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# Jadwiga Olszewska: A Woman Pioneer in Medicine in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

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#### Abstract

This article describes the life and medical activities of Jadwiga Olszewska (1855-1932) in Serbia from 1895-1899, Austro-Hungarian (AH)-occupied and annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH) from 1899-1918, and the newly founded Kingdom of Yugoslavia, from 1919-1932. In summer 1899, Olszewska replaced Teodora Krajewska as an AH official female physician in Tuzla. Born in Congress Poland, Olszewska had enrolled in 1873 in the medical courses for women in St. Petersburg but had left Russia in 1880 to study medicine in France. She had lived as a student and single parent in Paris since 1883, and she was awarded her Doctorate in Medicine from the University of Paris in 1894. She could not practice medicine in Russian-occupied Poland because of her French diploma, and she could not practice in most Western countries due to her gender. Therefore, she decided to move to Serbia, where she worked as an assistant physician in the district hospitals of Loznica (1895-1897?) and Požarevac (1897-1899). Driven by the need for a higher income to fund her son's education, she engaged her network of Polish compatriots and procured the position of an AH official female physician of Tuzla in 1899, where she performed her duties in an exemplary manner. After the breakdown of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (AHE) in 1918, Olszewska remained in Tuzla and retired as a Yugoslav official physician in 1923. When she died in Tuzla in 1932, local colleagues had to arrange for a proper funeral because Olszewska did not leave any savings due to her insufficient pension. Olszewska's grave never received a tombstone, and it is untraceable today. Conclusion. Jadwiga Olszewska (1855-1932) was a woman pioneer of medicine from Poland, who practiced her profession first as an assistant physician in Serbia (1895-1899) and then as an AH and Yugoslavian official female doctor in Tuzla, BH (1899-1923).

Key Words: Official Female Doctors • Jadwiga Olszewska • Tuzla • Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## Introduction

Jadwiga Olszewska is exceptional as a first-generation female pioneer of medicine in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH). Born in Poland, she practiced her profession in the few areas that were available to female physicians in the 19th century. Nevertheless, no exhaustive biography of her person has been provided by women's historians or Polish and former Yugoslavian historians and biographers. Overlooked in the history of women medical pioneers, Olszewska is only briefly mentioned in the context of Serbian, Yugoslavian, and Bosnian national and local histories of medicine and public health (1-6). Polish contemporaneous and recent sources on Polish emigrés and their networks and communities include Olszewska (7, 8, 9) but only as the protegée of her more prominent compatriot and colleague Teodora Krajewska, the Austro-Hungarian (AH) official female doctor Olszewska replaced in Tuzla. This neglect is likely due to the fact that Krajewska's memoirs (10) are the only detailed source of information about Olszewska.

Krajewska explains that after she had been invited to continue her service in Sarajevo in 1898, it was important to her to choose a suitable successor for her practice in Tuzla (10). A Polish compatriot brought Jadwiga Olszewska to her attention because Olszewska was a Polish female medical doctor who was working in the closely situated Serbian city of Loznica and would likely be interested.1 After further investigation, Krajewska decided to encourage Olszewska to apply for the advertised position in Tuzla.<sup>2</sup> She knew that the AH authorities were unlike to employ "Russians" because of suspected "nihilism", and she therefore intervened for Olszewska with de facto governor Benjamin de Kállay in Vienna (10). Olszewska was appointed the provisory official female doctor of the district of Tuzla in May 1899, and her first name was Germanised as "Hedwig". Olszewska arrived in BH to receive training from her predecessor several weeks prior to the arrival of Gisela Januszewska, the simultaneously appointed official female physician of Banjaluka.<sup>3</sup> She was the fourth of nine AH official female physicians who came to BH to staff the institution of AH "Amtsärztinnen" (official female physicians) for Bosnian Muslim women, which was created in 1891.

