

Leo Freundlich and the “Albanian Correspondence”

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The Austro-Hungarian publisher Leo Freundlich (1875-1953) was born of a Jewish family in the town of Bielitz-Biala (Bielsko-Biala), now in Poland, and lived in Bohemia where, in 1907, he was elected as a member of the Reichstag (parliament) in Vienna. After the defeat of the German socialists in northern Bohemia in the elections of 1910, Freundlich withdrew from politics, divorced his eminent wife Emmy Freundlich, and moved definitively to Vienna, the capital of the multi-ethnic empire.

It is doubtful, when Leo Freundlich got to Vienna, whether he knew anything at all about Albania and the Albanians, but this was soon to change. Albania had declared its independence as the crumbling Ottoman Empire was being pushed out of the Balkans, and, in Vienna, Freundlich was to play a major role in the “discovery” of this small Balkan country and its people.

Leo Freundlich has been known up to now primarily for the publication of his small book *Albaniens Golgatha: Anklageakten gegen die Vernichter des Albanervolkes*, Vienna 1913 (translated into English as *Albania's Golgotha: Indictment of the Exterminators of the Albanian People*, available under http://www.albanianhistory.net/texts20_1/AH1913_1.html). In this work, he gathered press articles of the period to inform the world of the massacres committed by Serb forces in Kosovo and in northern Albania in 1912 and 1913. Freundlich also published the book in Italian as *Golgota dell'Albania: atti d'accusa contro gli sterminatori del popolo albanese* (Vicenza 1913).

In *Albania's Golgotha*, the author makes reference to another work that I had never heard of, the “Albanian Correspondence,” and this awakened my curiosity. Was it a book or a periodical? I could find no trace of it in any major library, including the venerable Austrian National Library in the Hofburg in Vienna. Several years passed and I had almost forgotten the matter, but in 2008, I finally discovered a copy of it in the library of the University of Vienna. This copy, the only one known up to now, is in three volumes and contains over 1100 typed pages as well as numerous handwritten additions. For Albanian studies it is, I believe, a major discovery.

What is the “Albanian Correspondence”? Every day from the spring of 1913 to August 1914, Leo Freundlich gathered information about critical developments in Albania and distributed this “latest news” from the Balkans to official circles in Vienna, mainly ministries and institutions of the Austro-Hungarian government. If you will, the “Albanian Correspondence” could be regarded as the first Albanian news agency.

Aside from the news articles he assembled, Freundlich was in contact with numerous well-known figures from Albania, among whom were Ismail Qemal bey Vlora, Syrja bey Vlora, Dervish Hima and Fan Noli, and he published many of their letters and

messages in the “Albanian Correspondence.” With the help of his many contacts, Freundlich became a spokesman of the Albanian question in the Austro-Hungarian capital.

The “Albanian Correspondence” was not the only such news agency in Vienna during the period. In his book, *Großmacht Presse* (The Press: a Great Power), Vienna 1920, the conservative publisher Joseph Eberle (1884-1947), editor of the Catholic newspaper, the *Reichspost*, refers to the “Albanian Correspondence” as being one of many “purely Jewish correspondences,” as he states. Such news agencies served as lobbyists for various political issues.

The “Albanian Correspondence” was designed, in particular, to serve as a guide for Austro-Hungarian foreign and military policy at a time of great political tension in the Balkans. It is uncertain what concrete influence it had in political decision-making in the Dual Monarchy, but at any rate, it offered its interested readers, then and now, a myriad of information about critical developments in and around Albania during the chaotic years before the First World War, specifically, from June 1913 to August 1914. When the Great War broke out, Freundlich was then obliged to suspend his activities, no doubt for financial reasons. There were other priorities.

Later, in the middle of the First World War, in 1916, Freundlich endeavoured to revive the “Albanian Correspondence” but the quality of the reports he issued does not compare with the work done in 1913 and 1914. In this period, Freundlich was busy with another project. He was editor-in-chief of the Albanian-language newspaper *Vëllazërija* (Brotherhood) published in Vienna by the Dija Society, initially twice a week. This paper was issued from January 1916 to November 1918 when the First World War, which resulted in Austria-Hungary’s defeat and break-up, came to an end. *Vëllazërija* was an informative newspaper designed primarily to promote the Austro-Hungarian cause during the war. It still makes interesting reading today. One might call it the Albanian voice of the Dual Monarchy in an age of war in the Balkans.

After the war, with the mediation of Musa Juka (1880-1955), whom he had met in Vienna, Leo Freundlich entered the service of the Albanian dictator Ahmet Zogu (1895-1961), later King Zog, as press secretary of the Kingdom of Albania in Vienna. He continued to serve Zog during the 1930s, in promoting commercial relations between Albania and the German Reich. It is reported that during the Nazi period, when he was confronted with the new greeting *Heil Hitler!* which he disliked, he would reply with a *Heil Zog!* to intentionally confuse his German contacts who were thus led to believe that this was a standard Albanian greeting.

When life for the Jews in Nazi-occupied Austria became intolerable, Leo Freundlich escaped to Switzerland and lived in Geneva during the Second World War, where he was supported from time to time by his two daughters who had reached New York. He died in Geneva in February 1953. Such was the life of Leo Freundlich.

In conclusion, I would like to add a couple more words about the discovery of the “Albanian Correspondence”. When the whereabouts of the work were ascertained, I travelled to Vienna one winter, taking a pocket camera with me. This time, on 15 February 2008, I got the manuscript in the great Reading Room of the University Library where it had long slumbered, and photographed it, page by page. This work, i.e. photographing over 1100 pages, took me more than seven hours. I must admit that it exhausted me but it

filled me with satisfaction, even though I bothered numerous students in the reading room that day with my hours of “click, click, click”. The photos taken were digitally enhanced and the material was then typed up by three students of German from the University of Prishtina, under the direction of Blerta Ismajli, to whom I am very grateful. It then took me over a year to prepare the work for publication. After this, there was much delay to find a publisher and in particular to find funds to print the book. At this juncture, I would like to thank Konrad Clewing, deputy director of the Institute for Eastern and Southeastern European Research (*Institut für Ost- und Südosteuropaforschung*) in Regensburg, Bavaria, for taking on this huge work and for publishing it in one of its academic series.

As such, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the declaration of Albanian independence and on the 100th anniversary of the “Albanian Correspondence”, it is with great pleasure that I am able to present this 680-page book, that was published in the German original in early November 2012.

FREUNDLICH, Leo

Die Albanische Korrespondenz: Agenturmeldungen aus Krisenzeiten (Juni 1913 bis August 1914). Herausgegeben von Robert Elsie, mit einer Einleitung von Roswitha Strommer. Südosteuropäische Arbeiten, Band 144. ISBN 978-3-486-70716-8. Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012. lxvii + 614 pp.

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