

## FROM LOUIS BRAILLE TO THE FIRST SERBIAN SPELLING BOOK FOR THE BLIND

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**SUMMARY:** INTRODUCTION. Blindness is a multiple problem of a psychological-economic-social nature, viewed from different points through the centuries. Louis Braille is the creator of the letter that enabled blind people around the world to become literate and educated. THE LIFE AND WORK OF LOUIS BRAILLE. Blind from the age of three after an eye injury with an awl, Louis Braille (1809-1852) had the opportunity to learn about the possibilities of educating blind people early on. However, his talent, recognized in time and a desire to acquire new knowledge, will enable him to attend the "Royal Institute for Blind Youth" in Paris, where young Braille continues his education, creation, living, and later became a lecturer. A PRECURSOR TO BRAILLE. Until the creation of the Braille script, a relief linear script was used to educate the blind. THE ORIGIN OF BRAILLE. The meeting with the French captain Charles Barbie (1821), the introduction to the communication system for the needs of soldiers "night writing", was the starting point for the future Braille (1825), a dotted alphabet method for the blind, which the author adapted later for writing music and mathematical symbols (1837). The Braille alphabet was chosen as the official method of reading and writing intended for blind people only in 1878 at the World Congress in Paris, and later on adapted to more than two hundred languages and dialects. IN 1917, BRAILLE "SPOKE" IN CYRILLIC. The beginnings of the education of the blind in Serbia are related to 1917 and Bizerte, where, as part of the rehabilitation of the blind Serb soldiers with disabilities, for the first time in the "Printing House of Serbian Disabled People", the Braille "spoke" in Cyrillic. "My first joy" is the name of the first Serbian spelling book by Veljko Ramadanović (1874-1943), who at that time was the only one who knew pedagogical work with the blind, and was also their first teacher and future school principal. CONCLUSION. Louis Braille is one of the most inventive personalities in history, the creator of the letter that enabled blind people around the world to become literate and educated, as well as our brave Serbian army during the First World War.

**Key words:** blindness, Louis Braille, letter for the blind, Veljko Ramadanović, World War I.

### INTRODUCTION

*" Vision is not everything, but what is everything  
without sight?"*

Schopenhauer A., German philosopher

According to the International Classification of Diseases, there are the following levels of visual functionality: normal vision, mild and severe visual deficit defined as low vision (LV) and blindness [1]. Blindness is a multiple problem, of a psychological-economic-social nature, viewed from different angles through the centuries. Luisa Hofmann describes how a blind person experiences their condition in 1981 in the author's publication of the same name: "Blindness cannot be understood by just closing your eyes for a few minutes or trying to orient

yourself in the dark... blindness is much more complicated and problematic." [1]. Different definitions of blindness are mentioned in the literature. If there is congenital and early acquired blindness, it is also called "double blindness", it has a special weight, because such people do not have a proper idea of the outside world around them, and often lag behind in mental development, unlike later blind people who have retained "spiritual sight", ie the idea of previously seen things based on memory [2].

Louis Braille is one of the most inventive figures in history in general, the creator of the letter that enabled blind people around the world to become literate and educated.

#### THE LIFE AND WORK OF LOUIS BRAILLE

Louis Braille (1809-1852) was born on 4th January, 1809, at Couvray, near Paris. The date of his birth was marked as the International Day of Braille. Braille is the emissary of light in the lives of the light denied. He was the youngest of four children in the family. His father Simon-Rene was a master, a cooper. Little Louis loved to watch him as he worked leather, skillfully cut and made harnesses, bridles and saddles for country horses. In his father's absence, Louis injured his eye. At three years of age, an accident deprived him of his sight. At that time, there was no hope for the possibility of education and employment for the blind person without a rich background.

Louis' education was started by his father, who taught him to read the alphabet by pressing his index finger over wooden boards carved in the shape of letters and writing, guiding his hand and holding it in his hand. Father Poli was priest of the church of St. Peter in his birth place. He continued to teach a little Louis. Thanks to his engagement, and with a previous real assessment of the boy's quality, Bray received a scholarship for Royal Institute for Blind Youth at Paris (the first institution for the blind in the world), where he left in 1819 to study; to live and where he later on became a lecturer. The institute was founded in 1785 by the French professor of calligraphy Valentin Haüy (1745-1822), who came up with the idea that blind people could "read with their fingers" [3].

#### A PRECURSOR TO BRAILLE

A relief linear script was used to educate the blind until the creation of the Braille script. The convex, embossed text obtained by a special procedure should have been suitable for reading with the sense of touch, ie with the fingertips. The earliest information about the existence of a relief letter for the blind dates from 1312 and it is related to the name of a blind professor at the Baghdad High School, Zain-Din al Amid. "Quipos" is a system of knots of various shapes and sizes on a rope, which blind Indians, marked certain words, letters and dates from their calendar in the 16th century [3]. Other techniques like engraving letters and signs in wooden tiles in the form of bas-reliefs, imprinting movable convex letters from letters on paper, writing linear letters on a wax board, etc. were used in Europe during the 16th and

17th centuries [3]. Common to these attempts was that blind people were trained to write the letters for "seeing", on plain paper, with accessories, which was not an adequate solution, because it is not just about enabling the blind to write on the way of "seeing" with a pen, pencil or pen, it is already necessary to find a letter that the blind could write quickly and safely and then easily read it themselves " [3].

