

## **Paissi of Chilendar**

Founder of the Bulgarian Renaissance

By Assen Nicoloff

Two hundred years ago\*, while the American colonies were preparing to proclaim their independence from England, the Bulgarians – descendants of a people which had known better days in the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries (the periods of the First and Second Bulgarian Kingdoms) – were in danger of extinction. Bulgarians of wealth and education solemnly pronounced themselves to be Greeks and faithful subjects of the Ottoman sultan, because at that particular moment for over three centuries politically the country was a part of the Ottoman Empire and spiritually under the authority of the Greek Patriarch in Constantinople. Only the vast majority of uneducated Bulgarian peasants, who cultivated the farms of their Turkish landlords, refused to accept the grim reality of national extinction. They went on as usual with their chores and on Sundays and holidays attended church where mass was conducted in Greek, a language utterly unintelligible to the common people both in village and town communities. But at home these commoners continued to communicate with each other by speaking Bulgarian. The new generations, born in simple Bulgarian homes, were raised in Bulgarian traditions and folklore. Mothers spoke to their children in Bulgarian and taught them to sing Bulgarian songs. Isolated churches and monasteries were the only places where Bulgarian manuscripts were kept.

It was during these times that Paisii was born in 1722 in Bansko, the Diocese of Samokov. Very little is known of the life of the founder of Bulgarian renaissance. In 1745, at the age of twenty-three, he visited his brother Lavrentii at Mt. Athos, not far from Salonika, and remained as a monk at the monastery of Chilendar. There he had an opportunity to participate in discussions where questions of political and historical significance were debated and opinions on matters pertaining to religion were expressed. Greek, Russian, and Serbian monks at Mt. Athos mocked their Bulgarian brethren and stated that the latter belonged to a race of soil-tillers and shepherds. Therefore such simple folks had no history even worth mentioning. These rash and untrue statements provoked Father paisii to busy himself collecting and organizing information on Bulgarian history. In spite of ill health he was able to systematize the collected material and in 1762, when he was forty years of age, to put the finishing touches to his Slaviano-Bulgarian History. Thus he proved to his adversaries that the Bulgarians had a glorious past.

He proudly declared that he wrote his book for all Bulgarians who loved their country and people, and who wanted to know about their own race and language.

On the other hand, turning to all Hellenized Bulgarians, he castigated them in the following terms:

“O thou foolish and degenerate man, why art thou ashamed to call thyself a Bulgarian? Have not the Bulgarians had a Kingdom and Empire of their own? Why shouldest thou, O imprudent man, be ashamed of thy nation and shouldest labor in a foreign tongue?” – Quoted from Clarence A. Manning Roman Smalstocki, *The History of Modern Bulgarian Literature*, p. 51.

Then, he went on to explain:

“There was a time when the Bulgarians were famous throughout the world; many times they have imposed tribute upon the strong Romans and the wise Greeks;...of all the Slavonic peoples the Bulgarians have been the most illustrious. They were the first to receive baptism, the first to have a patriarch, the ones who made most conquests, , the first Slavonic saints were of the Bulgarian race.” Quoted from L.S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans Since 1453*, p. 370.

Paissi's work was not an objective history, but its emotional appeal fired the imagination of his countrymen. It aroused the dormant patriotism of the Bulgarian people and created a modern miracle – this book saved a nation which was on the verge of extinction.

Paissi's patriotism did not stop with his writing. He went about the country urging his audiences to study Bulgaria's illustrious past and have a greater respect for their heritage and be proud of their nationality.

The first handwritten copy was produced from the original manuscript of Slaviano-Bulgarian History in 1765 by Stoiko Vladislavov, a young priest who later became Bishop Sofronii of Vratza. Of the great number of handwritten copies of Paissi's history there are over fifty extant manuscripts existing today. Another eighty years elapsed before this book was printed. A schoolteacher made a revised version of the *Slaviano-Bulgarian History* and published it in Buda (Hungary) in 1844 without mentioning Paissi's name. It was called *Tsarstvenik* (Book of Kings) and was used as a history textbook in Bulgarian schools over a hundred years ago.

Paissi's pioneer work bore fruit. In a little over a century the Bulgarians won their national church (in 1870). Later, as a result of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, their country was set up as a tributary principality – the prelude to complete political independence proclaimed in 1908.

Father Paissi's dreams of Bulgarian heritage in the second half of the eighteenth century became a reality for his fellow Bulgarians a century later.

\*The text was written in 1962 by *Assen Nicoloff, Cleveland, Ohio*

### **Text, translated into English, under the facsimile of Paissi's handwriting**

“I wrote it for you who love your race and the Bulgarian fatherland, and also want to know about your race and language. Copy this little history and pay to have it copied for you by those who know how to write. And then see that it is not destroyed.”