

Maja Nikolova
Museum advisor

FORCED CHILD LABOR AND THE ART OF LIVING

Abstract. The issue of child labor in Serbia, in addition to legislative acts, is determined by the child's status in society, which is best seen in the field of history of schooling and education. Namely, during the 19th century until the beginning of the First World War in Serbia, child labor was not legally regulated. Since families, especially in the villages, lived in a community, children's participation in domestic affairs was inevitable. Along with adults, children learned and matured, acquired basic practical knowledge, and became equal members of society by fitting into everyday life. Although children often did demanding physical work, the emotional relationship between children and adults was based on respect, obedience, and trust.

On the other hand, during the second half of the 19th century, when crafts in Serbia began to develop intensively, apprentices appeared in society. These were boys, mostly from low-income families, with or without completed primary school and about ten years old, who learned a specific craft from a master. The master provided them an apartment, food, and clothes, and in return, they had to do everything, even the most difficult, household chores. The apprentices usually stayed with the master for three or four years, during which time they mastered the craft and became journeymen.

In practice, however, it was not easy to be an apprentice. During the first year, the apprentices brought water to the journeymen, cleaned their shoes, were ridiculed and humiliated, while the master demanded absolute obedience from them. It was often heard that the apprentices were hungry, poorly trained, ill, and physically abused. As these were mostly children from poor backgrounds, they did not support their families. The exploitation of child labor accompanied physical and psychological abuse. This situation lasted until the end of the 19th century when the first craft school in Belgrade was opened at the House of the *Society for Helping and Educating Abandoned Children*. Although the *Law on Craft Schools* has been in force since 1892, one gets the impression that society continued to exploit children's free labor because children without parental care were forced to decide to study a trade that would enable them to live independently the fastest.

After the First World War and in the second half of the 20th century, more attention was paid to children's social status, so the exploitation of child labor was reduced. Even in this period, although there were craft boarding schools, the memories of some apprentices who still did the most challenging jobs and lived in terrible conditions were noted.

This paper aims to point out the genesis of child forced labor, its connection with social events, and its causal relations related to the development of education and culture. By analyzing archival material, mostly recorded memories, and reading relevant published sources, using the historical method, we will shed light on another segment of the permanent development of social protection of children as well as schooling and education among Serbs.

Keywords. child forced labor, digitalization, apprentice, Serbia, art.

1. Introduction

The issue of child labor during the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century in Serbian and Yugoslav history of pedagogy has been little researched. We come across this notion in some complex works that deal with the history of schooling, but little is known about the child's position in the process of physical work, even in the circumstances of forced labor. The monographs on vocational schools mainly state the facts related to the teaching process, both general educational and professional,

theoretical and practical teaching is treated, but only from pedagogical and professional justification.

Some research points to the conclusion that the issue of child labor in Serbia was determined in the first place the position of the child in society. During the 19th century, Serbian families lived in cooperatives within which the social hierarchy was clearly expressed. In a patriarchal society, which was determined, among other things, by socio-political premises, the head of the family was the material and moral support and initiator of events in both micro and macro environments. Large families in rural areas lived in a community where children's participation in domestic affairs was predetermined. Along with adult members of the family community, children learned and matured, acquired basic practical knowledge, and became equal members of society by fitting into everyday life. Strictly determined family and social rules also require a particular emotional attitude. Children expressed a kind of awe towards adults, but at the same time, they showed great trust in the decisions of the elderly.

With the development of socio-economic relations, with the development of crafts in Serbia during the second half of the 19th century, a new form of child labor appeared. These were apprentices who studied a specific skill with a master.

2. Digitization of materials related to the study of child forced labor

For the study of the history of education, the digitization of materials whose originals are in numerous museums, libraries and archives in Serbia is of great importance. The study of one segment of educational work requires a global approach that includes political and social events in the country in each period. This interdisciplinary research implies the use of all available historical sources, which, in case they are digitized, enable a precise view of educational events and their impact on the development of the social community.

