

DR. KAREL PEČNIK – A SLOVENIAN PHYSICIAN IN EGYPT

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Abstract: *Dr. Karel Pečnik was born in Carinthia in 1867. After studying medicine in Vienna and Dresden he focused on tuberculosis. He came to know Egypt accompanying his patients there for climate therapy. In 1895 he settled in Alexandria, established his medical practice there and remained in Egypt for 16 years. His findings on the local climate and tuberculosis were quoted in medical textbooks. He also became much involved socially, including the foundation of the society »Slovenian Palm on the Nile«. In various Slovenian newspapers he published articles on Egypt, dealing with its present and past, and strongly advocating export of Slovenian goods to Egypt. In 1911 he returned to Slovenia and practiced there. Upon retirement he moved to Vienna, where he died in 1936.*

Keywords: *Karel Pečnik; Egypt and Slovenia; Egypt in the early 1900's.*

Introduction

The European colony living and working in Egypt at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries included many medical doctors.¹ The present paper is dedicated to the Slovenian physician Dr. Karel Pečnik (1867-1936), an extremely versatile person with many talents and interests, who was among their number.

Early life

Karel Pečnik was born into a peasant family in a Carinthian village Leše near Št. Jakob v Rožu (Lessah bei St. Jakob in Rosental) on 1st September 1867. Regarding his later work and achievements, it is interesting to mention that on his mother's side he was a nephew of three prominent persons of the time: a well-known Slovenian literary scholar and linguist Anton Janežič, author of a Slovenian language grammar (1854) that remained in use for about 60 years; Dr. Valentin Janežič, a medical doctor and chief staff surgeon, who is acknowledged as the founder of the peasant mutual savings bank (Št. Jakob v Rožu 1872), the first of its kind in today's Austria and Slovenia; and Simon Janežič, an editor and later one of the managers of the still-operating Carinthian Mohorjeva družba/Hermagoras Publishing House.²

¹ Lehnert 2018: 209-217.

² Sturm-Schnabl 2016: 549-551/1039.

It might be imagined that Karel by talent and/or family tradition inherited/absorbed these interests and abilities, as he was later in his life active in the fields of medicine, language and linguistics, economics, as well as writing and publishing. In the present paper, linguistic affinities are just briefly noted, the main focus being on medicine, writing and publishing, the latter being rather interweaved with his economic ideas, suggestions and proposals.

Young Karel attended secondary school in Celovec (Klagenfurt). Owing to his language gift he was warmly recommended to pursue studies in this direction. However, he decided to enrol in medical faculty in Vienna, studied there but graduated in Dresden. Although his career choice might have come as a surprise for his secondary school teachers, from today's perspective it comes as a much bigger surprise that in 1890, i.e. presumably soon after his graduation, Pečnik published a textbook entitled »Practical Textbook of Slovenian Language for Self-learning« (Praktisches Lehrbuch der Slovenischen Sprache für den Selbstunterricht).³ No less astonishing is the fact that since the first issue in 1890 the book was reprinted no less than five times: in 1899, 1905, 1911, 1916 and 1919. Despite a hint⁴ that he might have also enrolled in the Faculty of Arts (which could help explain authoring of the book) this is not confirmed.

At the time when Pečnik began his medical career, tuberculosis was a huge medical problem affecting many people. Although the causative organism was then already identified therapeutic options remained severely limited; climate therapy was one of the few. These challenges attracted the young doctor and in 1894 he joined the newly established sanatorium of Dr. Otto von Guggenberg in Bressanone (Brixen) in South Tyrol.⁵

At that period, quite some affluent patients with tuberculosis complemented their climate therapy, performed at various European locations, including the von Guggenberg sanatorium, by a winter sojourn in the South – Egypt being one of the destinations. Such patients were at times escorted by their doctors. It seems that Dr. Pečnik first got to know the »land of the pharaohs« in this way, by accompanying his patients there.⁶

Egyptian years

³ Pečnik 1890.

