

ENTRANCE TO THE CIRCLE



About birth and early childhood in Slovenia

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION AND FURTHER PLANS

The exhibition you are facing, is just an introduction. A beginning. An invitation. An announcement of the permanent exhibition of our museum which (among other things) will narrate the "story about man" and his transitions - "entrances" - from one to another social role, delegated to him and supervised by his surroundings, into which he grows through particular periods of his life "circle". Human action, thinking, feeling and mutual communication line themselves in incessantly repeating natural daily and annual "circles". Such an universal "file rouge" will be placed by the planned exhibition within the Slovene cultural space of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century, pointing out the richness of regional variety of phenomena. The preserved material sources are part of our cultural inheritance, which differs us from, but even more connects us with the rest of the Middle European space. Material remainings are not only important as facts, but also because they tell us about the invisible part of the inheritance - about the structure of relations among people, about their valuation of particular elements of life, about their attitude towards death. All these define us strongly, whether we are aware of them or not.

Each story has to start somewhere. Ours starts with birth and the first years of human life. This makes sense and seems right. As this modest exhibition, which you see in front of you, also follows the idea of wholeness, its' part of the story is caught in the early dawning and the early spring of the first half of the 19th century. Some aspects of birth and childhood are introduced by particular objects from our collections, while the meaning and changing of phenomena are presented by words and pictures.

While looking at the exhibition, we would like you to feel this miracle of life, which preserves its universality, although repeated in numerous social, time and regional varieties. It is even more beautiful and precious, that each of us may experience it in his own specific way.

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"WHY" IN THE MIRROR OF TIMES

Each birth is a miracle in itself.

Evaluation of this miracle has been strongly conditioned by the society and the time. For centuries a child had been understood as a small adult, differed from the others due to his incapability or inadequacy to work. Childhood did not represent a special period of life, worth of special attention due to its characteristics. If biological reproduction is put aside, the question: "Why did they have children?", still remains.

The preindustrial patriarchal society of the first half of the 19th century still carries within itself the structure and the manner of thinking of the previous centuries. Peasants, living in feudal dependence from their landlords, represented the majority of the population. The church and the state also claimed their taxes. Survival was hard enough in normal circumstances, and even harder in cases of numerous additional



difficulties and dangers (diseases, epidemics, wars, natural disasters, famine and injuries at work). The care for survival was therefore the basic motive power and initiative of every activity. The adults, capable of working, had the best chance to survive, therefore they were the most appreciated by the society. A logical consequence was, that children were considered as a marginal sphere of society.

Even worse. In more or less frequent cases of famine they represented a burden to their family. Childhood was therefore a period of life, to be overgrown as soon as possible, so that a man could take over his part of the burden.

But nevertheless... in each society children are also carriers of the future. They represent assurance for continuation of the mankind and preservation of the family power, preservation of profession, property, which all are values, most appreciated by the past society. For peasant families they also represented a guarantee for survival of the elderly and a self-understood source of gratis labour force. It took quite some time and substantial social changes to exchange this rational and somehow calculating attitude towards children for warmer family feelings.

WISHING TO HAVE CHILDREN...

Only married people were "allowed" by the society to have sexual intercourses and children. Therefore, children were awaited and wanted within marriage and were considered as the God's blessing and the proof of fertility. In plenitude of matrimonial elements, there were some, which tried to assure children to couples; some others were used to forecast the time of birth and the sex of the first-born or the number of children to be born. Highly appreciated fertility was not considered as an individual's given biological fact, but was also affected by larger community, natural and supernatural forces.

Marriage without children was considered as a shame by the society and was not admitted as "the real one". A "barren" marriage was always the wife's fault, and she usually didn't give up hopes very quickly, although ridiculed and despised by the community. The "barren woman" tried to pray for her fertility to St. Anna or St. Mary, and the probability for her prayers to be heard was supposed to be better if she gave presents and went to pilgrimages to some of the pilgrim churches of both patronesses.

Infertility of women was tried to be cured by vegetal concoctions and the fertility was tried to be "conjured" by various rituals, based on their faith in supernatural forces.



