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# Do Women Belong in Medicine? Discussions, Prejudices and Stereotypes in the Czech lands at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries

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**Abstract**

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The present article explores the role and perception of women in medicine in the Czech lands at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, examining the professional training required for nurses and female doctors, the qualifications demanded, and their subsequent career opportunities, with a particular focus on their acceptance within both professional and general discourse—an acceptance often shaped by prevailing gender prejudices. The current analysis of the representation of female medical doctors and nurses is primarily based on contemporary press sources and texts authored by male medical authorities, which evaluated the abilities, qualities, and potential contributions of women in the medical and nursing professions.

Women in positions other than long-established, traditional roles, i.e. wife, mother, homemaker, patriot, became a frequent topic of public debate and controversy in the 19th century, especially for women from the middle bourgeoisie. In central Europe, the most frequent of these debates concerned a drive for greater education for women and their inclusion in professions that had hitherto been exclusively reserved for men. Why should girls study at all? What kind of jobs are they capable of doing and which are even suitable for them? What are the economic and social consequences of skilled women entering the labour market? There were no clear answers, but together such questions aroused considerable public interest, and not just amongst the female population, impacting wider society significantly. Comments, answers and proposed solutions, whether taken from abroad or formed at home, appeared in the pages of the press, where the views of both supporters and opponents of women's studies and employment were discussed. One of the most pressing issues was the role of women as doctors, a profession requiring university studies and carrying with it a high level of prestige.

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The following text presents the path that led female students to the lecture halls of medical schools, and the treatment of the phenomenon in the contemporary press and memoirs. The focus is placed on the present-day discourse in the Czech lands on the role of female doctors and nurses, which reflected both rational and relevant arguments and the experience of experts, as well as unfounded speculation, emotions and prejudices.

## The first step—gymnasium for women

Women's efforts to pursue higher education, which can be traced back to the last third of the 19th century, saw relatively rapid success in the Czech lands thanks to the persistence of Eliška Krásnohorská,[1] who opened the first private gymnasium (high school) for women in the Habsburg Monarchy. Minerva was founded in Prague in 1890, financed by an association of the same name.[2] The aim of Krásnohorská was to prepare a generation of educated girls to stand at the gates of universities and demand the right to study under the same conditions as boys.

The first students of Minerva took the matriculation exam in 1895 yet had to wait two years to enter university lecture halls in their homeland, or five years in the case of women interested in medicine. Krásnohorská's very efforts to get the girls to graduate from the gymnasium were met with a contradictory reception, even among the educated, as she described with a great deal of lingering bitterness years later.[3] All the more poignant were the attacks against the first female undergraduates that later came.

The harsh critics towards the new type of school were mostly individuals who emphasized a traditional image of women, one connected to the family and the home. The word "antifeminism" can hardly be used in their case; we can speak rather of clinging to old orders and stereotypes, of the conviction that a woman is best at home, where she is protected from all the problems of the outside world. This was the spirit in which physician Emanuel Engel, for example, referred to girls as "hothouse flowers" who must not be touched by "the harsh breath of life with its blizzards and gales."[4] The press, especially the satirical magazine *Kopřivy*, typically presented female students as not very pretty or orderly, using caricatures or short and easy to understand descriptions, which did not spare any satire or irony.

On the contrary, Krásnohorská and her colleagues found supporters in the magazine *Ženské listy* (the Women's Letters),[5] which welcomed the establishment

1 Eliška Krásnohorská, first name Alžběta Pechová (1847–1926), writer, translator, librettist, literary critic, editor of the magazine *Ženské listy* (the Women's Letters), member of many women's associations, founder of the first girls' gymnasium (high school) in Austria-Hungary, and advocate of equal access to education for women and men.

2 For the history of the school, see e.g. SMĚŘIČKOVÁ, Helena (ed.) *První české dívčí gymnázium. Sborník ke 100. výročí založení.* Praha : Ústřední ústav pro vzdělávání pedagogických pracovníků, 1990; MALÍNSKÁ, Jana. Financování českého dívčího gymnasia Minerva, spolku pro ženské studium. In *Moderní dějiny*, 2009, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 1–33; SEKYRKOVÁ, Milada (ed.) *Minerva 1890–1936. Kronika prvního dívčího gymnázia v habsburské monarchii.* Praha : Karolinum, 2016.

3 KRÁSNOHORSKÁ, Eliška. Boj o vyšší dívčí školu. In KRÁSNOHORSKÁ, Eliška. *Výbor z díla II. Studie, kritiky a paměti.* Praha : Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění, 1956, pp. 483–495.