In the 1980s, Ctibor Nečas (1991), historiographer of the AH institution of official female physicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH) (12), began to search for more information about Jadwiga Olszewska (13). His biographical sketch, published in 1987, revealed Olszewska's journalistic and literary work for Polish newspapers and magazines, her short marriage in 1882, and her status as a single parent who was constantly under financial pressure. Nečas also determined the correct date and circumstances of her death in Tuzla in 1932 (13). Nečas found evidence that Olszewska had worked as a hospital doctor in Požarevac in Serbia and incorrectly concluded that she had not worked in Loznica as Polish sources had indicated (13). A recent investigation in Serbian archives by Husref Tahirovic revealed that Olszewska was employed as an assistant physician in Loznica in 1895 (14) and moved to Požarevac (15) to work in the same function in 1897 (5) before she was appointed an AH official female doctor in Tuzla in 1899.<sup>4</sup>

Jadwiga Olszewska's life and medical activities, first in Serbia and then as an AH official female physician in BH, are the subject of this review. The review is based on Nečas' biography and Krajewska's memoirs, as well as new archival materials and various Yugoslav, Serbian, and Bosnian sources.

# **Olszewska's Short Biography**

Jadwiga Olszewska was born on April 10, 1855 in Kuzawka (16) near Slawatycz. Today a village in Eastern Poland next to the Russian border, Slawatycz was then situated in Russian-occupied Poland. Nothing is known about Olszewska's family background, except that her mother was a teacher (17). Olszewska attended a girls' gymnasium in Warsaw and took her school leaving examination in 1873. Subsequently, she moved to St. Petersburg, where medical courses exclusively for women had been established at the Military Medical Surgery Academy in 1872.<sup>5</sup> She enrolled in a four-year programme for "learned obstetricians" ("uchenye akusherki"), a qualification that entitled female graduates to practice as physicians without being awarded a doctorate (18). Olszewska did not finish the programme; instead, she left Russia when the Tsarist persecution of radical students reached an initial climax. Many female students from Russia and Russian-occupied Poland left at this time to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>By 1898, Olszewska had already left Loznica to work in Požarevac.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>The advertised position designated Tuzla as the site of operation (11), but apparently there was no advertisement for the newly created position in Banjaluka, which Gisela Januszewska filled in 1899.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Cf. Gisela Januszewska (née Rosenfeld), an Austro-Hungarian 'Woman Doctor for Women' in Banjaluka, 1899–1912. In: AMA 49/1 (2020): 75-83.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>Unfortunately, this research did not uncover a portrait photograph of Jadwiga Olszewska, but see Picture 6 (Jadwiga Olszewska in the company of friends in Sarajevo in 1905).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>For more information regarding the situation of women studying in the Russian Empire under diverse changing discriminations, see e.g., Barbara A. Engel. "Women Medical Students in Russia, 1872-1882: Reformers or Rebels?", Journal of Social History 12, 1979: 394-415; Ruth A. Dudgeon. "The Forgotten Minority: Women Students in Imperial Russia," Russian History/Histoire Russe 9/1 (1982): 1-26; Johanson, Christine. Women's struggle for higher education in Russia, 1855-1900. Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press,1987; Koblitz, Ann H.: Science, Women and Revolution *in Russia*. Women in Science. Amsterdam et al.: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000.

pursue studies in Switzerland and France.<sup>6</sup> In 1880, Olszewska settled in Paris, a site of refuge for many Polish émigrés from the late 18th century through the 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1881, Olszewska enrolled in the Medical Faculty of the University of Paris (17).<sup>7</sup> She interrupted her studies to marry Bartlomiej Boldireff in 1882. She separated from Boldireff before the birth of her son Włodzimierz on January 15, 1883 (13, 19). As a young mother, she continued to pursue her medical studies under her own name "Olschewska" (13).

Włodzimierz Boldireff-Streminski (1883-1970)8 was a reputed civil engineer in Poland in the interwar years and was also a noted pioneer of Tatry mountaineering (Picture 1). Olszewska relied on her Polish network to help her raise her son and generate an income. In the 1880s, she began to write for Polish newspapers and magazines in Cracow and Lviv, and she continued to pursue journalistic and literary activities as an assistant physician in Serbia and an official female physician in BH (13). In her journalistic work, Olszewska advocated for women's equal rights and criticized educational and professional discrimination against women (20). She was committed to the cause of higher education for girls and was among the most avid donors at charity events for the Serbian "Bel-



Picture 1. Włodzimierz Boldireff-Strzemiński, Jadwiga Olszewska`s son. A detail of the Picture "Sekcja Turystyczna Polskiego Towarzystwa Tatrzańskiego na Hali Gąsiennicowej, 1910. With permission of Museum sport and tourism in Warsaw.

grade Women's Association", which raised funds to support this cause (21).

