

Bulgarian Garden Art-Past and Present

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Numerous monuments dating back to ancient times are still preserved in Bulgaria. This is not surprising as, owing to its central geographic location in the Balkan Peninsula, it has been criss-crossed by countless tribes and invaders. At the crossroads of the Mediterranean world and a gateway to the Orient, it was a meeting-place of various cultural foci in Antiquity.

The still extant architectural monuments, as well as archaeological finds and products of the other arts, give us an idea about the achievements of landscape gardening in those long bygone days. The monuments of Thracian art discovered fairly recently, in particular the famous Kazanluk tomb with its wonderful frescoes, are of great interest as a basis of Bulgarian architecture and arts in general. In the Thracian town of Seuthopolis the dwellings were laid out around an inner courtyard or garden with colonnades. Traces of garden drains and courtyard drain wells, a prime condition for the creation of gardens, have been found.

The Roman civilization, whose achievements in architecture and construction work were quite substantial, has left behind even deeper marks. In Oescus and Nicopolis ad Istrum, two relatively well preserved towns dating back to Roman times, the outlines of atria are still clearly visible. Particu-

larly typical in this respect is the villa discovered in Abritus (present-day Razgrad), probably the property of a big landowner; it had a large rectangular atrium (25 & 125 metres) paved with marble slabs and interspersed with colonnades in an Ionic style, which was surrounded by 27 residential and other buildings.

The break-up of the Roman Empire into a Western and an Eastern part was of prime importance for the further development of landscape gardening in Bulgaria. The star of the new capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, Constantinople, began to shine brightly, and its beneficial cultural influence was felt with particular intensity in the nearby Balkan lands. With the disappearance of the Western Roman Empire, mighty Byzantium remained the only custodian of Roman traditions.

In 681 a Bulgarian state* made its appearance in the eastern half of the Balkan Peninsula in lands which boasted of a rich cultural heritage: Thracian, Roman as well as Slavic. Along with the numerous tribes which in the 7th century crossed the Danube and penetrated the Balkan Peninsula, the Proto-Bulgarians settled in the lands lying between the Danube, the Balkan Range and the Black Sea, i.e. the northern half of present-day Bulgaria. There they founded, together with the Slavs

the new state whose two oldest capitals were Pliska and Preslav. In the early 10th century, under the reign of Tsar Simeon, generally known as the Golden Age of the First Bulgarian Kingdom, favourable conditions for the development of landscape gardening were created. Preslav was surrounded by two fortress walls, an outer and an inner one; palaces, churches and monasteries (among which the Golden Church) made their appearance, situated amid parks and gardens and adorned, according to the description of Ioan the Exarch, on the outside 'with stone and wood' and on the inside with 'marble and copper as well as with silver and gold'.

The specific conditions of the natural milieu determined the architectural and landscape lay-out of Veliko Turnovo, the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (1186-1391). The Tsarevets and Trapszitsa hills offered the builders of the new capital excellent opportunities for the establishment of a unique medieval fortress-town. The palace and the churches of the tsar and the patriarch rose on Tsarevets, while the boyars' residences were located on Trapszitsa. The streets running down the two hills were narrow and crooked, and the gardens were terraced. The architects of those days must have had a fine feel for fitting contrasts and dominants into the landscape, to judge by the smart distribution of the buildings, which formed a harmonious entity with the natural setting.

Interesting albeit schematic data on the lay-out of gardens in Bulgaria during that period can be found in church murals. Church and monastery courtyards with trees, paved walks and fountains form the background of many icons, decorative images and prints. The scenery, however, is gloomy and

most of the land is untilled, so that Nature has a virginal and wild look. Passing through Bulgaria on their way to the Holy Land, the Crusaders spoke with amazement about the impenetrable forests which they called *Silva Bulgariae*.