4 KRÁSNOHORSKÁ 1956, p. 488.

5 *Ženské listy*, the first modern Czech women's magazine, originally a supplement to the social magazine *Květy* (1872), from 1874, an independent monthly published by Ženský výrobní spolek český (the Women's Czech Manufacturing Association). The editorial board was headed by Eliš-

of the girls' gymnasium (high school) and saw the facility as the first important step towards breaking the stereotype of the only possible task available for a woman:

> In every thinking person, after the instinct of self-preservation, the desire for knowledge of the truth is the strongest emotion. But hitherto the order of decency has inexorably commanded girls not to admit to this desire and to repress it in themselves as something unwomanly, harmful to them, and, in their case, utterly ridiculous. Let the Chinese wall of this tiresome prejudice be at last dismantled by Minerva. […] May the girl of ability and learning not only be allowed, by chance and exception, to peer into the inexhaustible fountain of the sublime laws of nature, but finally, like the young man, be allowed to enjoy with understanding the thousand beauties of the universe, to follow the course of its development.[6]

At the same time, however, let us recall that writer Karolina Světlá,[7] author of the above quote, reproached Krásnohorská as late as September 1890 for devoting too much time and energy to Minerva, and ten years earlier, she had also flatly refused a proposal to set up a class in the school of Ženský výrobní spolek český (ŽVSČ, the Women's Czech Manufacturing Association), as a preparatory school for the gymnasium (high school).[8] It is clear, then, that the debate on the benefits or detriments of higher education for girls had, from the beginning, its supporters and opponents in the camps of both women and men, the educated and people belonging to the lower social classes. Age was not a determiner either; enthusiastic supporters of girls' studies included Vojta Náprstek,[9] born in 1826 and almost seventy years old at the time of Minerva's foundation, as well as Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who was in his forties.[10]

## Women at university

As mentioned above, the growing interest in girls' studies by the press appeared at the moment when girls could apply to study at the philosophical and medical faculties of Austrian universities thanks to ministerial decrees, i.e. at the very end of the 19th century.[11] Attitudes towards female university graduates

ka Krásnohorská from 1875 to 1911. Under her leadership, the magazine brought information about the women's movement at home and around the world, contemporary fiction and poetry, reports, educational articles, theatre and literary criticism, contributed to the education of women and to the dissemination of ideas about women's rights.

6 SVĚTLÁ, Karolina. České Minervě. In *Ženské listy*, 1890, vol. 18, no. 10, p. 195.

7 Karolina Světlá, first name Johanna Rottová, married Mužáková (1830–1899), writer, publicist, founder and member of many women's associations, including Americký klub dam (the American Ladies' Club) and ŽVSČ.

8 BAHENSKÁ, Marie. *Počátky emancipace žen v Čechách. Dívčí vzdělávání a* ženské *spolky* v *Praze v 19. století*. Praha : Slon/Libri, 2005, pp. 131–132.

9 Vojta Náprstek (1826–1894), Prague burgher and entrepreneur, Czech patriot, philanthropist, patron, founder of the Industrial Museum, promoter of women's education, so-called advocate of women.

10 Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937), professor of sociology, philosopher, advocate of women's rights, politician, first president of the Czechoslovak Republic.

11 *Reichsgesetzblatt 1897, Gesetz Nr. 84, Verordnung des Ministers für Cultus und Unterricht vom 23. März 1897, betreffend der Zulassung von Frauen als ordentliche und ausserordentliche Hörerinnen an den philosophischen Facultäten der k. k. Universitäten,* https://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/alex?apm=0&aid=rgb&datum=18970004&seite=00000427&size=45 [last viewed on 26 May 2025]; *Reichsgesetzblatt 1900, Gesetz Nr. 149, Verordnung des Ministers für Cultus und Unterricht im Einvernehmen mit dem Ministerium des Innern vom 3. September 1900, betreffend der Zulassung von Frauen zu den medicinischen Studien und zum Doctorate der gessamten Heilkunde*, https://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/alex?apm=0&aid=rgb&datum=19000004&seite=00000379&size=45 [last viewed on 26 May 2025]. On the subject of university studies for women, see e.g. BAHENSKÁ, Marie – HECZKOVÁ, Libuše – MUSILOVÁ, Dana. *Iluze spásy. České feministické*

were not uniform. Students of philosophical faculties most often chose teaching for their professional future, a field close to the traditional female role. This was seen by the public, including the biggest critics, as a profession suitable for women and it was generally acknowledged that for many families this solution (i.e. the employment of female members of the household outside the family) was necessary for financial reasons. Even so, the reception was not unambiguously positive; for example, women teachers were accused of taking jobs from men, men who were supporting entire families and waiting years for promotions and higher pay. There was also the occasional argument that a single and childless woman was not an ideal educator because she had no experience with children.[12] In the case of female medical students and graduates, the pros and cons put forward on unbelievable scales were much more complex to balance, especially in the early 20th century. Negative views were more prevalent, traversing generations, genders and social classes. What, then, were the specific pieces of information and opinions on medical education and women's involvement in medicine were reaching the readership?