In 1894, Olszewska defended her thesis regarding the clinical study of typhoid-related myocardial disorders among children (22) (Picture 2). She was awarded her medical doctorate from the Medical Faculty of the University of Paris at the age of 39 (17).

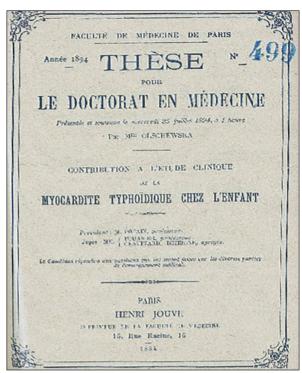
Olszewska had planned to return to Poland with her son upon completion of her studies; however, the Russian authorities were not recognising foreign diplomas (18). The only alternative for Olszewska was to seek employment in the Kingdom of Serbia, where female physicians could obtain permission to practice as assistant physicians in hospitals.<sup>9</sup> On April 28, 1895, she wrote a letter of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>The overwhelming majority of female students graduating from Swiss and French universities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were from the Russian Empire (including Congress Poland), see Daniela Neumann: Studentinnen aus dem Russischen Reich in der Schweiz (1867-1914), Zurich: Rohr, 1987; Sigrist, Natalia Tikhonov. Les femmes et l'université en France, 1860-1914. Pour une historiographie comparée. In: Histoire de l'éducation 122/2009, pp. 53-70, p. 57; see also Lipinska (9) and Schultze C. Women physicians in the 19th century [in French]. Paris: Ollier-Henry; 1888. p. 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>French universities were closed to (French) women prior to the 1860s because they were excluded from higher education. Female emigrants from the Russian Empire were not subjected to the required higher education entrance qualification; cf. Christen-Lécuyer Christen-Lécuyer, Carole. Les premières étudiantes de l'université de Paris. In: Travail, genre et sociétés (Dossier: Histoire de Pionnières), 2000/2, no. 4, pp. 35-50; Pigeard-Micault N. "Nature féminin" et doctoresses (1868-1930). Histoire, médecine et santé. 2013;3:83-100. https://doi.org/10.4000/hms.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>Włodzimierz Boldireff assumed the name "Streminski" (the name of his wife's grandfather) in 1925 to Polonize his Russian name.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>In the Kingdom of Serbia (1882–1918 according to the Julian calendar), all doctors in the civil and military service were



Picture 2. Front page of "Mlle Olszewska's" thesis "Contribution à l'étude clinique typhoidique chez l'enfant", Paris, 1894. With permission BIU Santé (Paris).

inquiry to the Serbian Ministry of the Interior in Belgrade to offer her service as an assistant doctor at "any district hospital near the railway" (Picture 3). On May 6, the Ministry employed Jadwiga Olszewska as an assistant physician in the Hospital of the District of Podrinje, situated in the district capital Loznica (Picture 4), a small city in Western Serbia near the Bosnian border.<sup>10</sup> She left her son in the care of her compatriot and friend Bronislawa (Bronia) Sklodowska-Dluski (1865-1939)<sup>11</sup> in Paris and departed for Serbia.

Sources related to Olszewska's membership in the Loznica branch of the "Belgrade Women's Society" (BWS) (23) indicate that she had joined the society immediately upon her arrival in Loznica. In early 1896, she asked the BWS for a loan and designated the local merchant Svetolik Popović as her guarantor (24); she obviously lacked a sufficient income to support her son. Indeed, the need to improve her financial situation was a dominant motive of Olszewska's life from the beginning of her professional career. In the same year, Olszewska sought transfer to a location where she would be able to open a private practice. She was transferred to the District Hospital of the District of Požarevac<sup>12</sup> (Picture 5), a city near Belgrade in Eastern Serbia; however, her plans to practice as a private doctor did not come to fruition (10).

