

“...I was thinking, when doing this scrubbing, of Miss Florence Nightingale’s barracks...”: A Local Typhoid Epidemic in the Correspondence between a Bulgarian and an American Nurse in 1932 (Nevena Sendova and Clara Noyes)

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Abstract

One of the most important epidemics in Bulgaria in the 1930s was typhoid fever. The research focuses on the description of this disease in a small town in Southern Bulgaria in 1932 in a letter written by a leading Bulgarian nurse, the Director of the Sofia School of Nursing, Nevena Sendova (1895–1987), to Clara Noyes (1869–1936), National Director Nursing Service of the Red Cross in the USA. Together with two of her colleagues and four students from the School of Nursing in Sofia, Nevena Sendova came to the small town of Bratsigovo in order to support local hygiene and anti-epidemic measures and to teach the accompanying students. At that time, the number of professional nurses in Bulgaria was small and there were no local nurses in this town. The letter is a rare egodocument about a local epidemic from the point of view of a nurse. It is part of a large regular correspondence between the directors of the Sofia School of Nursing and the leading nurses of the American Red Cross. These exchanges continued for about 15 years after American Red Cross nurses supported the reform of the Sofia School of Nursing in the 1920s along the same lines as the American education model. While describing the nurses’ activities in the two hospitals of the small town during the typhoid epidemic, Nevena Sendova also described the poverty of the local population, its hygiene habits, and the local beliefs and superstitions. Moreover, she recounted what local people were saying about the illness, a topic she considered she ought to bring to Clara Noyes’ attention.

Keywords: Typhoid fever, Sofia School of Nursing, Clara Noyes, Nevena Sendova

1 The Reorganization of Nursing Education in Bulgaria after World War I

Professional nursing education in Bulgaria was started by the Bulgarian Red Cross Society in 1900, following several discussions in the 1890s. The Red Cross invited some nurses from Russia – from the Holy Trinity Society (Svetotroizka obshtina), led by Russian nurse Sister Efrosina. A Holy Trinity Society was set up in Sofia, affiliated to the Red Cross Society. It followed the Russian nursing practice of learning, working and living together, which was similar to the German “motherhouse” model. A small hospital with eight beds was opened for the practical training. The course lasted one year, followed by a year of hospital practice, during which the nurses’ skills, qualities and abilities were evaluated by the head doctors on

an attestation form. Qualities like obedience, accuracy and diligence were evaluated. In 1904, a Public Health Law passed by the Bulgarian Parliament formulated the general obligations of nurses: caring for and consoling patients, encouraging their hopes for improvement, and other activities connected to their status of “sisters of mercy”.

About 100 nurses graduated from the courses before the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913. Almost all of them served in the hospitals during these conflicts and later in World War I (WWI). Another 1,500 or so voluntary nurses who were trained in short courses also worked as sanitary staff. Many of them served in the military hospital wards for cholera, typhus, dysentery, and other infectious diseases. Many of them became ill and some of the nurses died.¹ A large number of nurses took part in the struggle against cholera and typhus epidemics during the Balkan Wars and WWI. They were appointed to care for typhus cases in the military hospitals. Unfortunately, the scarce documents detailing their activities are insufficient to reconstruct the work and contribution of nurses during this wave of epidemics.

On the initiative of Queen Eleonore of Bulgaria (1908–1917), nursing education in the country was reorganized after 1913. Eleonore von Reuss zu Koestritz was a skilled nurse, who studied in Kaiserswerth in her youth, and managed a sanitary train in the Far East during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). Afterwards, she had a leading position in the nursing institution in Luebben.² Eleonore intended to reform nursing education in Bulgaria in line with the American model: a longer course of study with more disciplines, introduction of regular working time and salaries, and more independence in their personal life. For this purpose, she contacted Jean Delano³ in the USA. After the organizational troubles caused by the war, two American nurses, Helen Scott Hay⁴ and Rachel Torrance⁵, reached Sofia and the new School of Nursing was started at the Alexander Hospital, run by graduates of the American colleges in the Bulgarian towns of Lovech and Samokov.