The process of digitization of archival material related to the history of education is neither a simple nor an easy task. Considering that the material is in several mentioned institutions, as well as with private persons, in the first place, it is necessary to localize the desired material. After that, it is necessary to make a detailed project on digitalization, which includes a selection of relevant archives, photographs and printed material, as well as supporting literature. In some institutions, as well as in private individuals, there are three-dimensional objects whose historical value indicates the connection between education and the needs of real life. Some topics from the history of schooling, such as discipline or events from school life, also require interviews with former students. Their recorded memories indicate the real application of school laws. However, given the time distance and emotional attachment, it is necessary to compare their statements with the official school reports.

For each of these segments, it is necessary to choose a keyword based on which it is possible to search for digitized material. The material arranged in this way facilitates scientific research, but also affects the protection of cultural property. Given the importance of the topic related to forced labor of children, we believe that it is extremely important to collect data related to this historical topic in one place. We will briefly present the main features of the future digitization project Forced child labor and the art of living.

This project includes the period between the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. In the initial phase of the project, the sources of research will be determined, i.e., the institutions in which the necessary materials will be collected: the Archives of Serbia, the Archives of Yugoslavia, the Pedagogical Museum and the National Library of Serbia. In the mentioned institutions, the digitization of archives, photographs and

reports of craft schools and homes for neglected children will be performed. In addition, it is necessary to collect material that is in the possession of private individuals, former students or owners of craft shops - certificates, photographs, work accessories. In this part of the research, a conversation with students as well as with members of their families will be recorded. Their memories, as well as some personal items related to the given topic, will be used for an interactive exhibition that is planned to be realized after the research.

The next phase of the project is the analysis of the collected digitized material and finally the presentation of the research results in the form of a digital publication. In addition, a virtual exhibition is planned, which would acquaint the professional and public with this little-examined part of the history of education in our country.

Why is it necessary to digitize material related to forced labor of children in Serbia in the period from the middle of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century? The mentioned topic is insufficiently researched, so the professional and public is not fully acquainted with the historical development of craft schools, which reflected the level of development of the craft itself. In addition, the realization of a virtual exhibition would enable a re-examination of the social position of the youngest population both in peacetime and in times of war.

It should be noted that there are a significant number of digitized documents and photographs that have been used in previous research.

3. Education of craftsmen in the second half of the 19th century

In the seventies of the 19th century, the craft in Serbia was not yet developed, so there was no professional education of craftsmen. The only school in Serbia of that direction was founded by the Military Technical Institute in Kragujevac, within the Crafts School for blacksmithing, carpentry, and tanner.¹ Men from 13 to 20 years of age were admitted to the school, and the schooling had a realistic character and took place in workshops. They spent three years as apprentices at school and four years as journeymen.

Soon after that, the masters began, as part of their work, to teach children various trades. These were apprentices, boys of about ten years of age, who lived with the master in the household but also did the hardest housework.² As already said, they mostly came from low-income families, which provided for the essential existence of their children and their families. Focused on forced learning and forced labor, the boys became people who took the journeyman exam after three years. The masters were obliged to give the apprentice a certificate of conduct, education, and time spent in the craft.

The life of an apprentice in a new and unknown environment was not easy. Since they were still children, the most accessible work was hard for them. Many of them came from poor and uneducated families and did not know even the most basic household chores. The recorded memories in the Serbian literature point to the fact that these unprotected children were forced to do physical work by both their parents and the masters where they lived. From the parents, because that was the only way out of misery and poverty for the family, and by the masters a misguided authority based on fear and harassment. The apprentice was often exposed to ridicule and humiliation. The journeymen forced him to crawl under a low chair while they beat him with a belt to

¹S. Cunkovic, *Schooling and Education in Serbia in the 19th Century*, Belgrade 2016, p.136.

