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The Quest for Architect Elena Bokus

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: There is limited knowledge about the early formally educated architects on the territory of present North Macedonia, and, especially, about the early women architects.

AIM: The aim of this research is to find more about the life and work of one the first women architects practicing on the territory of North Macedonia, Elena Bokus.

METHODS: This work is based on the study of available primary and secondary sources complemented with selected gray literature. The primary research focused on finding additional information about the life and work of Elena Bokus since she was already identified as one of the first woman architects practicing on the territory of present North Macedonia. In addition, secondary research was carried out to identify Bokus' contemporaries with similar names to exclude the possibility of misidentification within the original sources.

RESULTS: The research to date has not identified any further information on Elena Bokus apart from those already available in the first volume of the "Architects in Macedonia" book by the late Professor Konstantinovski. However, the presence and work of the architect Jelena Bokur (*née* Tomić) were identified on the territory of the present North Macedonia in the period between 1915 and 1923.

CONCLUSION: Based on the information available to date, it appears that Elena Bokus and Jelena Bokur most likely are the same person, whereby a possible misreading of a handwritten signature or similar had probably contributed to the misidentification of the actual name of one of the first woman architect working on the territory of present North Macedonia. Further research is required to confirm these findings and inform about her life and work, especially within the territory of present North Macedonia.

Introduction

There is limited knowledge about the early formally educated architects on the territory of present North Macedonia, and, especially, about the early women architects. One of the prime sources on the history of architects in North Macedonia are the three volumes of the "Architects in Macedonia" *(Graditelite na Makedonija)* book by Professor Georgi Konstantinovski. In the First Volume, Elena Bokus (b. 1893?) is the first woman architect listed. The brief entry states [1:62]:

> *"Lived and worked in Skopje. Designed detached family houses. Despite her active period coinciding with the exceptionally reach opus of her contemporaries Rudolf Vošta, Boris Dautov, Ferdo Kraus, and Gligorije Tomić, her only remaining project is: 1923 Detached family house (Ground floor plus one floor) for Jovan Tašković on 'Hajduk Veljko' Street ('Egejska') in Skopje."*

The entry incorporates what appears to be a contemporary drawing of the ground floor plan and the main elevation of the building rather than an archive drawing (Figure 1). It is assumed that the reference



Figure 1: Detached family house for Jovan Tašković on Hajduk Veljko Street (Egejska) in Skopje (1923) by Elena Bokus. 1. Entrance, 2. Porch, 3. Corridor, 4. Room, 5. Kitchen. Source: Konstantinovski, [1]

to the "last remaining project" may be related to material that is still available in the Skopje Department *(Oddelenie Skopje)* of the State Archive of the Republic of North Macedonia *(Državen arhiv na Republika Severna Makedonija).*

Based on this entry, Elena Bokus is probably one the earliest practicing women architects on the territory of present North Macedonia. However, very little is known about her life and work. This paper presents the early findings to uncover more about this pioneer woman architect.

Methods

The research is based on the study of primary and secondary resources complemented with selected gray literature. The analyzed resources were either already available in printed form or accessible in digital form. This desktop-based research was carried out mainly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited the possibilities for archive or site-based research.

Research assumption

The following research assumptions were made:

1. The early women architects on the territory of present North Macedonia emerged in the post Balkan Wars (1912–1913) period. During the five centuries under the Ottoman Empire's rule (c.1392–1912), women were generally not allowed to practice their profession.
2. Elena Bokus is probably correctly identified as one of the early women architects, if not the first one, practicing on the territory of present North Macedonia. This is based on the entry in Konstantinovski's [1] book.
3. Elena Bokus was a certified architect before her last remaining project in Skopje in 1923 since only qualified and certified professionals were allowed to practice on their own and sign-building designs at the time.
4. Elena Bokus was born in the late 19th century, probably in the 1890s. This is based on the entry within Konstantinovski's [1] book.
5. Her surname Bokus may be either her maiden name or the name that she has taken upon marriage (as it is not clear from the original source).
6. There is a possibility that Elena Bokus originated from outside the territory of present North Macedonia within the former Kingdom of Serbia, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. It is understood that professionals from other parts of the Kingdom were assigned to work within the territory of present North Macedonia or decided to move and work there at the time.
7. There is also a possibility that Elena Bokus might be an émigré from abroad, from other parts of Europe, or from the Russian Empire, especially following the October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent Russian Civil Wars that resulted in a number of refugees either settling or temporarily staying on the territory of the former Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. In the case of one of the above two options, she may have graduated either abroad or in the Kingdom after moving there.
8. Another possibility is that Elena Bokus might be of a Jewish origin. The surname Bokus does not appear to be Macedonian [2], [3], Serbian [4], Croatian [5], or Slovenian [6]. However, the presence of a vibrant Jewish community in the Kingdom and their fate during the World War II (WWII) in conjunction with examples of Jewish people in Poland with the same surname [7] requires this possibility to be explored. This may provide an explanation for why there is no information about architect Bokus after 1923. The Jewish community mostly perished during the WWII when most of the territory of the present North Macedonia was under the Kingdom of Bulgaria rule, an ally of the Axis Powers (1941–1944). According to Professor Holly Case in Troebst [8], out of 7,762 Jews living on the territory of present North Macedonia in the interwar period, 7136 were rounded up, interned, and deported by the Bulgarian police to the German extermination camp Treblinka in occupied Poland in March 1943 where most of them perished. Apparently, only about 200 Jews were left by the time of the establishment of the Federal Unit Macedonia within Federal and Democratic Yugoslavia in 1944.
9. The possibility of misidentification should not be excluded too since the drawings might have been handwritten and signed by hand at the time or the certified architect or engineer stamp might not be clearly legible.