... AND TO REMAIN WITHOUT THEM

Limited surviving possibilities of a certain family very soon turned their wish to have children into its opposite. It is certain, that they were glad of the first-born children (especially, if they were sons), but reception of the following ones varied from happiness to sadness, despair or even rejection - depending on circumstances. Numerous pregnancies and births were quite common for married woman within their fertile age, but high mortality of babies and small children strongly decreased the average number of family members. This also referred to aristocrat, bourgeois and worker's families. We have very limited data on contraception and abortion methods and means in the past, but sources prove such manners of "family planning".

Matrimony was not accessible to all the people mature for marriage, through the whole 19th century (in the middle of the century only a third of the population was married). The



number of marriages was limited by inheritance rules and related possibilities of division of farms to smaller independent units. The strong influence such rules had on the number of births and the death-rate (of legitimate and even more of illegitimate) children, is proved by regional varieties of these rules. All those, who were not married, lived through the difficulties of "compulsory celibacy", strictly supervised by the community within the general spirit of se-

vere moral order. As hidden transgressions, invisible to the public eye, were "permitted", the fruit of such slips often had to be secretly removed (abortions, exposure, infanticides). Illegitimate children or those, born outside of marriage, were severely judged by the community, as visible consequences of moral rules violations. In general the strictness of the "punishment" dependent on social status and wealth of the transgressors, but the woman was without exception the one to carry the stigma of guilt.

"SHE BECAME WIDE"

(About pregnancy)

Knowledge of impregnation physiology and the course of pregnancy was very poor and unclear even to the medical science. People usually turned to the analogy with animals in order to explain to themselves the mysterious changes, connected with supernatural forces, which - as they believed - essentially influenced the course of pregnancy and birth. Therefore these phenomena carried a slight tint of mystery and uncertainty, strongly influenced by fearing the result of the birth. This was actually very unsure, due to bad knowledge of the functioning of the birth mechanism.

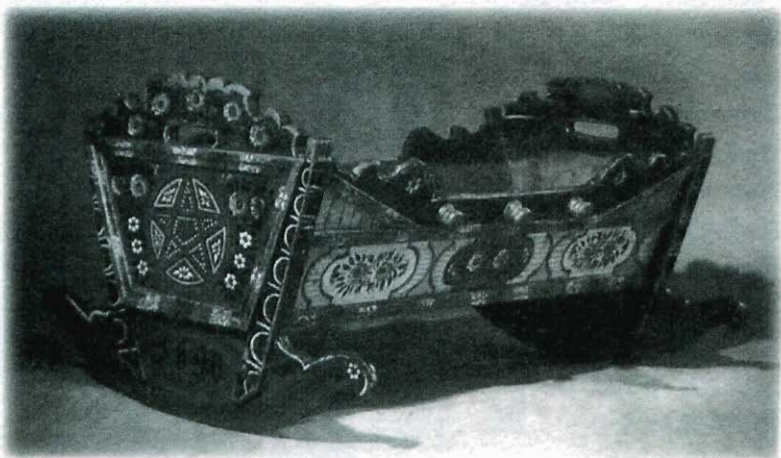


The described fear and a kind of a shame dictated even the married women to hide their condition rather than to declare it to the community and they also never avoided hard work due to it. Their intimate experience of pregnancy and their understanding of responsibility towards the unborn child and the community, demanded from the pregnant women to more or less strictly consider numerous instructions, prohibitions and commands referring to their food, drink, sex and contacts with other people. These were mostly based on prejudice and mystical ideas and partly on experience and intuition.

"THE STOVE COLLAPSED..."

(A story of a birth. A scene presentation.)

In the beginning of the spring 1830. A family of a middle-range farmer somewhere at Kranjska is up. All the children from the house were sent to the neighbours, although the night is only slightly inclining towards dawn. The master of the house



went to fetch the woman, who helps all the women in the vicinity when their time approaches. In the morning he will visit the Mayor's family. If he would only accept to stand as godfather...