² Apprentice is a word of Turkish origin.

check his readiness. During such jokes, many apprentices shed tears, while others stoically endured beatings and humiliations

Craft schools at the end of the 19th century

With already developed crafts in Serbia, at the end of the 19th century, more precisely on March 27, 1892, the *Law on Craft Schools* was passed.³ At that time, the state took on the obligation of educating craftsmen, but there were still a lot of masters who had apprenticed as assistants. The schools, which provided students with modern professional, practical, and theoretical craft knowledge, were of the boarding type. The Ministry of National Economy was responsible for their work. The school accepts students from 12 to 18 years of age who have completed primary school. The first craft school, with workshops for various crafts, was founded in Belgrade in 1892 at the House of the *Society for Helping and Educating Orphans and Abandoned Children*.⁴



Figure 1. The building of the Society for the Education and Protection of Children, Belgrade, late 19th century

At that time, in many towns in the interior of Serbia, there were trade and craft evenings and a weekly holiday school. They worked based on the *Program for artisan trade evenings and Sunday holiday schools* enacted in 1899.⁵ Students acquired the basic and professional knowledge needed for a specific craft during their schooling. The apprenticeship lasted three years, and the journeymen two years. It should be emphasized that craftsmen were obliged to take care of their apprentices' primary and general education.

At the end of the schooling, the apprentice took the exam before an examination board composed of guild elders. The exam consisted of a practical, oral and theoretical part in which the apprentice answered specific questions. For the valuable part of the exam, the apprentice had to do a so-called *rehearsal*, that is, to make a particular subject and thus show the necessary knowledge and skills.

³ S. Cunkovic, *Cited work*, p. 212.

⁴ *Same*, 212.

⁵ *Program for artisan trade evenings and Sunday school holidays*, p . 5.

After at least two years of performing the trade, apprentice could take the master's exam only when he became an adult. However, the journeyman's internship often lasted longer because the masters, especially those trades that suffered great competition, tried to prevent the journeymen from becoming masters. The working hours of the journeyman lasted between 16 and 18 hours a day. The rent paid journeymen from time to time or from pieces for their work. And the journeymen became masters after passing the master's exam, and in that way, they acquired the right to perform the craft independently.

The difficult position of young students in Serbia was not only related to apprentices. Other young people, eager for knowledge and material security, also went from rural areas to larger cities for schooling. Many of them did not have the primary means of subsistence, so they were forced to work for more affluent people. Their lives in their new home were often filled with uncertainty and suffering. They had to do hard physical work and take care of the household, while accommodation and food were relatively scarce. Teacher Srdan Novakovic noted memories from his early school days in his diary. Namely, in 1880 he came from the Uzice region to Belgrade for high school education. Since he had no means of subsistence, he slept on a bench for the first few days, and then, thanks to his older friends, he went to his first service. He came to the house of the warden of the Military Academy, where he had to do all the work: washing dishes, chopping wood, cleaning shoes, going to the market, bringing water. He wrote in his memoirs: *I had to endure the hedgehog's torments at first. Clumsy in everything. My first duty was to go to the grocery market.*⁶

4. Establishment and work of the Serbian company *Privrednik*⁷

When talking about child labor, it is important to mention the founding and work of the Serbian company *Privrednik*, founded in Zagreb in 1897.⁸ The goal of this Association was to gather and educate intelligent, hard-working and poor Serbian children from economically backward areas, i.e., from all parts where the Serbian people lived. In addition, the founder of the society, merchant Vladimir Matijevic, with this move, wanted to strengthen the Serbian civil society that lived, in the first place, in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Thanks to the network of benefactors, the Association started working immediately, and teachers and traders helped choose the boys who went to the craft.⁹ Boys who completed primary school were admitted to the craft between 12 and 15 years of age, physically and mentally healthy, with a pleasant appearance and good behavior. For the admission of students, they had to have the consent of their parents. The businessman signed a contract with the craftsmen, according to which they were obliged to provide the apprentice with an apartment, food, shoes, and clothes, as well as to make sure that he attended a vocational school. For four years, the apprentices received a certificate of completion and remained with the boss as assistants or would work abroad.

