

The Bulgarian Botanical Society celebrated its 80th anniversary*

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Abstract. The Bulgarian Botanical Society is the oldest botanical society in the Balkans. It was founded on 7th November 1923 in the town of Sofia. The first Chairman of the Society was Dr Boris Ivanov, and its printed organ: the *Proceedings of the Bulgarian Botanical Society*, whose first issue came out in 1926. The Society's seal was a depiction of *Haberlea rhodopensis* in the centre.

Key words: anniversary, Bulgarian Botanical Society, history of botany

Eighty years are not such a long period of time, but few scientific institutions have an 80-year history span. The Bulgarian Botanical Society, the first in the Balkans, is among them. That is why, we have every reason today to celebrate solemnly its anniversary and feel proud that Prof. Nikolai Stoyanov, Prof. Boris Stefanov, Prof. Daki Yordanov, Prof. Nikola Arnaoudov, Prof. Boris Kitanov, Prof. Kiril Popov and other prominent scholars, who had gained renown and established the prestige of Bulgarian botany in the scientific world, were among its founders and members.

After these slightly pathetic introductory words, somehow unavoidable on such occasions, let us get down to bare facts and old chronicles, so as to trace out in brief the road traversed by the Society since the remote year 1923 up to our times.

It is well known that Bulgaria's Liberation from Ottoman bondage marked a turning point in the educational, cultural and scientific development of the country. The seeds of National Revival and Bulgarians' centuries-strong thirst for more knowledge and light thrived already in the first years after Liberation. The number of secondary schools grew rapidly, many gifted and studious young people were sent on government expenses to study higher sciences at European universities of renown. In 1888, a

Bulgarian University (initially called Higher School) opened in Sofia, publication of literary and scientific journals began, etc. The newly liberated Bulgaria and, above all, its enthusiastic young intelligentsia were making every effort to shake off their Oriental slavish backwardness and as soon as possible make themselves part of the spiritual values of Europe. Manifestation of such intellectual pursuits was undoubtedly the establishment of the first scientific societies in Bulgaria. By the way, already in 1869 in Braila (Romania) a Bulgarian Learned Society was set up on a public principle and with the active participation of Marin Drinov, Vasil Droumev and Dimitur Stoyanov. However, the first specialised scientific society in Bulgaria was the Bulgarian Natural History Society founded on 7th April 1896, in one of the lecture halls of the Higher School on 49, Moskovska Street. Its founders were 39 natural history scholars: chemists, mathematicians, zoologists, geologists, geographers, including seven botanists, namely, Prof. Stefan Georgiev, his assistants Stefan Petkov and Dimcho Mihailov, and the school teachers Alexander Toshev, Vladimir Dyakovich, Vasil Kovachev, and Vazlav Střibrný. Only a year later branch-societies were set up in Plovdiv and Rouse (rather short-lived), whose initiators and first chairmen were the botanists Petur Kozarov and V. Kovachev.

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The Bulgarian Natural History Society was soon followed by the newly-founded Bulgarian Physics and Mathematics Society (1898), Bulgarian Chemical Society (1901), Bulgarian Entomological Society (1909), and Bulgarian Geographical Society (1918). In 1923 they were joined by the Bulgarian Botanical Society. Did this remarkable event happen early or late? What were the objective and subjective preconditions for its emergence?

The last 15 years of the 19th century should be regarded as the point of inset of Bulgarian botany. During that period several Bulgarian natural history students defended successfully Doctor's Dissertations on botanical subjects at the universities of Leipzig (S. Georgiev, P. Kozarov), Gent (S. Petkov), and Odessa (V. Dyakovich). The first botanical articles written by Bulgarians (S. Georgiev, Anani Yavashev, V. Kovachev, A. Toshev, Ivan Urumov, S. Petkov, and P. Kozarov) saw light in Bulgarian and foreign journals. A Natural History Department opened with the Higher School in Sofia, with a Chair of Botany (1891), where S. Georgiev, S. Petkov, P. Kozarov, and Sava Kazandzhiev commenced their scientific career. In the documents of that period the Chair was defined as one of the "units that make our young Higher School proud."

Already in the first years of the 20th century manifested their botanical potential the recent graduates of the Higher School: Ivan Neichev, Bozhimir Davidov and N. Arnaoudov; the Doctorand of the Geneva University, Todor Nikolov; and of the University of Bern, Boris Ivanov. But the turn of the new century also marked the inset of troubles for the Bulgarian botany after such a successful start.