After the death of Eleonore in September 1917, work on the new School of Nursing in Sofia was interrupted. Jean Delano also died during a trip to Europe in 1919. But in August 1920, the new National Director of the American Red Cross Nursing Service, Clara D. Noyes⁶ visited Bulgaria with Helen Scott Hay to explore possibilities for restarting the school. In October 1922, Rachel Torrance, who assisted Helen Scott Hay in 1915–1916, was appointed Director

¹ Popova 2013.

² In Luebben, Eleonore held an honorary position on the Board of Nurses (Kuratorium der Schwesternschaft) which she gave up in 1907 immediately before her marriage to Bulgarian King Ferdinand.

³ Jean Delano (1862–1919), President of the American Nurses Association and founder of the American Red Cross Nursing Service.

⁴ Helen Scott Hay (1869–1932), founder of the Queen Eleonore School of Nursing in Sofia in 1916, Chief Nurse of the Balkans Commission of the American Red Cross.

⁵ Rachel Torrance (1886–1937) was an assistant to Helen Scott Hay and Director of the Sofia School of Nursing 1923–1927.

⁶ Clara Noyes (1869–1936) was appointed Director of the Nursing Division of the American Red Cross in 1919. More about Clara Noyes, Noyes 2017.

of the School of Nursing in Sofia. She arrived in the Bulgarian capital accompanied by her assistant, Theodora LeGros⁷. In 1924, Rachel Torrance was replaced by a new Director, Hazel Avis Goff⁸, who stayed until 1927. During the early years of the school, some Bulgarian nurses were trained at the Teachers College in New York to take up leading positions in Sofia. The first was Nevena Sendova⁹, followed by Krustanka Pachedjieva¹⁰ and many others. Another young nurse, Boyana Christova, participated in the first international course for public health in London. She returned as the first nurse in Bulgaria specialized in public health.¹¹ Maria Nikolova¹² also graduated from the Bedford School in London.

In her book, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening*, Julia Irwin researches the politics of the American Red Cross in Europe after WWI.¹³ This activity is embedded in the context of the "Progressive Era" in the USA – a time of major sociopolitical reforms in public health and education, the rise of feminism and the expansion of women's public participation. Julia Irwin believes that this was the time when, on the one hand, the American government discovered the value of foreign aid as a means of influence and as part of diplomacy. On the other hand, however, it became part of the self-understanding of Americans during WWI and in its aftermath.

The reorganization in Bulgaria was similar to processes in other European countries after WWI (Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, France etc.). There too, American concepts of nursing education and work were introduced, as experts sought to convince the local authorities that the American standards of the profession were the highest in the world.¹⁴ The profession was defined in a universalist way.¹⁵

Special attention was paid to the educational level and qualities of the individuals who entered the school. The educational qualifications of the applicants had to "connote sufficient maturity of years and mind to safeguard the school against the extremely youthful persons of unformed character and unstable ambitions." "Nursing," Clara Noyes wrote, "is one of the noblest of vocations and as such not to be entered into lightly or as a stopgap

⁷ Clara Noyes wrote about Theodora LeGros: "Theodora C. LeGros, a graduate of the General Hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.A [...]. Miss LeGros had served as an Army Nurse with the American Expeditionary Forces, had done medical social service work in Bellevue and from 1919 to 1922 had been assigned to nursing duty under the Red Cross in Romania and Poland."

⁸ Hazel Avis Goff (1892–1973). Clara Noyes wrote about her: "...a nurse of superior professional attainments and a specialist in school administration".

⁹ Nevena Sendova (1895–1987) graduated from Teachers College in New York, Director of the Sofia School of Nursing 1929–1934.