⁶ *Memories of Srdan Novakovic*, Historical Archive of Uzice, Uzice 2020. (editors Maja Nikolova and Aleksandar Savic), p. 53.

⁷ *Privrednik* means one who deals with larger affairs in the economy.

⁸ P. Krestic, *Serbian Business Association Privrednik (1897-1918)*, Belgrade 2002, p. 45.

⁹ One of the benefactors was Paja Jovanovic, a painter who lived in Vienna at the beginning of the 20th century.



Figure 2. *Privrednik* home, Zagreb, end of the 19th century

The trustees of the *privrednik*, visited the children once a year and supervised the employer's treatment of them. If they saw that the conditions did not correspond to the basic needs of the cadet, they would move them to another place.

Although going to a craft for many families meant getting out of poverty, some memories of the cadets suggest that the apprentices worked for the master 14 hours a day and lived in inadequate conditions. The first year was the most difficult for the apprentices because they had to clean the journeymen's shoes, bring food and water, and other types of harassment. One death was recorded in the archives: *There were two cases when our boys were with unscrupulous masters due to a weak and ugly suit, an unhealthy apartment, etc. The sick and had to go to the hospital. Here, we pity the children - based on the surface and unscrupulous information and recommendations of certain people - we entrusted them to non-humans. One of the two poor boys died, and the other returned - incurable - to his home at the expense of his inconsolable parents.*¹⁰

Since 1904, there has been a tendency for female children to be accommodated in honest and respectable Serbian houses, where they would learn good manners, housework, and domestic work.¹¹ They could also be trained in some women's crafts. The proclamation for Businessmen's cadets stated: *Businessmen's cadets are not maids. Those ladies must be more than grumpy, unkind, unfaithful maids; they must be the lady's right hand, everything, a face of trust, and so on.*¹²

¹⁰ P. Krstic, *Cited work*, p. 69.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 90.

5. Children and forced labor in Serbia during the First World War

The events in the field of upbringing and education result from the educational policy, which is especially evident in crises like the time of the First World War. In addition to many military and civilian casualties, the consequences of the war were also present in family life. Women and children, left alone, had to fight for essential existence. Faced with death, military obligation, poverty, and illness, many families have fallen apart, leaving children without parental care. The Austro-Hungarian authorities opened an asylum under the pretext of taking care of the Serbian youth. With the pursuit of changing national identity, they conducted their political goals and used children's physical strength.

The establishment of the children's asylums began in the spring of 1916. To that end, Lieutenant Colonel Oscar Jelinek, Deputy Governor-General, ordered that children from 4 to 12 years without parents and means of subsistence, instructions to orphanages connected to primary schools.¹³ Although the students were under 12, during September, October, and the first half of November in 1916, they performed domestic and field work. From April 1917, due to work obligations, they had lectures only from mathematics, reading, and writing.¹⁴

Although the authorities wanted to present their humanitarian work as a significant contribution to the care and upbringing of Serbian children in practice, it was not so. Some of the memories of contemporaries lead to the conclusion that the lives of children, especially those abandoned, in occupied Belgrade were complicated. Forced labor was part of their daily lives: *First, boys between the ages of 8 and 14 used a heavy hammer to pound the stone to fill the road; then they went to mow the occupying sown nettles, which grew almost more than a meter and a half, they were used to make clothes.*¹⁵

Scarce data on the work of asylums for children without parental care led to the conclusion that the social component in the educational policy of the Military Governor-General was only partially present. The establishment of these institutions was related to implementing the most basic and wrong educational goals, and their primary task was to mobilize free labor and create an apparent social peace. The education of these children was relatively modest and subordinated to physical work, the results of which were used only by the occupiers.

¹³AS , VGG , VIII /190, April 26 , 1916N 2222: letter regarding the opening of an orphanage.

¹⁴AS , VGG , XX / 179, 1917: weekly review of classes held during the school year 1916/17 in the third grade of the primary school in the Asylum for Orphans in Topcider.

