

The Bulgarian Revival in the Memories about Deeds and Events of its Builders: The Memoirs of Ekaterina Vassileva

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Abstract: This publication presents an underknown woman figure of the Bulgarian National Revival. Ekaterina Vassileva belongs to two national traditions – the Romanian and the Bulgarian. Together with her husband Mihail Vassilev, she takes part in the establishment of the Bulgarian Literary Society in Braila. She writes in Romanian and in French. She is the author of memoirs, poems and articles and the prose poem 'The Epic Bulgaria' which she gives as a gift to the Russian emperor Alexander II in 1877, and to the Bulgarian prince Alexander I Battenberg in 1882.

Keywords: Women writers, bilingual authors, embroidered portraits, public and patriotic activity

Ключови думи: жени писатели, двуезични автори, бродирани портрети, обществена и патриотична дейност



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Ekaterina Vassileva (1850, Ploesti, Principality of Wallachia – 1926, Paris, France) is a woman writer belonging to two traditions – the Romanian and the Bulgarian. She was born in Romania, but on her mother's side she comes from the renowned Diamandiev's family in Sliven, and during her whole life she is fighting – with the power of words and deeds, for the cause of enslaved Balkan Slavs and actively participates in the culture work of the Bulgarian diaspora in Romania. To a great extent, her works remain unknown for the Bulgarian audience as she writes in Romanian and French and shares with pain that she does not have a good command of her mother's Bulgarian language. She is the author of narrative poems and poems in Romanian, of articles written in Romanian and published in the bilingual Bucharest newspaper 'Otechestvo' [Fatherland]/ 'Patria', which are translated in Bulgarian by the editor of the newspaper Pandeli Kisimov. Furthermore, she is the author of another article in 'Turtsia' [Turkey] Newspaper, which is probably also translated from Romanian into Bulgarian language. She also leaves a book of memoirs written in French and published in Paris in 1923, where she describes the most important moments in her life. A copy of her memories is kept in the National Library 'St. St. Kiril i Metodiy'.

During the years, the life and work of Ekaterina Vassileva attract relatively low attention,

may be because of difficulties due to the language barrier. D. N. Minchev¹ devotes an article on her performances as part of the theatrical company of Dobri Voynikov and publishes a few of her poems translated in Bulgarian. The three performances of 'Velislava' staged by D. Voynikov's company in April-May 1870, the paper disputes provoked by the play in the print press of the Bulgarian national revival, and the participation of E. Vassileva in such paper disputes are studied in details by St. Karakostov². N. Zhechev³ gives valuable details about the activity of E. Vassileva and her husband Mihail Vassilev in the establishment of the Bulgarian Literary Society in Braila in 1869 and for her involvement in the creation of the women's society in Braila in May 1870. K. Boycheva⁴ makes an original portrait of E. Vasileva. We can find information about E. Vasileva in the researches of V. Paskaleva⁵, E. Siupiur⁶, I. Ivancheva⁷, N. Aleksandrova⁸. L. Malinova⁹ publishes valuable document that sheds light on the last years of E. Vassileva's life, which is now stored in the archive of the Monarchic Institute

THE MEMOIRS

The memories of E. Vassileva are divided into two parts. She names the first part 'Chronicles of the Russian Dynasty' [*„Летопис на руската династия“*]. In these 'chronicles', however, she puts a few texts that do not have direct relevance to the history of the Russian dynasty, although one of them mentions the letters from Emperor Alexander II to her, which she keeps.

The second text, entitled 'Input' [*„Увод“*], praises France as the first among civilized countries and ends in a strange way, with a paragraph about woman's obligations for the proper education of her children.

Then comes 'Introduction' [*„Въведение“*] written in 1823 where Vassileva tells about the circumstances that have resulted in the publishing of her book: her acquaintance with General M. Savov and his request to write her memories about the two historic letters.

The prose poem 'The Epic Bulgaria' is the last text of the 'Chronicles of the Russian Dynasty', written in French language.

Her memories about the two meetings with

the emperor are not mentioned in this part, as the logic would be when we speak about the history of the Russian dynasty, but in the second part presenting her 'authentic stories of my life'.

The memoirs of E. Vassileva are characterized with strong fragmentariness. Various events are not presented as a whole, in chronological sequence, but are 'put together' from reports scattered on different places. This is how several individual bodies are outlined in the following chronological sequence:

1. Memories of Turkish violence against the enslaved Bulgarian people. These memories are not her personal memories, they are not even her mother's memories, who has been taken out of Sliven as a child. These are rather legends retold by her relatives and fellow citizens in the Bulgarian diaspora in Ploesti and Braila.

