

Grigor Purlichev (1830-1893)

Grigor Purlichev was born in the city of Ochrid, where he attended the local elementary school and the teacher of which was, for a time, Dimiter Miladinov, the brother of Constantin Miladinov. The Miladinovs are distinguished for the publication in 1860 of the first anthology of *Bulgarski Narodni Pesni*, collected from the Bulgarian people in Macedonia.

On his graduation from the Ochrid school, Purlichev went to Athens and was enrolled there in the school of Medicine. Later, however, he returned to his native city, where he taught school and fought for the liberation of Macedonia and the preservation of the Bulgarian nationality. He was a talented poet and ardent Bulgarian patriot who loved his people and nationality more than his personal success and fame. His poem *Serdarut* (known also as "*Armatolos*") has been translated from Greek into Bulgarian by G. Balsacheff, and published in the *Collection of Bulgarian Folk Songs* in 1897, Volume 11, Sofia, Bulgaria.

Grigor Purlichev sacrificed fame, talent, career, material gains and personal well being before the altar of the enslaved Bulgarian people; he himself died in poverty and misery, but with that rewarding and noble feeling: the fulfillment of his national duty toward his people and his fatherland.

The following is an excerpt of his *Autobiography*, translated from the original by Nicola Roussanoff in 1969. In his notes Roussanoff writes:

"I did the translation with only one thing in mind: to show to the younger generation of Bulgarians the kind of Bulgarians that lived in the land of their parents and grandparents."

One consolation for my misfortunes in the past was the arrival of Mitre (Dimiter) Miladinov, the new teacher in Ochrid. He and his young bride took lodging in my grandfather's house. Prior to his arrival we had more than 10 other teachers, but no one of them was as useful as was Miladinov. There was something pleasant and attractive in everything he did or said. His voice and words were like honey. A sacred fire was constantly burning in his eyes. Until his arrival we did not know anything about arithmetic. Acting on his advice, the senior students of our school – I was one of them – formed "Study Circles" and carried with them the three thick volumes of *The Lexicon*, by A. Gazi. We used to get together in someone's house, and for hours and hours we would read the words of Plutarch and had them translated in the modern Greek language. Oh, my Lord! What absorbing memory we had then!

At that time Miladinov also introduced us to the Italian language. And within only six months time we were all able to translate the entire first volume of *Telemakh*. The final examinations were completely a stunning success. Miladinov's reputation as a teacher spread far and wide in Macedonia, and even from the westernmost parts of Albania, came to study in the school of Ochrid. They all wanted to study under the guidance and supervision of Miladinov.

I was going to Athens not only to continue my education but also to cure my illness. I thought at that time that the Greek physicians in Athens were the best in the world, as there were no better poets in the world than Omar. Had this not been the case, my mother would never let me go.

I arrived in Athens in August of 1859 and enrolled myself in the School of Medicine as a second-year student. But even then I continued to write verses in my spare time. I had just started my poem *Serdarut* at that time. I knew that the poem had to be submitted to the awarding committee not later than the 13th of February, but I was not aware the fact that the signature of the author should have been affixed separately in a separate envelope, on the outside of which the best verse of the poem was to be written. On March 25th, 1860, the chairman of the committee for the competition, Mr. Rangavis, began the literary evaluation of submitted entries in public, commencing with the poor ones first. Among the public, and right in the front row were sitting both Mr. Orphanidis, a talented and widely recognized Greek poet, and Mr. Vermandavis, Professor of Philology at the University of Athens, both of them in high spirits and in very optimistic mood and expectations. They were firmly convinced that they were going to win the wreath, or at least the money prize. I was, of course, standing, as were the majority of the public because there were not enough seats.

However, when Rangavis said: "Finally there is a poem, rather shorter than the rest, entitled *Serdarut*", I then felt a special kind of sensation, and an indescribable excitement, feeling that I have never felt before in my life. No one would have been able to recognize me at that moment. I was out of my mind with joy. It was clear: the wreath and the prize were mine.

I am now describing all of this in such details because I want our youth to know I am not writing this for personal glorification, but for the glorification of our people.

We, the Bulgarians, have been insulted and looked upon with contempt by all the people of the world for a very long time. It is about time that we awaken and become proud of ourselves. When one reads our folk songs, in which every beauty is called a Greek woman, one unwillingly arrives at the unavoidable conclusion that the self-contempt is a characteristic attribute of the Bulgarian people. The industry of the Bulgarian people could be rarely matched by any other people in the world. This has sustained us: it has been, it now is, and it is going to be our only salvation. If it were true that idleness is the mother of all evils, it is all the more true that industry and hard work are the father of virtue.

