

## IN MEMORIAM


 BLAŽE KONESKI 1921–1993

It is impossible to imagine post-war Macedonian intellectual life without the contributions of Blaže Koneski. Koneski, who died on 7 December 1993, played a pivotal role in the codification of the standard Macedonian literary language, in the development of modern Macedonian poetry, and in the establishment of those institutions which promote an active intellectual community. Koneski's contributions as a linguist, scholar and writer fundamentally shaped the development of the Macedonian language and the direction of Macedonian poetry.

Koneski was born on the nineteenth of December 1921 in the village of Nebregovo where he lived until his family moved to the town of Prilep when he was eight. Throughout his life, Koneski felt indebted to those early years in the village and to his paternal grandmother for imbuing him with a love for and knowledge of Macedonian folk traditions, songs, stories, and legends.

Koneski completed his early schooling in Prilep, then attended high school from 1934–1939 in Kragujevac, Serbia. He began writing poetry when he was ten and his school poems, written in Serbo-Croatian, were published in 1938. The following year, 1939, when Koneski began writing in Macedonian, marks the beginning of his literary career.

After completing high school, Koneski studied Slavic linguistics and literatures in Belgrade and in Sofia, Bulgaria. By the time Koneski passed his B.A. examinations in 1944, he was already engaged in literary activities. In 1944 he served as a consultant to the Macedonian National Theatre in Skopje. Beginning in 1945, he was on the editorial board of the satirical journal *Osten* and served as a proof-reader for the newspaper *Mlad Borec*.

Koneski was soon thrust into prominence through his participation on the committee which codified the Macedonian literary language. Although the youngest member of the commission at twenty-three, Koneski is largely credited with shaping the modern standard language, which came into official use in the Republic in 1945.

Throughout his life work in both literature and linguistics, Koneski was a tireless and creative supporter of the Macedonian language. He enriched it through his poetry, his studies in folklore and linguistic studies.

In 1945 his poem "The Bridge" was published, followed by his first collection of lyric poems published in 1948. This volume aptly titled *Land and Love* contains the much anthologized poem "Teskoto." Here, as in his later poetic works, Koneski makes frequent reference to folk traditions and motifs. Koneski's interest in and debt to folk lyrics are evident also in his anthology of folk stories first published in 1945, and again in an expanded edition in 1986, which serve as a testament to his life-long interest in Macedonian folk tradition.

Koneski's work towards the standardization of the modern Macedonian language continued throughout his life. During the 1950s Koneski published *A Grammar of the Macedonian Literary Language*, and together with Krum Tosev, an orthographic dictionary of Macedonian. The grammar, filled with detailed descriptions of literary Macedonian and richly illustrated with examples from a wide range of literary styles, has not been surpassed. At this time Koneski was a member of the Macedonian language department of the University of Kiril and Methody in Skopje where he later served as chair of the Department of South Slavic Languages, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy from 1952–53, and as rector of the university from 1968–70.

The volume entitled *Poems* appeared in 1953. Here and in his later poetic works, Koneski successfully married old motifs with new poetic forms. Indeed, one of Koneski's great contributions is the recognition of his debt as a Macedonian writer to folk tradition, while revitalizing that tradition through contemporary genres.

While Koneski was composing his own poetic works in the early 1950s, he also published a number of translations into Macedonian of world literature including the poems of Heinrich Heine, *Lyrical Intermezzo*, published in 1952, Shakespeare's *Othello* published in 1953, and the poetry of Aleksander Blok, a poet with whom Koneski felt a special affinity, as is evident in his own cycle of poems to the Unknown.

Two significant works appeared in 1955, a volume of prose stories entitled *The Vine*, and a collection of poems entitled *Embroideress*. The collection *Embroideress*, which appeared in an expanded edition in 1961, solidified Koneski's growing stature as the leading poet of the post-war generation. The later edition contains the cycle of poems *Sterna*, viewed by many as one of Koneski's masterpieces.

The decade of the sixties was an active one for Koneski the scholar and linguist. Between the years 1961–1965 Koneski was President of the Union of Yugoslav Writers. In addition to being appointed a corresponding member of the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1962, the Serbian

Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1963, and the Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1968, Koneski also became the President of the Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences at its founding in 1967, a position he held until 1975.

A three-volume Macedonian dictionary, edited by Koneski, was completed in 1966. The publication of these volumes, interrupted by the Skopje earthquake of July 1963, remains a tribute to the spirit of scholars working in Skopje at that time. This dictionary of the Macedonian language with its 70,000 entries and republished in one volume in 1986, remains an unsurpassed reference work.

*The History of the Macedonian Language* was published in 1965. This work, too, has been widely hailed as a major contribution not only to Macedonian studies, but more broadly to the general literature on the history and development of the Slavic languages.

After a decade in which Koneski's major work was outside of poetry, he published a collection of poems, *Notes*, in 1974. The reappearance of Koneski the poet was met with critical success. This collection of poems was followed in 1979 by another collection, *Old and New Poems*. In the 1980s Koneski again turned his talents to poetry. The publication of a second jubilee edition of Koneski's collected works was followed by the publication in the late eighties of six volumes of poetry and a collection of prose sketches. Koneski's last poems are intensely personal and reflective poems on aging, on love, and on the place of Macedonia.

Koneski was not only the leading linguist and writer, the leading Macedonian intellectual and international figure, he was also a kind, generous teacher who found time to delight in the linguistic intricacies of his language with junior scholars. Those of us who had the honour of knowing him and consulting him cannot imagine Macedonia without him. His conversation and his friendship will long cast their light and warmth on those who knew him.

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