2. Memories of her personal life (the acquaintance with her husband, her decision to marry him, their evenings at home when he has been telling her how the shepherd Geneviève has saved Paris, how Jeanne d'Arc has saved France; memories about the establishment of the Literary Society; memories about Dobri Voynikov, about the staging of the drama 'Rayna Knyaginya' and about her own role in the staging of the play 'Velislava'.

3. Memories related to her meetings with the Russian Emperor Alexander II.

4. Memories about her first stay in Paris in 1880-1882 when she meets V. Hugo and gives him a copy of her poem 'The Epic Bulgaria' as a gift.

Thus, the personal memories of E. Vassileva, i.e. 'the authentic stories' of her life encompass the period from her marriage in 1866/68 to 1882.

The period from 1882 to 1926, when she lives in Paris, is not included in her book, except for the story of her acquaintance with General Savov and the pictures of honorary diploma and civic merits order she has been awarded in 1923 by Tsar Boris III. Vassileva does not tell anything about her life during all these 44 years.

The creation of the embroidered portraits of the Russian rulers, Tsar Peter the Great and Emperor Alexander II, is presented in details. The story is consistent and fascinating, abundant of interesting details about persons and events.

Captured by the stories of heroic deeds of the French heroines her husband has told her about,

¹ Minchev 1957; Minchev 1958.

² Karakostov 1973.

³ Zhechev 1970.

⁴ Boycheva 1978; Boycheva 1981; Boycheva 2011.

⁵ Paskaleva 1964.

⁶ Siupiur 1982.

⁷ Ivancheva 1992; Ivancheva 1995.

⁸ Alexandrova 2012; Alexandrova 2019.

⁹ Malinova 2012.

the young Ekaterina dreams of doing something important too. Then she decides to embroider the portrait of Tsar Peter the Great and to give it to the Russian emperor as a gift; this endeavour enjoys her husband's full support.

Another two events in the life of E. Vassileva she tells about in her memories are of particular interest from the perspective of the Bulgarian history and culture: her involvement, together with her husband, in the establishment of the Bulgarian Literary Society and her role as an actress in the three performances of Dobri Voynikov's drama 'Velislava' – all this happens within three years: 1869, 1870 and 1871. These events, which chronologically precede the creation of the embroidered portraits, are retold afterwards, and the reason for such choice is not known.

E. Vassileva tells about her involvement in the activity of the Literary Society in her inherent concise way in a short text that immerses the reader into the atmosphere of Vassilevi's home, being the host of prominent figures – active builders of the events that have developed new Bulgaria, such as Vasil D. Stoyanov, Vasil Drumev, Dobri Voynikov, etc., whom Ekaterina meets and communicates with. She also reproduces the atmosphere in the home of Tsonevi's family, which hosts the Literary Society and the lectures.

This is how my husband presented me to Mr. Voynikov – a prominent teacher and newspaper editor in chief, ex-schoolmate of my husband at Robert College in Constantinople. I also listened to Mr. Stoyanov, how he was talking about literature, about science, and about the Library in Braila; he was very nice company. I also met Drumev – playwright and historian who became the bishop of Sofia later on; with Savich – a journalist with martial spirit who was interested in public issues and literature. I remember the scientific library, which was arranged in the house of a very wealthy philanthropist called Nikolay Tsenov who, together with Mrs. Tsenova, covered the costs of the Literary Society in Braila.

The lectures were held in this house. They tackled various issues, for example: how mothers need to educate their children well; why love and compassion (charity) should be the foundation of the Christian society; what are the obligations of the good citizen... and other issues as well: for mothers' feelings by the example of the famous woman writer Madam de Sévigné.

The talks in this Society of Sciences were attended by many ladies and some of them took the floor to speak about morals, about education and about mother's obligations. So, I was invited many times to give a talk about parents and how they should be good examples for their children; how

children should deserve their family name, etc. Every time I was giving a talk, I published it in 'Otechestvo' Newspaper in Bucharest, with Pandeli Kisimov being the editor in 1872.

THE POEM 'THE EPIC BULGARIA'

This poem carried in the Memories is probably identical to the printed version, which is not saved as a separate book. The cover page is type-written and the text of the poem itself is written in print. The full title is 'The Epic Bulgaria. To Emperor Alexander II. Presented in Livadia, 1880' [„Епичната България. Посветена на Император Александър II. Поднесена в Ливадия, 1880“].

Two years later, in 1882, the poem is printed in Paris in Boudet's printing house with title 'Bulgaria. Legend. To His Royal Highness Alexander I, Prince of Bulgaria' [„България. Легенда. На негово Височество Александър I, княз на България“].

