

## **Ivan Vazov (1850-1921)**

### **The Patriarch of the Bulgarian Literature**

BY N. ROUSSANOFF

In the History of the Bulgarian literature the national poet Ivan Vazov is such a rare unique phenomenon, as was Khan Asparukh in the political history of the Bulgarian people, the two brothers Sts. Cyril and Methodius, the Bulgarian Prince Boris in the history of the spiritual and intellectual development of the Bulgarians, and Father Paissy and the fiery Georgi S. Rakovsky in the history of the Bulgarian National Awakening.

All of them have one thing in common: they put the cornerstone and laid the foundation of something new and great, something that was destined to outlive them, and by so doing radically changed the future course of history for the people inhabiting that part of the Balkan Peninsula known as Bulgaria for more than a millennium. The area inhabited by the Bulgarian people extends from the Danube River on the north to the Aegean Sea on the south, and from the Black Sea on the east to Albania on the west, a country recorded in the annals of history as the land of the Bulgarians.

Ivan Vazov was born a Turkish subject in the then enslaved Bulgarian Thrace but when he died some 70 years later, he was acclaimed and officially acknowledged as the greatest Bulgarian national poet. He was often affectionately referred to as "Grandpa Ivan" by old and young alike in Bulgaria. During his lifetime Vazov won the love and confidence of his people and thus he became the voice and conscience of the entire Bulgarian nation. He sang passionately about the aspirations and the ideals, the faith and the despair, the victories and defeats of the Bulgarian people in the struggle to obtain justice, achieve national unity after centuries of Turkish political domination and Greek spiritual oppression. Ivan Vazov sang exuberantly full of joy, and wept bitterly, sorrow-stricken, together with his beloved people, through all turbulent vicissitudes of recent Bulgarian history. He was bitterly criticized, persecuted and forced to flee the country, and for a short period of time he was even negated as a poet. His literary fate hung in the balance immediately after the advent of the Communist regime in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, his literary achievement was not affected, his popularity and greatness were not overshadowed, and his genius today is shining as ever in Bulgaria. And how could it be otherwise? How could anyone "extinguish that which is inextinguishable" and deprive a person of that which mother nature has so lavishly showered upon him?

Vazov's songs are deeply embedded in the hearts of the Bulgarians, regardless of age and place of residence, and there is no power in the world capable of obliterating them. Were we to remove his literary works from the treasure of the Bulgarian literature, it would be the same as the English literature would be if it were deprived of the works of Shakespeare.

In Bulgaria today Ivan Vazov is acclaimed again as the greatest national poet and his works, in prose and poetry, are being constantly republished.

In the recent past Vazov has been unjustly accused of funneling aggressive nationalism and chauvinism in some of his fervently patriotic poems. But Vazov was not a chauvinist and could not have been one because of his own nature. He was simply a Bulgarian patriot, an honest and sincere man, plunging into the morass of national injustices and subjugation inflicted upon his people who deserved a better fate. Hence, the poet merely expressed the indignation of the Bulgarian

people against the evils of national calamities resulting from the greediness of its neighboring states manipulated by the Great Powers in their power-politics and diplomatic maneuvers.

Vazov was the complete embodiment and personification of the Bulgarian people, and their national aspirations. And if he is to be accused of chauvinistic tendencies, then one must level the same accusation against the entire Bulgarian people. But history teaches us, if it teaches us anything at all, that throughout its long history the Bulgarian people have never aspired to conquer and subjugate foreign people and territory. Its struggles have always been preventive measures, that is, wars for self-preservation and national unification, but never for conquests. Hence, Vazov's aspirations, like those of the Bulgarian nation, were the unification of the Bulgarian lands which have been left under foreign domination. And for this purpose three unsuccessful wars have been waged by the Bulgarian state, to redeem the Bulgarians living in Thrace and Macedonia.

That Vazov was not the lusty chauvinist as some want us to believe, he was, quite on the contrary, humanistic, a national poet and a citizen of the world; it could be from many of his artistic works, but most of all from his poem "In the Dugout," and his short story, "Is He Coming?" In the former he lovingly depicts a heart-breaking moving scene of a brotherly friendship between two enemy soldiers, a Bulgarian and a Serbian; in peace time they were neighbors and knew each other well, but in the heat of the fratricidal battle they have mutually wounded themselves and agonizing in the very last hour of their life, they exchange reminiscences and mutually consoling each other beg for forgiveness. A very touching scene, indeed!

In the above short story Granny Tzena, whose son was fighting in the war against Serbia which treacherously attacked Bulgaria in 1885, at the sight of the captured Serbian war prisoners she exclaimed: "Oh, look at them, they are just like our folks, the poor ones" speaks eloquently about the author's sentiments. The same Granny Tzena, whose son was killed in the war by the Serbians, gave food and wine to the captured enemy soldiers and consoled them with a motherly love. Could a chauvinist write the way Vazov has written in the poem and the short story mentioned above? Don't these two examples repudiate outright all the accusations of Ivan Vazov of chauvinism and extreme nationalism?

No, Vazov was not a chauvinist or war-monger. He abhorred war and violence and he never advocated them; yet he strongly hated slavery because he has known it himself; he also cherished very dearly the historical heritage of his own people whom he loved with all his poetic heart and to whom he has devoted all his life. Thus, it is understandable why this poet of beauty and love, categorically and firmly declared: "We don't give it away" that which is our birthright, that which belongs to us, and the heritage of our ancestors throughout the ages, our land and our people. Is this not the natural and undeniable right of every man, to cherish the sacred memory of his forefathers, protect their legacy and guard it as the apple of his own eye? Is this chauvinism? Let the reader of the poem below decide for himself.

NO, WE DON'T GIVE IT AWAY !

By Ivan Vazov

For our father's sacred land, in  
war and peace, we pray,

No, our cherished native soil, we don't give it away!

No, we don't give away the ashes of Tzar Samuil,

Nor the greatness and the deed of Saints Methody and Cyril!

It's ours ! For centuries she wore together with us  
The thorny wreaths of slavery and yoke with a heart of brass.  
Yes, they're ours, Salonica and Shar, Rila and Pirin,  
And all the songs about them that minstrels chat and sing!  
No, we don't give it away, as we never will  
The sacred legacy of our fathers' dead-will,  
And the cherished apple of our precious eyes!  
No, we don't give it away, till God reigns, till we die,  
Till Bulgarian native tongue loudly resounds, clear and high,  
There in the valleys, in the rolling hills, in the summits of the skies !

*(Translated from the Bulgarian) Nicholas Roussanoff*

Hereditary bondsmen ! Know ye not  
Who would be free, themselves must  
Strike the blow?

*Lord Byron*

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