

INTRODUCTION

Faïk bey Konitza (1875-1942) was one of the great figures of Albanian intellectual culture in the early decades of the twentieth century and was no doubt the first Albanian whom one might consider to have been a real European.

Konitza was born on 15 March 1875 in the now village of Konitsa in the Pindus mountains in northern Greece, not far from the present Albanian border. After elementary schooling in Turkish in his native village, he studied at the Jesuit Saverian College in Shkodra which offered him not only some instruction in Albanian but also an initial contact with central European culture and Western ideas. From there, he continued his schooling at the French-language Imperial Galata secondary school in Constantinople. In 1890, at the age of fifteen, he was sent to study in France where he spent the next seven years. After initial education at secondary schools in Lisieux (1890) and Carcassonne (1892), he registered at the University of Dijon, from which he graduated in 1895 in Romance philology. After graduation, he moved to Paris for two years where he studied mediaeval French, Latin and Greek at the Collège de France. He finished his studies at Harvard University in the United States, although little is known of this period of his life. As a result of his highly varied educational background, he was able to speak and write Albanian, Italian, French, German, English and Turkish fluently.

Konitza's stay in France, a country of long-standing liberal democratic traditions, was to have a profound effect on him and he was able to acquire and adopt the patterns of Western thinking as no Albanian intellectual had ever done before him. The young Konitza was particularly marked by the uninhibited freedom which the French press enjoyed in the years of open and caustic debate sparked by the Dreyfus affair. It was during this period that he began to take an interest in his native language and his country's history and literature, and to write articles on Albania for a French newspaper.

In September 1897 he moved to Brussels, where at the age of twenty-two he founded the periodical *Albania*, which was soon to become the most important organ of the Albanian press at the turn of the century. He moved to London in 1902 and continued to publish the journal there until 1909.

It was in London that Konitza made friends with the noted French poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), initially through correspondence on an article published by the poet in 1903 in *L'Européen*. Apollinaire stayed with Konitza at the latter's Chinford home in 1903 and 1904 while endeavouring to regain the affections of his beloved Annie Playden. Konitza not only hosted the poet, but seems also to have served as an intermediary in the 'affaire de coeur.' Contacts between the two writers were finally lost in 1909 when Konitza emigrated to the United States. Apollinaire endeavoured to find the Albanian publisher there, but received no response to his letters.

Konitza's first stop in the New World was Boston where he became editor of the Albanian-language newspaper *Dielli* (The sun), which was founded by Fan Noli (1882-1965) in 1909. *Dielli* was the organ of the important Pan-Albanian *Vatra* (The hearth) federation of Boston, of which Konitza became general secretary in 1912. He also edited another short-lived periodical, the fortnightly *Trumbeta e Krujës* (The trumpet of Croya) in St Louis, Missouri, which he ran for a short time (three editions) in 1911. In 1912 he travelled to London on behalf of the *Vatra* federation to defend Albania's interests at the Conference of Ambassadors. This conference, held in the autumn of that year, was to consider recognition of the fledgling Albanian state which had declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire on 28 November. On 17 December 1912, the ambassadors agreed to recognize Albanian autonomy, though

initially under the continued suzerainty of the Sultan. At the beginning of March 1913, Konitza, who had quarrelled with Ismail Qemal bey Vlora (1844-1919) and initially given his support to the government of Esad Pasha Toptani (1863-1920), also spoke before three hundred delegates at the Albanian Congress of Trieste who had gathered to discuss their country's fate during the political anarchy precipitated by the Balkan Wars. He became disillusioned with Austro-Hungarian policies, which he had earlier supported, when it became clear that Vienna was only interested in a fixed northern border for Albania and that his native town of Konitsa was to be awarded to Greece.

In 1914, at the start of the First World War Faik Konitza was in Austria (Vienna, Feldkirch and Baden). There, in the political tension created by the war, rumour spread that he was spying for Italy and he was obliged to leave the crumbling Austro-Hungarian Empire for neutral Switzerland. In Lausanne, he met up with Mehdi bey Frashëri (1874-1963) and Mid'hat bey Frashëri (1880-1949), and on 2 November 1915 published a treatise entitled *L'Allemagne et l'Albanie* (Germany and Albania), in which he attacked German support for a proposal to partition Albania between the Greeks and Slavs. In March 1916 we find him in Sofia with Dervish Hima (1873-1928) and in July of that year he was back in Baden (Austria). He was subsequently obliged to leave Austria once again, this time for Italy, because of his criticism of Austrian and German policies in Albania and the consequent suspicion with which the Austrian authorities treated him. In 1921, back in the United States, he was elected president of the *Vatra* federation in Boston and resumed editing the newspaper *Dielli* (The sun) there, in which he now had his own column, *Shtylla e Konitzës* (Konitza's Column). In the summer of 1926, Faik Konitza was appointed Albanian ambassador to the United States by the dictator Ahmet Zogu (1895-1961), a post he held until the Italian invasion of his country over Easter 1939. He died in Washington on 15 December 1942 and was buried in Forest Hills cemetery in Boston. After the fall of the Communist dictatorship, his remains were transferred to Tirana and interred in a park at the edge of the city.