In a footnote at the end of the poem, E. Vassileva says:

This epic poem – one of my youth works – I gave to Emperor Alexander II in Livadia in 1880, and on this occasion, he gave me a private audience. Two years later, in 1882, I also gave it as a gift to Prince Battenberg Bulgarian.

We can get an idea of the appearance of the version given to Prince Alexander I Battenberg only from the memories of the author who tells:

[...] I gave him the booklet bound with leather and golden embroidery of his coat of arms on one side, and the Lion – the symbol of Bulgaria, on the other side. He thanked me very much.

I told him that I have gave the portrait to the Tsar as a sign of gratitude for his benefaction to Bulgaria. The Prince promised me a scholarship for my son to study in Paris.

The information about the acquaintance of E. Vassileva with Prince Battenberg can be put together from a few scattered elements. The first memory is from Livadia:

On the day of my departure, the Schneider family hosted a farewell dinner for me and I was presented to many persons who have come there to see me. At the table was sitting next to the governor of Riga – Lisandi from Riga – who asked me if I knew whether Prince Alexander Battenberg, whom I knew, would marry the daughter of the multimillionaire Dondukov, or would he prefer the daughter of Prince Nikita from Montenegro. I answered him with a smile: 'He will marry neither the one, nor the other.'

Two other pieces of the puzzle can be put together with this passage, which makes it clear that she already knows Prince Battenberg, mentioned somehow by the by ('whom I knew'), and so well that she can answer to the question about his marriage with a smile (with confidence):

In 1882, I went to Bucharest (Romania) where I had a house with big garden – I inherited this property from my mother, which I intended to sell after her death. Before going to Bucharest, I made a slight detour and went to Sofia to give this very booklet entitled 'The Epic Bulgaria' personally to the Bulgarian Prince [signed by me] 'To His Royal Highness Prince Battenberg of Bulgaria'.

[...] When I arrived in this city, I was introduced into the Palace of Prince Battenberg thanks to Minister Stoylov. He knew me from before. In 1880, there was a ball in honor of the Prince in Rulkul in Islahane. I was also invited to this ball.

Therefore, E. Vassileva has been presented to Prince Battenberg yet in 1880, at the ball in his honor. However, she does not write anything about this ball, which should have been an important event in her life. When we arrange the facts consistently, however, we can outline the following picture: at the beginning of 1880, E. Vassileva is invited to the ball in the honor of Alexander I Battenberg in Ruse where she meets him. In May during the same year, she takes a trip to Livadia

to give Emperor Alexander II his portrait that she has embroidered, and there, at the dinner, she firmly states that the Bulgarian prince would marry neither one, nor the other of his candidates. Then comes the third meeting of E. Vassileva with the prince in 1882 in Sofia, when she gives him her poem. Furthermore, this meeting has not happened by chance at all; she does not just drop by in Sofia along her trip to Bucharest. Earlier in the very same 1882, the poem is printed in Paris with a dedication page especially for the Bulgarian prince, and the embroidery of the binding has required continuous efforts.

Everything that Ekaterina Vassileva writes about herself, about her activity, about the people who mark the historic events of her time, her words that Emperor Alexander II is 'the saver of the *Balkan Christians*', which are underlined repeatedly, define her not only as a Romanian, not only as a Bulgarian (as she is both), but as a Balkan intellectual, fully educated in the spirit of the then dominating *common European* view of the woman's role and her obligations in the society, and at the same time as a strong-willed, independent, self-confident, courageous personality standing for her ideas, definitely a woman 'of good stock', who is able to cook, to give talks, to play in the theater, to write poems, to embroider, to play violin, to take singing lessons, and to participate in literature evenings, and even to win the respect of an author like Victor Hugo.

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Българското Възраждане в спомените за делата и събитията на неговите строители: спомените на Екатерина Василева

Недка Капралова

Екатерина Василева (1850, Пловдив, Румъния – 1926, Париж, Франция) е книжовник, принадлежаща на две национални традиции – румънската и българската. Активно участва в културната дейност на българската диаспора в Румъния, заедно със съпруга си Михаил Василев са сред учредителите на Българското книжовно дружество в Браила. За българската публика творчеството ѝ до голяма степен остава непознато, тъй като тя пише на румънски и френски. Авторка е на поеми, стихотворения и няколко дописки. Остава и една мемоарна книга, написана на френски език и издадена в Париж през 1923 г. Почти сто години по-късно сега спомените ѝ за първи път излизат в пълен превод на български. За пръв път се публикува и преводът от румънски на стихотворенията, включени в тях, които разкриват нови страни от световещането на авторката: тъга по родината, скръб по рано починалия съпруг, дори една философско-религиозна нагласа.



