarian Independence Party failed to do so. She comments that, in this respect, the Novi Sad Serbs were more advanced than the Hungarians. The article closes with the following conclusion: "The question of women's right to vote has become part of the agenda in every way and nothing will take it off the agenda anymore. The fact that in many countries this right has been adopted is a testimony to the direction humanity has taken."⁴⁹ This sense of enthusiasm, kindled by the hope that women in

45 "Biračko pravo ženskinja u Engleskoj," 248–49.

46 "Pobornice ženskog prava glasa u Kini," 249–50.

47 "Grofica Teleki o ženskom pravu glasa," 247. On the Congress, see Schwartz, *Shifting Voices*, 55–56.

48 This article was translated into English in Schwartz and Thorson, *Shaking the Empire*, 279–84.

49 Ibid., 284.

Hungary, at least some women, may soon gain the right to vote, would give way to a major disappointment a few years later. On July 16, 1918, *Žena* reported that the Hungarian Parliament (the last one to convene in Austria-Hungary), with a vote of 161 to 65, had struck down the proposal to extend the right to vote to a limited number of women. The tone of the article is clearly one of disillusionment.⁵⁰

The end of World War I soon brought about major shifts regarding women's political rights. With the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary lost many of its territories to the south, and Vojvodina became part of the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. This decision had been initiated in Novi Sad on November 25, 1918 at the Great National Assembly of Serbs and other Slavs living in the Bácska, Banat, and Baranya regions of Southern Hungary. Milica Tomić was one of six women deputies to take part in this Assembly.⁵¹ However, whereas in truncated post-Trianon Hungary women were finally given the right to vote in 1920 (albeit with certain limits), the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes did not extend this right to its female population. Women in Yugoslavia would only gain the right to vote in 1945. We can thus see that while women's educational rights in the Dual Monarchy had made some progress by the early twentieth century, when it comes to political rights before and after World War I, despite women's activism across ethnic, regional, and national boundaries, decisions in this area were made as part of much larger political agendas.

While in recent years, Novi Sad has given some official recognition to Adél Nemessányi by naming a small street after her in the district of Veternik as Ulica Adel Nemešnji, Milica Tomić has yet to be granted such recognition. To date, the only mention of this great daughter of her city is a small commemorative plaque on the house where she lived.⁵² The online article that presents the monograph on Tomić published in 2018 states that the lack of public recognition (except in small academic and feminist circles) and the still prevailing perception that she stood in the shadow and worked under the influence of two famous men, may be due “to a certain skepticism, an incredulity that back in that time and culture, such a high degree of female individuality, such a brilliant polemical spirit and courage were at all possible.”⁵³

50 “Žensko pravo glasa,” 369.

51 Pantelić et al., *Dradeset žena*, 20.

52 Noizz, “Ljudi ne prestaju.”

53 Admin, “Monografija.”

Crossing Borders within the Dual Monarchy

Jelica Belović-Bernadžikovska⁵⁴ was about a decade younger than Nemessányi and Tomić. Her life and work have been much more studied and recognized, with biographies and bibliographies published already during her lifetime as well as in recent years.⁵⁵ She was born in 1870 in Osijek (Croatia-Slavonia) and died in 1946 in Novi Sad. Like Tomić, she too was educated in several European cities, including Zagreb, Vienna, and even Paris. Thanks to her multiethnic family background (her mother was an ethnic German and her father of Montenegrin background), she grew up speaking several languages. Both her parents were teachers, and her mother began tutoring children following her husband's untimely death in 1875 when Jelica was only five. According to an article published in 1925, Belović-Bernadžikovska was fluent in nine languages. The same article presents her as an "embroiderer and ethnographer, an exceptionally educated lady."⁵⁶ She was a very prolific writer. In addition to 800 articles in German pertaining to feminism and women's education, she published more than thirty books in several languages. Some of these publications appeared under pseudonyms.⁵⁷ During her lifetime, she was recognized internationally as an outstanding researcher, in particular for her tireless work on collecting and preserving women's embroidery techniques unique to the lands of the South Slavs, with an emphasis on Serbian women. Her most important publication in this area was the almanac *Srpkinja: Njezin život i rad, njezin kulturni razvitak i njezina narodna umjetnost do danas* (The Serbian woman: her life and work, her cultural development, and her folk art to date), published in 1913 in Sarajevo. Her reputation spread across Europe, and she received numerous accolades from professors and other intellectuals beyond Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, i.e. Germany, France, and Italy (she was even invited to work in Rome).⁵⁸ She is deemed to have "contributed a great deal to the education and cultural life of women in Bosnia Herzegovina,"⁵⁹ where she moved in 1895 after

54 Bernadžikovska, Bernadzikowska, and Bernadžikowski are also spellings of her name used in different sources.

55 In 2023, her memoirs were published in Sarajevo, *Memoari Jelice Belović Bernadžikowski*, edited by Enes S. Omerović and Tomas Jacek Lis and supported by Bosnian and Polish funds.