In 1900 Prof. S. Georgiev died, a year later died also his talented and promising assistant S. Kazandzhiev (the older brother of the prominent scholar in philosophy Prof. Spiridon Kazandzhiev), A. Yavashev gave up botany and switched totally out to archaeology and museum work in his native Razgrad town, V. Kovachev oriented himself completely to zoology, and A. Toshev took up a diplomatic and political career (and in 1935 even became Prime Minister of Bulgaria). Then came the wars (1912–1913; 1915–1918) and science was pushed to the background: university and school teachers fought at the front-line, where Bulgaria's young botanical science suffered new casualties. In the epic battles at the curve of river Cherna (Macedonia) perished the first Bulgarian mycologist, Krum Vlaev, and the devoted helper of Prof. Josef Velenovský, Ivan Mrkvička



Sofia, July 2003, the 80th anniversary of the Botanical Society.

(the son of the artist, Prof. Ivan Mrkvička) who loved botany dearly. Exhausted by warfare died I. Neichev, while B. Davidov suffered a personal life drama and in the course of five or six years did not make any publications.

But as if in support of the old folk wisdom that nothing is as bad as it looks, the end of World War One marked the start of a new and lasting upsurge of Bulgarian botany.

In 1918, a Department of Plant Physiology opened at the Central Agricultural Experimental Institute, which in 1920 grew into a Department of Botany under T. Nikolov, with D. Yordanov and V. Šřibrný as assistants. At the same Institute, mycologist B. Ivanov headed the Department of Phytopathology.

On 1st June 1919, the enterprising and energetic Director of the Royal Natural History Museum, Dr Ivan Bouresh, opened a Botanical Department with the so far one and only Zoological Museum, enlisting as regular or voluntary staff N. Stoyanov, B. Stefanov, Boris Ahtarov, and B. Davidov. Dr Bouresh and King Boris III maintained close friendly and professional relations and already in the first years after the foundation of the Botanical Department a number of scientific trips were organised to the Rila, Rhodopi and

Strandzha Mountains, the Balkan Range, Kresna Gorge and other places all over the country, during which were found many new to science plants, and rich herbarium material was collected.

In 1922, an Agronomical Faculty with a Chair of Botany opened with Sofia University, and the Chair was headed by N. Stoyanov, with B. Stefanov and Toma Georgiev as assistants. Agronomists Ivan Ivanov and Dimitur Atanasov, agrologist I. Stranski (natural history scholar by education), sylviculturist Todor Dimitrov, all specialists with broad biological culture and close in their scientific interests to the problems of botany, were appointed at other chairs of the Agronomical Faculty.

At the same time the Chair of Botany at the Physical and Mathematical Faculty, where S. Petkov and N. Arnaoudov worked, was expanded and D. Yordanov, Boyan Burzakov, Atanas Popnikolov, and Katya Palieva went to work there.

The increased number of botany centres and botanists itself was an objective precondition for their association into one society, similar to those set in many European countries, as well as in Bulgaria, but in other scientific fields. Young, vigorous, enthusiastic and ambitious, they experienced a natural need in

communication and mutual information, a need of support and of pooling their efforts together in the name of a common goal: studies into the flora and vegetation of Bulgaria.

Encouraged by Dr I. Bouresh, Director of the Royal Natural History Museum and Chairman of the Bulgarian Entomological Society, who after the death of Prof. P. Bakhmetiev became a major figure in the natural history circles in Bulgaria, in 1921 the botanists informally associated into the so-called Botanical Fellowship and held meetings jointly with the zoologists of the Entomological Society. In the meanwhile, some administrative problems were settled, a Statute was prepared and some controversial issues were dealt with, and on 7th November 1923 the Bulgarian Botanical Society was officially founded. Among its founding members were botanists S. Petkov, B. Davidov, N. Arnaoudov, I. Urumov, V. Štríbrný, Alexander Radoslavov, P. Kozarov, N. Stoyanov, B. Stefanov, D. Yordanov, B. Ahtarov, T. Georgiev, B. Burzakov, A. Popnikolov, and K. Palieva, zoologists I. Bouresh, Delcho Ilchev, Dimitur Yoakimov, Metodi Popov, Pavel Patev, agronomists Ivan Ivanov, Dimitur Atanasov, Georgi Georgiev, agrologist I. Stranski, sylviculturist T. Dimitrov, etc., 30 persons altogether.

Dr B. Ivanov, Head of the Department of Phytopathology at the Central Agricultural Experimental Institute, former teacher and private instructor in natural sciences of King Boris III, was elected Chairman of the Society. The Society's seal with a depiction of *Haberlea rhodopensis* in the centre was made by D. Yordanov, who became the Society's Secretary, while B. Burzakov and A. Popnikolov respectively became its Treasurer and Librarian.

Associated into a society of their own, the Bulgarian botanists got institutionalised as a scientific community and declared publicly their presence, which undoubtedly greatly contributed to their prestige in Bulgaria and abroad.

