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Article Summary: Dr. Olga Stastny, who was graduated from the University of Nebraska Medical School in 1913, struggled against great odds to secure professional training and to practice her skills. Despite her Czech immigrant background and the few women doctors of the time, she made great strides both in the United States and abroad as a physician and was a significant force in eliminating discrimination against female physicians.

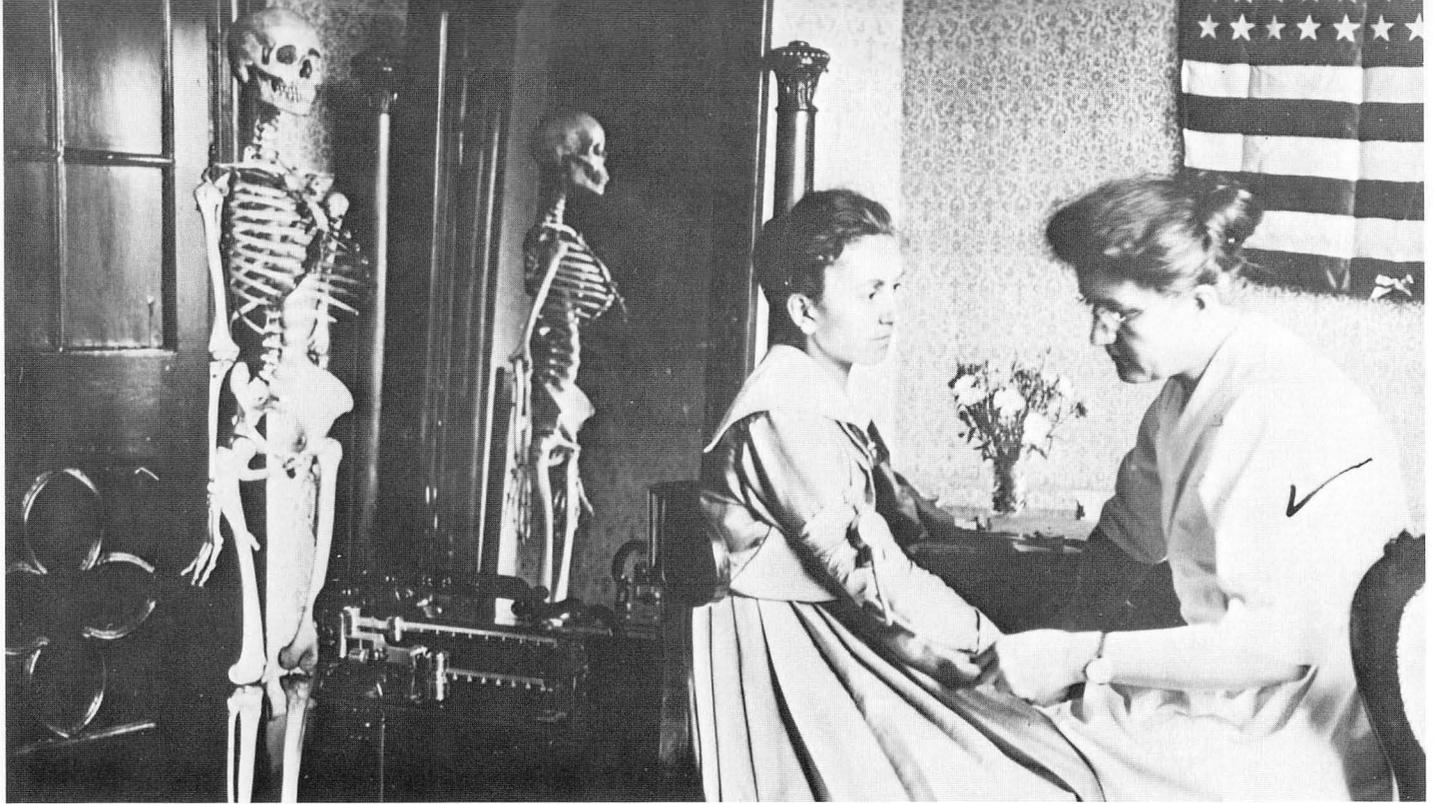
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Photographs / Images: Dr Olga Stastny treating Kyra Klinderma at a Czech and German YWCA Social Service School in Prague, 1919; Family portrait of Olga Stastny with husband Charles and their two children in 1905; Olga Sadilek at the age of twelve, 1890 in Wilber; Dr Stastny working at her desk, 1919; Dr Stastny at a YWCA sponsored clinic for young mothers in Prague, 1919; YMCA library for Czech soldiers at Trencin which included Dr Stastny's booklet on sexual hygiene; Dr Stastny in YMCA uniform, 1920; Dr Stastny with Austrian children from Vienna being taken by the American Relief Association to Switzerland, 1919; Macronissi Island with hospital tents; Dr Smoloff treating patients in children's ward of hospital on Macronissi; Chief dietician Gladys Forilsham and helper John; publicity photo of Dr Stastny during her speaking tour in 1923-1924