During the almost five-century long Ottoman bondage (1391-1878) landscape gardening was confined to the lay-out of church and monastery courtyards, where herbs were grown for medicinal purposes. The boyar estates were turned into big farms of beys and agas, while the Bulgarian population fled from the towns to withdraw to safer mountain fastnesses, where gradually new Bulgarian towns sprang up: Koprivshtitsa, Panagyurishté, Kotel and Tryavna. In the late 18th and the 19th century, these towns became the cradle of the economic and cultural upswing of what has become known as the Bulgarian National Revival, characterized by the rapid progress of domestic industry and trade. Here craftsmen produced leather and woollen articles which were marketed throughout the vast Ottoman Empire. The steady growth of the Bulgarian urban population gave an impetus to the construction of residential and public buildings. The city skylines came to be dominated ever more by the domes of churches; clock towers made their appearance, which put their imprint on the city centre (for instance, Tryavna).

The courtyard or garden was usually small in size (0.2-0.5 ha) and irregular in shape. The free build-up and asymmetric composition of the house determined the scenic look of the garden. The cobble-stoned street in front of the house, the flower garden and the orchard somehow fitted together in a peculiar manner. The garden was insepa-

rably connected with the house and this linkage found its best expression in the vine-arbour, which represented a *sui generis* pergola stuck to the house. The vine-arbour or trellis vine was made of wooden props on which thinner beams and laths forming a grate were arranged. Vine leaves and branches were intertwined in this grate, thus forming a veritable laid-out ceiling, a natural fresco. There were no pronounced compositional axes in the courtyard design. The fountain, the well and the flower garden were so situated as to meet the functional needs of the craftsman: the fountain and the garden next to the house and the well next to the lean-to or annex. Whenever the terrain was even, the courtyard or garden would be on one or at most on two levels and be larger in size (for instance, in Karlovo), while in steep and mountainous places it would be smaller in area and terraced (Kotel, Zheravna and Gradets). The way in which the Bulgarian courtyard was organized reveals a sense of proportion. The outline of the architectural framework is calm and well balanced. The sole dominant in this space is the chestnut-tree, the old pear tree, the oak or the sycamore whose mighty branches rise skyward and which seem to be set there to protect an inward-looking pastoral life. A multitude of flowerpots whose colourful geraniums stand out brightly against the white walls round off the picture. Some of the Karlovo courtyards had as many as 500 flowerpots and even more.

Water occupied a privileged place in the Karlovo gardens. The rills which in the past passed across all the courtyards lent a specific touch of beauty to these spaces.

Everywhere a harmonious entity was achieved between the miniature terri-

tory of the courtyard and the surrounding landscape. In this respect the monastery courtyards had no peer; their architecture and lay-out seemed to grow out of the ground, to form an integral entity with the rocks, the woods or the river, while the scenic beauty of the surrounding nature was mirrored in the painted murals (the Rila monastery, the Troyan Monastery and the Bachkovo monastery).

Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman domination following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 found its towns almost entirely devoid of public parks and gardens. Sofia's sole green spot was in the down town area, where the City Park is now located, in front of the townhall of Makhzar Pasha, the last Turkish vali; like all Turkish courtyards, it was planted with willows, mulberry trees, poplars, chestnuts and other fruit trees.

The new principality immediately set about designing public and other gardens. Distinguished landscape architects and gardeners from abroad were invited to lay the groundwork, including Daniel Neff, Switzerland (1879), Karl Betz, Germany (1882), Josef Fray, France, and the Czech Anton Kolar. It took several decades to build up the most important one, Freedom Park or, as it was known in tsarist days (before World War II), Boris Gardens (in honour of the then Crown Prince Boris). Hardly less important for the development of landscape gardening was the subsequent establishment of the botanical and the zoological garden, the first of their kind in the whole of the Balkan Peninsula.

The example of Sofia was followed by other towns in the country. In Plovdiv the Dondukov Garden (1879) and the Princely garden (1880) were created.