The meaning and essence of the Society was expressed in Article 1 of its Statute, which stated as follows: "The purpose of this Society shall be to elaborate scientific issues in the field of botany and its applied branches by means of: a) individual work of its Members; b) studies into the Bulgarian flora; c) publication of its own printed organ *Proceedings of the Bulgarian Botanical Society*; d) undertaking of single and collective exploratory trips; e) establishing of contacts with kindred scientific societies."

In the course of several years all Bulgarian botanists and most of the agronomists and sylviculturists engaged with botany-related issues had grouped around the Society. Its 34 members in 1926 grew to 64 in 1939.

In the first decade of its existence the Society held regularly meetings and sessions to read publicly original works, make original scientific communications, show some discovered interesting and rare plants, report about books and articles, discuss thoughts and ideas relating to the investigation of flora and vegetation, and to hold annual meetings, etc.

Thus, for instance, within the first two years of its existence alone the Society held two annual meetings, 20 monthly sessions and 41 sittings, at which 24 scientific papers and communications were read, and over 100 books, journals and articles were reported. Among the original works read and discussed publicly were, for instance: "A Monograph on genus *Colchicum*" (B. Stefanov), "On phytogeography of the Western Balkan Range" (D. Yordanov), "Biological studies into the carnivorous fungus *Zoophagus insidians*" (N. Arnaoudov), "*Polyporaceae* in Bulgaria" (B. Burzakov), etc. N. Stoyanov and B. Stefanov reported the newly described by them species *Chondrilla matfeldii*, *Verbascum psedonobile*, *Colchicum davidovii*, etc. Reports of the Society's activities were regularly published in the *Natural History and Geography* and *Natural History* journals.

In the course of time the meetings and session decreased in number, but the Society continued to lead a very active creative and organisational life.

The Bulgarian Botanical Society engaged in vigorous public work related to school teaching of botany, environment protection, celebrations of the anniversaries of prominent botanists, etc. Thus, for instance, in 1928 it was one of the initiators and active champions of the foundation of a Union for the Protection of Native Environment, with botanist Prof. S. Petkov as its first Chairman, followed later by Prof. N. Stoyanov. The Society initiated the creation of first natural reserves in Bulgaria – Parangalitsa (Rila Mts), Silkosiya (Mt Strandzha), Bayuvi Douпки (Pirin Mts), Bistrishko Branishte (Mt Vitosha) – all in the time period 1933–1934.

A particularly important side of the Society's work was the publication of its printed organ, the *Proceedings of the Bulgarian Botanical Society*, whose first issue came out in 1926. In the course of 16 years (1926–1939) a total of 16 issues were brought out,

with 139 original scientific papers and communications, plus biographical, bibliographical and other material, or 150 publications altogether (136 of these belonged to Bulgarian authors and 16 to foreign scholars: William Bertram Turrill, Johannes Mattfeld, Friedrich Hermann, etc.). Nearly half of the papers of Bulgarian botanists were written in foreign languages (mostly in German), which made them appropriate for wide-reaching book swapping. In exchange the Society's library received 137 (by 1939) foreign and Bulgarian specialised journals from 122 universities and other scientific centres in about 30 countries. Access to that literature, which was practically impossible to come by in any other way, helped very much the Bulgarian botanists in their scientific research and along with this made them popular via their own printed journal.

The Bulgarian Botanical Society contributed greatly to the development of international scientific cooperation and the establishment of international prestige of Bulgarian botany. Already in the first one or two years of its existence, a number of prominent European botanists involved in investigation of the Bulgarian flora, became its foreign Members: J. Mattfeld (Germany), W. Turrill (UK), F. Hermann (Germany), František Novák (Czech Republic), Leodegar Derganc (Germany). On the other hand, the scholars J. Velenovský (Czech Republic), Árpád von Degen (Hungary) and Boris Fedchenko (Russia), as well as Tsar Boris III and teacher V. Stříbrný (Czech Republic), all with great merits to Bulgarian botany, were made Honorary Members.

During that first period until 1944, after Dr B. Ivanov (1923–1928) the Society was chaired by Prof. S. Petkov, with I. Ivanov, I. Urumov and A. Radoslavov as Deputy-Chairmen, who served one or two consecutive mandates in office. D. Yordanov, B. Burzakov and A. Popnikolov respectively served without replacement as Secretary, Treasurer and Librarian.

During World War Two (1939–1945) and several years after it the Society practically did not engage in any brisk activities, but did not stop its existence. In 1947 it resumed work, already implemented under the auspices of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and in close cooperation with the leading botanical institution in Bulgaria: the Institute of Botany. In 1958 the Society adopted a new Statute in line with the requirements of the then ruling Bulgarian Communist Party for scientific societies and science in general. At the end of the 1960s, the Society became a collective member of the Union of Scientific Workers in

Bulgaria, which rendered it organizational and financial support.