#### THE ORIGIN OF BRAILLE

Young Bray realized that the embossed Latin alphabet was difficult to use after reading all the books the institute owned. He thought that there must be a way to read faster, "to make the letters on paper feel faster", so he started experimenting with drilling leather in the shape of circles, squares and triangles, in an attempt to develop an alphabet for the needs of the blind. At the same time, Charles Barbie, a captain in the French army, developed a communication system for soldiers during the night shift. "Night Writing" was represented by a lattice structure composed of twelve convex dots and dashes on cardboard. By grouping and combining points in different ways, Barbie marked letters and sounds, hoping that his method would be applicable to the needs of blind people as well. Louis Bray became acquainted with this system in 1821, when Captain Barbie visited the Royal Institute for Blind Youth and showed his method to the school principal. Although it had many shortcomings, the system served as inspiration and encouragement to the clever thirteen-year-old Bray, to adapt it for the needs of blind people and thus develop the method of the dotted alphabet. From the original twelve, Bray reduced the "cell" to eight, and then to six points. The "six-point" of the established schedule and nomenclature became the basis of his letter. He formed convex dots into an upright rectangle, with three dots grouped vertically and two horizontally, and he also designed a simple pen and writing frame. He was sixteen years old (1825) when he finished and presented to the director his system of "points" originally intended for the students of the Institute in which he was educated. Dr. Pinier, director of the Institute, realizing all the ingenuity of this new method, encouraged Louis to supplement his letter with mathematical and musical notation, which was done in 1837. Bray published his first book for blind people, entitled "A Method for Writing Words, Music, and

Polyphony with the Help of Dots," in 1829, at the age of only twenty. It explains for the first time a new, simple method of reading and writing, according to which blind people read by dragging the index finger of the right hand from left to right, and write in the opposite direction. Louis Bray continued to perfect and develop his system of dotted alphabet. He removed the dashes that were present in the first, original version, because, although easy to read, they made writing difficult, and at the request of English students from the Institute, he added the letter "w", which did not exist in the original version. The genius of Braille was demonstrated to the public only in 1843. During the celebration on the occasion of the opening of the new school building, the assistant director of the Institute gave a speech dedicated to the Braille method, praising it wholeheartedly and presenting to the audience all the advantages that this letter can provide to blind people. It was the first official presentation of Braille. Simple and acceptable to blind people, but too much of a novelty at the time, the introduction of Braille was very slow, with strong resistance that existed in official circles. Eight years before Louis Braille's death (1844), the letter was accepted in France, which only in 1854 officially recognized the Braille alphabet as translated into English, Italian, French, German, Spanish and Latin. Countries around the world, one after another, recognized the advantages and benefits that the Braille alphabet provided. At the World Congress held in Paris in 1878, the Braille alphabet was chosen as the official method of reading and writing intended for the blind. In 1890, it was adapted for the needs of schools in Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, England, Germany, Spain and Scotland), and only in 1917 was it recommended in the USA. Under the auspices of the United Nations, work began on adapting the alphabet in 1949 in more than two hundred languages and dialects. Thus, Braille became a universal language for blind people around the world. Louis Braille rests in the Paris Pantheon, where his remains were transferred during a ceremony organized in 1952, and one hundred years after his death.

#### IN 1917, BRAILLE "SPOKE" IN CYRILLIC

The treatment and recovery of the Serbian army in the period from 1916 to 1919 was realized in North Africa, which served as a solid base in which Serbian soldiers could be

treated, recovered, trained and retrained in peace, in the deep background. According to the third allied plan for rescuing the Serbian army, it was specified that the destination would be Bizerte, and the deployment of troops in the Tunisian desert [1]. The first naval transport of the Serbian army from the shores of the Albanian coast from Durres to Bizerte was realized on 6 th January, 1916. That date is one of the most important in the history of the Serbian army and state, it marked its turning point, Easter, salvation and deliverance, and unfortunately it was suppressed from our history. From that day on, not only from the homeland, but also from the Balkans and Europe, the entire army, state and part of the people found themselves in exile [1]. The wounds of the "Albanian Golgotha" have not yet healed, and in mid-August of the same year, ships with the wounded from the Thessaloniki front arrived in the North African ports, and then the evacuation of wounded and sick soldiers from the Thessaloniki port continued for another 32 months to North Africa and from other destinations, all with the song "The French ship is moving". After complete medical care and successful treatment, the soldiers were sent to the Convalescent Department in Lazouz, and from there, according to the degree of recovery, to the front [4].