¹⁰ Krustanka Pachedjieva (1895–), graduated from New York, Director of the Sofia School of Nursing 1934–1940.

¹¹ Boyana Christova organized the first children's ward in Sofia in 1924.

¹² Maria Nikolova (1897–1985) graduated from Bedford School. She was a lecturer at the School of Nursing in Sofia, Vice-Director of the school 1934–1935 and the head nurse inspector at the Public Health Department of the Ministry of Health 1935–1944.

¹³ Irwin 2013.

¹⁴ Noyes 1923, p. 3.

¹⁵ Lapeyre 2013; Irwin 2013.

between school and marriage.”¹⁶ The curriculum was enriched by the addition of more specialist subjects. Hazel Goff prepared some new textbooks. Boyana Christova prepared a course in public health, and Maria Nikolova taught the new subject of ethics, a topic that Krustanka Pachedjieva also lectured on.

Soon after the school relaunched, a Florence Nightingale Society of nursing was organized, which started taking part in international meetings and congresses of nurses. The Florence Nightingale Society joined the Bulgarian Women’s Union, which was the main such organization in the country and led the struggle for women’s rights. A newspaper called *Sestra* (“Nurse”) was also launched. It commented on professional topics as well as on the social and cultural life of nurses, and covered international news regarding the profession. Additionally, it described the activity of the School of Nursing.

As a result of the school’s reorganization by the American nurses and their Bulgarian students, a new type of nurse with a different professional habitus appeared. The new situation was described by Maria Nikolova, who later wrote a history of nursing in Bulgaria. She distinguished the “new nurse” from the “old type”, while also emphasizing continuities:

Since 1923, another image of the nurse emerged, quite different from the previous one, established in the period 1900–1922. The two differed in their intelligence, professional and general knowledge, methods of work, personal interests, attitudes toward social life, level of culture and social views. The new type of nurse preserved for a long time the qualities and her devotion to the patient, without regarding direct service to the patient as humiliating her – the intelligent nurse. She preserved this attitude which was characteristic of the nurse of the old school, who had less knowledge, but a rich practical experience drawn from her work.¹⁷

In the 1930s, vocational training for nurses became a more attractive profession and its status in Bulgarian society changed. The field still had to overcome the traditionalist attitudes of local Red Cross authorities and of officials at the Health Ministry. The Red Cross tried to keep the traditional image of nurses as symbolic figures of compassion and charity work.¹⁸ This corresponded also to the traditionalistic and neo-patriarchal tendencies in Bulgaria. Only at the end of the decade did women win the right to vote.

¹⁶ Noyes 1923, p. 3.

¹⁷ Nikolova (without year).

¹⁸ In 1936, the Red Cross Society prepared a calendar with an image of a nurse on the cover. The president of the society described it as follows: “On the right side, almost in the full part of the calendar the true image of compassion is presented: the fine image of a nurse in white with a red cross on her breast and with eyes looking forward piercing through the troubles of the suffering people, alleviating them through her warm sympathy as well as through the tools that science has created”. Circular letter N 5664 from December 5, 1936, Central State Archive, F. 156k, op.1, a.e. 71, p. 127.

2 The Correspondence

The communication between American and Bulgarian nurses included collaboration in Sofia as well as regular correspondence between the Americans (Rachel Torrance, Hazel Goff, and Clara Noyes) and senior Bulgarian nurses Nevena Sendova and Krustanka Pachedjieva, both during the Bulgarians' apprenticeships and when they became directors of the School of Nursing. Other regular letters maintained the social and professional network: between Clara Noyes in New York and the Americans in Sofia (Rachel Torrance and Hazel Goff), between students sent abroad and the directors etc. This exchange created a network of communication that helped establish and internalize personal contacts and loyalty, develop professional standards, and create female role models. The correspondence was very important in maintaining the women's network of individuals who traveled a lot and often changed their place of work.

