

BANOVITCH STRAHINYA

Historical Data

The ballad relating to Banovitch Strahinya is one of the finest and most famous which the anonymous Serbian bards composed during the Middle Ages. The author was probably a dependent of the descendants of Banovitch, and utilized few historical and biographical data, which he must have found among the manuscripts and other records belonging to his lord or in the other castles he visited from time to time.

Prince Ourosh (of the Nemanya dynasty) married Helen, a French princess of the house de Courtenay, and through her he kept up friendly relations with the French Court of Charles of Anjou in Naples, and he endeavored to negotiate an alliance between Serbs and French for the overthrow and partition of the Byzantine Empire.

Some Serbian historians believe that Banovitch Strahinya was really the glorious Strashimir Balshitch-Nemanyitch (who reigned conjointly with his two brothers from 1360-1370 in Skadar, the capital of Northern Albania) and a descendant of the old Provencal family of des Baux.

In early local records the name Baux is latinized Balcius, and members of the family who attended the Court at Naples changed the name, in Italian fashion, into Balza. And it is supposed that these Italianized Seigneius des Baux, who were permitted to marry into the Royal House of Nemanyitch, and who settled in Serbian lands, then further changed their patronymic to Balsha or Balshitch---itch, or ich, or ic being the characteristic termination of most Serbian family names.

It may here be stated that Skadar was at that time still the capital of Zeta (the Montenegro of modern times). The valiant Nicholas I Petrovitch, the present King of Montenegro, and an indirect descendant out of Balshitch, was obliged by the Great Powers to evacuate the town after he had obtained possession of it by the heroism of his troops, and Serbian bards throughout the kingdom are now improvising ballads, in which they may transmit to future generations the story of the sad events of the present time, just as their ancestors recorded the exploits of Strahinya. But let us turn to the story of Banovitch as it was given in the old ballad.

The Falcon Banovitch

In the opening verses the bard describes the hero and eulogizes him as "a falcon without equal." He tells of the orders given by Banovitch to his servants and pages relative to the preparations to be made for himself, Dyogo his faithful steed, and the greyhound Caraman, his inseparable companion. He is not going to the hunt; however, he intends to visit the aged Youg Bogdan, and is clad in pure silk and velvet embroidered with fine gold. Bogdan, his beloved father-in-law, resides at his sumptuous castle in Kroushevatz. The old man rejoiced to see him, and his nine sons and their wives, as well as Bogdan's sons-in-law, of whom one was direct descendant of King Nemanja, greeted him warmly.

As they were feasting, a letter was brought from Banovitch's mother, telling him that innumerable hordes of Turks had encamped on the field of Kossovo. Strahinya seized the letter and read in horror his mother's malediction: "Woe to thee and they feasting in the accursed castle of thy wife's father!" The letter went on to say that a certain chieftain named Vlah-Ali, proud, haughty, and independent not only of Mehmed, the Grand Vizir, but of Sultan Amourath himself, had attacked, conquered, and pillaged his castle, captured his servants, and taken his wife away to his tent on a mountain near the field of Kossovo. where she was seemingly quite content to remain Youg Bogdan, observing Strahinya's grief, asked him in alarm what was

amiss, if he lacked anything in his castle, or if any one of his family had offended him. Banovitch thanked his father-in-law, and assured him that other misfortunes were troubling him, and he read the letter aloud. Banovitch then begged Young Bogdan to allow his sons to accompany him to the field of Kossovo, as he had resolved to rescue his wife from the hands of the foe. but Young Bogdan, thinking that it would be foolish for so few to go and face the many thousands of bloodthirsty Turks, disapproved altogether of this, and strongly advised Banovitch to abandon the idea. He even promised to find him a bride fairer and more worthy of him than his own faithless daughter. But Strahinya remained unshaken in his resolution, and convinced of his father-in-law's lack of chivalry, ran hurriedly to the stables, refusing in scorn the help of Bogdan's servants, saddled Dyogo, and indignant and sorrowful mounted forthwith. As he was riding out of the courtyard he suddenly remembered Caraman, so he whistled, and instantly Caraman ran to his master and comforted him.