Dr. Olga Stastny (right) treating Kyra Klinderma at a Czech and German YWCA Social Service School in Prague, 1919.

DR. OLGA STASTNY, Her Service to Nebraska and the World

By Stepanka Andrews-Koryta

There were few women in the medical profession during the early twentieth century. Male doctors and society in general believed women to be physically and intellectually incapable of working as physicians. Family and church matters were thought to be the proper centers of female concern. Such women as Dr. Olga Stastny, who was graduated from the University of Nebraska Medical School in 1913, struggled against great odds to secure professional training and to practice their skills. Dr. Stastny suffered the additional disadvantage of a Czechoslovakian immigrant background,

which further isolated her from fellow medical students and other physicians.

Olga Stastny was born September 13, 1878, the second of eight children, to Teresa and Francis Sadilek of Wilber. Both her parents were natives of Bohemia, now part of Czechoslovakia. Olga's father was not content to follow his early vocation as a saddler and describes in his memoirs, written in 1914, his desire for public office.¹ Having served as a justice of the peace in Wilber, he was elected to the state legislature in 1882. Sadilek then served as deputy treasurer for four years and in 1897 was elected register of deeds for Saline County, a position he held for twenty-two consecutive years.²

In her autobiographical sketch written for a medical journal in 1935,³ Dr.

Stastny remembered herself as something of a tomboy — a naughty girl who was not fond of playing with dolls. The period between her childhood years and her entrance into medical school seems to have been free from considerations of a professional career. However, she was intrigued by the work of the local midwife, who according to Olga, must have been very skillful since the population of Wilber was constantly growing.

In 1895 at the age of seventeen Olga Sadilek married Charles S. Stastny, a first generation Czech immigrant, who became a dentist. Stastny, an ambitious man, also wanted to secure medical training. He and Olga dreamed of going to medical school, perhaps together. In the meantime two children were born to the Stastnys, a girl and a

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Olga Stastny

boy. In 1907 at the age of twenty-eight, Charles died in Wilber after a gall bladder operation.⁴

The tragedy of her husband's premature death and the responsibility of supporting her family altered Olga's life. Previous plans to further her education, as well as her ambitious father's influence, prompted her to enroll at the University of Nebraska College of Medicine. Later in life Dr. Stastny recalled her registration in 1908:⁵

Less than a year after my husband's death, I found myself registering at the University of Nebraska, a country widow, in black and white gingham, over-serious perhaps, in my time of sorrow, feeling myself almost a misfit when all round the registry desk fluttered gay young girls being rushed by the sororities and going into school happily and light-heartedly.

The life insurance money left by Olga's husband and income from a weekend job with a Czech-language newspaper in Wilber were sufficient to cover expenses. Family members assisted her in meeting the demands of her strenuous schedule. A sister commuted each weekend from Wilber to Lincoln to care for Olga's children while Olga worked in Wilber on her newspaper job.⁶

Although the medical school

Olga Sadilek at the age of twelve, 1890, in Wilber.



Olga Stastny with husband Charles and their two children, 1905. The son, Robert, died in a 1921 airplane crash in Czechoslovakia.

officially accepted female students, Dr. Stastny was the only woman in her class, and her male classmates resented her presence, feeling that women lacked the capacity to learn and practice medicine. Gradually, however, Olga began to be accepted by her fellow students and to adjust to her new environment. She was graduated in 1913 at the age of thirty-five — not unusual since many medical women in Nebraska had embarked on their careers after marriage and the birth of their children. Dr. Stastny served her internship at the New England Hospital for Women and Children in Boston, where she practiced mainly obstetrics in the maternity ward. Her children meanwhile attended boarding school in Boston. After completing her internship, Dr. Stastny returned to Nebraska and opened a private practice on July 1, 1914, in Omaha.⁷