As an assistant physician in Požarevac, Olszewska applied to the official female physician position in BH advertised in 1897 (11). However, she was quickly informed that they had not "drawn her into consideration" (12). Rather than giving up, Olszewska put her Polish network into motion, and in 1898, Krajewska chose her as a successor for her practice in Tuzla and intervened for her in Vienna. The responsible authorities assessed Olszewska's application and accepted it in March 1899, citing her pre-existing local language skills, (10), and Olszewska travelled to Cracow to acquire Austrian citizenship. Soon after, she travelled to Tuzla to meet Krajewska, who had learned of her own transfer to Sarajevo and the obligation to instruct her successor (10).

From the last week of May 1899, Krajewska and Olszewska worked together in Tuzla and apparently separated as good friends. Krajewska described Olszewska as a pleasant woman who had a taste for the bohème and was "awfully dressed" (10). Bronislava Prašek Calczynska (1887-1969),

appointed by decree of the ruler, though a woman doctor could not be appointed by decree. Medical assistants were appointed by prescription of the Minister of the Interior.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>Working protocol of the Sanitary Department of the Ministry of the Interior of Kingdom of Serbia for 1895, SN0 3416.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>According to Boldireff-Streminski, who lived in Paris until 1898 under the care of Marie Sklodowska-Curie's elder sister Bronislawa (Bronia) Sklodowska-Dluski (1865-1939), who practiced as a gynaecologist in Paris and maintained a "salon" as a meeting point for exiled Poles.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>The archival sources do not allow to reconstruct the exact point in time when Olszewska's moved to Požarevac, although the record of her membership at the local branch of the "Belgrade Women's Society" (BWS) provides clues as to the time and reason for the transfer (Milanović J, Jovanović Simić J. Female physicians and doctor's wives - members of the Women's Society (1875–1915) in Serbia). Srp Arh Celok Lek. 2020: DOI: https://doi.org/10.2298/SARH191106078M).

НУМЕРА И ДАТУМ ДОЛАЗЕЋЕГ САДРЖАЈ имена лица или наддан, месец и година кад је писмо у протокол TERYRA лежателства, од којих HYMEPA ПРЕДМЕТА 10111.10 писма долазе 542 aran 10, No: MAN -OCN: 3888 no th somare unchen 111 -Co aran. Lekor gr Re nuebcha Jach Kanna

Picture 3. Archives of Serbia. Page of the Protocol of 1895 of the Ministry of the Interior - Health Care Department which mentions Dr. Jadwiga Olszewska's application sent on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1895 (No. 3416). Published with kind permission of the Archives of Serbia.



Picture 4. Loznica at the time when Dr. Jadwiga Olszewska started working there. Published with kind permission of Museum of Jadar, Loznica.



Picture 5. Požarevac at the time when Dr. Jadwiga Olszewska started working there. With Permission from the Historical Archives of Požarevac. (The Pozarevac District Town Hall, built between 1888 and 1889. Historical Archives of Pozarevac/ Republic of Serbia, Digital Collection of Tanasije Bata Dimitrijevic, sign. 044a.)



Picture 6. Jadwiga Olszewska "sitting in the first row with both hands raised up" in the company of friends in Sarajevo around 1905. By courtesy of the Department of the Old Medical Book of the Central Medical Library in Warsaw. Reference Number GBL-I-1327 (103).

Jadwiga Olszewska died on February 28, 1932 in Tuzla (1, 25). Her small pension, which had not sufficed to cover her cost of living, did not cover the expenses of a funeral either. Compassionate colleagues collected money to organise a funeral at the Roman Catholic cemetery of Tuzla. No tombstone was placed, and the location of Olszewska's grave has since vanished, along with the wooden cross that showed her name (5).

who met Olszewska in 1915, confirmed this impression, depicting her as a winning companion but strikingly unattractive and neglectfully dressed (Picture 6) (4). Olszewska was reputed to be a woman of high literary education who spoke numerous languages fluently (16).

