

## PICCIOLA PHARMACY MUSEUM IN TRIESTE

### MUZEJ LJEKARNE PICCIOLA U TRSTU

Anja Petaros\*

#### SUMMARY

*Using poetic licence, the author of this essay interchanges documentary approach and her own impressions to describe a unique Italian museum dedicated to the history of pharmaceutical practice. This Picciola Pharmacy Museum was founded in Trieste in 1799 by the Picciola family, later to be taken over by the du Bans. In addition to valuable exhibits such as furniture, apothecary's utensils and tools, there is a library with substantial holdings, including the first poetry collection Chamber Music of the great Irish novelist James Joyce, who happened to live at the same address between 1910 and 1912. For this reason the museum has been included in the well-known "Trieste Joyce School" itinerary.*

*The author concludes that the Picciola Museum has helped many a visitor to understand and appreciate the forgotten world of classical pharmacy and other precious curiosities related to the political, cultural and historical development of Trieste.*

**Key words:** History of pharmaceuticals, pharmacy, Trieste, Italy

Lulled in oblivion, history awaits the moment when it will reawake and body forth memories, so that modern men can hear what it has to say. The splendour of the times past - reborn in the dusty shelves, in the arousing scent of old books, in the colourful diversity of china vases – establishes an intimate and subtle connection with these modern men, recalling in them the memories that were not even there, but which are deeply rooted in their soul, like unspoiled mementos of tradition and inexhaustible cultural heritage.

---

\* Student at the Medical School, Rijeka University. Corresponding address: Anja Petaros. Kvaternikova 29/a, HR - 51000 Rijeka. E-mail: andrea.petaros@ri.htmet.hr

The Picciola pharmacy is one such memento of pharmaceutical heritage of Trieste, thanks to the enthusiasm and effort put into it by two people Giorgio du Ban and Athos Pericin. It has got across all time barriers and was reborn as the first Italian museum dedicated to the history of pharmacies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Two hundred years of the national pharmaceutical heritage scattered as hundreds of items, documents lost and found, owners old and new – all this has left dark warehouses and rich private collections and has laboriously been reconstructed into a “historical greeting card” which is absolutely palpable and real.



Figure 1 Giovanni Antonio Picciola Jr. (1865-1947)

*Slika 1. Giovanni Antonio Picciola ml. (1865.-1947.)*

The Picciola Museum, situated above a modern pharmacy, unfolds its historical account as the visitors walk the eight rooms (A-H), each restoring the spirit of the past, the life of pharmacists who dedicated all their professional life to this “temple of health”. The pharmacy started back in 1799 and has been managed by the wisdom of family tradition to this day. Among several, the names of two families gradually stand out as the most important in the life of this pharmacy; these are the Picciola and the du Ban (who are still in charge of the museum).

Little by little, the story unfolds with the documents and antiquities which fill these rooms with a variety of watercolours and scents, introducing the visitor to the tradition of pharmacy. In no more than 120 square metres, this historical oasis in the midst of the urban desert takes us on a journey through time, and we feel a real-like presence of all those enthusiasts who dedicated their life to the pharmacy. From the start, this shop has shared the same throbbing heart with the multicultural city of Trieste from whence it came, following it on the same cultural, healthcare and political odyssey. Being a part of the historical turmoils of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is a precious time-machine revealing to us fragments which gradually complete the mosaic of the history of the city.



Figure 2 The interior of the Picciola pharmacy after the restoration in 1907

*Slika 2. Unutrašnjost ljekarne Picciola nakon obnove 1907.*

There are many writings, preparations and tools witnessing the development of the pharmacy with the technological progress of everyday life. They also speak about the training of young apprentices which lasted twelve years. Shelves rich with history give us an insight into the unusual ways of healing minor and common health conditions, or deadly pandemics spreading all over Europe. Plague, smallpox and cholera urged many a known and less known medical mind to seek and find effective cure. These theoretical and practical efforts are documented in a variety of historical manuscripts, including the ones by Giovanni Antonio Picciola, describing the control of cholera outbreaks on three occasions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1830-1836, 1846-1855, and 1856-1872). There were three ways to treat the disease at the time: blood letting, induction of vomiting, and the use of purgatives. Knowing that dehydration is the main problem with cholera, it is hard to believe that medicine was not ready for cholera and was still guided by Mediaeval preconceptions for all the progress achieved by that time. No wonder then that Picciola too shared these misconceptions, opting for the use of purgatives, in fact preparing one himself. Beside the instructions for the use of Picciola's preparation Roob against cholera,