General research approach

The primary focus of the research was finding additional information about the life and work of Elena Bokus as she was already identified as one of the earliest women architects practicing in North Macedonia. In addition, secondary research was carried out to identify Bokus' contemporaries with similar names to exclude the possibility of misidentification.

Primary research

The primary research focused on finding additional information about the life and work of Elena Bokus. In this respect, the following research activities were undertaken:

- A general internet search for Elena Bokus, as well as a search through academic search engines and databases, such as CORE, DOAJ, Google Scholar, Hrčak (Croatia), and SCIndeks (Serbia) (no results retrieved).
- Internet search for Elena Bokus of the online catalogs at the National and University Library "St. Kliment of Ohrid" - Skopje, the National and University Library in Ljubljana, the National

and University Library in Zagreb, the National Library of Serbia in Belgrade, the University Library "Svetozar Marković" in Belgrade, and the Museum of Science and Technology in Belgrade (no results obtained).

- The Faculties of Architecture at the Universities of Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Zagreb were approached with a request for access to their registers of early graduates in architecture, as well as the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy in Sofia (Bulgaria) (no reply received from Sofia).
- The University of Belgrade, the University of Zagreb, and the University of Ljubljana through the National and University (Zagreb and Ljubljana) or Departmental Libraries (Faculty of Architecture, Belgrade) were approached to obtain access to their registers of foreign architecture and engineering degrees recognized by their Technical Departments before WWII (response received from the National and University Library in Ljubljana and a copy of a register from the University of Belgrade identified through the Library of the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade and then located on an internet portal).
- An Internet search for Elena Bokus on various genealogy-related websites was carried out (no results retrieved).
- Based on the literature review and genealogical research, Hungary, Poland, and Russia were identified as possible alternative countries of origin and/or education in architecture of Elena Bokus. Therefore, the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, the Warsaw University of Technology, the Lviv Polytechnic National Institute, the Moscow School of Architecture – State Academy, the Russian Academy of Arts in Moscow, the Ilya Repin St. Petersburg State Academic Institute for Painting Sculpture and Architecture, the Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University, the Central State Historical Archive of St. Petersburg, the Nicholas Roerich St. Petersburg Arts School, and the Saint Petersburg State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering University were contacted to inquire if Elena Bokus was their graduate (replies received only from the last two).
- A question was posted on the "Research Gate" website (one response was received from a faculty member in Croatia referring back to Professor Konstantinovski's book).
- Two articles were published in a construction-related magazine in North Macedonia Porta 3 and at an international Construction History conference in the UK, respectively, and in part covering Elena Bokus too to promote discussion from the professional and academic community on her life and work (no response received).
- A university professor with the surname Bokus from Poland and a historian-teacher with the surname Bokus from the USA were approached in case they were willing to provide some information on the surname (no response received).
- The "Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia" and the "Jewish Community in the Republic of Macedonia" were approached to obtain any information they may have on Elena Bokus in case she was of Jewish descent (researchers from the memorial center advised that they do not have information on her and that based on her name and surname, she does not appear to be of a Jewish origin).
- The International Jewish Cemetery Project website was searched for Elena Bokus, as well as similar cemetery websites, such as Billion Graves or Find a Grave (no results retrieved).
- (*Akcionersko Društvo*/Shareholders Society) "Butel" who manages the cemeteries in Skopje was approached to establish if there is any grave listed for Elena Bokus (no response received).
- The White Pages/Residential Telephone Directories of North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo were searched for the surname Bokus in an attempt to identify any possible relatives (no results retrieved).
- Through the search of accessible historic images and architectural plans, as well as site visits to the remaining historic neighborhoods of Skopje City, attempts were made to identify any buildings that may be either designed by or attributed to Elena Bokus based on their architectural style and characteristics.
- Any other available relevant materials consulted and identified within the paper.