Banovitch seeks the Turk

So over fields and over mountains, straight to Kossovo Banovitch rode forth with courage and gladness, for his dog was even dearer to him than his steed. At Kossovo he saw the plain crowded with tents and soldiers, and as he looked he felt something like dread within him; nevertheless, he called on the name of the true God and taking the precaution of disguising himself as a Turk, he rode over the plain. For several days he sought, but alas! in vain, the tent of Vlah-Ali. At last from the banks of Sitniza, he beheld a spacious green tent upon the pole of which a golden apple shone; before the entrance stood an Arab steed stamping sharply with his forefeet upon the ground. Strahinya thought that this must surely be the tent of Vlah-Ali, and he fiercely spurred on his Dyogo. Reaching the tent in a moment, spear in hand, he boldly drew aside the silken curtain which veiled the entrance. To his disappointment he saw that the only occupant of the pavilion was an old Dervish with a white beard reaching to his knees. The old man was drinking wine, a thing forbidden to him by the laws of his order, and he returned the greeting of Strahinya, who spoke good Turkish, with a profound salaam. Then, to Strahinya's astonishment, the dervish said: "Hail! O Banovitch Strahinya, Lord of Little Banya near Kossovo!" Banovitch was taken aback, but he tried to put a good face upon it and asked in apparent surprise: "Who is the man thou hast called Banovitch Strahinya?" The half-drunken dervish laughed aloud. "Thou canst not deceive me," said he, "I would instantly recognize thee, yea, even wert thou on the top of the mountain Goletch." Then he told Banovitch how that he had been a captive in his castle a few years previously, and had been treated most humanely, even receiving a daily measure of wine. Finally Banovitch had let him go to his estates to collect his ransom. Upon reaching his home he discovered that his estates had been appropriated by the Sultan, and his house and other possessions had been given to Pashas' daughters as dowries. All was dreariness and desolation; he had lost his fortune--and, he added bitterly, consequently all his friends--so he was reduced to ride to Yedrenet to offer his services to the Sultan. The Vizir, he continued, told the Sultan that he looked as if he might quite likely be of use as a soldier, whereupon the Sultan had given him good clothes and better weapons and the Vizir added his name to the roll of warriors sworn to fight for the Sultan. "Now," he concluded, "I do not possess so much as even a dinar, give me, I pray thee, time for my fortunes to improve."

Strahinya was deeply touched by the dervish's misfortunes and, alighting from his steed, he embraced him and spoke to him in the following friendly manner: "Thou art my brother-in-God! I forgive thee gladly thy ransom, neither shall I ever ask even a dinar from thee, but thou canst repay me! I am now seeking the haughty Vlah-Ali, who demolished my castle and robbed me of my wife. Tell me, O aged dervish! Where shall I find my foe? I beseech thee as my brother-in-God, not to let the Turks know of my presence here, and not to suffer them to take me by guile." The dervish was glad to become brother-in-God, not to let the Turks know of my presence here, and not to suffer them to take me by guile." The dervish was glad to become brother-in-God of such a valiant hero as Strahinya, and he pledged his unalterable faith that, even if Strahinya should destroy half of the Sultan's army, he would never betray him; but at the same time, he tried to persuade Banovitch to give up all intention of attacking such an unconquerable and terrible foe, whose mere name was enough to strike terror into the heart of the best and bravest. He went on to describe the warlike character of the invincible rebel of the Padishah, and finished by assuring Banovitch that neither his sharp sword, nor his poisoned spear, nor his steed would avail to protect him, for the terrible Vlah-Ali would surely seize him alive in his iron grasp, break his limbs to pieces and pluck out his eyes.

Strahinya laughed aloud when he heard all this; "O my brother," said he, "thou aged dervish! Thou needest not warn me against one warrior, only do not bring upon me the Sultan's whole army! Since thou goest to water thy horses every evening and every morning at the River Sitniza, thou couldst save me from riding my steed into muddy depths!"

At this the dervish repeated his oath, and exclaimed:

Strahni-Bane, ti sokole Srpski!
Tvome Dyogu i tvome junashtvu
Svud su brodi, dyegody dodyesh vodi!

Banovitch crossed the river, and rode without haste to mount Goletch. He was still at the foot of the mountain when the morning sun shone out upon the field of Kossovo, making the tents and the soldiers' armor gleam.

The lines are considered to be the finest composed by any Serbian bard, and may be freely translated:

"O Lord Strahinya, thou Serbian glorious falcon!
Depending ever upon thy true steed Dyogo and upon thine own courage,
wherever thou goest, there thou shalt find a way free of all danger."

The Faithless Wife

What was the mighty Vlah-Ali doing when dawn came? The Turk's custom was to seek slumber only at sunrise. "How very dear to him was his new slave, Strahinya's wife, "recites the bard," may be understood when I tell that he had closed his eyes when his head on her shoulder." The faithless woman was not sleeping; through the door of the tent she gazed over the sleeping camp. Suddenly she roused her new lord and pointed in terror to the figure of an advancing horseman in whom she had recognized her true husband.

At first the Turk laughed at her fears and said that it was only an ambassador from the Sultan. "Verily," said he, composing himself again to rest, "Strahinya will not dare to come near the tent!"

Presently his companion again roused Vlah-Ali and told him that the horseman was no messenger from Amouradh, but her own husband, Banovitch Strahinya himself, and she warned Vlah-Ali that he was in peril of his life.

Upon this, the mighty Vlah-Ali leapt to his feet, girded on a long silken sash, fastened in it a sharp gleaming yataghan, quickly belted on his shining sabre, and was soon firmly seated in his saddle.