Figure 3 The Picciola pharmacy museum

*Slika 3. Muzej Ljekarne Picciola*

the museum keeps the instructions for the use of another drug, “Purgative and Vomitive-Purgative of Mr Le Roy” whose sale was later banned and sanctioned as sale of poison. In addition to fighting devastating epidemics, which would leave behind lifeless bodies and existential terror, pharmacists put much effort into preventing and treating other health conditions. There are many extracts of vegetal and animal origin such as those of the ladybug (against cough), nose-horned viper (against sore throat), cuttlebone, and mummy dust, which take us into the magic world of pharmacy, balancing between tradition and science for a while, before it definitely took the scientific direction. This evolution is reflected in the development of many a medical and pharmaceutical device which are the result of the storming modernisation taking place in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century which did not by-pass the art of pharmacy. The most interesting of these devices is the microscope of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is an anecdote that this microscope was borrowed for eight days not to be returned to its owner before eleven long years were over. More than 1000 articles and 800 books give an idea of the healthcare of the time; worth singling out is the 1740 book *Della sifilide di Girolamo Fracastoro* (*On Girolamo Fracastoro’s Syphilis*) and Dioscorides’ masterpiece *De Materia*

*Medica* translated and annotated by the famous physician and pharmacist Pier Andrea Mattioli in 1563. The museum is an apt reconstruction of the Picciola period, but we are also introduced to the story about the du Bans who are responsible that we can still enjoy this two-century-long adventure that has no intention to give up the race with the time.

The development of the Picciola pharmacy was accompanied by many historical events, including a variety of bureaucratic, political and absurd entanglements. Trieste was a tempting bite for many countries, being favourably situated as a harbour and as a traffic hub of the time. This is why it developed internationally under several monarchies. The pharmacy reflected this by changing its name as the city changed hands. As early as 1804, it changed its original name “Imperatore Romano” to “Imperatore d’Austria”. The pharmacy was also the place where political ideas of Picciola the father and Picciola the son clashed, the former being monarchy supporter and the latter irredentist, both actively participating in the political and social events of Trieste. The pharmacy also bears witness to the times when human dignity gradually yielded to the devastation of wars, sparing no one, including the du Bans, who have actively been involved in pharmacy management since 1926. The impact of politics on



Figure 4 Historical pharmacy items

Slika 4. Dio povijesnoga ljekarničkog inventara



Figure 5 Furniture across history

Slika 5. Dio povijesnog namještaja

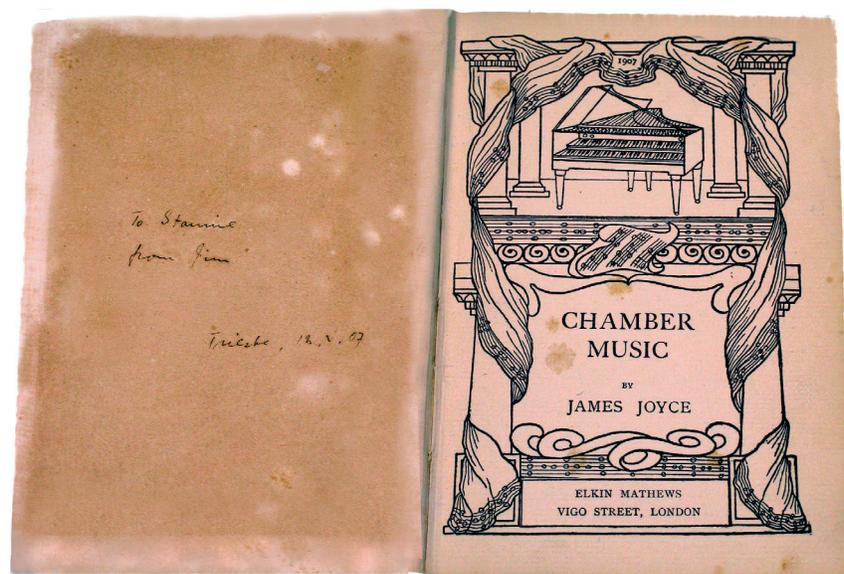


Figure 6 The first edition of Joyce's Chamber Music (1907)