Central parks sprang up in Sevlievo (1887), Turnovo (1891) and Shoumen (1897), followed by the beautiful maritime Garden in Varna (1894), the Park of the Liberators in Plovdiv (in the wake of the first exhibition in 1892), the maritime Gardens in Bourgas (1900), the Mausoleum and Skobelev Park in Pleven (1904-7), the Central Park in Roussé (1906-7), and the Danubian Gardens in Vidis (1907-8).

The gardens created in Bulgaria during this period, from its national liberation in 1878 to the establishment of socialist rule in 1944, were strongly influenced by the compositional techniques which were fashionable in those days in Western and Central Europe. The experts who came from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France and Great Britain brought with them, along with the culture of their nation, the conceptions of mixed landscape and geometrical eclecticism which they had imbibed there. Their greatest merit was that they enriched Bulgarian gardens with new plant species (trees, decorative shrubs and flowers). This was done with exceptional skill in the royal residences at Vranya, Euxinograd and Krichim, where the dendrological variety made it possible to create interesting groups of trees and shrubs, artistically laid-out landscapes, alpineous and lakes with aquatic flowers. Even such rare species as Victoria Regia were cultivated in the greenhouses of Vranya.

After Bulgaria's liberation the capital's townhall and the garden around it were thoroughly overhauled, so as to properly accommodate prince Battemberg, Bulgaria's first ruler. The remaining green area was rapidly extended and enriched with new vegetation; flower-beds, a small fountain, a refreshment stall, a pavilion for the

Guards' music, and even copies of ancient statues, all features typical of that epoch, made their appearance. That is how Sofia's first public garden gradually acquired a distinct look, a face of its own. Since then it has been overhauled on several occasions, the last time in 1978, when in its central part a monumental fountain was built, which to a certain degree integrates the garden with the pedestrian zone in front of the National Theatre.

The foremost garden not only in Sofia but in all of Bulgaria is Freedom Park. Lying, when first laid out in the late 19th century, on the approaches to the city, it has now evolved into a veritable central park, connecting the prewar city with its most important postwar additions. Its distinguishing features are a beautiful composition, a diversified tree and decorative shrub vegetation, a lake with a fountain at the entrance, busts of eminent Bulgarian poets, writers and public figures, and the monumental Common Partisan Grave, on which the memorable words of Hristo Botev, the immortal bard of the national revolution over a century ago, are engraved: "He who falls in battle does not die!" The building of Freedom Park began in 1882, when the energetic Swiss landscape architect Daniel Neff created a big nursery garden, in which he planted acacias, trumpet-flowers, pagoda-trees, mulberry trees, platans, elms, limes, pea-trees, maples, almond and other trees. In 1888 the acacias were replaced by oaks, ashes, sycamores, birches, spruces and pines. The nursery was transformed into public gardens, continuing as such until 1906, when the new landscape architect Josef Fray considerably extended them in area, adding many new flower species. He also organized flower shows, which proved

to be quite popular. In 1934 the gardens acquired a new decorative sculpture and several fountains.

In 1948 a plan for the general reconstruction of Freedom Park (now its official name) was prepared. Based on a project submitted by Prof. D.T. Sougarev, it provided for the establishment of a rosarium and a landscape lay-out of flower-beds, new playgrounds as well as a traffic lights installation for children.

Year in and year out new decorative vegetation is being introduced into Freedom Park. In 1960 the alpineus, comprising many rare species, such as ginkgo, bilboa, Amur cork, wild almond, wild carob-tree and hepatica, was completed. When the Lord Mayor of London paid a return visit to his Sofia colleague in 1972, an 'Englisa grove' comprising some 5,000 erica and calunda (?) species as well as 20 dwarf pines, all sent from England, was set up in the vicinity of the small lake. A similar present of Japanese morello trees was received from the Tokyo municipal Council on two occasions. In its present shape Freedom Park covers an area of 333.64 ha, of which vegetative are 270.42 ha, walks and open spaces - 26.56 ha, water surfaces - 2.10 ha, and sport grounds - 33.56 ha. As regards tree species composition, it has 119,133 deciduous trees (62.4 per cent) and 71,871 coniferous trees (37.6 per cent).