Faik Konitza wrote little in the way of literature per se, but as a stylist, critic, publicist and political figure he had a tremendous impact on Albanian writing and on the culture of his time. His periodical *Albania*, published in French and Albanian under the pseudonym Thrangk Spirobeg, not only helped make Albanian culture and the Albanian cause known in Europe, but also set the pace for literary prose in southern Albanian dialect. It is widely considered to be the most significant Albanian periodical to have existed up to the Second World War. Writers like Thimi Mitko (1820-1890), Kostandin Kristoforidhi (1830-1895), Andon Zako Çajupi (1866-1930) and Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940) first became known to a broader public through the pages of the periodical which Faik Konitza published faithfully over the course of twelve years. *Albania*, financed to some extent by the Austro-Hungarian authorities under the auspices of the *Kultusprotektorat* and accordingly betraying pro-Austrian proclivities, contained articles and information on a wide range of topics: history, language, literature, folklore, archeology, politics, economics, religion and art, and as such constitutes a mini-encyclopaedia of Albanian culture of the period. Konitza valued a free exchange of ideas and he placed the columns of *Albania* at the disposal of his rivals whom he countered with caustic wit. In literature, he attacked the often banal nationalist outpourings on the lofty virtues of the Albanian people and called for a more realistic and critical stance towards his nation with all its failings. Steeped in Western culture, he found it difficult to appreciate the poets of early romantic nationalism like Naim bey Frashëri (1846-1900) whose ideals were those of a bygone age and whose verse he regarded as unsophisticated. How could they, with their sacrosanct expressions of patriotic fervour, compare with the higher level of literary and artistic achievement he had encountered in France, to writers like Verlaine, Baudelaire and Apollinaire? The biting sarcasm with which he expressed his

intransigence towards the naivety of his compatriots and towards the many sacred cows of Albanian culture and history let a breeze of fresh air into Albanian letters.

Konitza strove for a more refined Western culture in Albania, but he also valued his country's traditions. He was, for instance, one of the first to propagate the idea of editing the texts of older Albanian literature. In an article entitled *Për themelimin e një gjuhës letrariste shqip* (On the foundation of an Albanian literary language), published in the first issue of *Albania*, Konitza also pointed to the necessity of creating a unified literary language. He suggested the most obvious solution, that the two main dialects, Tosk and Geg, should be fused and blended gradually. His own fluid style was highly influential in the refinement of southern Albanian Tosk prose writing, which decades later was to form the basis of the modern Albanian literary language (*gjuha letrare*). Konitza's ties with the Zogu regime in later years created consternation among many Albanian intellectuals and it is this more than anything which caused his influence on Albanian literature and culture to be underestimated and ignored by post-war critics in Tirana. His sarcastic comments and polemics in *Albania* and elsewhere, and his irascibility and arrogance did not always make him a popular figure, but the spontaneity and refinement of his prose are universally recognized and admired.

Faik Konitza's writings are nonetheless fragmentary. He was the author of numerous editorials and articles on politics, language, literature and history which appeared for the most part in *Albania e vogël* (Little Albania), a fortnightly supplement to his periodical *Albania* from 1899 to 1903. He also wrote what could be regarded as a novel, although he never completed it. This is the satirical *Dr. Gjëlpera zbulon rënjët e dramës së Mamurrasit* (Dr Needle discovers the roots of the Mamurrasi drama) in which he makes some delightfully pungent observations on the backwardness and the questionable hygienic standards of his compatriots. Konitza's only book publication in Albanian was a translation of Arabic tales from a Thousand and One Nights, entitled *Nën hien e hurmave*, Boston 1924 (In the shade of the date palms). In *Dielli* (The sun) from 1929 on, he also edited the narrative of his travels to Albania, a series entitled *Shqiperia si m'u-duk* (How Albania appeared to me), in which he expressed much unflattering criticism of various character types he had encountered there: bureaucrats, social climbers, pretentious aristocrats etc. It is only in very recent years that his writings in Albanian have been collected and published. In English, a selection of his work was edited by Qerim M. Panarity in the 175-page volume *Albania, the rock garden of southeastern Europe and other essays*, Boston 1957.

The present publication, bringing together not only the first English translation of Guillaume Apollinaire's short essay on Konitza, but also much of the Albanian publicist's previously inaccessible correspondence with noted figures of his age, constitutes a further achievement and another step major forward in making this much neglected figure known to the Western reader.

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