The few women who became physicians in the early 1900s, such as Dr. Stastny, found themselves outside

the mainstream of male-dominated medical education and practice and were only grudgingly accepted as members of the American Medical Association. Thus a small group of women doctors began to work toward organizing their own medical society.⁸ This goal was realized in November 1915 at the Chicago Women's Club, where a relatively radical group of female doctors, including Dr. Stastny, met to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Mary Thompson Hospital in Chicago. The Medical Women's National Association, later renamed the American Medical Women's Association (AMWA), was organized to protect and unite women doctors and to work toward equality of opportunity for female physicians.⁹ However, the new group did not gain the allegiance of all medical women, some of whom preferred to work quietly within the status quo to improve relations with the men's segment of the profession. These more

conservative women doctors preferred to remain unaffiliated if not admitted to existing professional societies.¹⁰

The AMWA held a progressive stance on most medical and social issues. They were interested in securing places for more women in health fields and in improving conditions for, and the image of, women in medicine. Later they supported universal medical insurance and the liberalizing of legislation against birth control. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, women physicians of the AMWA realized that they were being discriminated against by the government and the U.S. Army in matters of war service. The emphasis of the group's struggle changed from general social improvements to eradicating the injustices of the military ranking system, which did not permit women to hold a commissioned rank on the same basis as men.¹¹ The women doctors' attitude towards the government's discrimination against female doctors was demonstrated at the second AMWA annual meeting in New York City in June 1917.¹² Those attending denounced the American government for providing for the enlistment of nurses, but not for women physicians. The medical women, wanting to serve in the same way as did their "professional brothers," called upon the War Department "for a square deal regardless of sex, color, or previous condition of servitude."¹³ War Service Committees were appointed to organize hospital units, and the American Women's Hospitals (AWH), designed as a relief agency, was set up under Rosalie Slaughter Morton.¹⁴

An effort was made to compile a directory of all women doctors in the United States and ascertain which could offer war-related service quickly. Soon the AWH was able to announce to the Medical Board of the Council of National Defense that 1,916 women physicians, forty percent of those surveyed, were willing to serve as contract surgeons or in the branches of the armed forces. Medical women volun-



Dr. Stastny working at her desk, 1919.

teered more promptly and in proportionately higher numbers than their professional male counterparts — despite knowing that they would have lower status in the Army than men.¹⁵

However, Dr. Franklin Martin, chairman of the Medical Board, declared that the continuation of the American Women's Hospitals was not regarded favorably by some board members. Dominated by male doctors, the board tacitly tried to discourage women physicians from enlisting. Women doctors decided to defend their rights. The chairperson of the AWH, Rosalie Slaughter Morton, responded, "I owe it to the cause of women in medicine to continue . . . for evidently many men are still mediocrally minded. They don't seem to know that we have women specialists in all divisions of the *ars medica*, who are on a par with the men of this or any other country."¹⁶ Morton, a surgeon, wrote in her autobiography that she used her influential friends at the Justice Department to see that women physicians were allowed to go to France on October 14, 1917. More probably the AWH women were permitted to go because they did so as a volunteer unit of the Red Cross — which accepted them somewhat reluc-

tantly. The Red Cross did not oppose women physicians but did discourage independent medical units abroad as a threat to its control over relief work. However, France and Serbia had requested immediate help and since the AWH volunteer unit was at hand, women were sent.¹⁷

Dr. Stastny supported the war effort while a practicing physician in Omaha, where she organized the Americanization Department of the Nebraska Council of Defense.¹⁸ She was instrumental in a one-day effort to collect funds on the streets of Omaha to purchase an ambulance for use by the American Women's Hospitals,¹⁹ which she had joined in 1917. The possible commissioning of women physicians was then being widely discussed, and Dr. Stastny, hoping to obtain a commission, sought to join the Medical Reserve Corps. Keenly interested in overseas medical service, however, she ceased caring about obtaining a rank as the war progressed. To an Omaha newspaper she asserted, "I want to get to France, even if I have to scrub floors."²⁰ She twice received orders from the Red Cross in July 1918 to get ready for departure for France — and the orders were twice cancelled. Finally in January 1919, Dr. Stastny did join the First Unit of the AWH in France, where she was to do relief work in the devastated area of Seine-et-Marne, east of Paris.²¹