The Combat

A moment later Banovitch came up, and a fearful contest began between the two champions--heroes of almost equal renown, though not equal in strength. Strahinya addressed his opponent with reproachful and taunting words, and Vlah-Ali replied in equally offensive terms. But they did not fight only with words. Banovitch spurred Dyogo and furiously cast his spear, which the mighty Turk, stretching out his hands, caught and broke into pieces. "O Strahinya," he shouted derisively, "thou callest me a poltroon, indeed! Dost thou know to whom thou didst speak? Here is no woman of thy Serbian land whom thy threats might alarm; thou hast here to deal with the mighty Vlah-Ali who fears neither the Sultan nor his Grand Visir, yea, not even the countless horde which they command! One and all, they are to me but a swarm of ants!" Speaking thus, he alertly reined in his sturdy horse and sent his spear whistling through the air. So straight it went to Strahinya's breast that he surely would have been stricken had the just God not helped him. Dyogo, accustomed to duels, knelt swiftly in the nick of time, so that the Turk's weapon flew over Banovitch's head and struck against a rock behind him, breaking into three pieces. Their spears being thus

destroyed, the fierce warriors next grasped their heavy clubs, and rushed to close quarters. Their blows fell thick and fast until Vlah-Ali struck Strahinya so violently that he was stunned and fell forward upon Dyogo's neck. Again the true God stood by Strahinya; his beloved gray steed, trained for such a struggle, moved his head and his neck so cleverly that he threw his master back into the saddle. Strahinya, in his turn, now struck his adversary's shoulder with great force, but the mighty Turk sat unshaken although by this time his horse's legs were sunk in the black earth up to the knees.

And so the battle went on until the combatants broke each other's clubs, when they took to their sharp sabres, hoping to decide the combat very soon. But lo! Banovitch's sabre was not a common one; two strong smiths had spent a week in shaping it and in smelting the finest of fine steel for its blade. The Turk made a swift slash at his foe, but Strahinya caught the gleaming steel on his own blade, and the sabre was instantly severed above the hilt. This pleased Banovitch greatly, and, fiercely pressing the Turk, he now tried to hack off his adversary's arms. but the heroes were well matched; Vlah-Ali guarded his head most deftly with the remaining stump of his sabre, and, bit by bit, he broke away his adversary's weapon, until once more the two were on equal terms. They now dismounted, and grasping each other firmly, they heaved and wrestled with all their strength.

Finally Strahinya, feeling that he was almost spent, called upon his wife to take the other part of the Turk's sabre and to settle the contest by striking either his head or that of Vlah-Ali. Thereupon Vlah-Ali called out: "My darling! O thou wife of Strahinya! Strike me not, but rather strike Banovitch as thou canst never again be dear to him; he will blame and scorn thee for ever and ever. But thou shalt be always most dear to me. I will escort thee to Yedrenet, thirty maids shall there be to wait upon thee: to carry thy robes and wide sleeves. With sweetmeats will I feed thee and will cover thee with golden ducats from head to foot!"

Women may easily be misled by fair words; and so the wife of Strahinya sprang forward and picked up a piece of the sharp blade, wrapping it carefully in fine silk for she feared it might wound her hand. Then she ran swiftly to the fighting heroes, and taking all care not to hurt Ali, she violently struck the head of Banovitch, and cut through the golden crest and the white helmet. The blade but slightly gashed Strahinya's head, but down rushed the blood over his face fast and thick and all but blinded him.

At this bitter moment, Strahinya thought of his faithful Caraman and called to him twice. The dog rushed furiously at the faithless woman and held her fast, whereupon she was much terrified¹ and screaming loudly, she threw the blade afar and seized the dog by its ears. The Turk, alarmed and distracted, turned round to see what had happened. So encouraged was Strahinya at this new proof of his dog's intelligence and faithfulness that new strength came to him and seizing the opportunity he threw his adversary on the ground and slew him with his teeth "as wolves slaughter lambs." Then he carried away his wife (whom the intelligent Caraman had left unhurt) to her father's castle.

The return of the Falcon

When Youg Bogdan and his sons saw Strahinya covered with blood, they were greatly astonished that there should be a Turk valiant enough to wound a hero such as Strahinya. But Strahinya narrated to them the shameful conduct of his wife, and the story made Youg Bogdan so incensed that he commanded his sons to pierce their sister with their swords. But the ever chivalrous Strahinya protested, exclaiming: "O my brothers-in-law, ye nine Yougovitch! Why, O brothers would ye cover yourselves with shame today? On whom would ye draw your blades? Since ye are, O brothers, so blood-thirsty and so courageous, where were all your knives and your bright sabres when I went to the field of Kossovo? Why did ye not accompany me then, and exhibit your bravery before the fierce Turks? Why did ye not then prove yourselves to be my friends? I will not let ye kill your sister; without your help I could have slain her myself. She is but a frail and easily misguided woman! But I shall not kill her: on the contrary, she will henceforth be dear to me as ever."

¹ Here the bard in his naive meditations on the psychology of women, states that the fair sex is always alarmed by true dogs .

The bard ends his poem:

Pomalo ye takijeh younaka,
Ka' shto beshe Strahinyityou Bane!

("Few are the heroes fit to be compared with Banovitch Strahinya!")