¹⁵P. Savić, *Children in the Vortex of War 1914-1918*, Gornji Milanovac 1988, p. 51.



Figure 3. Children sell newspapers, at the end of First World War

6. Interwar period

After the First World War, there was a rapid increase in craft boarding schools in Serbia. The students had general theoretical and professional classes and practical classes in workshops. The items made during the classes were sold, and at the end of the school year, an exhibition of student works was organized.

As for the legal regulations in this period, the schools worked based on the *Rules on taking the master's exam* from 1929, the *Law on Chops* from 1931, and the *Decree on Professional Extended Schools* from 1936. Boys from 12 to 14 years of age with completed primary school were admitted to the lower craft school. The schooling lasted for three years, within which classes took place 10 hours a week at school and two hours of practice. After that, the apprentice became a journeyman and continued his education in higher professional extension schools, which lasted for two years and had the rank of an incomplete secondary school. After the expiration of that time, the student received the title of master. At the end of each class, a commission exam was taken, and the guild associations had the right to issue a certificate as proof of the master's education. The testimony also stated the name of the master when the student finished the craft.



Figure 4. Testimony of the Workers' School of the Women's Society, Belgrade, 1902



Figure 5. Journeyman letter, Belgrade, 1923

Although the work of vocational schools was legally regulated, child labor was also exploited in this period. The recorded memories lead to the conclusion that the masters were strict, that the living conditions were often inadequate, that there was a lot of humiliation and harassment of the apprentices.

7. Children and forced labor during World War II

Even during the Second World War, child labor was used for general social purposes. According to the order of the Ministry of Education, and in order to develop a sense of responsibility towards the community, the obligation of physical work was introduced in all schools in June 1941, and the School Work Service was established. Each class

had the duty to work, in accordance with the prescribed schedule, in the school garden once a week, and to clean the snow in the winter. The student troop, which consisted of twenty to fifty students and was commanded by an elder, that is, the most competent student, could be special or mixed. They included the children between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. For every ten students, there was one corporal, a young teacher, and for the youngest students, corporals could be older comrades. The formation of working companies was following the educational policy:... *that the life of every member of the Serbian people's community must be established by serious, real work.*¹⁶

Work methods could be individual or group (when shared accommodation and meals were organized for students). It was planned that the group work would last from four hours to eight hours a day, followed by a two-hour break with fun: *A sense of the human right to rest and enjoyment only if he worked hard not only for himself but also for the community, it cannot be developed by any school theorizing, but by the involvement of the youth in all the reality, difficulties and responsibilities of real work.*¹⁷ Special attention was paid to the rapprochement of town and peasant youth, which was achieved by organizing working holidays.

It was planned to hold a ceremonial review of high school students in Belgrade on June 28, 1942, with the participation of about 16,000 young people, but it was postponed to July 5 of that year and the number of participants was much smaller.¹⁸

During the Second World War, forced labor was the obligation of every young person. It had a twofold character - the exploitation of child labor in rebuilding the country and maintaining an apparent order, and educational - as a didactic method of creating new generations loyal to the then political regime.



Figure 6. Youth in forced labor, Belgrade, 1942

¹⁶ AS, MPSV, GPS, f 6, r 6/1941: decision of the Main Education Council on the introduction of working companies, June 6, 1941.

¹⁷ *The same.*

¹⁸ PM, f World War II, inv. no. BB: The Pedagogical Museum keeps the Memorial from the ceremonial review of high school students in Belgrade, associates of the School Work Service in the name of Petar Bosnic, a second-grade student of the Tenth Men's Gymnasium in Belgrade. Signed by Velibor Jonic, Minister of Education, Belgrade, July 1942.

One working summer vacation for Belgrade high school students was organized during 1942. According to the recorded memory of one of them, a small group of young men worked on building the barrier on the Danube.¹⁹ They were housed in barracks on an old truck, modestly equipped with wooden beds with pallets and two military blankets. Life went according to the rules of military life - six hours of work, followed by military exercises. Duty, reports, and guards were organized with shovels instead of weapons; the young men wore uniforms and clog with wooden soles, and the food, unlike in Belgrade, was excellent and plentiful. In addition to physical labor, they were forced to attend political classes.