Dr. Olga Stastny was stationed in the village of Luzancy about sixty miles from Paris. American medical women there set up a model hospital in a chateau and established thirty dispensaries. Although Dr. Stastny was made a citizen of Luzancy and was awarded the *Medaille de Reconnaissance* by the French government, as were the other AWH members, she felt that her delayed departure for France had prevented her from taking full part in the medical service there. She served as an anesthesiologist and escorted patients to and from their homes. Dr. Stastny commented, "I feel that my part in it (the AWH in France) was earned, to a

Olga Stastny

great extent, by those who preceded me, as I was one of the late comers and the greatest war work was done by the first members to go.”²² Thus, while recovering in June 1919 from a short illness in a Paris hospital, she welcomed an offer from Dr. Alice Masarykova, daughter of the president of the newly created country of Czechoslovakia, to chair the Department of Hygiene and Social Service in the Social Service Training School of Prague. Dr. Masarykova hoped that Dr. Stastny as an American would bring to the school not only a fresh view of the social services but the prestige and authority generally attributed to Americans in Europe after World War I.²³

During Dr. Stastny’s years in Czechoslovakia, which she later described as “the happiest . . . of my life, though the busiest,”²⁴ she established a child welfare station in Prague and assisted with a survey of nurses in that city, as a result of which the American Red Cross later established a nurses’ training school in Prague.²⁵ She lectured on her past experiences as an obstetrician and assisted with the 1919 campaign against tuberculosis sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation and aided by the organizational efforts of Dr. Masarykova, also president of the Czechoslovakian Red Cross.²⁶

Dr. Stastny then assumed the chairmanship of the Health Department of the YMCA and toured Czechoslovakia for several years to lecture on preventive medicine and sexual hygiene to soldiers in major army camps. Her lectures did not need to be translated since she was fluent in the language of her ancestors. Dr. Stastny spoke in support of fidelity and romantic love and in her talks discussed the evils of prostitution. She brought up the problems caused by a double standard of sexual behavior for men and women:²⁷ “If a woman is a prostitute, society looks down at her, but it looks normally at a man who lives immorally, because it is commonly held that men have to remain sexually active in order to stay



Dr. Stastny (left) at a YWCA-sponsored clinic for young mothers in Prague, 1919 . . . (Below) The YMCA library for Czech soldiers at Trencin included Dr. Stastny's booklet on sexual hygiene.

healthy.” Dr. Stastny did not praise this aspect of male behavior but urged men to correct such injustices. She received many letters thanking her for her advice. “I shall never forget the way she (Olga Stastny) . . . the only lady in the hall spoke to us,” recalled one soldier from Pardubice, a town in eastern Bohemia. He recalled in a letter to the journal *Vestnik* that Olga Stastny

was a tall, attractive, motherly woman.²⁸ Czech army officials in several towns compelled all soldiers to attend her lectures.

At the request of the Slovak Ministry of Education, Dr. Stastny lectured also to teenage girls in several Slovak schools about their femininity, the modern role of women, and the importance of a clean moral life for the health



Dr. Stastny in YMCA uniform, 1920 . . . (Right) Dr. Stastny with Austrian children from Vienna being taken by the American Relief Association to Switzerland to improve their health, 1919.

of the nation.²⁹ She received much recognition for her work from individuals, officials of the Czechoslovakian government, and from members of private organizations with whom she had worked.

Her work in Czechoslovakia was abruptly ended by a fatal accident involving her son Robert in April 1921 while he was touring the country. While in Prague Robert was given the opportunity to go aloft in an airplane. He went up once and then a second time with another young woman passenger. The plane crashed, killing both the pilot and the girl instantly; Robert lived for only six hours. Dr. Olga Stastny was at his bedside when he died.³⁰

Grieving over the accident, Dr. Stastny returned to the United States. After a brief respite, she toured the Midwest, sharing her overseas experiences and emphasizing to the "good people of America that their every gift to the people of Czechoslo-

vakia would be received with inexpressible gratitude."³¹

In 1923 Dr. Stastny decided to return to Europe for further medical study. She spent six weeks at a clinic in Czechoslovakia and then traveled to Berlin, where she planned to do postgraduate work in pelvic pathology. In November 1923 she received from the headquarters of the American Women's Hospitals in New York City the following cable: "Will you go to Athens, badly needed, answer immediately." With little hesitation, Dr. Stastny left for Athens on December 23, spending Christmas Eve in a Hungarian hotel.³²

On January 2, 1924, Dr. Stastny arrived on Loutraki, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea, where she was to work as medical director.³³ In season, it would have been a holiday area, but the hotels were now filled with 3,600 refugees from Turkey. The exodus of Christians was a consequence of the

loss of the Greek holdings in Turkey, which resulted from World War I and the nationalist Turkish movement headed by Mustafa Kemal. The Turks wanted to rid their country of Christians who had lived there for several centuries, prompting the arrival of 1.5 million refugees on Greek shores.