Power relationships were part of this communication and they were reflected in the letters. These differences were more obvious in the beginning because the Bulgarians were still students and the Americans were their teachers and leaders, and also decided on the future leadership of the School of Nursing. Writing letters to their American teachers in the initial period, Bulgarians became familiar with professional standards and learned to evaluate new situations and professional challenges according to these standards. The correspondence was also a way to maintain control over the school's activities. In the second period, during the 1930s, once Bulgarians were in charge of the School of Nursing in Sofia, the communication with the American nurses continued and new forms of collaboration were found.¹⁹ Bulgarian nurses stressed in their letters that the school was a "grandchild" of the American Red Cross.²⁰ Using the same kind of family metaphor, Clara Noyes regarded the Bulgarian school as "a daughter" of the American Red Cross.²¹ She was proud "that the work that was done there by our American nurses has borne such good fruit."²² Such maternalistic discourse was typical of the relationship between "Western" and East European women in international communication in the women's movement at that time, and was supported by both sides. In the correspondence with Clara Noyes, this metaphor continued throughout the years of Nevena Sendova's directorship, which ended in 1934. Krustanka Pachedjieva deployed the same metaphor of "the American Red Cross's daughter" when she took over as Director.²³

The letters written by Nevena Sendova and Krustanka Pachedjieva to Clara Noyes contain reports on the school's work. They also contain personal information, jokes, and memories of their shared past, meetings, friends and colleagues. The documents comprise a mix of

¹⁹ One of the most interesting forms of collaboration was the Rural Health Center in Golemo Konare Village, which was started by Hazel Goff with Todorina Petrova as her assistant in 1933 to prepare public health nurses for the rural areas. It was also intended to be an institution for international collaboration. The Center was supported by the Rockefeller Foundation.

²⁰ Letter from Nevena Sendova to Clara Noyes, October 13, 1931, p. 76, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

²¹ Letter from Clara Noyes to Krustanka Pachedjieva, January 18, 1935, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

²² Letter from Clara Noyes to Krustanka Pachedjieva, May 23, 1936, p. 60–61, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

²³ Letter from Krustanka Pachedjieva to Clara Noyes, February 12, 1935, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

institutional and private narratives that helped maintain not only professional but also personal ties between the Americans and the Bulgarians.

3 Typhoid Fever, 1932

In September 1932, a typhoid epidemic broke out in the southern regions of the country. According to the Director of the Sofia School of Nursing, Nevena Sendova, the Red Cross Society in Bulgaria decided to send four third-year students, led by Todorina Petrova²⁴ (at that time head nurse at the Red Cross Hospital in Sofia), to help the patients in the small town of Bratsigovo, where they stayed and worked for 40 days.²⁵

Typhoid fever was a widespread infectious disease in Bulgaria well into the 1940s:

Diphtheria	Poliomyelitis	Typhoid fever	Typhus	Malaria
60.5	20.8	10.8	2.4	943.6

Rates of the most widespread infections per 100,000 population in 1942²⁶

Between 1930 and 1934, typhoid epidemics exploded in Sofia, Plovdiv, Pazardjik, Kyustendil, Haskovo and other towns. The main causes of this situation were the lack of hygiene and especially the insufficient clean water supply for the population.²⁷ In some regions of Bulgaria, schools were closed. In the small town of Bratsigovo near Plovdiv, about 400 people fell ill in 1932, out of a population of 3,200.²⁸

The situation remained critical in other towns too, despite the beginning of immunization campaigns.

Nurses played a key role in the struggle against typhoid fever: They cared for patients in hospitals and assisted with prevention measures as public health workers.²⁹ Their contribution was very important, especially in the case of sick children: Mary Walton and Cynthia Connolly wrote that “Research on nurses’ work at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia

²⁴ After graduating from Bedford School in London, Todorina Petrova was a teacher at the School of Nursing in Sofia. She was assistant to Hazel Goff. In Golemo Konare Village, she initiated a model health center in 1933 to train public health nurses in rural areas. After Hazel Goff left in 1936 to go to Istanbul, Todorina Petrova became head of the health center. From 1942 to 1944 she was Director of the School for Public Health Nurses in Skopje.