⁴ Jutro 1936: 3-4.

⁵ Hribovšek 1987: 191.

⁶ Hribovšek 1987: 193.

The land seems to have impressed him and in 1896 he settled in Alexandria, opening his practice at 15, Ramleh Boulevard. This is confirmed by a notice in the newspaper *Slovenski narod* that in May 1896 amongst other things reported: »... on the 2nd of May quite a few South Slaves gathered in the apartment of the city physician Dr. Pečnik to discuss the organisation of a Slovenian-Croatian singing choir. ... the choir was established. ... Now we already have an extended Slovenian-Croatian aid society, the choir and in a few years, we are considering to establish a Slovenian-Croatian school. ...«⁷ The notice went on to report on the ongoing cholera epidemic and foreigners fleeing the land, and other events. It is signed »Cheops Redivivus« and was most probably written by Pečnik himself. This assumption is supported by the fact that during his 15 years in Egypt he wrote quite some articles for various Slovenian newspapers. At the same time, the abovementioned meeting heralds the beginning of Pečnik's agile social engagement during the period.

It seems appropriate to discuss Pečnik's activities in Egypt in two broads, yet also overlapping areas: medical work, and writing/publishing and social activities.

Medical work

Besides doing his regular medical practice, Pečnik very thoroughly studied Egyptian desert climate and its potential in the framework of tuberculosis therapy. He performed precise and long-term measurements of air and sand temperatures as well as other factors. From the medical standpoint he also noted that Bedouins did not fall sick with tuberculosis while living in their everyday surroundings and in their tents. Based on this findings and insights he developed his own approach to treatment of tuberculosis (he named it »bedouinism«), leading to establishment of a tent sanatorium in Ramleh near Alexandria. This sanatorium consisted of special »bedouin-like« tents built to serve as therapeutic habitations for the patients.

The results of these engagements were twofold. On one hand, Pečnik reported on his observations and findings at a medical congress in Berlin in 1899⁸ and published a book entitled »Klimatische Wüstenkuren« in the same year.⁹ His writings attracted attention of the medical community: this is witnessed by the fact that they were quoted by at least two

⁷ *Slovenski narod*, 16 May 1896: 4.

⁸ Pečnik, 1899: 699.

⁹ Hribovšek, 1987: 193.

extensive medical textbooks.^{10, 11} On the other hand, the Ramleh project drew attention of the Alexandria city authorities; consequently, Pečnik was asked to write a book about Ramleh as a climatic resort. The invitation resulted in the book »Ramleh; Die eleusinische Riviera bei Aleksandrien in Aegypten« that extensively fulfilled the request. It was published in German, French,¹² English and, reportedly,¹³ also in Arabic. The book was nicely illustrated for that era and included a chapter on ancient Egyptian history written by the museum director J. Botti. Although mentioning this book represents a slight jump ahead in time – the first edition of the book was published in 1900 – it leads us directly to Pečnik's writing and socio-economic engagement.

Writing, publishing and social activities

During his 15 Egyptian years beginning in 1896, Pečnik published articles in at least 7 various Slovenian newspapers (Dom in svet; Novice gospodarske, obrtniške in narodne; Ljubljanski zvon; Slovenec; Slovenski list; Slovenski narod and Soča), covering quite broad topics, from introducing Egypt, over its economic potential, to the situation of immigrants (in particular Slovenians) and to Egyptian history. »Egypt,« he writes, *»is rather far away from our Slovenian land. ... But on the other hand, the distance is not that big at all. If you embark in Trieste on Thursday at noon, you arrive in Alexandria on Monday, bright and early. ... It takes three and a half days from Trieste to Egypt, thus it is much closer than to America.«*¹⁴ The latter remark is typical of Pečnik: those were the years of massive migrations from Europe, including his native Slovenia, in particular to the United States. Pečnik was firmly opposed to emigration of his compatriots to Americas: he strongly discouraged emigration to South America (describing the latter as »lands of misfortune, tears and exploitation«), while for North America he was asserting that people moving there will in shortest time lose their national identity and turn English. Consequently, he recommended his countrymen to settle in Egypt, saying that *»Slovenian settlement in Egypt is the only one that has future ... brighter future than all American-Slovenian colonies together. ... For Slovenians ever to have a permanent colony, the targets are Alexandria and Cairo«.*¹⁵

¹⁰ Schröder 1904: 404.