Secondary research

In addition, secondary research was carried out aimed to identify Bokus contemporaries with similar names to exclude the possibility of misidentification. This focused on capturing results from the primary research that was associated with persons with similar first names to Elena Bokus, such as Jelena or Helena and/or similar surname(s).

Research limitations

Only responses received and materials made available until 19.02.2024 are incorporated in this paper.

Language conventions

The British Permanent Committee on Geographical Names System was used throughout this paper to Romanise the original Cyrillic words.

Results

The history of early women architects and engineers on the territory of former Yugoslavia can be traced back to 1900 when Jelisaveta Načić (1878–1955) became the first woman architect to graduate from the University of Belgrade. According to architect Krstić [9], Inspector at the Ministry of Construction, by 1940, there were about 220 women architects and engineers graduated from the Technical Faculties of three universities in the country: Belgrade (founded in 1846), Zagreb (founded in 1919), and Ljubljana (founded in 1919). Later research by Đurić-Zamolo [10] found that 144 women were enrolled to study architecture at the University of Belgrade between 1896 and 1940. However, some of them graduated after the WWII as their studies were interrupted by the war.

Considering that the last remaining project by Elena Bokus in Skopje has been identified to be done in 1923, it is reasonable to assume that at the latest by 1923, she should have not only completed her degree and professional experience but also have passed or being exempt from the professional examination for architects and engineers. As the first student of architecture to graduate from the University of Zagreb in 1923 [11], and from the University of Ljubljana in 1924 [12], Elena Bokus could have not obtained her degree there.

The reviews of Đurić-Zamolo's [10] list of early women architects from the University of Belgrade, Marković's [13] register of early architects and engineers graduated from the University of Belgrade between 1919 and 1938, and Nikolova's [14] paper on the education in Serbia until World War I (WWI) were unable to identify either Elena Bokus or any women graduate named Elena. Furthermore, the research by Ladinski [15], [16] has not been able to identify either a woman architect or engineer named Elena Bokus or Elena born on the territory of present North Macedonia that graduated by 1944. Similarly, this work failed to identify any women architects with the same name and links to present North Macedonia who enrolled to study architecture at the University of Belgrade between 1896 and 1940, although some 14 were identified by the research [16]. Elena Bokus, therefore, is unlikely to be a graduate from any of the Technical Faculties at the Universities in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana. This suggests that a person under the name of Elena Bokus might have graduated elsewhere and moved to the Kingdom. Naturally, without any additional information, it is difficult to follow this lead fully.

A review of the register of graduate architects and engineers who graduated abroad and then recognized their degrees by the University of Belgrade under the Recognition Law of 11.07.1930 [13], similarly, did not yield any results. So far, it has not been possible to examine the equivalent registers, if any, from the University of Zagreb and the University of Ljubljana, but this will be highly unlikely as these universities were established only a few years before Elena Bokus was already practicing in Skopje.

Another possibility is that this woman architect might have completed the Higher Technical School *(Viša tehnička škola)* in Belgrade or a similar institution. According to Konstantinovski [1], Isajlo J. Jovanov-Nikolovski (1910–1963) who completed his studies in 1932 was able to complete his studies in construction at the Higher Technical School *(Viša tehnička škola)* in Belgrade that allowed him to sit a professional exam. Upon completion, he was able to engage in the design and construction of buildings. However, it has not been possible to explore this possibility any further due to limited access to information about the school.

In the absence of lead on the education side, an attempt was made to examine the actual drawing of the house Elena Bokus designed in Skopje. Unlike for most of the other architects presented in the Konstantinovski [23] book, the entry for Elena Bokus does not contain a reference for the source, like the archive number or similar. The response to the inquiry to the Skopje Department of the State Archive of the Republic of Macedonia in November 2023 suggested that they do not have this drawing by Elena Bokus. This, in combination with the absence of the source for the information, made it difficult to follow this lead. Viewing the original plans should have provided the opportunity to examine them in detail and to look for other clues.

The attempts to find more information about Bokus' life did not yield any additional information. The attempts to find potential descendants by searching for the surname Bokus on the White Pages/ residential telephone directories for North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo in early December 2023 again did not yield any results, as well as the search of international online graveyard registers, such as Billion Graves and Find a Grave.