²⁵ Nevena Sendova to Clara Noyes, the same letter.

²⁶ Dikov 2012. About 30 years later these diseases had almost disappeared.

²⁷ Dikov 2012.

²⁸ Letter from Nevena Sendova to Clara Noyes, December 6, 1932, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

²⁹ For the important role of nurses in typhoid fever epidemics see Walton/Connolly 2005.

in the late 19th and early 20th centuries shows that nurses were crucial in the treatment of pediatric victims of the typhoid fever epidemics.”³⁰

The work of nurses during the epidemics in Bulgaria is underrepresented in historical sources as well as in the historiography. The correspondence between nurses is an important source that can break this invisibility of the past because it reflects the nurses' experiences but also indicates the expectations of the recipients.

Nevena Sendova described the nurses' work in her letters to Clara Noyes. She continued writing letters during the epidemics and was able to provide direct information to Clara Noyes as part of her reports on the work of the School of Nursing in 1932. She took the opportunity to present the growing importance of nurses in Bulgaria.

Nevena Sendova, as Director of the school, together with her colleague Maria Nikolova, joined the students to help and to observe the nurses' work in Bratsigovo. They stayed for eight days. Maria Nikolova visited 40 homes of the sick. Home visits were not only needed to help the patients, but were also established as an important public health measure at that time. The aim was to study, control and advise people (primarily mothers) on how to improve the living conditions and the social situation of their families according to scientific hygienic standards. During their visits, the nurses were confronted not only with the health situation and bad hygiene conditions, but also with the poverty and the living conditions of the local people and with their habits, superstitions and prejudices.³¹

Nevena Sendova described for Clara Noyes the desperate situation that she found in Bratsigovo, where the schools had been turned into hospitals during the epidemic:

The two school buildings in Bratsigovo were the only suitable places for hospitals. Patients were brought in with their own beds and bedding. You can imagine the sight of a hospital with beds and bedding of all sizes and colors. The people of the town, 3,200 in total (1,800 households), are extremely poor. In most cases, the bedding they possess consists, with very few exceptions, of a faded red, green or brown. There are very few white sheets or pillowcases. Many of the patients lay in bed in their everyday clothes. They were all asked to bring a chair from home (some had to borrow one, because they had none) to serve as a bedside table. Until we got out our own enamel bedpans and dishes, they had dozens of jugs and pots around their beds. There is a big hole in the school yard today where we have buried hundreds of those infected jugs and pots. There is no other way to disinfect them.³²

In this situation, the nurses from Sofia – Sendova, Nikolova and Petrova – organized work both to help the sick local people and to train their students. Their intervention therefore also had a pedagogical character. The letter emphasizes that some of the people's household belongings – the infected objects – were publicly burned. This is presented as a

³⁰ Walton/Connolly 2005.

³¹ Letter from Nevena Sendova to Clara Noyes, December 6, 1932, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

³² Letter from Nevena Sendova to Clara Noyes, December 6, 1932, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

necessary civilizing activity, and as something of which Clara Noyes is expected to approve. Nevena Sendova points out that people needed the nurses' explanations and demonstrations because doctors did not discuss the situation properly with their patients.