¹¹ Loewy 1924: 265.

¹² Pecnik 1901.

¹³ Hribovšek 1987: 193.

¹⁴ Pečnik 1902: 52.

¹⁵ Pečnik 1902: 56-57.

The Slovenian colony in Egypt at the turn of the century was quite large: Pečnik reports the number 5300 in 1897, the most numerous among them women (mainly from the hinterland of Trieste and Gorica) serving as maids, cooks, nannies, wet nannies etc. It should be noted that Pečnik, along with other distinguished local Slovenians, engaged very much in providing this group with a sort of social and health security support.

He was also a co-founder of the society »Slovenian Palm on the Nile« (Figure 1): *»What about the societal life?' the reader might ask. Well, it is quite lively. From 1895 to 1898 the Alexandria Slaves maintained the Slavic society »Unity« (Sloga). However, as there are practically no other Slaves here, the society meanwhile reorganised into a Slovenian one, »Slovenian Palm on the Nile«.*¹⁶

In Pečnik's opinion, Egypt was of overwhelming importance for the commercial development and economic progress of Slovenia. This belief is reflected in titles of his articles, such as »Slovenians and international commerce«,¹⁷ »Slovenian craft and artisanry«¹⁸ and »Potato«¹⁹. Despite the prosaic title, the latter was a detailed, minute, calculations-equipped economical study about the possibilities of export of potato from Slovenia to Egypt; due to its expertise it was also published as a separate brochure. Pečnik was also strongly advocating wood export from Slovenia to Egypt as well as establishment of trade ties between of carpenter cooperatives around the town of Gorica and the Egyptian market.

Despite his vivid interest in economic issues and in the economic potential of Egypt for his homeland, Pečnik himself could hardly (if at all) be considered an economic emigrant: in fact, he was a well-to-do young doctor before moving to Egypt and a prosperous expert after his return to Europe in 1911. His Alexandria medical practice flourished and seemingly attracted quite some foreign patients due to his professional reputation, but probably also because of his multilinguality. Besides the Slovenian mother tongue he was fluent in French and German, most probably also Italian, and learned Arabic as well. In the article »At the Arab University in Cairo« in which he describes the Cairo Al-Azhar University, he writes: *»From Alexandria I often have to go to the city of Cairo (three and a half hours by train). And whenever I am in Cairo, I always visit the Arab University of El-Azhar. There, excellent Arabic is spoken, which we, cultured and educated Europeans, need like daily bread. I should like to briefly report on this interesting school to my dear countrymen.«*²⁰

¹⁶ Pečnik 1902: 55.

¹⁷ Pečnik 1898a: 53.

¹⁸ Pečnik 1898b: 83.

¹⁹ Pečnik 1901: 236.

²⁰ Pečnik 1897a: 526.

This article belongs among the Pečnik's newspaper writings informing his readers about the contemporary Egypt from a broader perspective, sometimes accompanied by pictures or photographs (Figure 2).

Although being mostly focused on modern times, Pečnik also informed his audience of the abundant Egyptian history: *»In no country in the world remnants of the old time are so densely strewn as they are in Egypt. There are the mighty Pompey's pillar and large catacombs in Alexandria. Cairo in addition to the Giza pyramids also has the pyramids in Sakhara – smaller, but no less noble. The whole Middle and Upper Egypt are strewn with ancient temples from old Egyptian, Greek and Roman times, most of them perfectly preserved. They are followed by the ruins in Memphis, pagan temples in Abid and Dendera, by Luxor with the ruins of old Thebes.«* Considering the pyramids, readers also got to know that they were built by the ancient pharaohs, that they were described as one of the wonders of the world by Herodotus and later admired by Alexander the Great, Caesar and Napoleon (Figure 3).

