



Unveiling the secrets of sand flies: Transitioning from obliviousness to expertise

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“People never notice anything.” wrote J.D. Salinger in *The Catcher in the Rye*.

I would also like to take this opportunity to tell you an anecdote about ignorance from my own life which, when I remember it, still fills me with a sense of unease and guilt towards my grandmother even after so many years.

Our family home, where my sister and I were born, is in Aleksinac, a small mining town in central Serbia. Our family moved to Niš, 30 kilometres from Aleksinac, relatively soon after my younger sister was born, and only my grandparents stayed in the house. From my childhood, I have fond memories of fun and relaxing warm summers, where we spent 2 months every year playing carefree in the large garden. The house was built in 1936 and had high ceilings. All the rooms had a ship's floor made of beautiful planks and, as I found out later, well-filled earth underneath.

Although we had a dog, several cats, chickens and the occasional mouse or rat as "pets", the most dangerous beast in the house, according to my grandmother, was the bloodthirsty papatać (local name for sandfly).

Although for years she showed us blood stains on the walls from flattened insects and explained that they were not mosquitoes and that they sucked blood but were mute, not only did no one in the family believe her, but we occasionally made fun of her monsters.

Twenty years later, when I applied for my first job at the Institute of Medical Research, the head of the medical entomology laboratory asked me, among other things, whether I would prefer to do research on ticks or papataći. I was not sure if he was teasing me or if he was serious. All I was sure of was that my donkey ears were suddenly growing and I was overwhelmed with intense feelings of guilt and happiness.

My grandmother was not only a wonderful grandmother but also paved the way for my professional success in science and research.

At some point, I realised that my family was responsible for the flourishing of many generations of the *Phlebotmus papatasi* species that lived happily in the old house in our Aleksinac, along with all of us who selflessly contributed to their success.

To right the great injustice done to my grandmother, I decided to scientifically substantiate her claims. I placed my first sticky papers in the room and used a mouth aspirator to suck up all the specimens of sandflies, of which I made permanent slides and then forced all the members of the extended family to look at them with a microscope. In this way, our grandmother received a well-deserved apology and was declared by me to be the first medical entomologist in our family. She then told me that she remembered how, after the First World War, the Serbian soldiers who broke through from Greece and liberated the Kingdom of Serbia from the occupying forces,

brought with them a strange flu-like disease that made people sick en masse. When reviewing the available literature from that time, I found that sandfly fever raged in Serbia at least twice, namely in the period after the First and after the Second World War.

The pioneer of entomological and epidemiological research on phlebotomine sandflies in Serbia was the parasitologist Dr Čedomir Simić, whose enthusiasm for these insects I am proud to pass on to new generations of young medical entomologists from 1935 to the present day. As some of you already know, the species *Phlebotomus simici* was named after this extraordinary parasatologist.

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