

Nikolla Simaku

HISTORY AND VOSKOPOJA TODAY

Today, I feel a legitimate pride for being born and grown up in Voskopoja, the topic of this colloquium. Also, I am very pleased to hear and read for the city of Moskopol in the past, whose culture and economic development made it known all over Balkans, whose savants and personalities of culture let their important and permanent traces in European culture. Moskopol city was known as the symbol of Hellenic culture, but also, according to E. Bulgari, the well-known western savants were widely read and known there. This showed an advanced level of culture and science achieved there till the complete destruction of 1769 and its successive ones.

It was in Moskopol where the first attempts to write the Albanian language were made. So, I can mention here the famous three languages vocabulary drafted by the director of New Academy of Moskopol, Theodore Kavallioti. It was written in Greek, Vlachs and Albanian. Albania, the country where Voskopoja is situated, has the right to consider it as the city where a great contribution for Albanian language and culture is given.

I consider as indispensable that both countries, Greece and Albania, whose cultures are influenced by the culture of that time in Voskopoja, should preserve and take under their protection this city. Voskopoja, the city with the biggest number of religious monuments and churches for its size, has become a village forgotten in its poverty. It hurts me that nobody cares seriously for its restoration.

Everybody who has seen the stone roads of Paris can not but admire its people who has preserved them with such care. Our ancestors have made a lot for Voskopoja too. They have built stone roads, bridges, parks and it was considered an honour to bring the high personalities of the state and foreigners to visit Voskopoja. This continued till 1939 when the country was occupied by foreign armies. And now the majority of the monumental works and churches are wholly or partly damaged.

Voskopoja Churches are a wonderful evidence of the art of Byzantine orthodox construction and iconography. Two of them, Saint Nicole and Saint Athanase, are damaged but they still preserve about 90% of their mural paintings which can be restored with few expenses. The others as Saint Mary, Saint John, Saint Mehulli, etc., need more work, but I think it is worth while.

Voskopoja is a city incomparable for its beauty, climate and the great possibilities it offers for development, tourism and winter sports.

Voskopoja was burned several times. But, fortunately, the churches were not destroyed. Communism, as the enemy of religion and belief, brought a lot of damage to churches. On one hand, the regime preserved them as cultural monuments, but on the other did nothing to repair them, thus contributing in their damage from faithless people. Also, the state of that time did nothing to make known their historical values to people. Only two months ago, students of Islamic seminars scribbled the eyes of the saints painted 300 years ago. Altogether there were 24 mural paintings damaged.

In front of the maltreatment of the time, Moskopol of the past and Voskopoja of today have the right to shout loudly: Will we wait more? What is the meaning of the history, what is it worth for?

I will mention later that we are organising a committee to work for the good of Voskopoja, but let the today's colloquium on Voskopoja be the first serious attempt in helping its revival.

Anyone who pretends to know and respect history should be ashamed that there is no any museum which could be a testimony of the culture and development of Moskopol. One thing should be clear. This is not to make you responsible for that. With this appeal I only ask for your help, because it is you, historians and scientists, the people who first feel the need for the revival of Voskopoja, so that it can be the place where everybody can find the signs of a well-preserved culture. Let me remind you of Metsovo in Greece and Hrushevo in Skopje, which are also the places where vlach culture is better represented.

On June 30, 1929, in Korça city, a commission composed of honourable Manol Taçi, Dhimiter Falo, Mihallaq Doku, Dhori Tira, Dhimiter Theohari, Vasil Ekonomi, etc., requested for the foundation of the beneficent Association of Voskopoja «Renaissance». The Prefect of Korça of that time, Mr. Hil Mosi, accepted this request, so the Association began work centred in Korça. On July 23, 1929, the head of Secretary of the Court of first degree legitimated it. The administrative Council of that Association had Mr. Vangjel Fundo as its head. The article 2 of its statute, «The objectives of the Association», states:

a) The care for maintenance, beauty and prosperity of Moskopol village in every respect.

b) When the budget of the association is sufficient, it will help the poor members of it.

c) Through advises, conferences, plays, etc., it will serve to keep people in high spirits.

d) Politics would be out of any concern of the association.

The article 3, «The means», states: To achieve its goals the Association accepts as its members every Voskopoja's habitant or from other parts of the country and abroad, as in America, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Russia, etc.

The article 5 of the statute states: The association accepts gladly and with gratitude any present or donation which could be made to it by anybody from Voskopoja or elsewhere, who desires its prosperity.

In the article 6 it is written: when the amount donated exceeds 20 gold franks (about 70 USD), a letter of thanks will be sent to the donator. When this amount exceeds 100 gold franks, the name of the donator will be written in golden letters in a special book kept in the main hall of the building of the Association .

The article 7 states: The Association branches can be founded from Albanian immigrants everywhere in the world.

There are many documents which prove that these honourable people have done a lot for Voskopoja of that time.

After sixty eight years, in Tirana, we, the sons and grandsons of the founders of the above mentioned Association, gathered and established the new Association with the same name. The date of its foundation is August 15, 1996, the Saint Mary's day. This day used to be holiday according to the old Association statute. We drafted the statute and the program. We have decided to ask the Albanian government for the restitution of the property of the churches. The Court of Tirana, with its Decision No. 7348, dated on September 9, 1996, recognised and legally accepted the activity of the Association.