Olszewska was appointed as an AH official female physician on May 24, 1899. She took the oath of office upon her arrival in Tuzla, where she was expected to "provide medical help to all women in the city and its surroundings, regardless of their social status, nationality or religion, with special attention to Muslim women" (12). Krajewska (10) noted that Olszewska seemed happy with her new position, particularly for financial reasons, though her financial situation continued to be difficult. Olszewska was at the forefront of the AH official female physicians' effort to win equal pay for female and male AH official doctors and an increase of their basic salary (12). Her desperate financial situation likely also influenced her decision to stay in BH after the AHE collapsed in 1918. Olszewska took an oath of allegiance to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on March 1, 1919 (Picture 7), and she remained in her position as an official physician in Tuzla until her retirement in 1923 at age 68.

ZAKLETVA. Terriga Olyrewska zaklinjem se svemogućim Bogom, da ću vladajućem kralju PETRU I. vjeran biti, da ću se Ustava savjesno pridržavati i da ću dužnost moju po zakonima i zakonskim naredbama predpostavljenih mi vlasti tačno i savjesno otoravliati. Potvrdujem, da se je . I He danas predamnom zakleo. 1 Marte 1914 53207/19 P. do. 9616. 1918/19.

Picture 7. Jadwiga Olszewska's Oath of Allegiance to King Peter the First stating that she will abide by the constitution and exercise her duty according to the laws and regulations. Archives of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

# **Olszewska's Professional Activities**

A recent search in Serbian archives revealed that Jadwiga Olszewska began her professional career as an assistant physician in the city hospital of Loznica in 1895 (26) and worked in the same function in the city hospital of Požarevac in 1897 (27). The sources do not specify the exact date of her transfer to Požarevac, but the record of her membership in the Loznica branch of BWS indicates that she moved to Požarevac in late 1896 or early 1897 because she was not on the list of members for the second half of 1897 (28).

Jadwiga Olszewska's activities as an official female physician in Tuzla and Tuzla district have been documented in detail in Nečas' collective biography of the AH official female physicians in occupied BH, published in 1992 (12). Tuzla, referred to as "Dolnja (Lower) Tuzla" in AH sources (Picture 8), was known for salt production and was considered an emerging industrial town in the late 19th century (29). At that point, the town had about 10,200 inhabitants, and about 60% of the inhabitants were Muslim.

When Olszewska arrived in Tuzla in May 1899, Krajewska introduced her to the local clientele, including the Muslim ladies of the city (10). They worked together in Krajewska's practice and travelled together on an official trip to the rural subdistricts of Modrica and Gracanica. When Krajewska left Tuzla at the end of June, Olszewska was sworn into her office and began service as a provisory official on June 21, 1899 (16). She gained permanent status in June 1901 (12). Olszewska had an advantage in that the local outpatient clinics for women and children – which had been established by Anna Bayerová in 1892 (30) and taken over by Krajewska in 1893 – were already familiar to the local population.

According to official statistics, Olszewska treated 395 (mostly female) patients from July to December 1899 and an average of 850 patients annually in the following years (31). These figures included patients from the city who visited her in her practice and those whom she visited on official trips to various cities and rural sites of the district. Like all official female physicians in BH, Olszewska functioned as a general practitioner and was most frequently consulted for "diseases of the digestive system" and "diseases of the genital organs", followed by respiratory and skin diseases and metabolic disorders, including rheumatic and osteomalacic affliction as well as rickets. Many of her patients suffered from poverty-related chronic infectious disorders such as tuberculosis, scrophulosis and endemic syphilis (32). About 25% of her



Picture 8. Tuzla at the time when Dr. Jadwiga Olszewska started working there at the end of the 19th century. From "Tuzla in Memory" by Enver Mandžić. With permission of the author.

patients were children; notably, the average proportion of child patients among official female doctors was about one-third (31). The proportion of Muslim patients in the practice had increased rapidly, from 37% in 1893 to 64% in 1897, due to Krajewska's zeal for "approaching" local Muslim women. However, this trend reversed itself under Olszewska's leadership: 64% of her patients were Muslim in 1899, and the proportion fell to 46% in 1900 and 37% in 1901 (31).