In the postwar years several new big gardens have sprung up in Sofia. Among these, the two most significant ones are South Park, designed by woman-architect M.Karlova, and West Park, designed by architect I. Boyadjiev.

South Park is situated on the southern axis of the city, intersecting its centre radially and representing a green belt linked up with Mt. Vitosha. Right

now it covers an area of 120 ha, which according to final plans is to be brought up to 400 ha. The varied configuration of the terrain made it possible to develop a spread-out landscape composition, in which the adopted wide lawns, clusters of trees and decorative shrubs stand out clearly against the magnificent backdrop of Mt. Vitosha. Functionally designed for rest and recreation, this park abounds in playgrounds for children, natural lakes, decorative water areas, solariums and flower-beds. The trees encountered most frequently are the black pine (*Pinus niger*), the common spruce, the Douglas fir and the *concolorca* fir (*Alies concolor*), the birch, the chestnut-tree, the lime, the sycamore, the ash, the oak, the poplar and the willow.

West Park lies on the western approaches to the capital, in close vicinity to the last rolling hills of Mt. Lyulin. Its composition is delineated with geometric walks in its even front part and, the closer it comes to the outlying natural setting, the more it assumes a landscape character with large, almost forest-like massifs of trees and groups of decorative shrubs. Intended also as a centre of culture and sports which is to cover an area of about 500 ha, West Park has an open-air theatre, a swimming pool and other sport facilities. On holidays it is frequented chiefly by those living in Sofia's suburbs, attendance attaining 40,000 during peak hours. The most common tree species found there are the birch, the ash, the sycamore and the red oak.

Sofia's most recent acquisition in the field of landscape gardening is the little park in front of the newly-built Lyudmila Zivacova Palace of Culture, with which it forms a most impressive ensemble - a most welcome addition to

the city centre. Connected with the magnificent building in a single monumental axis, the composition stands out with its grandiose system of fountains forming a cascade. The aquatic picture ends in a unique decorative-plastic ensemble, in which water jets gushing forth along steel globes are harmoniously combined with multicolour mosaics. The cascade is enclosed on both sides by the scenic delineations of various plantations, in which parterres of various species of flowers, trees and decorative shrubs form a harmonious whole. Of particular interest is the originally conceived childrens' garden with a picturesque modelling of the terrain, the rock clusters and the brooklets. In the overall proportional composition of the park the bold modernistic silhouette of the monument commemorating Bulgaria's 13th century-long history provides a striking contrast. The designers of this original park are an architectural team headed by another talented woman in this field, Landscape Engineer V. Atanassova.

One of Varana's great assets is its Maritime Park which extends along the Black Sea coast and with its varied scenery forms an integral part of the skyline of Bulgaria's biggest port as seen from the sea. Created way back in 1862 by the then Turkish valie Hafuz Eyub of very limited area, it was rapidly extended after the nation's liberation due to the efforts of its first Bulgarian mayor M. Kolonyi. In the last decade it was merged with the Saltanat Gardens into a single compositional landscape covering a total area of over 120 ha, thus acquiring its final look. The spatial conception is characterized by a harmonious combination of already well laid-out clusters of various tree species and effectively distributed

solitaires: maples (*Acer plataneoides*), albicia, maidenhair trees, cedars, cypresses, fir-trees, sequoi euonymuses, chaste-trees, rosemaries, cariopterix, bladder-nuts and magnolias. The Maritime Park is also one of Varna's cultural centres containing a casino, an observatory, an aquarium, a museum, a summer theatre, busts of eminent Bulgarians, as well as fountains, a lake and of course, the adjacent beaches.