## Nurses

In Central Europe, in line with the existing ideology of femininity (*Weiblich ideology*), the qualities and abilities traditionally attributed to women were quite easily connected with the nursing profession. It was an occupation with a "feminine character," associated with dedication, subordination and selflessness.[13] Within the family, women performed this work without any professional qualifications, based solely on traditional practices and generations of experience. As theoretically and practically trained nurses, the new phenomenon of women did not appear in the Czech lands until the last third of the 19th century.

### *Nursing—a woman's duty or a profession?*

The call for qualified assistant physicians was first heard in 1866, after the end of the Austro-Prussian War. At that time, necessary care of the wounded created a huge demand for medical personnel, but it also showed that good will and dedication alone do not shape a willing and kind volunteer into a qualified and useful nurse. The voluntary work of women in hospitals was judged with a great deal of self-criticism, even by women's journalists. Women were willing to help out, but "the Samaritan services of mercy were limited to the provision of some delicacies, refreshments and strengthening drinks, the supply of linen, bandages, cupannas."[14] The author of the article from which this quote was

*myšlení 19. a 20. století.* České Budějovice : Veduta, 2011, pp. 138–150; HEINDL, Waltraud – TICHY, Marina (eds.) "*Durch Erkenntnis zu Freiheit und Glück...*" *Frauen an der Universität Wien (ab 1897).* Wien : WUV-Universitätsverlag, 1990; LENDEROVÁ, Milena – KOPIČKOVÁ, Božena – BUREŠOVÁ, Jana – MAUR, Eduard. *Žena v českých zemích od středověku do 20. století.* Praha : Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, pp. 358–479; MAURER, Trude (ed.) *Der Weg an die Universität. Höhere Frauenstudien vom Mittelalter bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen : Wallstein Verlag, 2010.

12 See: BAHENSKÁ, Marie – HECZKOVÁ, Libuše – MUSILOVÁ, Dana. *O ženské práci. Dobové (sebe)reflexe a polemiky.* Praha : Masarykův ústav a Archiv AV ČR, 2014, pp. 37–45.

13 BISCHOFF, Claudia. *Frauen in der Krankenpflege. Zur Entwicklung von Frauenrolle und Frauenberufstätigkeit im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert.* Frankfurt am Main : Campus Verlag, 1997, p. 69.

14 LUŽICKÁ, Věnceslava. Dobrovolná služba v nemocech. In *Ženské listy*, 1873, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 9.

taken frankly admits that such help is useless, and that mere effort itself cannot sufficiently replace practical experience and knowledge. When a conference of women's societies was held in Berlin in 1869, a speech by Ludwig Rudolf Karl Virchow, a physician, aroused great interest on the education of women nurses outside of church organizations.[15] The speech dealt primarily with the question of where to find qualified nurses who met the demands of doctors and from what social strata they should come, but he also addressed the problem of providing for them in sickness and old age.

The first proposal to establish a nursing school in Prague came in 1845, but it was not implemented due to lack of funds. Thus, women working in the hospital remained unskilled labour and performed extremely hard, physical work. Moreover, they often lived in rooms with patients and lacked any privacy. The motivation for the establishment of nursing schools in the Czech lands and the benefits of women in the profession were illuminated by Augusta Opicová in the early 1870s:

> Well-trained nurses of the sick are a true boon for mankind not only in times of war, but also in times of peace, especially when terrible epidemics rage in the country, where the ranks of merciful nurses are not sufficient, nor will the assistance of good-hearted, self-sacrificing women who are not skilled and trained in the service of the sick be sufficient.[16]

Yet the nursing profession had long lacked formal qualifications and training, it was simply assumed that every woman was capable of caring for sick family members and therefore equally capable of performing such a service for strangers. However, from the second half of the 1860s onwards, there was a growing call for the expertise that nurses required if they were to be valid and useful assistants to doctors.

### *The ideal nurse*

The demands on nurses were quite high, but good social skills were still preferred over medical knowledge. A German nursing manual from the mid-19th century stated that the necessary qualities for nurses were diligence, a reasonable age, robust health and—loosely translated—a healthy state of all five senses. A nurse should not be too young, nor too old; between 25 and 40 was considered ideal. The demands placed on a nurse can be seen in the long list of medical conditions, or rather illnesses and physical difficulties, that were incompatible with the profession. Regarding mental abilities, love of people, patience, piety, honesty, truthfulness were emphasised. The nurse was also to be chaste, courageous, and obedient.[17] According to the author of the manual, Carl Emil Gedicke, the profession, so far referred to as *Krankenwartung* (not a full-fledged nurse, or *Krankenschwester*), had a threefold purpose: to relieve the suffering of the sick, to carry out the orders laid down by the doctor and to report to him on the sick.