What kind of qualities could other peoples have that we ourselves lack? Since I have listened to all kinds of insults addressed against the Bulgarian people, I have all my life lived with the thought that we are not worth anything at all as people. This very thought of mine has hindered my access to the highest circles of society without which no one could become either a famous citizen or a Messiah. It is true that the boastful and the arrogant one is never successful in life, but it is also true that the one who underestimates himself is committing a suicide. The former sin is far more dangerous, but as far as we Bulgarians are concerned, we have to be on our watchful guard against the latter. We should trust our own strength and rely on our own work.

Finally, Professor Rangavis said: "The competition committee declares that it considers this last poem to be the best one this year, and it therefore bestows the wreath to the poem *Serdarut*." He did not

mention “the money prize”, but only the wreath. Why? The wreath was placed on a plush and richly decorated table in front of Professor Rangavis himself. However, he did not call my name, or rather my initials, nor did he give the prize to me in the presence of the public, as was customary on this occasion. Why? The main reason was the fact that the names of the heroines of the poem, such as Stoyanka, Neda, Galichka, and Pena, did not apparently sound to him like Greek names.

I did not share my happiness with any one and I left the gathering even before the ceremony was over. Afterward, I called on Professor Rangavis and told him that I was the author of *Serdarut*. He welcomed me very warmly and with a solemn voice he called out his wife and introduced me to her. Then he told me:

“You have allotted half the money prize to some worthy cause?”

“Yes! That’s what I wrote and I don’t deny it!”

“This generosity of yours is a very commendable one, indeed; but what about the other half?”

This strange question bewildered me: “I need the other half, I am not rich!”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty years old.”

“What is your nationality?”

“Bulgarian!”

“No, it can’t be! It is impossible for a Bulgarian to have black hair and black eyes!”

To this I did not answer, but only fixed my eyes on his. He lowered his eyes. Professor Rangavis was stupefied by my boldness. The conversation became impossible, and I had to withdraw and go home. Three days later I was summoned by the University authorities. The first question they asked me was:

“What is your nationality?”

“Bulgarian!” They fell silent.

“Could you tell us by heart a few verses from the poem *Serdarut*?”

“All of it, if you wish me to.” And I began to recite.

They were astonished; until now they had been firmly convinced that the poem could not have been written by me.

“How would you like to be sent to Oxford or to Berlin to study on a government scholarship?”

I comprehended that their goal was to make me a civil servant of the Greek Government, so I told them straight:

“I am needed and expected at home!”

Then the Dean got up and handed the laurel to me with the hanging silken ribbons in the colours of Hellen’s national flag. He also counted me 500 drahmas.

“The other 500” he told me, “according to your written instructions have been given to a needy seminary student.”

“You have done well that you spared us both the embarrassment of knowing each other; otherwise we would have been ashamed of each other every time we met at the University”, I told them.

Several month later poverty knocked on my door again. But since I was sure that by writing another poem I would be able to make some money, my poverty did not disturb me as much as the universal hatred of the Athenians toward me, a hatred that was increasing with every passing day. They would have loved me very much, even much more than a son or a brother so long as they still entertained the hope that one day I would allow the Greek ideas to penetrate my heart, and thereby become a servant of the Greek spirit and ambitions. However, when they realized that I loved my own people and nationality more than my own life, they all abandoned me as if by a mutual general agreement. Not only my former friends, or my fellow students, or even my fellow countrymen ever greeted me anymore. The only one who remained loyal to me as a friend was Yakim Sapoundjieff. We talked together very often about our fatherland.

One day the deacon of the Russian church in Athens told me with a sorrowful tone and deep sadness in his voice: “The Miladinov brothers have perished in the jail in Constantinople, and...they were perhaps poisoned. That is what I read today in *Dunavsky Lebed* (Danubian Swan).”

On hearing this I was stunned; I could neither move nor say anything for some time, but inside me my heart was cursing the Greek clergy.

Soon afterward I packed my meager belongings. The poem *Skenderbey* I left with Mr. Yakim Sapoundjieff, with the request to have it submitted before the commission. Then I set out my way with the firm resolution to perish in avenging the death of the Miladinov brothers who were most probably poisoned by the Greek Phanariots*. The Miladinov brothers collection of *Bulgarian Folk Songs* were collected mainly from Bulgarians living in the geographical region commonly known as Macedonia.

- The term *Phanar* or *Phanariots* is applied to that quarter of Constantinople in which the Greek Patriarch resides. It was the center of a Greek aristocracy, half hierarchal and half commercial, which lent its services to the Turks. As a result of a strenuous agitation and petitioning of the Bulgarians to have their own church, separated from the Patriarchate Greek Church, the Grand Vasir was impelled to issue in February 1870, a *Firman* whereby the “Exarchate of all Bulgaria” was established. Thus, the schism between the Bulgarian and the Greek Phanariate Church began. *Notes of the Editor*