Second in size among Bulgarian parks ranks the municipal Gardens (formerly Tsar Simeon Gardens) in Plovdiv. Built on the occasion of the First International Exhibition in that city (1892) after a design of the French landscape architect Lucien Chevelat, it is a veritable refreshing oasis in one of the nation's hottest towns, consisting of tall cedars and plane-trees interspersed with fountains, statues, pavilions and a big lake in its centre. Laid out in a mixed geometric and landscape style, this park fits in beautifully into Plovdiv's city centre.

The Danubian Garden in Vidin was established in 1902 on the proposal of the Teachers' Union. Compositinally it is in tune with the baroque buildings of that period. At its western end rises the Baba Vida (Grandma Vida) Fortress, one of the most typical medieval monuments of the 12th-14th century, the two lending a distinctive touch to Vidin's skyline as seen from the big river. The garden's composition develops linearly along the mighty Danube river with well delineated perspectives towards the water area. Covering a relatively modest area (10 ha), it has a rich vegetation (poplars, ash-trees, lime-trees, yew thujae and other species), as well as fountains, statues, playgrounds for children, and a restaurant on the banks of the Danube.

Stara Zagora has good reason to be proud of its Ayazmo Park, which rises around and on a hill and has a distinctly exotic look. This is due to most favourable climatic conditions: moderate minimal temperatures, a hot and dry summer, a warm autumn and a mild winter, while the vegetation period has an average duration of eight months. It was created in 1895 by Bishop Methodius Koussevich, who is now buried there; he organized the first planting of the almost bare and eroded hill (formerly disrespectfully called by the Turks, Akhmak Bair or Fool's Hill) and coupled this with an irrigation scheme. Ayazmo Park received its name, which means shrine - curative mineral spring, from the Bulgarian Christian population. It owes its exceptional scenic beauty to a combination of factors, among which lush vegetation and a highly original location stand out. It has a green walk of cypresses, a cedar grove, and a group of Judas-trees, as well as many single specimens of exotic species, such as the Aleppo oak, the bay-tree, the paradise apple and the pencil tree. As special attractions it contains a miniature zoo, a dendrarium and a botanical nook.

The most intensive designing of gardens and laying-out of parks and lawns in the past two and a half decades were connected with the building up of the new Black Sea resorts. The biggest and most complete among them are the Zlatni pyassutsi (Golden Sands) and Slunchev Bryag (Sunny Beach) seaside resorts. Much of the credit for the research and designing in connection with the lay-out of these two fine resorts goes to Landscape Engineer Yordan Kouleliev.

Golden Sands, which owes its name to the light yellow sand of its beach,

covers an area of 250 ha. The terraced configuration of the terrain has been cleverly taken advantage of to develop a free urbanistic and park composition, in which the highly appropriate architecture of hotels and other buildings and the lush vegetation form an integral entity. The original vegetation has been skilfully combined with newly-introduced species, in particular with Spanish and Greek firs, silk trees and maples (*Acer platanoides*). The overall impact is heightened by the artistic use of small architectural forms, pavilions, terraces and low supporting walls, which tend to bring out the varying perspectives toward the sea.

The landscape of Sunny Beach is characterized by the level structure of the ground and a 5-km long beach ending in slight wavelike elevations resembling dunes. The resort fully deserves its name, for it is 'sunkist' almost the year round. It covers an extensive area (430 ha), dotted with numerous hotels varying in size and architecture, which can accommodate almost 30,000 holidaymakers per shift. The poor original vegetation made it necessary to introduce considerable quantities of vegetal earth. An ambitious gardening job has been performed here, characterized by a predominance of young vegetation and an abundance of annuals and perennials.