15 PANKE-KOCHINKE, Birgit (eds.) *Die Geschichte der Krankenpflege (1679–2000)*. Frankfurt am Main : Mabuse-Verlag, 2001, pp. 64–67.
16 OPICOVÁ, Augusta. Ošetřovatelky nemocných. In *Ženské listy*, 1873, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 4.
17 PANKE-KOCHINKE 2001, pp. 56–57.

So what was the ideal of a nurse at that time? A woman who fulfilled the role of auxiliary, usually unqualified staff in hospitals, who was also a symbol of selflessness, compassion, patience and kindness:

> A woman resembles the angel of life at the bedside of the sick, struggling with the angel of death. A woman's attendance is the most powerful medicine, and her presence and kindly care transform the sickbed into a temple of love and kindness.[18]

This idealistic portrayal of a woman's role in the hospital was certainly different from the reality of daily work with the sick. The doctor's comment on his idea of a proper nurse was much more matter-of-fact:

> She must be careful not to alarm the sick by unnecessary talk or perhaps even by crying and pitying; her behaviour towards the sick must be pleasant, kind, sympathetic, [...] but if necessary, firm and firm, but at the same time patient [...] these are the basic traits of character to which we can in good conscience entrust the sick.[19]

From a gender perspective, the fact that the nursing profession did not have a hyphenated name in the 19th century is also telling. It was an exclusively female activity, and represented what were considered to be the natural qualities and traditional duties of women. Unlike the work of a doctor, nursing the sick was seen as a purely auxiliary role, and nurses were subordinate to doctors and obliged to follow their orders. In the Prague General Hospital from 1844 onwards, only women worked as nurses,[20] whose status and education were very low. They belonged to the auxiliary staff and were called *wertrova*, i.e. watchwomen or attendants (the term is taken literally from the German–*Wärterin*).

### *Women's innate abilities versus qualifications*

As previously mentioned, the epitome of the perfect nurse in the first half of the 1870s was only an auxiliary worker, fully respecting her superiors, i.e. the doctors. However, their role in caring for the sick began to receive increasing attention, precisely because of previous shortcomings and ignorance, with the limits of women's voluntary work in hospitals after the Austro-Prussian War cited as an example. Although they were willing to help, effort alone could not always sufficiently replace theoretical knowledge and practical experience.

ŽVSČ set itself the goal of meeting these requirements and at the same time, providing women with a new profession. In 1875, in cooperation with the Association of Czech Physicians, the association began to organise nursing courses, officially called the School of Nursing the Sick, the first school of this type in Central Europe. The course for future nurses of the sick combined theoretical and practical teaching; lectures were attended by teachers from the Faculty of Medicine, prominent heads of Prague clinics, as well as practical and professional physicians, such as Vilém Petters, Antonín Erpek, Josef Hála, Vítězslav Janovský, and Čeněk Křížek. Internships were secured at Prague City

18 LUŽICKÁ 1873, pp. 9–10.
19 Náčrtky ošetřování nemocných. Podává praktický lékař. In *Ženské listy*, 1874, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 74.
20 SVOBODNÝ, Petr – HLAVÁČKOVÁ, Ludmila. *Pražské špitály a nemocnice.* Praha : Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 1999, p. 78.

Hospital, and only after passing the theoretical and practical exams could the graduates take up positions in hospitals.

The committee of ŽVSČ identified with Eliška Krásnohorská's ideas about the need for quality nurses and in a lengthy commentary, highlighted the importance of the school as the only one of its kind in Austria, the need for qualified medical personnel and the benefits of this knowledge for families.[21] The committee allowed itself a more explicit self-presentation for the first time in 1878, when the editors evaluated the success of the courses:

> On the contrary, both the public and the gentlemen physicians have proved to be entirely satisfied with the prudence and obedience of these nurses, and that the good qualities of these do not arise in any way from ignorance, but precisely from a clearer conception of the importance of medical regulations, from the good disciplinary rules inculcated in the course, and from the practical skill which they have there acquired by well-directed practice.[22]

From the wording chosen here, we may infer that the public first entertained some doubts as to the expediency of the school. Equally evident is the constant emphasis on the submissiveness of the woman in the nursing role, where she must be aware of her subordination to the doctor and willing to accept it fully. In further evaluation, it was reiterated that study and employment in this field is fully consistent with a woman's duties and will be "the mark of the most feminine education and the honour of a noble heart."[23] The Society, therefore, failed to transcend its own shadow and managed to confirm the age-old notions of the tasks and role of women. The courses came to an end in 1881 due to the difficulties of practicing in the sick-rooms and hospitals—without a practical examination, the school lacked its original purpose and aim.