56 Zrnić, "Jelica Belović-Bernadžikovska," 9.

57 Hawkesworth, *Voices*, 138.

58 Jelkić, *Četrdeset godina*, 28.

59 Hawkesworth, *Voices*, 138.

having been active as a teacher in other towns of the Monarchy, i.e. Zagreb and Osijek in Croatia and Ruma in Vojvodina.⁶⁰

At the time, Bosnia-Herzegovina had been under Austro-Hungarian occupation since 1878. Jelica Belović worked in Mostar, where she married Janko Bernadžikovski, an Austro-Hungarian civil servant of Polish background with whom she had two children. In Mostar she also became involved in the circle around the literary magazine *Zora* (Dawn), in which she published, among other works, some important articles on women's emancipation. From Mostar she went to Sarajevo and then to Banja Luka, where she became principal of the girls' secondary school. Belović-Bernadžikowska very much embraced the idea of Yugoslavism, i.e. the unity of Serbs and Croats. She was also friends with the Bosnian Muslims. For displaying pro-Serbian feelings, she was chastised by the Austrian authorities and forced to retire from teaching in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 (another source cites 1902).⁶¹ This was one of the reasons why she sometimes used pseudonyms in her publications. The family moved to Sarajevo and later to Zagreb. In 1910, Belović-Bernadžikowska participated in the pan-Slavist congress in Prague with an exhibition of women's embroidery from Bosnia-Herzegovina. After World War I, she moved to Novi Sad, where she taught at a co-ed school until her retirement in 1936.⁶² She remained in Novi Sad until her death ten years later. Among her many contacts with famous people all over Europe, she knew and/or corresponded with other early feminists from the South Slavic world, such as Slovenian-Yugoslav writer, editor, and activist Zofka Kveder; the forgotten Croatian feminist Franjka Pakšec; and Novi Sad-based Savka Subotić, one of the leading members of the Dobrotvorna zadruga Srpkinja Novosatkinja (Novi Sad Serbian Women's Philanthropic Association).⁶³ Her reputation as a researcher, writer, and feminist led to an invitation, in 1922, by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom to attend their assembly in The Hague in December of that year. Apparently, she was denied permission to travel.⁶⁴

Her ideas regarding women's emancipation, judging by the articles she published on these questions, can be qualified as coming from a position of

60 Zdero, "Belovic-Bernadzikowska," 51; Jelkić, *Četrdeset godina*, 4.

61 Jelkić, *Četrdeset godina*, 5; Reynolds Cordileone, "Reinventions."

62 Zdero, "Belovic-Bernadzikowska, Jelica" 53.

63 In 1911, Rózsa Schwimmer invited Savka Subotić to give a lecture in Budapest, but we have no information as to whether Subotić followed up on this invitation (Schwartz and Thorson, *Shaking the Empire*, 72–73).

64 Jelkić, *Četrdeset godina*, 22.

cultural feminism fused, not unlike Tomić's more radical feminism, with nationalism. Two articles stand out in this respect, both published in the Mostar-based periodical (edited by Serbian poet Jovan Dučić) *Zora* in 1899, "Moderne žene" (Modern Women) and "Žena budućnosti" (The Woman of the Future).⁶⁵ Both articles thematize similar issues, first and foremost the need to improve women's education and their personal development. Women are seen as different from men but in a positive and empowering light, which was a position typical for contemporaneous cultural feminism. In "The Woman of the Future," Belović-Bernadžikovska conveys her wish to see women become stronger and more enlightened in order to be able to face life's battles, but ultimately mainly for the sake of offering their husbands a wiser, more educated and interesting wife who can understand matters of the world beyond her household duties. "Life is so much more different next to a woman with an educated mind and heart [...] who is also interested in the bigger questions of the human race, in the public matters of the homeland, but first and foremost in the spiritual life of her nation."⁶⁶ She expresses ideas often found in the writings of feminists from the Slavic (here Serbian) nations of the Monarchy, with their aspirations for national independence (also seen in Tomić), namely, defining women and the need for their education for the sake of family and nation. Belović-Bernadžikovska also demonstrates her familiarity with developments regarding the international women's movement when she refers to American women as "the leaders in the modern fight for women's rights."⁶⁷ In her praise of American women as beacons who show the rest of the world "what woman can [do],"⁶⁸ she selects from among all women's associations the "mothers' clubs," where American "mothers meet and they deliberate on the happiness and salvation of their loved ones, of their homes, of their children."⁶⁹ Thus, in demonstrating familiarity with feminist developments in the West, Belović-Bernadžikovska is careful not to overstep the boundaries of her general position concerning women's place in the Serbian and Bosnian society of her time as first and foremost in the service of their husbands, families, and nation.⁷⁰

