

## HISTORY

# Bulgaria's Universal Buffoon

**THE SOURCE:** "To Chicago and Back: Aleko Konstantinov, Rose Oil, and the Smell of Modernity" by Mary Neuburger, in *Slavic Review*, Fall 2006.

BAĬ GANO, THE MOST FAMOUS character in Bulgarian literature, was conceived in the back of a kiosk at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. His creator, Aleko Konstantinov, was a Bulgarian satirist and writer, and son of a successful Ottoman merchant. An early world's fair aficionado, Konstantinov was dazzled by the Columbian Exposition, and humiliated by the contrast between its technological wonders and his country's backwardness. In a small curiosity shop, one of only two Bulgarian displays at the fair, Konstantinov came upon a Bulgarian salesclerk wearing an outdated costume of billowing pants and fez while presiding over vials of cheap geranium oil—used to adulterate the rose oil that was one of the country's prized exports. This rustic countryman became the model for a flurry of journal articles chronicling the fictional exploits of the Bulgarian antihero Baĭ Gano. He would become the most exhaustively analyzed cultural figure in the nation's history.

Konstantinov was on his fourth world's fair when he and his crowd of Sofia intellectuals and raconteurs

arrived in Chicago. There, according to Mary Neuburger, a historian at the University of Texas, Austin, he was so impressed by the garlands of electrical bulbs bathing the fairgrounds in light that he wrote that he "felt sorry for the moon. How poor and pale she seemed in comparison."

Bulgaria had only recently won autonomy from the Ottoman Empire and was modernizing and Westernizing at an exhilarating pace. But what Konstantinov saw in Chicago illuminated only his country's meager progress. He was awed by the immensity of the Chicago fair's Palace of Manufacturing. He wrote



Fictional Baĭ Gano, the unwashed traveling rose oil salesman of Bulgaria, epitomizes the backward rube meeting the modern world, then and now.

that he expected that, at least in farming, Bulgaria could not be outdone. He was shattered when he saw the display of goods from California's fields and orchards.

Upon his return to Bulgaria, he created the bumbling character of Baĭ Gano, modeled on the world's fair salesclerk who sat like a rube in the midst of modern splendor. In articles that became a book of the same name (published in 1895), Baĭ Gano stumbles around Europe trying to sell the bottles of rose oil hidden in his suit. Emitting a foul smell, the salesman contrasts ironically with his precious wares, used throughout Europe to make the finest perfume and soap.

Only once does he unveil a vial, but when he offers it to a refined Czech woman to sniff, she can detect nothing but the stench of sweat and fish on his hand.

Baĭ Gano, sliced and diced as a national figure of self-ridicule for more than a century, purveys this natural essence to Europe, transforming rose oil into a commodity somehow out of the experience and reach of those who created it. He became a satiric archetype, so popular that customers awaited each installment of his exploits the way Londoners anticipated new chapters by Charles Dickens.

"Many East Europeans then and now have difficulty seeing themselves without looking at their own reflection in West European eyes . . . ; without lamenting their unequal cultural and economic relationships," Neuburger concludes.