Sunny Beach, a brand-new resort that has yet to celebrate its 25th anniversary, has the unique advantage of forming a most original contrasting whole with the adjacent peninsular town of Nessebur, the ancient Mesembria, founded in 510 B. C. by the Doric Greeks. In the past this picturesque little town had considerable strategic, commercial and cultural importance. It boasted of no fewer than 40 churches,

only a few of which are preserved in a relatively good condition. Their architecture is characterized by a happy combination of brick and stone masonry in tune with the Byzantine traditions and is enriched with multicolour ceramic ornamentation. The wooden houses and flower-decked courtyards complement the picturesque aspect of this jewel from the distant past.

In the course of this century quite a few fairly large forest parks for recreation purposes have been established in the environs of several towns. Those near Sofia, Stara Zagora, Kyustendil, Roussé and Lovech deserve particular mention. Pride of place here goes to Mt. Vitosha, Sofia's beautiful landmark, lying some 7 to 10 km to the south, which is 20 km long and 19 km wide; its average altitude above sea-level is 1,380 m. Its summit, Black Peak (2,290 m.), offers a gorgeous view of the majestic Rila, Balkan and Rhodope mountains. In Antiquity Vitosha was known by the name of Skomios or Skombros. In 29 B.C. Virgil, after his visit to Greece and the Orient, wrote rapturously about the scenic beauty of Mt. Skombros. The Slavs called it Skopar (steep mountain); it is only in the late Middle Ages that this mountain acquired its present name.

The well-known Turkish traveller Evliya Chelebi, who in the 17th c. visited these parts, mentioned the woods of Vitosha. This is what he wrote: "In the village of Valieffende [(present-day Knyazhevo (author's note))] there is a dense oak forest, which neither arrow nor bullet can penetrate." In those days some forty monasteries were nestled in its recesses, only two of which, the Dragalevtsi and the Kladnitsa Monastery, have survived the Ottoman domination. In the foothills of

Mt. Vitosha lies the Boyana church, whose wonderful frescoes have won universal recognition as masterpieces of pre-Renaissance art. A specific feature of the Vitosha landscape are the so-called moraines, huge stone rivers which descend from the peaks of the mountain to its foot.

The exceptional popularity of Mt. Vitosha, which on Sundays attracts from 100,000 to 150,000 Sofiotes, its fast-growing facilities - chalets, refuges and hotels, as well as highways, rope-ways, ski-runs, chair-lifts and cable-cars for national and international ski contests, have made it necessary to prepare an overall plan to ensure optimal conditions for recreation, on the one hand, and to protect the mountain from over-urbanization, on the other. The architectural task force in charge of it was headed by Prof. D. T. Sougarev. The main principle underlying this plan was to confine modern facilities to few centres, in particular Aleko with its three hotels and several chalets, and Zlatni Mostove (Golden Bridges) with its restaurant and nearby holiday houses, while preserving as much as possible of the mountain in its natural shape. The Vitosha National Park, as it is now called, has two reservations; the Bistritsa coniferous reservation and a peat reservation.

The great variety of the Bulgarian scenery has considerably influenced the aspect of parks and gardens in various parts of the country. The landscape of the Black sea coast, the Danubian river valley, the Thracian plain, the Rila-Rhodope massif which also comprises the alpine Pirin mountains, the high Sofia plateau and in the south the colourful minitown of Melnik, caressed by a whiff from the Mediterranean coming up the Strouma River, all of

them have features of their own which are reflected in the individual aspect of the composition of vegetation and, more in particular, on its choice. Remarkable successes have been scored in this respect in the introduction of wild species into a garden milieu. The spectacular rise of the urban population (from 20 to 60 per cent in the postwar years) and the concomitant extension of the city limits have led to the appearance of new gardens, parks and forest parks and to the aggrandizement and refinement of the existing ones. A distinctive feature of the new green areas that have sprung up is their saturation with architectural and sculptural elements, aquatic effects and well-distributed playgrounds for children. Quite often the parks also include, depending on their size and location within the city, band-stands for concerts, open-air theatres and libraries, dancing and other amenities. In such cases it has come to be accepted that it is necessary to isolate what may be termed the noisy section of the park from its quiet one by means of suitable vegetation.

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