Slika 6. Prvo izdanje Joyceove "Chamber Music" (1907.)

life was not limited to war devastations, but it also involved laws and regulations defining the healthcare system. We learn about these through amazing documents recording for instance a purchase of leeches, red tape and anecdotes from life.

Not only is this pharmacy an inexhaustible source drawing on the Italian healthcare and political heritage, but it also digs into the literary tradition of the time. Beside the membership in the Association Europeene des musees d'histoire des sciences medicales u Parizu, Accademia Italiana di Storia della Medicina, and Società Italiana di Storia della Medicina, the museum has been included in the itinerary of the Trieste Joyce School. This exceptional Irish novelist contributed to the world literature with his new literary style, stream of consciousness and with a masterly application of Freud's psychoanalysis to his own modern characters, who rise from the inner subconscious torrents to become the paradigm of the 20th century literary heroes. During his European wanderings, Joyce settled in Trieste for some time, and he lived at the Picciola pharmacy address from 1910 to 1912, when he was asked to leave for his unrestrained bohemian lifestyle. In addition to Joyce's first collection of poetry *Chamber Music* published in 1907, the museum's bookshelves keep some 500 other titles in Italian, French and German, witnessing to the Picciolas' culture and wit.

The museum provides an intriguing ride to the magical and vibrant atmosphere of the pharmacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, accompanied by an exceptional hospitality of the hosts whose family history is deeply braided with the world of cultural and political events of those times. This museum gives an insight into the past and present of the development of pharmacies and into the contribution of many generally anonymous pharmacists to the healthcare of this culturally and socially exceptional city.

## SOURCES

1. Visit to the pharmacy on 27 July 2005.
2. Du Ban G. Il Museo della Farmacia Picciola 1799-1999. *Rivista di Storia della Medicina* 2001;(1):148-58.
3. Du Ban G. *Farmacia Picciola 1799-1999*. Trieste: Edizioni "Italo Svevo", 1999.
4. <http://tcd.retecivica.trieste.it/triestecultura/musei/altrimusei/privati/picciola.htm>

## SAŽETAK

*Autorica u eseju u slobodnijemu poetiziranom stilu, ispreplećući faktografiju i osobne opservacije, prikazuje osebujan talijanski muzej posvećen povijesti i praksi farmakoloških vještina. Riječ je o muzeju ljekarne Picciola osnovane u Trstu 1799., čiji su vlasnici bili najprije iz obitelji Picciola, a zatim du Ban. Osim što muzejsku zbirku krasi vrijedni eksponati – pokućstvo, ljekarničko posuđe i alati te bogata knjižnica, muzej na još jedan originalan način sudjeluje u afirmaciji kulturnog identiteta grada. Zahvaljujući tome što je na istoj adresi od 1910. do 1912. obitavao znameniti irski romanopisac Joyce te što se, među inim, u muzeju čuva prvo izdanje njegove zbirke poezije Chamber Music, muzej je uključen u poznati itinerar Trieste Joyce School.*

*U zaključku se ističe misao da zahvaljujući Muzeju Picciola posjetitelji mogu početi shvaćati i više cijeniti gotovo zaboravljeni svijet klasičnog ljekarništva, kao i ostale neprocjenjive zanimljivosti o političkom, kulturnom i povijesnom razvoju grada.*

**Ključne riječi:** *povijest farmacije, ljekarne, Trst, Italija*

### *Acknowledgement*

*The author wishes to thank Mr Giorgio du Ban for his exceptional hospitality, information provided and the permission to take photographs of the pharmacy and publish materials from the archives.*