To Chicago and Back: Bulgaria and the World’s Fair of 1893

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In 1994, the Bulgarian government donated to the University of Chicago a monument of the country’s legendary writer Aleko Konstantinov (1863–97), who documented his tourist experiences at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in the travelogue To Chicago and Bach (1894). The administration placed the monument in the Regenstein Library and inaugurated it with a modest ceremony that November. Although the event passed almost unnoticed in the university community, it received intense media coverage in Bulgaria and was considered a key indicator of a new Bulgarian-American cultural partnership. The monument’s intention, however—to help establish a positive Bulgarian image in the United States—by and large missed its target, as most Americans remain unfamiliar with Konstantinov and his famous work.

Bulgarians consider To Chicago and Bach a masterpiece by an author so beloved that he is usually referred to by his first name rather than his last. While travelogues rarely attain the rank of canonical text, Aleko’s work is an exception. At the end of the nineteenth century, Bulgaria was a newly liberated country; it had been part of the Ottoman Empire from 1396 to 1878. The country’s cultural endeavors at that time focused inward, and the horizons of the foreign world barely reached beyond the Balkans. Against this background, writer Aleko Konstantinov spent his entire life trying to open up the self-centered Bulgarian culture both spatially and intellectually. He created the first Bulgarian tourist club and was a famous pleasure hiker. Despite his chronic lack of money, he traveled to Russia, Paris, Prague, and London, in addition to his famous trip to America. By testing himself and his literary characters away from their sheltered home territory, he brought the Bulgarian identity to a worldwide arena.

This bust of writer Aleko Konstantinov was originally displayed in Svishtov, Bulgaria. In 1994, the Bulgarian government donated the monument to the University of Chicago, where it now stands in the Regenstein Library.