Beside all the serious topics, Pečnik spiced his articles with some humorous details as well. He tells his Slovenian readers that even in Arabic they would encounter quite some familiar words. *»Philosopher is »felasuf« in Arabic,«* he writes, *»and calling somebody »ibn el felasuf«, son of a philosopher, is considered a severe insult.«*²¹ In another text he reports of a Slovenian maid, who was sent to the post office to fetch some mail. *»Poste restante?«* she was asked by the clerk. *»Non, catholique,«* she allegedly replied without hesitation.²²

Home again

After 15 years in Egypt, Pečnik in November 1911 definitely returned to his homeland. With his Linz-born wife, whom he met and married in Egypt, he permanently settled and worked in Trieste. They remained there until 1915, when the region became a WWI battleground. It seems that for a while he was practicing in his native Carinthia, but finally moved to the newly established state of the South Slaves. In 1919, he published his last Egypt-related newspaper article (*»Slovenian Colony in Egypt«*).²³ Otherwise, he continued his professional work in the field of tuberculosis, published several books on the topic and organised a sanatorium near the town of Celje. His interest in linguistics continued and he

²¹ Pečnik 1902: 53.

²² Pečnik 1897c: 1-2.

²³ Pečnik 1919: 1.

published a book about Slovenian language and dialects in Carinthia. In 1927 he retired and with his wife moved to Austria (Vienna), where he lived till the end of his life in 1936.



Fig. 1. Board of the society »Slovenian Palm on the Nile«. (Karel Pečnik is sitting second from the left.) [After Pečnik, 1902: 56].

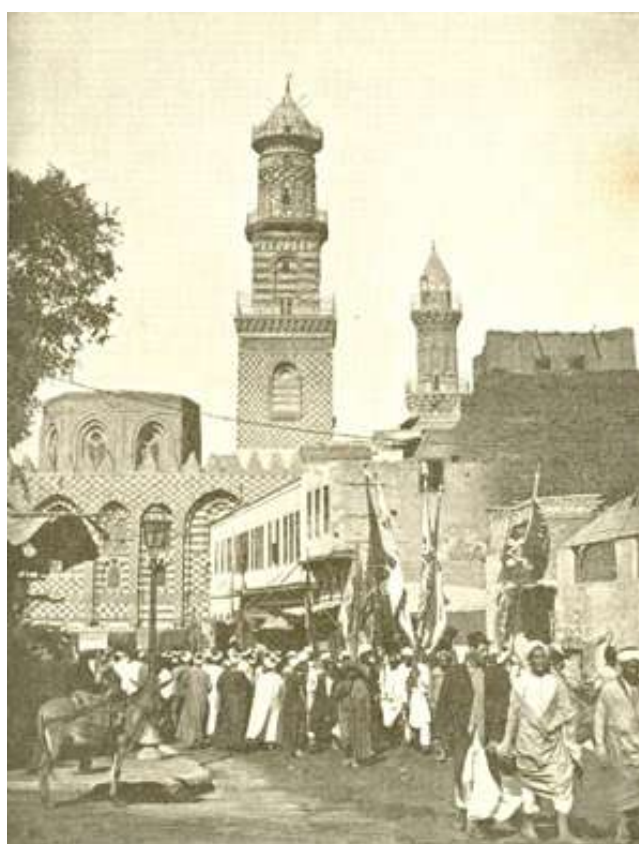


Fig. 2. Arabian festivity in Cairo. (Illustration to the article on the Arab University in Cairo.) [After Pečnik, 1897b: 561].



Fig. 3. Khufu's Pyramid and the Sphinx from afar. (Illustration to the article »Slovenians in Egypt«.) [After Pečnik, 1902: 51].

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