65 See Schwartz and Thorson, *Shaking the Empire*, 88.

66 Belović-Bernadžikovska, "Žena budućnosti," 292.

67 Belović-Bernadžikovska, "Modern Women," 145.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Belović-Bernadžikovska's embracing of Serbian nationalism (despite her own hybrid ethnic heritage) is also evident from some of her later, post-Monarchy writings. In her book *Bijelo roblje* (White slavery), published in 1923 (thus already in Yugoslavia, and when she lived in Novi Sad), one that was inspired in part

An Early Feminist Writer from Austrian Occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina

Of the four examples of early feminists from various regions across the southern periphery of the Dual Monarchy, Nafija Sarajlić (born Hadžikarić, 1893–1970) came from the most socially conservative background. As a young Muslim woman in Habsburg-occupied Ottoman Bosnia-Herzegovina, she was an exception in that her father, a Sarajevo-based tailor who made uniforms for the Habsburg officials, allowed his daughters to be educated, an act for which he was attacked by the townspeople (his shop was stoned).⁷¹ Sarajlić attended the Sarajevo Muslim Female School established by the Habsburg authorities in 1897. This school and others fostered the education of Muslim girls “in a province where more than eighty percent of the population was still completely illiterate”⁷² and where opposition to girls’ education beyond religious schools was still very strong among the Muslim elites.⁷³ Against such public opposition, both Nafija and her four sisters graduated from the Girls’ Teacher Training School.⁷⁴ Nafija Hadžikarić married the writer Šemsudin Sarajlić, who was much more conservative than her father and pressured his wife to abandon the teaching profession after only three years. For a short while, Nafija Sarajlić remained active in public life as a writer and published about 20 short stories in the Muslim newspaper *Zeman* and later in *Biser*, where her husband was also a contributor.⁷⁵ However, after their eldest daughter died, she withdrew from a writing career as well. She gave in to patriarchal pressure to devote herself entirely to her family.⁷⁶ She maintained one creative public outlet, however, in the privacy of her home by teaching illiterate female neighbors and tutoring children.⁷⁷ Today, she is praised by critics as “a precursor of modern short prose”⁷⁸ and as the “first

by Freud’s theories on human sexuality, she expresses negative and highly stereotypical views on Hungarian women, for example. She deems them of light morals, and because of their “hot” temperament expressed in their “passionate dancing” and in “promiscuous Hungarian operettas and songs,” she considers Serbian women’s contacts with Hungarian women in Vojvodina detrimental for the Serbian girls’ (allegedly higher) morality (50).

71 Omeragić, “The Muslim Women’s Question,” 95.

72 Giomi, “Daughters of Two Empires,” 5.

73 Omeragić, “The Muslim Women’s Question,” 95.

74 Ibid.

75 Giomi, “Daughters of Two Empires,” 8.

76 Omeragić, “The Muslim Women’s Question,” 103.

77 Ibid., 104.

78 Schwartz and Thorson, *Shaking the Empire*, 89.

woman prose writer in the Muslim community,"⁷⁹ and she is claimed by both the literary and national history in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Sarajlić's short pieces are not only innovative in form. In her short prose, she broached topics such as women's education, modernization, her own triple burden as a mother, wife, and aspiring writer, religion, and ethnic relations. Her first piece, entitled "Rastanak" (The farewell), and published when she was only 19 years old, was inspired by her experience as a teacher who tried to offer, in her spare time, additional content for her more advanced female pupils, such as ethics and reading, only to be met with reprimand by the Muslim authorities, "in front of the children."⁸⁰ In fact, what she describes in this short piece is her last day at the school, a tearful departure that, in her own words, "had been the most difficult one in my entire life."⁸¹ What she does not say out loud to her pupils but puts down on paper is a powerful statement that can be read as an allegory for women's fight for a more advanced education and emancipation against strong patriarchal opposition: "We are much too idealistic and the contact with the dark world defeats us. But if we are strong and if we want to serve our profession, we have to fight against the difficulties, trusting in success no matter how strong and difficult the resistance may be!"⁸²