Steps, heavy breathing and occasional weak moanings, expressing the anguish of expectation and the fear: How will it go this time?... are heard from the last room. In the hall the maid pours some water into a small tub and a pail. She had already prepared some old sheets and some clothes, remaining from the last baby, as well as the straw and the cradle... Inside the room the master's mother is sitting in the half-darkness, murmuring silently her prayers to the Mother of God to help her daughter-in-law in the heavy hour. You can never tell, how it will end... The family has not enough youngsters. After a few barren years and some babies who died before they outgrew their diapers, they are expecting again, with impatience... If only it were a boy! If only the fortune-tellers would predict him something good! There is so much work at the farm - who will do it, if the family remains so small? Who will take care of the parents, when they are old? And what will the neighbours say, if this child also dies? ...

ADMISSION TO THE FAMILY

Nobody is born only into the space and the time, but also into the social environment, which accepts him and treats him in a strictly defined manner. A family is the smallest unit of every society, which still functions in the spirit of its regulations. The Slovene peasant family of that time is only a reduced pattern of the whole society of the time, which was hierarchically divided and patriarchy oriented. A father's authority was never



questioned, nor was the adults' deciding on their children's faith.

Admission of the newborn to the family was more or less informal. But it was necessary that the father - as the master of the family - takes the child into his hands, recognizing him as a member of his family. Thus the child was accepted by everybody else as well. Of course the emotional colouring

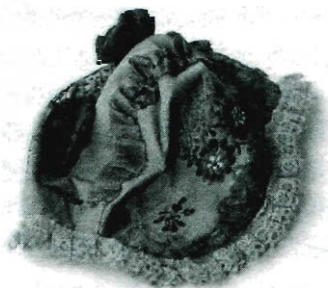
of the admission to the family depended on the child's sex (sons were much more wanted and appreciated than daughters) and on the number of previously born children in the family.

Experiencing bonds among parents and children is always individual. But, since the values, thinking, feeling and actions of an individual are influenced by the norms of the community, more than just external forms of relations depended on them. The social environment of the 1st half of the 19th century did not allow nor develop expression of feelings, which are nowadays referred to as the love for the child. This emotional bondage could legitimately be formed only as the care for survival, strict bringing up and suitable future. In this respect a child was more a part of the wholeness than an individual.

ADMISSION TO THE WIDER COMMUNITY

A new-born child also had to be accepted by the wider community. His acceptance to the Christian communion on one hand and to the village community on the other, was connected with numerous, formally strictly specified rituals. The church ritual of baptism, tightly connected with godfathers, was supposed to clear the newborn from the initial sin. Due to the high death-rate among newborns, they hurried the baptism as much as possible. They tried to baptize the child within the first few days, especially when the child was weak. They believed, that souls of unbaptized children returned to haunt their families. At baptism the child was given a name, which was part of his admission to the society; his name was from then on the strongest expression of his individuality. Giving presents to the new-born, the mother and siblings followed the baptism. A feast, to which relatives and neighbours were invited, finally confirmed the newborns membership in the circle of his relatives and the village community.

The ability of woman's body to create life initiated fear - as every unexplained and therefore mysterious phenomenon - and related resistance to all "female things" (from the monthly period to birth and the time after it). These were the periods when a woman was considered as "impure" and therefore dangerous for her surroundings. Within a certain period after the birth the woman in childbed had to be "cleaned" by certain rituals and the so-called initiation was included by the Catholic church



within its rituals and was explained as re-initiation to the Christian Communion. Only after completed initiation the woman in childbed was allowed to move around without limitations and to contact other people from the village.

The state started to "register" individuals in the registry book in the 16th century, but it was performed inconsequently and irregularly. In the second half of the 18th century registry books were prescribed by the law (especially those registering baptism, marriage and death) and catholic priests were entrusted with registration.

PROTECTION AND BRINGING UP

Care for children was considered a typical woman's job. Mothers assured that the child could sleep, be as fed as possible and as clean as possible. Health and safety of children were also their responsibility. When a few days, or at latest within a few weeks after the birth, mothers took over their regular duties, grand mothers, unmarried aunts, who lived with the family, maids and nannies came to their assistance. In the times of season works, which demanded all the available working hands, it was self-understood that babies and small children had to stay at home, guarded by their a bit bigger brothers and sisters. Sometimes babies in their cradles and little children in their wheel carts were brought to the edges of fields or lawns, where the adults were working. Due to deficient care accidents among children were very frequent throughout the 19th century. The child was always "encircled" by the family, but nobody took special care of him, at least not in the sense of cuddling, caressing and playing. This was simply not customary, or better said - it didn't seem suitable nor necessary.