However, nursing education and its role in caring for the sick did see increasing attention, precisely because of the current shortcomings as well as the association with a number of prejudices. "With regard to healing, there is not only ignorance as thick as the Egyptian darkness among the majority of women, but also a passionate opposition to all knowledge, to all interpretation and reason," pleaded Eliška Krásnohorská in calling for the establishment of the above-mentioned school.[24]

Increasingly, there was also the view that women trained in healthcare could play an important role within the family, contributing to preventive health measures and spreading an awareness of hygiene.[25] However, these tasks, again in line with the traditional conception of women, were seen as an integral part of patriotic action and not primarily associated with medicine. One specific feature of the Bohemian lands was an emphasis on the importance of good nurses for the successful development of the nation as a whole—thus we return to the stereotypical image of the woman-patriot and her duties:

21 In *Ženské listy*, 1875, vol. 3, no. 10, p. 163.
22 In *Ženské listy*, 1878, vol. 6, no. 11, p. 176.
23 Čtvrtý kurs školy ošetřování nemocných v Praze. In *Ženské listy*, 1880, vol. 8, no. 2, p. 25.
24 KRÁSNOHORSKÁ, Eliška. Ošetřovatelky nemocných. In *Ženské listy*, 1874, vol. 2, no. 5, p. 40.
25 LUŽICKÁ 1873, p. 10; OPICOVÁ 1873, p. 4; Náčrtky ošetřování nemocných. In *Ženské listy*, 1874, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 72–74.

> By trained, educated nurses of the sick, body science and health science will most easily spread in the nation. Health science must then penetrate to the core of the nation to prevent the pests of human health and at the same time the destroyers of human and national welfare. [...] It is for the benefit of the national welfare that trained nurses should do duty at the bedside of the sick, when, having been instructed and trained in the science of health, they should instruct the people how to behave in times of epidemic and in various cases of sickness, and how to spare their health.[26]

The ideal of the nurse, however, was still that of an auxiliary worker who respected her superiors. "They will strictly obey the doctors' prescriptions and orders,"[27] quoted *Ženské listy* magazine regarding the pledge of nurses trained for hospital work, thanks to the Alice Association for Voluntary Service in Diseases in Darmstadt, Germany.

### *Prestige and recognition*

Social prestige and a greater appreciation of nurses came only with the First World War, when the position of nurses was absolutely irreplaceable, whether they worked directly at the front or in the infirmaries and hospitals in the hinterland. Unfortunately, their remuneration and working conditions remained far below expectations even after the First World War, in which they proved their expertise and usefulness. A memorandum by the Association of Graduates of the State School of Nursing, issued in 1926 on the occasion of the discussion of a government regulation on the regulation of the service of nursing staff in public hospitals, was very disapproving of the employment and social protection of nursing staff.[28] Criticism was directed at working hours, holidays and the absence of basic conditions for the performance of nursing work, such as housing and food in kind, provision for personal hygiene and the possibility of washing working clothes.

## Female medics and doctors

The road to becoming a doctor and above all, respect for women doctors, was even longer and more difficult, as were the conditions for actually practising medicine. The image of a female physician or a female doctor remained exceptional in Central Europe until the end of the 19th century, and for a long time, any efforts to ensure equal access for women to the study of medicine in the Czech environment provoked a generally negative reaction. Karolina Světlá recalls the unpleasant moments she experienced in 1889 when she and ŽVSČ sought to obtain permission for Anna Bayer to practise medicine, "Some doctors who had previously greeted me very eagerly now walk past me as if they did not know me."[29] The sad working experiences of Anna Bayerová[30] and

26 LUŽICKÁ 1873, p. 10.
27 LUŽICKÁ, Věnceslava. Spolek Alice pro dobrovolnou službu v nemocech v Darmštadtě. In *Ženské listy*, 1873, vol. 1, no. 4, p. 33.
28 Národní archiv, Praha, fond Ženská národní rada, box 34, i. no. 56.
29 ŠPIČÁK, Josef (ed.) *Polemika s dobou. Karolina Světlá ve vzpomínkách a korespondenci současníků*. Praha : Odeon, 1969, p. 155.
30 BAHENSKÁ, Marie. Žena v medicíně: Anna Bayerová. In VOŠAHLÍKOVÁ, Pavla – MARTÍNEK, Jiří et al. (eds.) *Cesty k samostatnosti. Portréty žen v éře modernizace*. Praha : Historický ústav AV ČR, 2010, pp. 70–90.

Bohuslava Kecková, the first Czech women to earn medical degrees in Switzerland in the early 1880s, only confirmed many prejudices and the considerable conservatism of the public in their views on the application of women in the medical profession.