The increased number of botanists that resulted directly from the creation of new botanical units in the country (chairs of botany, Institute of Botany, Institute of Plant Physiology, natural science museums with botanical departments, etc.) led to the establishment of a branch of the Society in Plovdiv and of different sections (Vascular Plants, Lower Plants, Geobotany, Ecology, Paleobotany, etc.). Commissions and committees were set up with the Society's administration charged with development of specific theoretical and organisational issues related to environment protection, updating of the Statute, etc. The meetings and sittings (general, of the sections and of the Plovdiv branch) remained major forms of the organisational and scientific life of the Society. They were used for approval of scientific articles for print, for making communications about the work and decisions of international botanical congresses, symposia, etc., for public reading of research papers in various fields of botany, and lively discussions on topical and then controversial themes (for instance, on the problems of species and speciation, variability of organisms, acclimatisation, etc.).

The Society engaged in rather brisk activity in the field of natural history. A number of articles on environmental themes were published in the *Nature* (Sofia), *Nature and Knowledge* (Sofia) and *Environment Protection* magazines, motions were made for the establishment of new natural reserves, for the inclusion of new species in the lists of protected plants, etc.

The National Conferences on Botany held in close cooperation with the Institute of Botany and the other botanical centres in the country, and with the assistance of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Union of Scientific Workers in Bulgaria became a new form in the work of the Botanical Society. Four such Conferences were held by 1989. In 1983, with the active participation of the Bulgarian Botanical Society, a jubilee symposium was held on the theme "Contemporary Theoretical and Applied Aspects of Plant Ecology," dedicated to the 60th anniversary of the Society, the centenary of the birth of Acad. N. Stoyanov and the 90th anniversary of the birth of Acad. D. Yordanov.

Scores of plenary and section reports were read at those scientific fora, reflecting to a great extent the contemporary lines of research and the achievements in the different fields of botany in Bulgaria.

In 1973, on the initiative and with active participation of the Bulgarian Botanical Society the first Symposium on the Problems of the Balkan Flora and Vegetation was held in the town of Varna, dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the Society, followed in 1976 in Sofia by a Symposium on the Problems of Mapping the Flora on the Balkan Peninsula. These and other national and international events confirmed further the acknowledgement and prestige of the Bulgarian Botanical Society and Bulgarian botany, and contributed to the strengthening and development of cooperation between the Bulgarian and the European botanists, and especially with the botanists of the Balkan countries.

A very useful but, regrettably, only in its kind initiative of the Society was organized about 30 years ago: a general trip to neighbouring Greece for the purposes of botany.

It is important to emphasize that the Bulgarian Botanical Society focused the preparation and development of important research projects of national and international import, such as the multivolume *Flora of the People Republic of Bulgaria*, *Red Data Book of PR Bulgaria*, vol. 1. *Plants*, *Vegetation of the Natural Meadows and Pastures in Bulgaria*, etc.

During that period (1944–1989) the Society was chaired by N. Stoyanov, D. Yordanov, Velcho Velchev, and Dimitur Vodenicharov (of the Plovdiv branch), while B. Kitanov, K. Popov, Ivan Penev, Michail Hristov, Boyan Zahariev, Georgi Georgiev, Slavcho Ganchev, Asen Yanev, Tsvetana Hinkova, Ivan

Bondev, Hristo Kochev, Stefan Kozhuharov, Stefan Draganov, Iliya Cheshmedzhiev and Stefan Stanev (the latter two from the Plovdiv branch) served as its Deputy Chairmen, Secretaries and Members. In the last several years the Society is chaired by Dobrina Temniskova-Topalova.

In 1973, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Society, a number of prominent European botanists were accepted as its Members, including A. Takhtadjan, L. Kursanov, E. Lavrenko, M. Golerbach, while its oldest Founding Member, the 88-year-old Dr I. Bouresh, was made Honorary Member of the Bulgarian Botanical Society.

After the change of political system in Southeast Europe in 1989 and the onset of democratisation in the sociopolitical life of Bulgaria, with a host of difficulties related to that process, the activity of the Bulgarian Botanical Society has obviously slowed down. Nevertheless, two new national conferences took place, the Society was registered as a legal entity, and work has been in progress on updating its Statute, etc.

The opportunities for a more liberal and wider in scope international scientific cooperation that opened up after the changes, and for Bulgaria's overall sharing the spiritual values of Europe, inspire optimism and hope that in its future work the Bulgarian Botanical Society, retaining the best traditions of the past and coming out with novel ideas and views, will continue to reaffirm the good name and prestige of Bulgarian botany.