

The Discovery of the Letters of Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic

By Milos Rastovic

Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic was a Serbian philologist, which is a linguist who studies written texts. Known as the major reformer of the Serbian language, he collected old Serbian songs and fairy tales and wrote the first Serbian dictionary. Because he developed a new Serbian language form from the old Serbian-slavonic culture, he is remembered as a remarkable person of Serbian literature in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In the town of Martin, Slovakia, a Serbian team of experts who was researching Serbian medieval culture recently found Karadzic's original letters. According to Zoran Nedeljkovic, the director of the Library of Serbian Patriarchy in Belgrade, who initiated the project, the team scanned and digitized the letters and will donate them to the Vuk Endowment. The letters include valuable information about Karadzic's books.¹

Karadzic was born on November 8, 1787, in the village of Trsic, near Loznica in Serbia, formerly part of the Ottoman Empire. Because his parents experienced the loss of some of his older siblings, they named him Vuk (wolf) believing that evil spirits and witches would not hurt him. He went to school in Loznica, but became ill and could not complete his studies. When Dositej Obradovic, the first minister of Education in Serbia, founded the Higher School (Velika Skola) in Belgrade, Karadzic became the first student. After the Serbian rebellion against the Ottoman Empire in 1813, he went to Vienna and married Ana Marija Kraus. Although they had many children, only their daughter, Mina, and son, Dimitrije, survived. While in Vienna, he met Jernej Kopitar, a linguist who was interested in Slavic studies, and who helped Karadzic publish two important books among many others: *Serbian Language Grammar*, *Pismenica Serbskog Jezika* (1814) the first Serbian book on grammar, and *Serbian National Songs*, *Srpske Narodne Pesme* (1815). Karadzic's books attracted the attention of many famous literary figures in Europe: Jakob Grimm translated Karadzic's books into German and he compared Karadzic's poem "Building of Scutari on the Bojana" "Zidanje Skadra na Bojani" with the poetry of Homer, calling it: "one of the most touching poems of all nations and all times."² Goethe described Karadzic's Serbian poems as "excellent and worthy of comparison with Solomon's *Song of Songs*." Even Alexander Pushkin, the Russian poet, admired Karadzic's poems.

Karadzic's most valuable contribution, however, was his *Pismenica* (Grammar) wherein he simplified the old Serbian alphabet and spelling. He applied German Adelung's principle: "Write as you speak and read as it is written." He thought that every sound should have only one letter. In this way, he developed phonetic spelling and modernized both Serbian literature and language. With the publication of four books in 1847: *The War for Serbian Language and Spelling* by Djura Danicic, *Songs* by Branko Radicevic, *Gorski Vijenac* by Petar Petrovic Njegos, and a Serbian translation of the *New Testament*, it became clear that his alphabet and spelling had been widely adopted. His language was recognized as the official Serbian language in 1868, four years after his death.

Karadzic received many honors in Europe. He was a member of the Academy in Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Moscow, and Saint Petersburg, among others. He died in Vienna on February 7, 1864, and in 1897, his remains were transferred to Belgrade, where he was buried with honors in the Serbian Church. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has designated 1787 as the year of Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic.

¹ See D. Matovic, "Nadjena Pisma Vuka Karadzica," *Vecernje Novosti*, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/kultura.71.html:319479-Nadjena-pisma-Vuka-Karadzica>

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vuk_Stefanovi%C4%87_Karad%C5%BEi%C4%87