In her role as medical director, Dr. Stastny first established a dispensary and ordered the refugees segregated by sex in order to reduce the spread of infectious disease. The situation was beginning to improve when in late January typhus broke out. Dr. Stastny tried disinfection where possible, but the inadequate facilities prevented the strict segregation necessary to stop the disease. Eventually Dr. Stastny was reassigned to another post.³⁴

Although she regretted her inability to accomplish more on Loutraki, Dr. Stastny poured her energies into her next assignment on Macronissi Island. She worked in a quarantine station,

Olga Stastny

supervising the reception of refugees from boats crowded with the sick and dying.³⁵ The American Red Cross and the Near East Relief Organization supplied the quarantine station with drugs, bedding, surgical supplies, old clothing, and personnel. The post was flooded with refugees; 12,000 were cared for during the month of February 1924. Dr. Stastny recalled ten years later, "I look back at the entire picture and wonder where the courage came from to keep us carrying on."³⁶

Some days there was a shortage of food and water. The burial of those who did not survive was a daily occurrence. Dr. Stastny had been warned about the danger from thirst-maddened refugees but decided to stay on the island. "My children are grown and married," she said. "I have no duties which should take precedence over my duties here."³⁷

Dr. Esther Pohl Lovejoy, a member of the executive board of the American Women's Hospitals, termed Dr. Stastny "the heroine of that hour" for her work on Macronissi Island and wrote:³⁸

Her presence inspired confidence. She was six feet tall, very handsome, unconsciously commanding . . . In spite of all the dangers and difficulties, she stayed on the island for five months, leaving her post but twice for a few hours during this time.

In appreciation of the services of Dr. Stastny and the other medical women the Greek government awarded them the Cross of St. George. The Nebraska doctor was pleased with the recognition and particularly for "the knowledge that for at least one time in your life, you were able to bring some joy and comfort to those who had suffered so very, very much."³⁹ She returned to the United States in 1924 and re-

established her practice in Omaha, specializing in diseases of women.⁴⁰ However, the time she had spent on Macronissi left an indelible mark on her life. Her assistant and close friend died there of typhus. Having seen such extreme poverty, she tried during a subsequent speaking tour to impress upon the American people the need for them to materially help the countries of the Near East.

In 1925 she was selected as a delegate to the Chicago convention of the American Medical Women's Association and there elected a delegate to an international conference of medical women held in London.⁴¹ She later served as association president and treasurer. In 1925 she joined the faculty of the University of Nebraska College of Medicine as a clinical assistant. She was named assistant instructor in obstetrics and gynecology

Macronissi Island with hospital tents.

hospital end of Macronissi Island



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in 1929; instructor in 1931; and emeritus professor in 1948.⁴²

Dr. Stastny received for her work in medicine numerous honors and awards, not only from foreign governments, but from U.S. professional societies and medical schools. She recalled with special pride:⁴³

In 1931 the Phi Delta Epsilon, Alpha Chi Chapter of Creighton University of Omaha awarded me at the annual meeting of the Nebraska State Society the Noguchi Gold Medal 'for meritorious service in the field of preventive medicine.' This recognition of my attempt at service, my great interest in preventive medicine awarded me at home, was a tribute which I felt was a real compliment. The committee deciding on the award was made up of the finest professional men in our community, among them the deans of both colleges, the University of Nebraska College of Medicine and Creighton University College of Medicine.



Dr. Stastny in 1943 gave up the heavy duties of a private practice and accepted the position of medical director of the Supreme Forest Woodman Circle Insurance Company. She continued her life-long work in civic and charitable organizations, serving as a trustee of Doane College at Crete and the University of Nebraska Foundation.⁴⁴ Dr. Stastny died in 1952 at the age of 74.



Dr. Smoloff treating patients in children's ward of hospital on Macronissi . . . (Below) Chief dietician Gladys Forilsham (with notebook) and helper John (with ladle).

