

Jules Verne and Serbia and Montenegro

Extraordinary Voyages and Serbia and Montenegro

There are two novels from the series "Extraordinary Voyages" whose plot is partially set in Serbia and Montenegro. Those are "The Danube Pilot" and "Mathias Sandorf".

In "The Danube Pilot" Serge Ladko, the main character, on his way down the Danube, passes through many Serbian cities; Apatin, Karlovci, Novi Sad, Zemun and Belgrade are mentioned at least once in the book. In Zemun he gets arrested and makes an escape from the prison. Unfortunately, there are no descriptions of Serbian cities in the book, or any historical and geographical facts, so common in Verne's works. Perhaps he lacked good travel records regarding this part of Europe.

Another interesting thing in this book is that it features a Serb character Mihailo Mihailović. This character, although a minor one, was presented as very ingenious and cunning, and he almost guessed what kind of plan Serge Ladko had when he announced his voyage down the Danube. His thought even gave an idea to Karl Dragosh, the detective, how to catch the bandits he was looking for.

The heroes of the second book, "Mathias Sandorf", visit Boka Kotorska, the most beautiful gulf of Montenegro. In the narration Verne mentioned towns of Herceg-Novi, Perast, Risan and Kotor. He also made a realistic description of the local mountaineers who come to the seaside to sell their products on the market.

Besides these two novels, I would like to include "The Astonishing Adventures of Barsac Mission". In this book many inventions were discovered by Marcel Camaret, a character in the book. Those inventions include hydro plant, alternators, transformers, induction coils, transmission of the current over a long distance and wireless telegraph, all of them invented by the greatest Serbian scientist, Nikola Tesla.

Jules Verne has never visited Serbia, but his son Michel has. He went down the Danube to collect some information for his father's novel, and on his way he passed through Belgrade. There is an interesting story regarding this trip. In Belgrade Michel met Jackel Semo, a Bulgarian, and they exchanged their visit cards. Later, when the novel "The Danube Pilot" was published, the name Jackel Semo appeared in the book as the name of a bandit. Mr. Semo's lawyer sent a letter to Hetzel to inform him of the

problem. Although Michel said that he had never meant to cause any trouble to Semo and that he was only collecting common Bulgarian names, the name Jackel Semo was excluded from the book in the next editions, and replaced with that of Yakub Ogul.

Prince Nikola of Montenegro wanted to buy a yacht for private purposes, and he wanted it to be previously owned by a famous person. So he sent his best captain Savo Petković to Nantes to buy Saint Michel III from Jules Verne in 1886. The travel from Nantes to Kotor of the yacht named Sybil was the first long distance sailing trip in the history of Serbia and Montenegro. It was also the first ship ever to sail under the Montenegrin (Serbian) flag in the international seas.

While it was in Nikola's property, it was his favourite ship. All the members of the crew had to be chosen carefully, especially the captain who had to be well educated and had to master several languages. Many of European princes and other famous people and nobility had travelled on Sybil. Prince (later king) Nikola became famous as the Europe's father-in-law, as five of his daughters through their marriage became members of respectable European royal families.

Serbian Editions of Jules Verne's Books

There have been around 40 Verne's novels translated and published in Serbia so far.

The first translation of Verne's book in Serbia appeared in newspaper "Budućnost" (the newspaper for Politics, Economy and Education) from July to October 1873. After that it was reprinted as a book. The next year another two translations were published: "From the Earth to the Moon" and "Five Weeks in a Balloon".

Since these books were immediately accepted by the readers, next fifteen years were marked by publishing at least one translation each year, and even four books in 1886. From 1890 till 1905, the year of Verne's death, the interest for translating his works decreased, but in spite of that, according to a literary magazine article of that time, he was by far the most translated foreign writer in Serbia.

Between the two world wars a great number of new books were published. From 1927 till 1929 more than twenty new translations were published. However, these issues were mostly for children, so they tend to be abridged and simplified.

