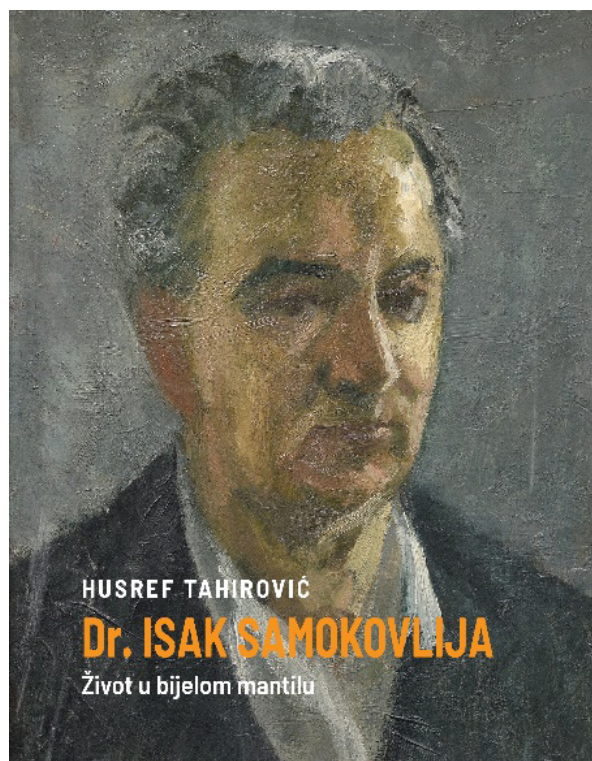


Dr. Isak Samokovlija: Life in a White Coat

Author: Husref Tahirović. Publisher: Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo, 2022, VI + 214 pages, Illustrated.

ISBN: 978-9926-410-79-7. [In Bosnian].

Jovan Dimitrijević retired professor of the Faculty of Medicine in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina



The book “Dr. Isak Samokovlija: Life in a White Coat” is by Academician Husref Tahirović and the publisher is the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2022. In the very title of the book, Academician Tahirović has indicated to us what the book is about, that is, it is dedicated to Isak Samokovlija and his professional work as a doctor. There is also another side to Isak Samokovlija, who was a well-known and recognized writer, a writer of set books used in

schools, a writer to whom books and gatherings are dedicated, a public figure. The main character of Academician Tahirović’s book is not this man. The book is about a modest and quiet county doctor who was taken by his service to various parts of the country, and in 1939 he was appointed a regular member of the Ban Health Council of the Drina Banovina. Being a district doctor in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the First World War “meant encountering the severe poverty of the population, the poor health and hygiene conditions, especially of the rural population, with the appearance of various infectious diseases that had the character of epidemics, all with a meagre number of health personnel”. The county doctor was often in a situation where he saw a patient for the first and also the last time, especially in the countryside. Doctor travelled to the villages on foot, sometimes on horseback, in all weathers and seasons. During World War II, he was the manager of the clinic in the Alipašin Most Camp, a camp for refugees from Eastern Bosnia, and after World War II, he was a doctor at the Ministry of Public Health of the People’s Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is a book about a person, but also about a period of time that we get to know through the life of Dr. Isak Samokovlija.

The book was conceived and written in two parts. The first part consists of a biography, and the second part consists of health education texts by Dr. Samokovlija. The first part, the biography, has chapters on “Family, Growing Up, and Education”, “The Peaceful Period Between the Two Wars”, “The

Period of the Second World War, 1941–1945”, “The Post-War Period, 1945–1955” and “Notes” at the end.