We also have another project, that of sensibilizing Europe so that artistic, historical and climatic values of Voskopoja as well as the mural paintings of the medieval churches will be known throughout Europe and protected by UNESCO.

The history of Voskopoja's destruction and reconstruction is similar to that of Feniks. This similarity makes us believe that as our grandparents and parents we will achieve our goal. Apart from people from Voskopoja who live there or not, members of this Association, we wish that you, honourable ladies and gentlemen, take part in this Association as well. We believe it is a great honour to be a member of the Association for Voskopoja's Revival.

In our program we have foreseen to make all the necessary attempts in order that the government of Albania helps us in issues like:

- the restitution of the land of the churches (as I have mentioned above),
- the promotion of tourism so that scientists or historians know the historical values of Voskopoja,
- the establishment of a library and a museum,
- the restoration of the churches so the people can pray in an appropriate environment,
- the attraction of potential investors creating for them all the conditions to work easily in this environment
- requiring funds from different foundations.

For the time being in the treasury of our Association there are only the contributions of its founders; we have started the preparation of necessary documents to be presented to the Government. We have contacted His Holiness, Head of Bishops in Albania, Anastasios Janullatos, who blessed us for this initiative and promised to help.

As a Chairman of the Association for the first year, Nikolla Simaku was selected. On behalf of this newly established Association I am taking the opportunity to give you the greetings of its members and also to present here their appeal for help for the protection of Voskopoja's culture.

It is our desire that branches of this Association be created in different cities of Greece, Romania, Skopje, America, etc. This would contribute to increase the budget which will be used for Voskopoja. This is quite obvious as Voskopoja is considered as the Mekka of Vlachs.

To implement different projects we have also thought to ask for help from Albanian and Greek Government.

The twinning of Voskopoja with two Greek cities has been achieved: those of Akso-pol-Kilkiz and Metsovo. Mr. Aleksander Kahremani, a good friend of mine, knows all my attempts to make this happen.

I would like once more to express the greatest desire of everybody who was born in Voskopoja, who has relation with it or has studied its history and culture and has a great respect for it, to leave Voskopoja to successors with all its rich values.

Dear friends, let me again present to you this final appeal: Help Voskopoja and its culture. Voskopoja's culture is also your wealth, the wealth of humankind. It is in danger!

Thank you very much.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Nikolla Simakou

ΜΟΣΧΟΠΟΛΗ: ΠΑΡΕΛΘΟΝ ΚΑΙ ΠΑΡΟΝ

Είναι κοινά αποδεκτό ότι η Βοσκόπολη (ή Μοσχόπολη, όπως ονομαζόταν πριν) εξελίχθηκε κατά τη διάρκεια των αιώνων σε μία από τις μεγαλύτερες πόλεις της Αλβανίας αλλά και των Βαλκανίων, δεδομένου του πολιτισμικού της επιπέδου και των θεσμών της. Στην πόλη αυτή άνθισε ο ελληνικός πολιτισμός, ενώ, σύμφωνα με τον Ευγένιο Βούλγαρι, ήταν εξίσου γνωστοί και οι Δυτικοί επιστήμονες και ιστορικοί. Στη Βοσκόπολη έγιναν οι πρώτες προσπάθειες για το αλβανικό αλφάβητο και η Αλβανία, η χώρα όπου βρίσκεται η Βοσκόπολη, έχει το δικαίωμα να τη θεωρήσει ως πόλη που συνέβαλε τα μέγιστα στη γλώσσα της και στον πολιτισμό της.

Η Βοσκόπολη, η πόλη της Ακαδημίας, του πρώτου τυπογραφείου, η πόλη γνωστών φιλοσόφων και σοφών, η πόλη των εμπορών που είχαν οικονομικές και εμπορικές συναλλαγές με άλλες ευρωπαϊκές χώρες, η πόλη των θαυμαστών εκκλησιών που υπάρχουν μέχρι σήμερα και μαγνητίζουν τους επισκέπτες με την εντυπωσιακή κατασκευαστική τους ποιότητα, δεν είναι πια παρά ένα λησμονημένο και σχεδόν εγκαταλελειμμένο χωριό.

Δεν υπάρχει άνθρωπος των τεχνών και του πολιτισμού που να μην εκτιμά την ομορφιά της Βοσκόπολης και το θαυμάσιο χειμερινό και θερινό κλίμα της και, παράλληλα, να μην υποφέρει βλέποντάς την να έχει εγκαταλειφθεί στην καταστροφή. Δεν είναι μόνο η συμπόνια και οι νοσταλγικές αναμνήσεις που μπορούν να συμβάλουν στη διάσωση κάποιων αξιών τέχνης και ομορφιάς στη Βοσκόπολη και στους ανθρώπους της, στη Βοσκόπολη που κατόρθωσε να επιζήσει σε πείσμα των καιρών.

Εκ μέρους του Συλλόγου «Rilindja e Voskorojes» (Αναβίωση της Βοσκόπολης), απευθύνω έκκληση για τη σωτηρία της Βοσκόπολης, ο πολιτισμός της οποίας είναι και κομμάτι του ελληνικού πολιτισμού.