The aim of up-bringing was forming the children who would approach as best as possible the physical and character ideals of the contemporary society. Therefore, certain properties were expected by the society, while others were suppressed and persecuted.

Within his very first years of life, every child was able to understand his place and role in the family, what he was allowed or forbidden to do, what were his tasks and what punishment he could expect in case he failed to behave in a satisfactory way.

THE CHILD'S WORLD

The child's needs for sleeping, feeding, clothing etc. were basically satisfied in the same way as for the adults. For centuries children had been treated as little adults, but not allowed to decide about things. A reflection of this understanding and the hierarchical family relations was a degree lower living "standard" of children. In the conditions of general poverty in the first half of the 19th century in our country, the material world of children was actually very poor. As the circumstances were not evaluated following today's criteria, but in the light of contemporary general conditions and customs, they were considered as self-understood, understandable and above all "normal".

In spite of difficult conditions and heavy circumstances, we presume that there were some happy occasions or moments of unspoiled happiness in every childhood. Among these moments, the time devoted to playing and toys, even when very

short and with limited number of toys, should certainly be counted. The constant companion of rural environment was the nature, which was growing into all the pores of life. If it offered a source of survival to the adults, it certainly provided an inexhaustible source of play and occasional toys for the children.



THE END OF CHILDHOOD ?

It was self-understood for that time, that children should work; and we are not talking only about the tasks and duties, that they were burdened with at once, as soon as they were capable of dealing with them (watching younger children at three or four, taking care of the grazing cattle when they were five or six, bringing wood to the house, etc.). The work had an educational value of its' own and in the 19th century's society it was considered as such (disregarding its' usefulness in the sense of creativity), as much as unactivity was considered the source of all sins.



At six or seven years of age, children seemed suitable for numerous farmers jobs. They were involved in them to such an extent, that they were unable to visit the school regularly, although it finally became compulsory in the sixties of the 19th century. A substantial part of farmers children was forced to leave their homes at that time and to earn their living with strange families (as shepherds, nannies or as workers in industry or craftsmen workshops). A more or less careless childhood was completed at the age of ten, which also went for other children. Childhood was somehow "extended" by the children themselves, as they were ca-

pable of finding elements of play in their work as well. They were also able to share feelings of carelessness and joy with the adults at times of feasts of the wider community.

Therefore the educating role of the family, and sometimes even deciding on further destiny of children, was taken over by other people: strangers, with whom the children worked and lived, school teachers and priests, and the village community with its values and norms on what an individual was entitled to or allowed.

A STEP ASIDE

It was generally characteristic of those times, that an individual was considered exclusively through his family. An individual was expecting to find solutions of his problems (at



least as observed from outside) through expectations and norms of others. Individuality was not a cultivated or expected part of human personality. Observing the whole social structure of that time, such evaluation of an individual was more or less strong: it was weaker in higher classes of the society than in rural communities, less obvious in richer than in

poorer families, less referring to masters of families than to other family members and finally: less expressed towards adults than towards children. A higher social accent on individuality started to move from the higher to the lower classes of society in the second half of the 19th century.

Changed attitude towards children was first felt in bourgeois Biedermeier families; within the last decades of the previous century it gradually strengthened and grew into rural homes as well. Thus childhood gained a status of an individual period of human development, for which it was no longer necessary to outgrow it as soon as possible. An expression of this development can also be found in cultivating memories of one's own childhood and the childhood of one's children, accompanied by emotionally (not functionally) conditioned keeping of child's first shoes, baptism outfit, caps, the first toy, drawing, notebook, the first curl...) and photos of children on which particular moments of childhood were frozen.



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GENERALNI POKROVITELJ
ODPRTJA NOVE MUZEJSKE HIŠE



SLOVENSKI ETNOGRAFSKI MUZEJ