After the WWII, in socialist Yugoslavia, publishing of Verne's works was encouraged because he was said to be the writer of prosperity. The quality of translations improved significantly. The big majority of the succeeding translators were linguists and teachers of French. Improvement in translations started in 1937 with the first Serbian translation of "The Children of Captain Grant" by Ivan R. Dimitrijević, who was already known for his good translations of Zola and Balzac.

In the fifties and sixties many publishers presented series of Jules Verne's books, and at the time he was the most popular writer among Serbian youth. It is now difficult to find anybody who was young at that time and had not read several Verne's books.

The importance of his books for scientific progress and appreciation for moral values brought Jules Verne to schools. "20000 Leagues under the Sea" is still an obligatory reading material for the fifth grade of primary school, and "The Mysterious Island" was included in the syllabus for the gymnasium.

In the last fifteen years, due to the crisis the country has suffered, books have been published in considerably smaller amount. That stands for Verne's books as well. Nevertheless, I have to mention that "Paris in XX Century" was published in 1995, shortly after the original French edition.

Nowadays, Verne is usually viewed as children's writer, so his books are published in such a fashion. Those translations are mainly reprints of the editions published in the twenties and thirties of the last century.

Jules Verne and Comics

Besides being published as books, Verne's novels have also been adapted in the form of a comic. In this aspect, Serbia had the leading role. According to data given by Arnaud Bedat, the first comics inspired by Jules Verne's novels were published in America in the late forties. However, as early as 1936, the very first comics based on Verne's novels were published in Belgrade. The author was Đorđe Lobačev and the titles: "The Messenger of the Emperor" (Michel Strogoff) and "The Children of Captain Grant". These comics were issued in Belgrade magazines and "The Children of Captain Grant" wasn't finished since the magazine ceased to exist (only the first volume, South America, was issued.)

The next author interested in adaptation of Jules Verne's novels was Sebastijan Lehner. In 1938 he published a comic "The Mysterious Island in the Pacific" and in 1939 "The Master of the World".

A comic by Aleksandar Hecl, one of the most famous Serbian illustrators, "Journey to the Centre of the Earth" from 1961 should also be mentioned as it represents one of the best comic of this author.

Besides those comics of domestic authors mentioned above, many translations of foreign authors' comics were also published. These comics include: "Five Weeks in a Balloon", "The Southern Star", "The Pirates from Halifax" (adaptation of "Traveling Scholarships"), "The Archipelago on Fire" and many others...

Verne's influence in Serbia

Verne's work was the inspiration for the artist and scientists all over the world. Serbian artist and scientist are no exception. I'll mention just a few.

One of the most prominent Serbian mathematicians Mihajlo Petrović Alas was a great admirer of Jules Verne's work. Several times he mentioned that Verne inspired him to take part in numerous expeditions in various parts of the Earth. In 1931 he joined French scientific polar expedition where a device for discovering the icebergs was tested. In the next couple of years he traveled over the Atlantic, visiting all the islands from the Caribbean to the polar circles.

He made travel records of all of his journeys, but they were so good that they were published as novels. As you read them you can feel Verne's influence on description of nature, especially of the fishes and whales as well as historical and geographical facts that were mentioned.

The greatest Serbian playwright Branislav Nušić wrote a comedy entitled "Around the World". There is an interesting line in the play stating that there were only three people famous for their trip around the world: Columbus, Phileas Fogg and Jovanče Micić. Jovanče Micić is the book's main character.

In 1964 a film based on this comedy appeared. It was directed by Soja Jovanović and the leading role was played by the most famous Serbian comedian Miodrag Petrović Čkalja.

One of the leading Serbian pop singers Đorđe Balašević composed a song entitled “The Journey to the Centre of the Earth” in 1985. What differs in this song from quite a few of those who mention Verne or one of his works, is that the author was familiar with the content of book, clearly indicated in the following verse:

“The book says that there exists a place
Under the earth’s surface where a sun is shining”

At the end, I would like to mention that Yugoslav Film Archive has celebrated the Centennial of Jules Verne’s death. From 12th to 19th of February a series of eighteen adaptations of Jules Verne’s novel was played.