

Memories of Zlata Blažina Tomić (5 January 1926 - 29 November 2021)

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Zlata Blažina Tomić holding a copy of her first book (2007), *Kacamorti i kuga: utemeljenje i razvoj zdravstvene službe u Dubrovniku* (Cazamorti and the Plague: Founding and Development of the Health Office in Dubrovnik).



For over two decades from 1970 to her retirement in 1991, Zlata Blažina was the engine that built the collections of the Osler Library. When she died at the venerable age of 95 last fall, we lost a stalwart friend of the Library, and a woman who poured her passion, high standards of scholarship, and deep loyalties into her work as bibliographer and chief of acquisitions. I worked beside Zlata from 1985 until her retirement, crafting our collections policies, working on special development grant applications, seeking out medical history scholarship from around the globe, and every once in a while, campaigning to nab a particularly spectacular rare acquisition. Zlata's facility with languages, her carefully cultivated relationships with bookdealers, and her nose for a bargain were invaluable assets in her work. But it was her instincts as a historian and her deep commitment to scholarship that really drove her, in both her daily tasks and in her larger ambitions to contribute herself to the history of medicine.

Zlata Tomić was born in Srijemska Mitrovica and until the age of 15 she lived in Požega, Croatia where her father had a wood business and the first electric sawmill in Slavonia. In 1940, due to the Second World War, she moved to Zagreb with her mother Ana Kovač (1901-1992), her father Slavko Tomić (1897-1989) and her brother Tomislav (1921-1987). Thanks to the persuasive powers of her grandmother Katarina Matić Tomić, Slavko relented and allowed Zlata go to the University of Zagreb, from which she graduated in 1967 with a B.A. in History and Latin. At the age of 21, during an excursion to Sljeme, the mountain resort north of Zagreb, she met Josip Blažina (1919-1968), a future lawyer, whom she married in January 1947. In November 1947, they welcomed their daughter Vesna.

In August 1967, the family moved to Montreal. Unfortunately, Josip Blažina died on Christmas Day 1968. In 1970, Zlata started working at the Osler Library for the History of Medicine at McGill University developing current and rare book collections.

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This was a truly exciting time for the Library's growth. The Wellcome Endowment had injected new vigour into our acquisition of journals, monographs and theses in medical history – a field that was undergoing profound transformation during this decade, as social history approaches began to be applied. At the same time, the creation of new permanent funds like the Friends of the Osler Library or the Class of Medicine 1936 Endowment widened the horizons of rare books acquisitions. Zlata not only rose to these challenges, but actively participated in applying for and administering grants for collections development from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Through all these changing conditions, she demonstrated an unfailing scholarly acumen, expertise in languages, professional thoroughness, and an uncanny instinct for the value of the dollar (she tracked exchange rates on a daily basis!). Above all, she was passionately devoted to the Osler Library and to the quality of its collections, and this passion has been instrumental in transforming the Library into a first-class scholarly resource in the history of medicine.

But deep inside Zlata there simmered an ambition to contribute to this field of medical history herself, and the new “social history turn” strongly appealed to her. Inspired by the work of Prof. Mirko Dražen Grmek at the Sorbonne, who had established that Dubrovnik, also known as Ragusa in the past, was the first city-state in the world to develop the quarantine legislation as early as 1377, Zlata began her research in the Dubrovnik State Archives. In 1981, she earned a Master's Degree from McGill University. The title of her thesis was “Historical Development of the Laws and Regulations Concerning Public Health in Dubrovnik (Ragusa) from the 13th to the 15th Century.” Zlata's next goal was a doctorate. Her research determined that Dubrovnik continued to refine its plague control measures and founded the first recorded permanent Health Office in 1390. This research led to a Ph.D. from the University of Zagreb in 2001.

Zlata's thesis became a book, entitled *Kacamorti i kuga: utemeljenje i razvoj zdravstvene službe u Dubrovniku* (Cazamorti and the Plague: Founding and Development of the Health Office in Dubrovnik) and published by the Historical Institute of the Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences in Dubrovnik in December 2007. Soon she was presenting her research at academic conferences in Charleston, S.C., Dubrovnik, Istanbul, Moscow and Vancouver, B.C., among other places. She was the recipient of research grants from the Hannah Institute for the History of Medicine (now Associated Medical Services) in Toronto and the History of Medicine Project of the Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb. In 2015, her second book *Expelling the Plague: The Health Office and the Implementation of Quarantine in Dubrovnik, 1377-1533*, co-authored with her daughter Vesna Blažina, was published by McGill-Queen's University Press. Some of Zlata's research was based on the Latin manuscript *Libro deli Signori Chazamorbi, 1500-1530* or the *Book of the Gentlemen Health Officials*. The transcribed text of this archival book, held at the Dubrovnik

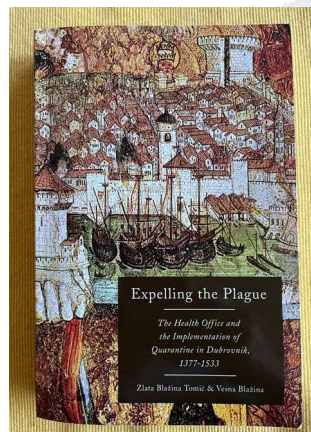
State Archives, edited by Zlata Blažina Tomić, Vesna Blažina, Zdravko Šundrica and Nella Lonza, was published by the Historical Institute of the Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb and Dubrovnik in December 2021. Zlata was looking forward to the publication of this book but she didn't get a chance to hold it in her hands.

The years during which I worked with Zlata overlapped with the war (1991-1995) during which her homeland of Croatia fought for its survival. Zlata was profoundly disturbed by this conflict, particularly as her mother still lived in Zagreb; she was also anxious about the safety of the historic library and archival collections she knew so well, and of the professors and students in Croatian universities. When AMCA (Almae Matris Croaticae Alumni) Quebec, the Association of alumni and former students of Croatian universities was founded in Montreal, Zlata was elected vice-president (1990-1995), in which office she worked tirelessly to help Croatian academic institutions and individuals.

Until her last moment, Zlata kept in touch with her relatives and friends, in Canada, Croatia and around the world. She was interested in world events, especially in science and culture. Until the pandemic, she particularly enjoyed attending concerts of classical music – including concerts by “I Medici di McGill” – both in Montreal and in Zagreb, in the company of friends and her daughter Vesna. She was also looking forward to a trip to Zagreb. According to her wishes, her ashes will be transferred to Zagreb and placed in her parents' grave.

Počivala u miru Božjem!

May she rest in peace and rise in glory!



Cover of Zlata Blažina Tomić's second book, *Expelling the Plague: The Health Office and the Implementation of Quarantine in Dubrovnik, 1377-1533*, co-authored with her daughter Vesna Blažina, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015).



Zlata Blažina Tomić's final work, *Knjiga gospode zdravstvenih službenika 1500. - 1530. = Libro deli signori chazamorbi 1500 - 1530 = The book of the gentlemen health officials 1500 - 1530* (Zagreb and Dubrovnik: Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021), was edited in collaboration with Vesna Blažina, Zdravko Šundrica and Nella Lonza.