### *Medical diplomas from abroad*

Czech women doctors have been mentioned in local media since the 1880s, when the first two Czech women completed their medical studies in Switzerland.[31] In both cases, the newspapers limited themselves to the facts, mentioning only the names and basic biographical data of Anna Bayerová and Bohuslava Kecková, their places of study (Bern, Zurich) and their subsequent work. More detailed information is found on Kecková, perhaps because her father's name was well known in Prague. Both doctors received more attention in the early 1890s when they were appointed state doctors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a position Kecková held for ten years. Professional evaluations of both women are positive, with particular praise for the practice of midwifery, which Kecková chose after failing to obtain a license to open her own practice in Prague. Bayerová, who lived and worked abroad until 1910, is also known in connection with the women's movement, lecturing in associations, publishing articles on health science and teaching in girls' schools. The reason for the basically favourable reports on the work of the first Czech women doctors could be the simple fact that they spent most of their careers abroad and did not represent competition in the domestic labour market. For women's magazines, logically these doctors were role models for progressive-minded women and pioneers of new ways of life.

Unfortunately, for a very long time the state did not offer the possibility of nostrification of medical diplomas obtained abroad. Nostrification was not allowed by Austria until 1896,[32] and only under very strict conditions—essentially a new examination. Gabrielle Possanner von Ehrenthal, who successfully completed her medical studies in Zurich in 1893, was the first woman at the University of Vienna to submit to the conditions of nostrification. She wanted to work in Vienna, which required retaking 21 tests and undergoing three rigorous examinations. Finally in 1897, she graduated as a doctor of general medicine for the second time in her life and was able to start practising medicine.[33]

A major breakthrough for the view of women in medicine came in the form of a pamphlet written by respected Viennese surgeon Eduard Albert entitled *Frauen und das Studium der Medicin*, published in Vienna in 1895. Albert made no secret of his opposition to women's study of medicine, presenting a number of reasons why girls could not even handle the curriculum itself, let alone the difficulties of the profession. He argued, for example, the

31 For a selection of articles on this topic, see: Archiv Náprstkova muzea, Praha (ANpM), Sbírka Scrap books, Ženská otázka, no. 10.

32 *Reichsgesetzblatt 1896, Gesetz Nr. 45, Verordnung des Ministers für Kultus und Unterricht vom 19. März 1896, betreffend die Nostrification der von Frauen im Auslande erworbenen medicinischen Doctordiplome*, https://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/alex?apm=0&aid=rgb&datum=18960004&seite=00000211&size=45 [last viewed on 26 May 2025].

33 STERN, Marcella. Gabriele Possanner von Ehrenthal, die erste an der Universität Wien promovierte Frau. In HEINDL – TICHY 1990, pp. 189–215.

length of the studies, the physical demands, the inability of women to make quick and rational decisions, the insufficient capacity of the female brain, here apparently inspired by the almost thirty-year-old work and misogynistic attitudes of the German physician Theodor Bischoff.[34] To illustrate, a brief quote from Albert's views:

> In general and overall, it seems clear that in women, the emotional world and light-hearted laughter prevail. […] I am still against the equality of both genders in higher studies. The prerequisites can never be the same.[35]

On the other hand, he was willing to accept nurses or midwives whose work corresponded to the abilities of women and their innate qualities.[36] If we take into account that the book was published before girls were allowed to enrol at Austrian universities, we can also see Albert's views as a warning; well-intentioned towards women who were not sufficiently aware of all the woes of the medical profession. The book provoked a stormy debate and harsh condemnation from Czech women and women's associations alike, all the more so because this opponent of girls' education was their compatriot—Albert came from the eastern Bohemian town of Žamberk.

### *The first female medics at the University of Prague*

The first women to study at the University of Prague complicated all the necessary work from the very beginning. The first applicants, graduates of Minerva, initially had to settle for the status of inpatients, not students, and were forced to overcome resistance from teachers and students.[37] They were met with conflicting reactions. In her memoirs, Anna Honzáková[38] mentions the names of professors of the Faculty of Medicine who supported their request to attend lectures as auditors (hospitants), (e.g. Vítězslav Janovský and Karel Maydl at the Czech Faculty, Karl Rabl at the German Faculty) and those who adamantly refused (e.g. Jan Janošík), justifying their refusal citing the lack of space in the lecture hall. Josef Thomayer was not very friendly towards female medics, again with typical references to their lack of physical strength and more recently, to the reluctance of patients to be examined by a woman.

From 1896, three women were employed at the German Medical Faculty, and one at the Czech Faculty two years later. Every year they persistently applied for access to proper studies, which were equally steadfastly rejected by

34 BISCHOFF von, Theodor-Ludwig-Wilhelm. *Das Studium und die Ausübung der Medicin durch Frauen*. München : Literarich-artistische Anstalt (Th. Riedel), 1872.