8. Forced child labor and art

The art requires freedom. It is a free activity whose goal is to convey emotions and ideas. If we are talking about art, let us remind ourselves that there are two types of art - art that has no functional value or fine art and an activity that has a practical purpose in addition to artistic value, and that is a craft. The paper presents facts that refer to children, apprentices and future craftsmen who tried to become small artists with the imposed life circumstances.

Not only the results of their work were like works of art, but their lives were also the art of survival. Without protection, they had to accept brutal and degrading living conditions out of poverty. Forced labor was imposed on them by their parents, by patriarchal society, and by masters who, without a realistic basis, were the dominant factor in their upbringing.

In addition, there was forced child labor in times of crisis. Suffering in war is not just death at the front, in a camp, or populated areas. Sufferings are also in skipped childhood, in forgotten love, laughter, kindness, playing. Sufferings are personal and collective. They are related to the survival and development of the youngest population, respecting, future generations on which the nation and the state are based. And in those difficult times, art was again present in their little lives. Although exiled to asylums during the First World War, their works were exhibited at school exhibitions. The general public could buy small valuable items made under duress.

Art belongs to the domain of culture, which represents the definition of the values of a society. Carriers of culture, creators in all parts of art, museums, and curators, define a society's policy of memory and oblivion. However, some topics are not institutionally remembered, so we believe it is necessary to realize exhibitions with personal memories and personal stories from childhood. It is required to exhibit personal belongings, photographs, memories from private archives, and personal oral memories. We believe that such challenging exhibitions stimulate the social imagination and keep the artifacts from childhood from being forgotten. Because oblivion is an unspoken attitude, it is silence with no differentiated opinions.

We believe that these children, apprentices from the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, young people who, under duress, created small works of art and were artists in survival, should be given a specific significance. Their feelings need to be musealized.

9. Conclusion

Forced labor of children in Serbia has existed since the seventies of the 19th century. It was not classic forced labor. This work is associated with the term of an apprentice, i.e.

¹⁹*One Hundred Years of the Third Belgrade Gymnasium*, Belgrade 1991, p. 272.

a boy from poor families who were forced to leave their families in order to provide, for themselves and others, the basic necessities of life. While learning the trade at the master, they experienced various humiliations, and in bad living conditions, they had to do hard physical work. Such exploitation of free child labor was recorded during the First and Second World Wars. It must be pointed out that these unprotected little creatures were mostly from socially endangered families who made small masterpieces during their childhood - small handicraft products that were present in the everyday life of their fellow citizens. And no one was aware of how much effort and tears it took to make them. We are of the opinion that these forgotten children deserve to have their lives visualized and to organize, in memory of them, an exhibition, or that their examples be a topic in the drawings of their peers from the 21st century.

References

Unpublished sources

1. Archives of Serbia (AS), Belgrade - Military Governor General's Fund (VGG)
2. Pedagogical Museum (PM), Belgrade - World War II Fund

Literature

1. Cunkovic Srecko, *Education and education in Serbia in the 19th century*, Pedagogical Museum, Belgrade 2016.
2. KresticPetar, *Serbian Business Association Privrednik (1897-1918)*, Institute of History, Belgrade 2002.
3. *Memories of Srdan Novakovic*, Historical Archive of Uzice, Uzice 2020 (organizers Maja Nikolova and Aleksandar Savić)
4. *One Hundred Years of the Third Belgrade Gymnasium*, Third Belgrade Gymnasium, Belgrade 1991.
5. *Program for artisan trade evenings and Sunday school holidays*, State Printing House of the Kingdom of Serbia, Belgrade 1899
6. Savic Petar, *Children in the Vortex of War 1914-1918*, Children's newspapers, Gornji Milanovac, 1988.

ngomusketar@hotmail.com