At the same time, the nurses presented their work in a symbolical way, both to their patients and to their former American teachers:

When Miss Petrova and I helped to scrub the floor in the hospital, people looked upon us with great curiosity. They said that what they learned from us in this short time they would remember for many, many years. They were criticizing their teachers and doctors for not having taught them to live more hygienically. I was thinking, when doing this scrubbing, of Miss Florence Nightingale's barracks, and of how she helped to reduce the mortality of the soldiers by cleanliness and I thought also of Miss Hey, who taught me how to do it.³³

Even when doing the most menial physical work, scrubbing the floor in the hospital, Nevena Sendova relied in her thoughts on the authority of two symbolic figures of nursing: Florence Nightingale, a symbolic figure for all nurses, and Helen Scott Hey, her personal teacher and educator for all Bulgarian nurses. Helen Scott Hey had recently died. Nevena Sendova wrote of her that she was "a friend, a good teacher and a hero nurse, the organizer of modern nursing in Bulgaria".³⁴

In her descriptions, Nevena Sendova maintained a cultural distance from the population of Bratsigovo. People were presented in their unhygienic conditions and their ignorance about the etiology of the typhoid epidemic. In contrast, nurses were able to explain the true reasons for their illness and teach them how to live in a more hygienic way. Their actions were enlightened and rational, in contrast to the irrational views of the population concerning the epidemic.

Miss Nikolova took charge of the patients in their homes. She visited 40 houses and she helped 56 patients. People were very pleased to have her in their homes, where she helped them to follow the doctors' orders and taught the people the cause of the epidemic. They had very erroneous ideas about the disease: They blamed their doctor for it and God too for He had sent the epidemic to them as repayment for the rich crops He had given them this year.³⁵

In Sendova's account of the "Bratsigovo case", Bulgarian nurses belonged to a symbolic professional community emulating its leading figures from the past. Those examples helped the Director of the Nursing School to do the work of cleaning without experiencing it as humiliating, and to burn people's belongings in the school yard. Guided by their foreign teachers, nurses managed to "normalize" the situation in the town: the "faded red, green or brown" sheets were removed, the infectious pots were buried. Death rates in the town were

³³ Letter from Nevena Sendova to Clara Noyes, December 6, 1932, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

³⁴ Letter from Nevena Sendova to Clara Noyes, December 6, 1932, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

³⁵ Letter from Nevena Sendova to Clara Noyes, December 6, 1932, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

minimized and Nevena Sendova hoped that in the future “the people will appreciate better the laws of personal hygiene.”³⁶

The Bulgarian Nurses Association sought to use these achievements and “the psychological moment” of the struggle against the epidemic for public demonstrations and information about caring for typhoid patients. Their activity in Bratsigovo was also invoked at a meeting with the Bulgarian Women’s Council (of the Bulgarian Women’s Union) to enlighten its members about the profession.³⁷

In this way, Nevena Sendova hoped to convince Clara Noyes that Bulgarian nurses were ready to fulfill their duty and serve society. She showed that they had reacted properly in the time of disaster and had managed to make the right decisions. Nurses had internalized the professional norms that they had been instructed in through their study of the American model. Doctors, nurses and midwives often described local hygienic habits as something strange, irrational and “dark”. This “othering” of their native people was a tool to strengthen their professional status. Nevena Sendova also observed this distance in her letters. She did not support the image of “the picturesque Bulgarian towns” that Clara Noyes knew from her short visits to Bulgaria, and did not hesitate to present Bratsigovo as an unhygienic place with citizens who believed in strange superstitions.

4 “We are healthy, we see only full days of work before us and even forgot that tomorrow is Sunday...” Typhoid in the Hospital in Haskovo, January 1934

In 1933 and 1934, typhoid epidemics spread again in the southern regions of Bulgaria. Two of the most experienced nurses – Zafira Christova³⁸ and Maria Lazarova, who were lecturers at the school in Sofia – were sent by the Red Cross to the hospital in Haskovo to assist the struggling local medical staff of 12 doctors, two nurses and two unskilled nurses (Samaritan nurses).