Among the most important tasks of the official female physi-

cians was to participate in the eradication of syphilis, a public health priority of the AH authorities in BH since 1890 (33). Based on the expert opinion of Isidor Neumann, professor of Dermatology and Venereology at the University of Vienna, the authorities in BH had refrained from the common method of hospitalizing rural syphilitics by use of military force (34). Rather, official physicians were instructed to treat infected locals on-site. Female physicians were therefore required to examine and monitor the patients, particularly the rural female Muslim population (33). In 1900, Olszewska became involved in a local syphilis eradication in Maglaj, which was one of several rural foci of endemic syphilis in her district. She was ordered to treat the 168 infected locals (of both sexes) with an iodine tincture for several years and expected to monitor the patients' adherence to the prescriptions (12).

Olszewska's duties as an official physician included the control of infectious diseases, such as carrying out vaccinations on a regular basis throughout the district and acting as an "epidemics physician" when required. For example, she was involved in combating a smallpox epidemic that had spread from Derventa in Northern Bosnia at the border to Croatia in 1899. She was ordered to Bijeljina and tasked with locating infected women in Muslim households, which were suspected of not reporting infected female members to the authorities. In 1899, Olszewska vaccinated 872 women and children in the subdistricts of Bijeljina and Tuzla (12). According to Prašek Calczynska, she was also actively involved in combating a cholera epidemic in the same region (Derventa) in April 1915 (4).

## **Concluding Remarks**

Jadwiga (Hedwig) Olszewska was a Polish woman pioneer in medicine. She began her study of medicine in St. Petersburg in 1873. Like many Poles and many female students at the time, she left the Russian Empire and settled in France in 1880. She studied medicine in Paris but interrupted her studies for her short marriage in 1882. As a young mother and single parent reliant on emigrated compatriots' support, she resumed her medical studies in Paris and finished in 1894. Despite her plans, she could not return to Congress Poland as a physician at that time, nor did she have the means to open a private practice in France or elsewhere. Among the few options left to her was to work as a hospital doctor in Serbia. Olszewska made considerable and eventually successful efforts to serve as an official female doctor within the AH administration of BH. From July 1899 to 1918, she performed her official duties by working as a general practitioner for women and children in Tuzla and implementing epidemic control throughout the district. She remained on duty as a Yugoslav official physician in 1919 and retired in 1923. Her memory had already vanished by the 1920s, when she still lived in Tuzla as a retired civil servant with an insufficient pension. Olszewska died on February 28, 1932 in Tuzla, where she is buried in an unknown grave in the Roman Catholic cemetery. The renowned physician Sulejman Azabagić (1915-1981) from Tuzla remembered Jadwiga Olszewska as a modest and quiet person who was devoted to her work (5).

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Please see the supplementary material entitled: Statistical Data for the Annual Report by the Official Female Physician Dr. Jadwiga Olszewska in Tuzla in 1905.

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## Supplementary material

# Statistical Data for the Annual Report by the Official Female Physician Dr. Jadwiga Olszewska in Tuzla in 1905

The statistical section of the 1905 official annual report of Dr. Jadwiga Olszewska provides information on her monthly activities and the places in the Tuzla district where she worked (Picture 9). The report provides a monthly presentation of the number of pathological conditions in each year, which is of particular importance because it lists the diseases for which patients sought medical attention. It is interesting to note that Dr. Olszewska examined only 27 patients with acute infectious diseases, a significantly smaller number than the 377 patients with chronic infectious diseases in that year. These data indicate that chronic diseases were a serious health problem for women in Bosnia that forced them to seek medical help, but the same was not true for acute infectious diseases. In Bosnia at that time, the most common chronic diseases were syphilis and tuberculosis, whose symptomatology impaired patients' quality of life. It is also important to note that Olszewska only provided obstetric assistance in seven labours. These data indicate that she was a female doctor who treated all women's diseases. She was not a gynaecologist, as some authors from the former Yugoslavia state in their papers.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Olszewska was primarily a family physician for all diseases of the female population.

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Picture 9. Olszewska's Annual Report from Tuzla in 1905. Archives of Bosnia and Herzegovina.