35 The original in German: "Im Ganzen und Grossen steht es wohl fest, das beim Weibe die Gefühlswelt und das Leiche Sichhinreisenlachen überwiegt. […] Ich bin nach wie vor gegen die Gleichberechtigung beider Geschlechter zu den höheren Studien. Die Vorbedingungen können nähmlich niemals die gleichen sein." ALBERT, Eduard. *Die Frauen und das Studium der Medicin.* Wien : Alfred Hölder, 1895, pp. 15, 26.

36 ALBERT 1895, p. 23.

37 See e.g. HONZÁKOVÁ, Anna. K zápasu o lékařské studium. In *Československé studentky let 1890–1930. Almanach na oslavu čtyřicátého výročí založení ženského studia Eliškou Krásnohorskou*. Praha : Ženská národní rada a Spolek Minerva, 1930, pp. 66–76; SVOBODNÝ, Petr. Lékaři v českých zemích 1848–1939. In SVOBODNÝ, Petr – HAVRÁNEK, Jan (eds.) *Profesionalizace akademických povolání v českých zemích v 19. a první polovině 20. století.* Praha : Ústav dějin – Archiv Univerzity Karlovy/Archiv AV ČR, 1996, pp. 126–146.

38 HONZÁKOVÁ 1930, pp. 66–76.

the Ministry until 1900. If they received confirmation from individual teachers of their attendance at lectures and seminars, they were granted two years of study and allowed to take their first rigorosum, and could then apply for recognition of the remaining three years and graduation. Thanks to this relative shortening of the study period, the first female doctor to graduate in Bohemia—Anna Honzáková—was able to graduate in Prague in 1902. She was soon followed by others: Maria Peigerová, Rosalie Machová, Ludvika Nová, Svatoslava Hornofová, Eliška Vozábová and Josefa Puklová.[39] However, all of them soon became convinced that the fight did not end when diplomas were handed out, even more difficult was the search for a suitable place to work.

### *From the lecture room to surgery*

Despite excellent evaluations from their studies and professional practice, positions at the clinic were almost unavailable to women, so they sought private practices, mostly in medical fields related to women or children's diseases, as fear of colleagues' and patients' reaction was also a common reason for the rejection of women assistants in clinics. Even in the interwar period, the situation did not improve much. If women wanted to stay on as assistants in the clinic, they usually settled for newly founded institutes or specialties where they were not seen as competition. That is, fields that were new or less prestigious and did not offer the certainty of career advancement (e.g. psychiatry, balneology, dentistry).[40]

The identification of the medical profession exclusively with men—as opposed to nurses—is also reflected in the commonly used title 'Miss Doctor' (slečna doktor in Czech) assigned to women physicians. In 1900, precisely in connection with the decision to open the faculties of medicine and pharmacy at Austrian universities to women, the view began to spread that a Czech translation should be found for the Latin term *doctor*, which had always existed only in the masculine form.[41] Much of the commentary on the subject of women's studies in medicine at that time was unfavourable to women, and there were a considerable number of even hateful reactions:

> If we disregard the abnormalities—such as a woman's inclination toward higher education out of mere intellectual curiosity or enthusiasm, or even hysteria—the influx of female students into medical studies must be seen as a command issued by the bitter necessity of seeking bread, that is, female students will, as a rule, be that splinter of the stream which does not fit into the broad rhetoric of marriage, the only natural vocation of woman. [...] The high school is a poison to the health of the girl in bloom, and the medical pentecost is a sin directly upon a creature whose outward forms from afar determine its natural vocation, and who, let it be said in serious debate, is so often reminded of that determination, the negation of which is decidedly a sin. A woman must flourish as a university student, and her heart

39 For a list of female university graduates including their personal data see: ŠTEMBERKOVÁ, Marie. Doktorky filozofie a medicíny na pražské univerzitě od r. 1901 do konce první světové války. In PEŠEK, Jiří – LEDVINKA, Václav (eds.) *Žena v dějinách Prahy: Documenta Pragensia 13*. Praha : Scriptorium, 1996, pp. 213–234.

40 Detailed information on the career of women in medicine: BAHENSKÁ, Marie – HECZKOVÁ, Libuše – MUSILOVÁ, Dana. *„Ženám žádný obor vědecký od přírody není uzavřen." Spletité cesty žen k vědecké kariéře v první polovině 20. století*. Praha : Academia; Masarykův ústav a Archiv AV ČR, 2023, pp. 98–103.