In another short prose from the series "Themes," she presents an autobiographically inspired situation from the space of the home where an aspiring writer struggles to satisfy the demands of her household duties while also finding time to devote to writing, all the while seeking her writer husband's approval. The first-person narrator manifests a remarkable assertiveness in the face of the husband's arrogance as he rebukes her initial attempts to draw his attention to her sketches: "One can write but only when it is justified, in a professional, not a primitive way using the same old patterns like everyone else."⁸³ Eventually, she breaks through his wall of sexist prejudice and he reads her pieces while adding some critical comments encouraging her to continue. With one obstacle out of the way (her husband's approval), the narrator still ends the piece on a tone of despondency, aware of the fact that not only does she lack a room of her own so necessary for the completion of creative tasks but also receives only verbal support from her husband: "I have strung together

79 Isaković quoted in Hawkesworth, *Voices*, 256.

80 Sarajlić, "The Farewell," 246.

81 *Ibid.*, 247.

82 *Ibid.*

83 Sarajlić, "Themes," 248.

a few themes that could be expanded if I only had more leisure time, but right now, that is unattainable for me.”⁸⁴ It is remarkable that Sarajlić’s words have lost nothing of their relevance for women in the twenty-first century, who, regardless of their background, still very often have to fight the same battles between double and triple burden.

Despite the difficulties and societal constraints that Sarajlić faced as an educator and aspiring writer, she succeeded in contributing to a shift in women’s education outside of a narrowly confined space set by rigid religious, cultural, and gender standards. She left behind an albeit small but significant body of writing through which she further paved the way for the emerging new Muslim woman in this geographic space.

Conclusion

The above analysis of the lives and work of four women from the southern peripheries of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy allows us to draw some conclusions regarding the development of women’s social activism and creative output in this region. Despite their different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, they were united by their exceptional education and their presence as a public voice, be it via teaching, publishing, or editorial activities. Nemessányi’s path gradually took her from further north in Hungary to the south, where she became a pathbreaker as the first female principal of a Hungarian language girls’ secondary school in Novi Sad/Újvidék and the founder of the local branch of the Maria Dorothea Association. Today, her life and work are studied as that of a pioneer of women’s secondary education in Vojvodina. Milica Tomić’s educational path initially took her from the south to the north to both big centers of the Monarchy, from where she returned to her native Novi Sad to advance both women’s and the Serbian national cause as the first female editor of a women’s journal in this region. Jelica Belović-Bernadžikovska went the furthest north and west in her quest for knowledge, and she was the most internationally recognized, published, and connected, as well as the most nomadic early feminist, living between various towns along the southern periphery of the Monarchy, all the while embracing the Serbian national cause. Because of her work across borders, however, today Belović-Bernadžikovska is claimed by Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian feminist history. Nafija Sarajlić remained geographically confined to her native Sarajevo

84 Ibid., 250.

but still exhibited a remarkable level of modernity and emancipatory awareness which, while recognized today within the context of Bosnian Muslim history, is relevant far beyond cultural and geographic boundaries.

Through the personal and professional lives of these remarkable women we can discern connections in their feminist activism that transgress ethnic, regional, and national borders. The role of magazines and women's articles in spreading ideas regarding their educational and political rights, influenced by international developments, needs to be emphasized as well. Finally, women's literary output and its role in furthering ideas of women's emancipation cannot be left out of the picture. In the overall conservative social environment across this geographic area, which shaped what women were (and were not) able to do, no women's associations with the explicit goal of demanding political rights existed at the time. Nevertheless, this ethnically varied sample of women pioneers from the parts of the Dual Monarchy that later became Yugoslavia demonstrates that a feminist awareness regarding developments in women's advancement in East Central Europe and beyond was very much present, and that these and other women from this multiethnic and culturally complex region greatly contributed to the improvement of women's image, education, and social status, leaving an imprint on and an important legacy for future generations.

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