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## Aleko Konstantinov: An Intellectual Profile

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

# ALEKO KONSTANTINOV: AN INTELLECTUAL PROFILE

*Petko Ivanov & Valentina Izmirlieva*

**B**ulgarian culture at the end of the nineteenth century was preoccupied with domestic issues determined by both historical circumstance and the prevailing rural mentality of the Bulgarians. The parameters of cultural endeavors were fixed territorially on the map of the newly liberated country and were confined to conceptualizing the native *per se*, the horizons of the foreign world not reaching beyond the Balkans. Set against this background the entire life and oeuvre of Aleko Konstantinov (1863 - 1897) was a continuous pioneer effort to unclose this self-centered Bulgarian culture both spatially as well as intellectually. This man, who was remembered among his compatriots by his first name only as a sign of utmost intimacy, and who dubbed himself semi-ironically "the Lucky One", was the paradigmatic modern Bulgarian *homo viator*. Graphic anecdotal details of his biography are his initiation of the first Bulgarian tourist club, his confession that he loved best the fragrance of steamships and locomotives, or his trips to Russia where he read law, and to Paris, Prague and London in defiance of his chronic lack of money. Konstantinov was the first to replace the traditional Bulgarian concept of pragmatic (business) traveling with that of traveling as an intellectual quest, and by testing himself and his literary characters away

from the sheltered territory of the native he for the first time contested the variables of Bulgarian identity and its ostensible clarity.

The culmination of his career in the art of traveling was his visit to the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893. This American experience germinated the textual crystallization of Aleko's views about traveling in a remarkable book, *To Chicago and Back (1894)* which to these days remains the best Bulgarian travelogue. There he traces chronologically his journey to the Exposition, including en route a cameo description of the Niagara Falls, which is often anthologized separately as a masterpiece of its genre. The book is built upon a series of counterpoints that synergistically amount to a triple juxtaposition of Bulgaria vs. Europe vs. America. The center of this constellation is Chicago envisioned as a nexus of utopias and anti-utopias of the New World and of modern technological society as represented spatially by two antipodal metaphors: the White City of the Exposition and Porkopolis of the stockyards. Among the numerous foreign travelogues apropos of the World's Columbian Exposition Aleko's work is the only one that had a significant resonance in a non-American culture. *To Chicago and Back* is this indispensable



interpretative filter through which generations of Bulgarians have screened their anticipation and impressions of the United States.

The travelogue has an additional, more subtle literary significance for there Aleko first introduces his most famous and most controversial creation - the character Bai Ganiu which later became the eponymous personage of his chef-d'oeuvre published in 1895. The book describes the "incredible" business trips of a Bulgarian rose oil peddler abroad and his political activity at home. It is organized as a sequence of comical and satirical stories told by different explicit narrators. There is a strong documentary touch in the book since Aleko processes in it his personal experience of a traveler, of an unsuccessful politician ousted by Bai Ganiu's prototypes, and of a hypertrophically honest lawyer harassed by a corrupt political system. Bai Ganiu, the somewhat biographical antipode of his author, is a complex character with distinct local Balkan color, which at the highest register of his personality has all the positive qualities of a successful entrepreneur: vitality, adaptability, pragmatism,

initiatives in all his activities - from business through politics to sex. At its lowest register these same qualities are manifested as brazenness, opportunism, scheming selfishness, aggressiveness verging toward open violence, and this is the gamut that Aleko satirically foregrounds. This "problematic Bulgarian" grew so overwhelmingly popular that in a few years only he started up a literary genealogy of his own, his "siblings" and "offsprings" parading in a myriad of literary parodies, pseudo sequels and imitations. Acquiring an extra-literary life, he became the national personification, similar to that of Uncle Sam in the United States, the ubiquitous personage of political cartoons, and in endless reincarnations, from the clumsy old-fashioned Ganiu Balkanski to its sophisticated variant Engineer Ganev he entered popular lore. At the level of its interpretative history the character has been a target of continuous ideological manipulations. The interpretations range from "the Brown" (i.e. fascist) to "the Red" (i.e. communist) Bai Ganiu, not to mention the notorious controversy of whether he is a social type or a representation of Bulgarianness. Despite the arguments of the critics, and of others, Bai Ganiu is indisputably a part of the Bulgarian ethno-cultural identity. For a century he has been the persona with which Bulgarians ironically identify themselves and by which they problematize their own national image.

By a tragic twist of fate Bai Ganiu drops out of his fictional frame in still another way. Aleko Konstantinov was assassinated at the age of 34 during an election campaign in a situation which could have been as well the final chapter of his book. Years later the painter Iliia Beshkov summed up the artistic exertions to articulate the Bulgarian paradoxes that Aleko had unmasked in a cartoon-epitaph: "Bai Ganiu killed his author".



ALEKO  
KONSTANTINOV  
1863 - 1897

AGENCY FOR BULGARIANS ABROAD  
2, DONDOUKOV BLVD.  
SOFIA 1000  
BULGARIA

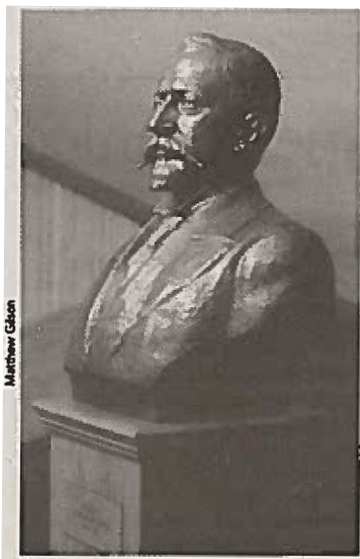
# Lecture, concert to highlight dedication of Konstantinov bust

A bust of turn-of-the-century Bulgarian writer Aleko Konstantinov will be dedicated at the University on Tuesday, Nov. 1, with a ceremony, lecture, concert and reception.

Konstantinov, who created Bulgaria's most popular satiric literary figure, Bai Gan'no, wrote the book *Do Chikago i nazad (To Chicago and Back)* in 1894, describing his travels to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. The book remains a literary classic and has made Chicago a household name in Bulgaria. The dedication ceremony also marks the centennial of the book's first edition.

The dedication, which will be attended by Snezhana Botusharova, Bulgaria's ambassador to the United States, will be held at 4 p.m. in Regenstein Library. The events will continue in Bond Chapel with a lecture by Nikola Georgiev, professor of Slavic and general poetics at Saint Climent Sofia

University in Bulgaria, at 4:30 p.m., and a concert by Philippopolis, a chamber ensemble for old Bulgarian and Slavonic chants, at 5 p.m. A reception will be held at 6:30 p.m. in Swift Commons. For more information, call 702-8803.



*This bust of Bulgarian writer Aleko Konstantinov will be dedicated on Tuesday, Nov. 1, in Regenstein Library.*