41 ANpM, Sbírka Scrap books, Ženská otázka, no. 17, p. 104.

> will certainly miss the realization of the ambitious desires which purposeful nature has placed in the heart of woman—unless she succeeds in catching a husband by way of a medical diploma, which is not impossible and may even be the secret wish and goal of many a student of medicine and pharmacy. However, in the greatest, decisive part of cases, this correction, this serious step of the teaching administration, is the aggravation of those social conditions, or rather disproportions, out of which the sociological monster under the name of women's self-determination was born![42]

The reason for such comments was, as in the case of the teaching profession, concern about increasing competition in a crowded job market.

Critics accused the students of resigning a woman's role in the family and society, renowned doctors refused to acknowledge their ability to study, and they were completely uncooperative in questioning the authority of female medics and doctors with patients. Resistance and dislike of women doctors was often cloaked in seemingly good intentions. Critics and detractors put themselves in the role of well-meaning and knowledgeable persons whose aim was to prevent the disappointment and misery of potential female colleagues. In the immediate aftermath of the opening of medical schools to women, there were voices, ostensibly from medical circles, describing the current existential difficulties of doctors and warning of the deterioration of conditions in the professional community. Instead of words of encouragement, there was only discouragement:

> This new regulation is, understandably, received with enthusiasm among the women students, that at last a new and longed-for future is open to them, as they themselves say. However, when the first flush of joy has passed, especially when the first women doctors, who will have overcome the enormous difficulties of study, the great cost of study and the present draconian rigorous regulations, enter practical life, the question will naturally arise: what now? Where to go to safeguard existence? What disappointments, what sighs over a poorly chosen profession! We men, too, physicians, have been preparing with zeal for our profession and hoping for our existence. And what is the lot of the great majority of us? A life of responsibility, of hardship, of sacrifice, yes, many of us are already in misery. For today the country is overcrowded with doctors. They are settling in places where doctors wouldn't have thought of it 20 years ago. And what will it be like in a few years when the first female doctors begin to breed the surplus ranks of physicians? Today, doctors are so miserably honoured as a result of their considerable numbers that even the Prague government paper wonders about it. How will they be remunerated later, and how many practices will doctors and female doctors gain, when 50 men, 30 and 40 women will apply for one position after a deceased or resigned colleague? Already today, 20–40 doctors are applying for the less lucrative posts at the same time. Let those young men and young ladies who are already enthusiastic about studying medicine and pharmacy think about this.[43]

Fearing for her existence, the traditional view of women's role in the bourgeoisie was thus restored—a woman is destined for family life, not a paid skilled profession. Thus, almost half a century after women entered the lecture halls of Swiss universities and the Sorbonne in Paris, claims about the different mental abilities of men and women or ironic comments reappeared in the pages of the Czech press:

42 Doktorky a lékárnice. ANpM, Sbírka Scrap books, Ženská otázka, no. 17, pp. 103–104.
43 Vážná otázka o budoucnosti ženských lékařek. ANpM, Sbírka Scrap books, Ženská otázka, no. 17, p. 104.

> A married woman doctor and pharmacist is possible only as a helper to her doctor and pharmacist husband. [...] the shame of female patients in front of the doctor is given as a possible reason for the profession of female doctors. If this reason really had the validity which is attributed to it, women doctors would have been in business long ago, if we accept the feminists' other claim that there is absolutely no difference between the mental capacities of women and men. This can be judged with unerring certainty when the world hears of the first great gynaecologist and surgeon in skirts. Till then the female practitioner must be looked upon as a product of false social conditions, such as would not exist if, simply speaking, every woman had reached her man.[44]

## Conclusion

Returning to the role of women in medicine, as perceived and reflected by the lay and professional public, it is necessary to emphasize the permanent appreciation of the work of the auxiliary, i.e. nursing women. The traditional image of a woman as a tireless and dedicated carer and nurse was that of her role in the family and later in the public sphere, a role that was fully demonstrated during the First World War. Caring for the sick has always been a typically female duty, and Florence Nightingale's view that every woman is a nurse is telling in this regard.[45] On the other hand, the first female nurses and medicine doctors constantly faced many prejudices and an underestimation of their mental and physical abilities during and after their studies, especially when applying for positions in clinics and prestigious hospitals. The glass ceiling for a woman's career was the position of assistant professor, mostly in new and marginally respected fields, while the path to habilitation in universities opened very slowly for females, only from the 1920s onwards.[46] It was not until the First World War, when the acute need for medical care outweighed gender distinctions, that a definitive break was made in the long-standing undervaluing, belittling or ridiculing of female nurses and doctors in the medical field.

44 Doktorky a lékárnice. ANpM, Sbírka Scrap books, Ženská otázka, no. 17, pp. 103–104.
45 PROCHASKA, Frank. *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain. The Disinherited Spirit*. Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 127.
46 See: BAHENSKÁ – HECZKOVÁ – MUSILOVÁ 2023, pp. 78–125, 165–167.