Dr. Olga Stastny is today remembered chiefly for her medical service overseas after World War I. She and most American women doctors returned to the United States with awards and decorations from various European and Eastern countries for their heroic work. Dr. Stastny and most others reopened their medical practices and continued successful careers. However, the general status of women physicians was not greatly changed. They still faced discrimination in medical schools and in obtaining internships. Most medical women had not vigorously demanded equal opportunity in military enlistment in 1917 because it was not believed patriotic. Many, like Dr. Stastny, were prepared to "scrub floors" overseas in return for the privilege of doing relief work. During World War I Surgeon General William Gorgas had agreed with the

American Medical Women's Association that justice demanded equal opportunity for women doctors, but he argued that time could not be spared from the war effort to pass the necessary legislation. He promised that in any future wars women physicians would be commissioned on an equal basis with men.⁴⁵ Nurses were commissioned in 1920 but nothing

comparable was done for women doctors.

The outbreak of World War II revived the issue. The U.S. government at first hoped to employ women doctors only on a contract basis or (after 1942) confine them to service with the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACS). However, the growing conviction that medical women should not

Olga Stastny

be relegated to second-class military status culminated in the passage of the Sparkman-Johnson bill, signed into law on April 16, 1943.⁴⁶ Fortunately Dr. Olga Stastny lived to see the enactment of this legislation permitting women doctors to enter the Army and Navy Medical Corps on an equal footing with their professional brothers.

NOTES

¹F.J. Sadilek, *Z Mych Upominek* (Omaha, Nebraska: Narodni Tiskarna, 1914), 40.

²*The Wilber Republican*, March 31, 1933.

³Olga Stastny, M.D., "Autobiographical Sketch," *Medical Review of Reviews* (August 1935):410-23.

⁴*Saline County Democrat* (Wilber), November 26, 1907.

⁵"Autobiographical Sketch," 413-14.

⁶Eva Mahoney, "Omaha Woman Laborer in Cause of Suffering Humanity," *Omaha World-Herald*, August 28, 1927.

⁷"Autobiographical Sketch," 414-15.

⁸Mary Roth Walsh, *Doctors Wanted, No Women Need Apply* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 213-16.

⁹Esther Pohl Lovejoy, *Women Physicians and Surgeons* (Livingston, N.Y.: The Livingston Press, 1929), 3-4.

¹⁰Walsh, 216-17.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 217-18.

¹²Rosalie Slaughter Morton, *A Woman Surgeon* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1937), 270. Lovejoy, *Women Physicians*, 4-5.

¹³Esther Pohl Lovejoy, *Certain Samaritans*



Copies of this photo of Dr. Stastny were used to publicize her U.S. speaking tour on behalf of Near East relief during late 1923 and early 1924.

(New York City: The Macmillan Co., 1933), 7.

¹⁴Lovejoy, *Women Physicians*, 6. Morton, 269-93.

¹⁵Morton, 280-82.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 283-84.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 284-88.

¹⁸"In Memoriam," *The Journal of the Omaha Mid-West Clinical Society* 14 (January 1953): 37.

¹⁹"Autobiographical Sketch," 416.

²⁰"Omaha's Grandmother Doctor Awaits Her Call," *Omaha World-Herald*, 1918, in Olga Stastny Collection, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society. Hereafter referred to as Stastny Collection.

²¹"Autobiographical Sketch," 416.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*, 417.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Letter, October 10, 1919, from Dr. Alice Masarykova, in Stastny Collection.

²⁷Olga Stastny, *Poctive Jednani* (Praha: YMCA, 1919), 9.

²⁸James Truhlar, "I Knew Dr. Olga Stastny," *Bratrsky Vestnik* 60 (April 1957):112. There are numerous other references to Dr. Stastny's height of nearly six feet.

²⁹Letter, August 18, 1919, from Educational Ministry official, Bratislava, in Stastny Collection.

³⁰*Colfax County Press* (Clarkson), July 28, 1921.

³¹Mahoney, "Omaha Woman."

³²"Autobiographical Sketch," 418-19.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Ibid.*, 420-21.

³⁵Mahoney, "Omaha Woman."

³⁶"Autobiographical Sketch," 422.

³⁷Lovejoy, *Certain Samaritans*, 234.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 234, 237.

³⁹"Autobiographical Sketch," 422.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 423.

⁴¹"Olga Stastny, M.D.," *The Medical Woman's Journal* 7 (June 1930):149.

⁴²"In Memoriam."

⁴³"Autobiographical Sketch," 423.

⁴⁴Helen Elizabeth Robinson, "Dr. Olga Frances Stastny" (typed biographical sketch in Stastny Collection), 6.

⁴⁵Walsh, 226.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 226-30.