Isak Samokovlija was born into a modest family in Goražde in 1889. He was lucky enough to receive a scholarship to study medicine in Vienna, through the “La Benevolencija” cultural and educational society. He participated in the First World War, first as a medical student, then as a qualified doctor. There was a period between the two wars, a “peaceful period”, and then another war. In World War II, he was faced with being a Jew and a doctor. Being a Jew meant immediate danger to his life and the lives of his loved ones; being a doctor saved him from that fate. The authorities of the Independent State of Croatia allowed him and a few other Jewish doctors to stay in Bosnia and work on suppressing endemic syphilis, with their headquarters in Banja Luka. However, due to his circumstances, he did not do this but was instead appointed manager of the clinic in the Alipašin Most Camp near Sarajevo, a camp for refugees from Eastern Bosnia. At the end of the war, he was again mobilized into the Home Guard, but managed to move to free territory. The next chapter talks about Dr. Isak Samokovlija’s work in the new state until his death in 1955. He was appointed head of the Department for Health Education at the Ministry of Public Health of the People’s Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He no longer visited the sick in the city or villages with a medical bag, on foot or on horseback. He now did the same work as a traditional healer, but in a different way. With the help of a group of colleagues and enthusiasts, he founded the first Bosnian medical journal, entitled *Život i Zdravlje* (Life and Health, Journal of Health Education). The journal was founded in 1946, had a circulation of 6,000 copies, and was published four times a year. Doctor Samokovlija was the editor of the journal, and the editorial board included other well-known doctors. He left the Ministry of Public Health in 1949, when his work on the journal *Život i Zdravlje* also ended. He became the editor of the literary journal *Brazde* and then the editor of the publishing company *Svjetlost*. He died in 1955.

The last part of this text is entitled “Notes”. This part is interesting because the reader can learn more about the various sources used for the biography, and also become acquainted with the short biographies of the doctors who met or collaborated with Dr. Isak Samokovlija during his life.

The second part of the book refers to the health education work of Dr. Isak Samokovlija. As we have already mentioned, this work took place through the journal *Život i Zdravlje*. In addition to editing that journal, in which there were also articles by prominent doctors of the time, Dr. Samokovlija also contributed a total of twenty-nine articles on health education. The texts dealt with the current health situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina after World War II. “Those were years in which difficult living conditions were caused by poverty, poor nutrition, the people’s lack of general and health education, and poor hygiene and sanitary conditions. In addition, the adversities that arose as a result of treatment using irrational folk medicine procedures came to the surface...”. The topics covered by Dr. Samokovlija can be divided into those related to infectious diseases, their causes, ways of spreading, treatment and prevention, then topics from general health culture, and finally articles where superstition and quackery are discussed. Of the infectious diseases, the most space was given to the fight against malaria, followed by smallpox and tuberculosis, and less to syphilis. Academician Tahirović divided these articles into texts using imaginary characters, sketches, scholarly articles and poetry. Already in the first issue of the journal, where Dr. Isak Samokovlija states the reasons for starting the journal, he says that: “Our articles and writings will not be embellished or written in a difficult and incomprehensible style. They should be characterised by simplicity and clarity.” All the contributors adhered to this, but Dr. Samokovlija’s articles stood out from the others, because they were written by a man who was also a writer. His professional medical education left its mark on the content of the text, and his literary talent and experience shaped its form and style. Sometimes it was in the form of an imaginary gathering, where the speaker communicated directly with the listeners

through dialogue (Baba Mara, health striker), sometimes he wrote brief notes, or sketches, with examples from life, usually from his medical practice. All his texts had a clear message and lesson, and they were all written in the “vernacular”, or “conversational” language. The group of “scholarly articles” were longer, delving deeper into the topic, but even here he managed to maintain his simple vocabulary and immediacy in addressing the reader.

Academician Tahirović divides these texts whereby the last group is poetry. Reading these nine poems, which are simple, humorous, instructive, and beautifully and harmoniously rhymed, a comparison with another children’s poet, Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, somehow comes to mind. Without going into an evaluation of the artistic value of the poems of one or the other, the comparison is that both of them combined their medical education with a literary gift, and these characteristics complement each other.

Academician Tahirović has given us a beautiful, well-thought-out, well-documented, and interesting book, written in fluent, professional, and likable language. The book is about a person from our past, about whom most people only know one side, the literary side. The other side has been in the shadow of the first, and known to a much smaller number of people. Now that other side has been revealed to us too, and we have gained a complete insight into the personality of Dr. Isak Samokovlija. We are given a glimpse of him, but we are also given a glimpse of a period of time, and the book is an expression of respect and recognition to Dr. Isak Samokovlija, as well as to all his other colleagues who worked to improve public health in this region during those times.

Academician Tahirović has been dealing with topics from the history of medicine for some time. This book is another fine and valuable contribution to that field.