Except for the Serbian army, no other had such a large disability formation, and great importance was attached to their treatment and recovery. Serbia and the descendants of old warriors owe immense gratitude primarily to French doctors and hospital staff engaged in the treatment of the wounded and sick. However, two names rise above all, and that is Émile Paul Aimable Guépratte (1856-1939), "Serbian mother", who, contrary to the order of the superior command, made a saving decision for the Serbs to settle in the best possible conditions upon arrival in Africa. and Dr. Salijez, the "good daddy" of all Serbs who stayed in Tunisian hospitals. Along with the French team, 14 of our doctors certainly played a big role in rescuing and treating the Serbian army [4,5]. In order to reduce the consequences and prepare the war invalids to accept the reality and the future in the best way, schools, courses and workshops are being formed in the Lambert barracks in order to train the disabled and learn crafts such as carpentry, footwear, typographic, printing, etc. All the contents of the work of our soldiers

and their daily activities were in the function of rehabilitation.

The beginnings of the education of blind Serbs are also connected to the same renunciation. Namely, in the Lambert barracks, on December 13, 1917, the first Serbian school for the blind in distant Africa was opened, in Bizerte (Institute for the Blind and Deaf Disabled), the forerunner of today's school for visually impaired students in Zemun. Its first participants were blind Serbian warriors from the First World War. In order for the school to work smoothly, books and primers adapted to the blind were necessary. Such books were printed in Braille. Of the five printing houses operating in Bizerte, two were Serbian. For the first time in the "Printing House of Serbian Disabled People", Braille for the blind disabled "spoke" in Cyrillic (N. Gizdavić, 1922) [4].

The headmaster of the school and their first teacher was Veljko Ramadanović (1874-1943), at that time the only one who knew pedagogical work with the blind. He faced many difficulties in such circumstances, and managed to overcome them with his dedicated work and with the material help of the allied humanitarian missions of France, America and England. Ramadanović saw the task of educating the blind and providing the knowledge necessary for future life with the help of handy teaching aids as a life mission [3].

In 1896, after returning from school in Prague, Veljko Ramadanović adapted the Braille alphabet and adapted it to the Serbian language. As there was no school for the blind at that time, this letter did not immediately find its use. It is only in Bizerte that it experiences its adequate application. In order to be able to engage in teaching work, Ramadanović started making the first Serbian primer for the blind called "My first joy". He took over the material for the primer from the primer by Steva Čuturilo printed in 1916 in Corfu. He considered it the most suitable, methodically best conceived for teaching in primary schools, and used it to print his primer. To print the primer, he used a sheet of used cans and kerosene cans, straightened it and folded it like a sheet of paper. He trimmed the pages according to the desired format of the book, then placed them in a handwritten board for the blind and with the help of a steel awl, the top of which was rounded, using a hammer, typed point by point in Braille letters for the blind. He made double tin clichés, put paper in

between, closed the clichés and put everything together in an ordinary office press, screwed and thus transferred the text of the cliché to paper. This process was repeated for each sheet of primer. He folded the printed sheets and bound them in a book. The primer was completed in the spring of 1918. The format of the primer is 17 x 24 cm, printed on one side and had 20 pages (Miodrag Janković, MA: Presentation of the oldest Serbian publication in Braille, primer "My first joy" by Veljko Ramadanović) [3].

By an act of the Ministry of Education and Religion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1918, the government approved the printing of the primer and its use for teaching. One copy of the oldest primer printed in 1918 is the private property of the family of the late blind warrior Luja Lovrić from Crikvenica. The second edition of the primer was printed in Paris in 1919. In the Museum of the School for Visually Impaired Students "Veljko Ramadanović" in Zemun and the Pedagogical Museum in Belgrade, there is one copy of the oldest edition of this primer [3]. After the liberation in 1919, by moving the disabled from the barracks in Bizerte to the premises of the barracks of the Austro-Hungarian army to the current location in Zemun, new perspectives of further development of education for the blind in Serbia opened up. In 1923, the Institute for the Disabled was transformed into a school for blind children, which was initially called the "Braille School". After the visit of King Alexander I, the school changed its name to "Home of the Blind King Alexander I" in Zemun. From that time, the school gradually began to acquire today's physiognomy [3]. Since Veljko Ramadanović, who made Braille's adaptation for the Serbian language in 1896, typhlopedagogical practice and theory have gone through an evolutionary path conditioned by the economic, political and cultural circumstances in Serbia.

#### CONCLUSION

Louis Braille is the creator of a letter that enabled blind people around the world to become literate and educated (1825). The adaptation of Braille for the Serbian language was done by Veljko Ramadanović (1896). In 1917, in Bizerte, in the "Printing House of Serbian Invalids", for the first time, the Braille alphabet for the blind "spoke" in Cyrillic. Beginning of work with blind Serbian soldiers in Bizerte was the beginning of today's

comprehensive educational work with visually handicapped people and their social care.

Conflict of interest: Gordana Stanković-Babić, Rade Babić None.

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