Similarly, the search for literature on Elena Bokus yielded limited results too. Apart from the original source in Konstantinovski [1], it identified a recent article from Dr. Ekaterina Namičeva-Todorovska and Namičev [17] in which Elena Bokus is listed as one of the Russian émigré architects practicing in Skopje in the interwar period that had probably graduated either in Moscow or in St. Petersburg, but it was not possible to identify the actual source for this. Ladinski [18]

suggested the possibility that Elena Bokus might be an émigré from the Russian Empire while highlighting the limited information available to confirm or deny this.

In pursuit of the above, the Moscow School of Architecture – State Academy, the Russian Academy of Arts in Moscow, the Ilya Repin St. Petersburg State Academic Institute for Painting Sculpture and Architecture, and the Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University were contacted to inquire if Elena Bokus was their graduate (no replies received). Based on a suggestion by the (secondary) Nicholas Roerich St. Petersburg Arts School [19], the Central State Historical Archive of St. Petersburg was contacted to inquire about possible records from the Women's Polytechnic in St. Petersburg (1905–1924) with a view to establish if Elena Bokus was their graduate (no response received). Response was received from the Archive of the St. Petersburg State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering University [20]. They confirmed that the University started enrolling female students in 1917 but that Elena Bokus is not on the list of graduates up to the year 1923.

The search of the names related websites suggested that in 2014, the highest density of the surname Bokus was located in Poland [21], while being most indexed in Hungary [22]. The potential links between the surname Bokus and Jewish descent can probably be established by searches through Holocaust-related websites. An example of this could be the history of Jan Bokus born in Warsaw, Poland [7]. Considering the geographical distribution of the surname Bokus with the potential link to some people of this surname to be of Jewish descent suggests that if that is indeed the case, then the surname might be linked to the Ashkenazi Jews, rather than to the Sephardic Jews that were and are considered to be more prevalent at the territory of current North Macedonia. However, the research to date has not been able to establish any further information about Elena Bokus either in relation to the country of her birth or her origin.

Based on the above results attempt was made to establish if Elena Bokus graduated in Poland or Hungary. Therefore, the Warsaw University of Technology in Poland and the Budapest University of Technology and Economics in Hungary were contacted (no reply received). Considering that the Budapest University of Technology and Economics commenced enrolling female students in 1925 [23]. Elena Bokus could not be their graduate. On the other hand, Elena Bokus potentially could be a graduate of the Warsaw University of Technology since, according to Marcinac [24], they started enrolling female students of architecture in 1915. However, so far there is no evidence for this. In addition to the above universities in Poland and Hungary, the Lviv Polytechnic National Institute in Ukraine was contacted too (no reply received). They were contacted as this polytechnic was part of the Austrian/Austro-Hungarian Empire (1817–1914) and the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939) when Elena Bokus could have been their student [25], [26].

The site visit to the remaining parts of Egejska Street in Skopje in November 2023 could not identify if there are any actual remains of the detached family house by Elena Bokus. The Novo Maalo neighborhood, where the remains of Egejska Street are still in existence, was damaged in the 1963 Skopje Earthquake and part subject to the post-earthquake reconstruction efforts.

The above site visit was complemented by a search of the digital collection of the State Archive [27], a review of the published collection of historic architectural plans [28], and a visit to other sites with remaining historic buildings in the Centar settlement within the Municipality Centar (*Opština Centar*) in Skopje. Unfortunately, the attempts to identify other buildings that may be either designed by or attributed to Elena Bokus based on their architectural style and characteristics have not come to fruition to date.

Since the primary research was unable to yield any additional information on the life and work of Elena Bokus, the Secondary Research became even more important. In the absence of any additional information from those originally available in Konstantinovski [1] and considering the absence of clues that might have helped identify where Elena Bokus was trained as an architect, the secondary research focused on those women architects who graduated from the University of Belgrade between 1900 and 1922 but may have a variation of her first or second name. Based on Đurić-Zamolo [10] and Nikolova [14], only two were identified in this period: Jelena Tomić (1889–1961) and Jelena Golemović (1890–1973) with Tomić graduating in 1913 and Golemović graduating in 1914.

The information available in Đurić-Zamolo [10] and the research by Ladinski [16] yielded rather interesting findings, in particular, both had links with the territory of present North Macedonia. Apparently, Golemović (married surname Minić, after marrying architect Milan Minić) spent part of the WWI in Ohrid where their son Oliver was born in 1915 before they had to evacuate alongside the Serbian Army through Albania and Greece to, in their case, Corsica. However, there is no available information that Golemović worked in North Macedonia during that period. Even if she worked during that period, the fact that she left North Macedonia during WWI does not align with the house designed in Skopje by Elena Bokus in 1923. The information about Tomić was more promising as she actually worked in Skopje for the Ministry of Construction between 1915 and 1923. Her married name was Bokur, having married Dr. Ignjat Bokur, an educator who was teaching in a school in Skopje at the time. Probably, the highlight of this research is related to identifying married surnames for Golemović and Tomić, Minić and Bokur, respectively.