Christova and Lazarova shared their experiences with the school Director, Nevena Sendova. In their letters to Nevena Sendova they described the hospital situation during the typhoid

³⁶ Letter from Nevena Sendova to Clara Noyes, December 6, 1932, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

³⁷ Letter from Nevena Sendova to Clara Noyes, December 6, 1932, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

³⁸ Zafira Christova studied in London in 1930–31 and after returning to Sofia she taught nursing techniques at the School of Nursing. She became Vice-Director of the school at the end of 1934, when Nevena Sendova got married and left the school, and Krustanka Pachedjieva took up the directorship. Zafira Christova replaced Pachedjieva in 1940 and remained Director until 1944.

epidemic, their work there and their living conditions during their stay.³⁹ Power relationships with the doctor who was head of the hospital were also discussed in the letters. As Director of the School of Nursing in Sofia, Nevena Sendova was in a position to send reports about the activities during the typhoid epidemic in Bratsigovo in 1932 (to Clara Noyes) and in 1934 found herself receiving reports (from Zafira Christova) during the epidemic in Haskovo. In both situations, she was responsible for maintaining professional standards and the nurses' personal networks.

The town of Haskovo had at that time a population of about 26,000 citizens. Like other towns in Southern Bulgaria, it had problems with its clean water supply. Doctors and other medical professionals considered the lack of clean water the main reason for the typhoid outbreak.

The hospital buildings in Haskovo had been destroyed by a strong earthquake that hit the region in 1928. In the following years, new buildings were erected and in 1936 the number of beds in the wards increased to 300. Because of the lack of financial support, furnishing the new buildings proved very difficult. According to the annual reports of the hospital, supplies of food and medicines for patients were also irregular in the 1930s.⁴⁰

The two nurses, Christova and Lazarova, arrived in Haskovo by train on January 25, 1934, and were met at the train station by the hospital administrator and a local nurse. Without having the possibility to see the town, they were taken straight to the hospital. They wished to have a separate room to live in there, but there was no space and they were accommodated together with a midwife in a hospital room described by them as a store for physiotherapy devices. They could not rest properly because the room-mate's shifts were different from theirs:

The room we have is in a nice, hygienic building, sunny all day but, as soon as we manage to sleep, the midwife is called – at 11.30 at night, or at 3 o'clock in the morning – because of a birth.⁴¹

They also described the low quality of the food (“horror”, “indescribable”, “I bristle thinking about it”) and water.

In the beginning, there was some disagreement about the division of work with the hospital head doctor, who said that he “didn't want generals in his hospital”.⁴² The matter was resolved and the two parties reached an agreement on the organization of medical services. Discipline in the hospital was very strong: “The hospital is like a military zone,” they wrote. “Nobody is allowed to leave.”⁴³

³⁹ Here their second letter is cited. Their first letter from Haskovo is not preserved in the archive but it is mentioned in the second letter.

⁴⁰ Haskovo State Archive, Fond 27k.

⁴¹ Letter from M. Lazarova and Z. Christova to Nevena Sendova, January 27, 1934, State Archive Sofia, Fond 360k.

⁴² Letter from Lazarova and Christova to Nevena Sendova, January 27, 1934.

⁴³ Letter from Lazarova and Christova to Nevena Sendova, January 27, 1934.

The two Sofia nurses were responsible for the severe cases ward with 45 children, and they alternated night and day shifts, each lasting 12 hours. The child morbidity and infant mortality rates in Bulgaria were still very high in the 1930s. The educational programs of the Sofia School of Nursing placed emphasis on measures for improving children's health and the need to train public health nurses for the children's wards.

When they arrived at the Haskovo hospital, the two nurses noted the poor conditions in the children's ward. There were no sheets for the children's beds and young patients were lying on "bare tarpaulin".⁴⁴ The nurses asked the hospital at least for "short sheets" for the children's beds so that they could be changed regularly but there were none available, so they asked Nevena Sendova and the Red Cross to send some old sheets for the Haskovo hospital.

Zafira Christova expressed in the letter her concerns about the hospital conditions for sick children: "It is poverty, poverty, a horror!"⁴⁵ The connection to the school in Sofia was very important to Christova and helped her solve many practical problems: She asked Sendova for nurses' apron dresses and slippers. However, what she sought above all was professional understanding and support.