Discussion

The reasonable endeavors to establish additional information about the life and work of Elena Bokus through primary research were unable to yield any results and additional information to the very limited one already available in Konstantinovski [1]. The secondary research focused on identifying early women architect from the University of Belgrade with links to the territory of present North Macedonia helped identify Jelena Tomić-Bokur as an early woman architect who graduated from the University of Belgrade in 1913 and worked for the Ministry of Construction in Skopje in the period between 1915 and 1923. Considering that the combination of her first name and her married surname is Jelena Bokur, she could be considered as a fairly strong candidate if Elena Bokus's name was misread in the original source. Elena could be considered as the Macedonian version of the name Jelena in Serbian, while the difference in the surname is only related to the last letter Bokus instead of Bokur.

Further support for the assumption that Elena Bokus and Jelena Bokur are the same person potentially can be found through examination of the timelines, especially in relation to the only known project by Elena Bokus from 1923. According to Đurić-Zamolo [10], Jelena Bokur was promoted in Skopje into the post of under architect I class in February 1919 and in September 1919 to an architect IV class. This suggests that Jelena Bokur either passed or was exempt from seating the state professional examination for engineers and architects in the period between February and September 1919. Furthermore, it is known that she worked for the Ministry of Construction in Skopje between 1915 and 1923 before she was promoted to the post of the Head of the Technical Department in Vršac, Vojvodina, Serbia. Considering that only the certified professionals were allowed to practice on their own and that the state-employed certified engineers and architects were allowed to engage in private professional work too, the period between 1919 and 1923 is probably the only one when Jelena Bokur could have been engaged in private work in Skopje. This period coincides with the period when Elena Bokus designed the 1923 Detached family house (Ground floor plus one floor) for Jovan Tašković on 'Hajduk Veljko' Street ('Egejska') in Skopje. The fact that Jelena Bokur moved from Skopje to Vršac in 1923 can explain the absence of subsequent works in North Macedonia. The fact that she was a state employee and newly qualified architect in the period between 1919 and 1923 in Skopje could explain the potentially small output within the private sector since the work for the Ministry of Construction would have been her prime focus and source of income. If this is the case, the above-detached family house for Jovan Tašković on 'Hajduk Veljko' Street in Skopje might well have been the only example of private work of Jelena Bokur in North Macedonia if she was misidentified as Elena Bokus later on.

Therefore, if we follow the words of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, stated by his fiction character Sherlock Holmes, *"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth"* [29], probably Elena Bokus is actually Jelena Bokur. Therefore, further research should focus on the life and work of Jelena Bokur as well as on Elena Bokus with a view to enhance our understanding of their lives and work in an attempt to confirm if the assumption is actually correct.

This research faced numerous challenges in trying to solve the identity of one of the first women architects working in nowadays North Macedonia and raises two intriguing suggestions. Namely, if the proposition that Elena Bokus and Jelena Bokur are not the same people that would highlight that the quest for Elena Bokus is not yet completed and should encourage further endeavors in the attempt to uncover more about her life and work. Alternatively, if the proposition holds, that will mean that our efforts should focus on the life and work of Jelena Bokur, especially in relation to her period on the territory of present North Macedonia. It is already known that she was the first woman engineer and architect to be appointed as a state employee in former Yugoslavia (the Kingdom of Serbs, Coats, and Slovenes) by decree in 1919. Any further research may help identify if she was indeed the first woman engineer and architect to work with North Macedonia. As it appears that she spent her professional formation years in Skopje, further research can help find more on how her stay in Skopje potentially shaped and influenced her future work. This will contribute to developing a better understanding of her overall opus. Understanding if Elena Bokus and Jelena Bokur were the same person can ultimately allow for the appropriate attribution of the detached house for Jovan Tašković on Hajduk Veljko (Egejska) Street in Skopje to its rightful author.

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Conclusion

Based on the information available to date, it appears that Elena Bokus and Jelena Bokur most likely are the same person, whereby a possible misreading of a handwritten signature or similar had probably contributed to the misidentification of the actual name of one of the first woman architect working on the territory of present North Macedonia. Further research is required to confirm these findings and inform about her life and work, especially within the territory of present North Macedonia.

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