Like other letters in the communication with the School of Nursing, these letters were a mix of informal and professional information. Nevena Sendova (the Director), Maria Nikolova, Todorina Petrova, Zafira Christova, and Maria Lazarova were young women from the same generation; they were friends and colleagues, but their letters were primarily about the service they had been sent to perform.

Their aim was not only to help in the hospital, but to initiate improvements in the way the institution's activities were organized. Zafira Christova wrote:

What we did: We took the ward into our own hands, we mobilized, organized the shelves: syringes, thermometers, mouth instruments, laboratory devices; the common making beds, removing every paper cover, designating responsibilities for certain services: all day, from 6 to 19.30 with a little break after lunch... The work is too much, hindered by many obstacles and with little help to motivate us.⁴⁶

The nurses described the cleaning of the children's mouths as especially exhausting. Typhoid disease caused changes in the digestive functions and system and was characterized by, among other symptoms, dry, cracked or swollen lips, with a brown or gray crust, which was painful for the patients, especially for children. This crust had to be regularly removed. Christova wrote: "When I am getting up from a child whose mouth I have cleaned, it is very hard to straighten my waist. And there are so many of them!"⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Letter from Lazarova and Christova to Nevena Sendova, January 27, 1934.

⁴⁵ Letter from Lazarova and Christova to Nevena Sendova, January 27, 1934.

⁴⁶ Letter from Lazarova and Christova to Nevena Sendova, January 27, 1934.

⁴⁷ Letter from Lazarova and Christova to Nevena Sendova, January 27, 1934.

Fatigue was also part of the hospital work during the epidemic. The nurses were tired and suffered from headaches. But the hard work was something they found young nurses had to get used to. Lazarova and Christova missed their students who could learn to work in extraordinary situations: “How I regret that the probationary class is not here to see how to clean mouths, how to do dozens of injections.”⁴⁸

During their service in Haskovo, both nurses demonstrated to their Director, Nevena Sendova, that they had not lost their optimism. Despite the 12 to 13-hour shifts, the lack of rest and sleep, and the poor living conditions, they expressed a positive attitude toward their stay. Zafira Christova summarized their everyday life in the hospital: “I and Sister Lazarova are healthy, we eat more bread, drink tasteless water and laugh from time to time.”⁴⁹ At the end of the letter she adds: “I repeat, for now we are healthy, we see only full days of work and even forgot that tomorrow is Sunday.”⁵⁰

Laughing “from time to time”, the two nurses kept their distance from the troubles in the hospital.

5 Conclusion

The two letters present important moments in the nurses’ experience during the typhoid fever epidemics between 1932 and 1934, and give us the opportunity to hear their own voices. These are voices of elite nurses in leading positions at the Red Cross School in Sofia, who represented the “new type” of educated “intelligent nurse”. The documents provide information about the trends in the nursing profession in Bulgaria at that time. Nevena Sendova, Todorina Petrova, Maria Nikolova, Zafira Christova, and Maria Lazarova did their best to represent the Red Cross Society’s School of Nursing through their work. Their descriptions present hard work: how they scrubbed hospital floors, cleaned rooms, organized instruments, gave hundreds of injections, cleaned children’s mouths, changed bed sheets etc. without proper rest. They also exercised their power: visiting patient homes and checking hygiene conditions, instructing local people, and burning infected pots in the school yard. They did not see their service as “humiliating” them. They also defended their independence to take decisions and plan their work. Feeling that they were part of a wider nurses’ society was also an important source of their positive attitude.

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⁴⁸ Letter from Lazarova and Christova to Nevena Sendova, January 27, 1934.

⁴⁹ Letter from Lazarova and Christova to Nevena Sendova, January 27, 1934.

⁵⁰ Letter from Lazarova and Christova to Nevena Sendova, January 27, 1934.

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