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MISCHA MARKOW:
MORMON MISSIONARY TO THE BALKANS

RICHARD O. COWAN

Conditions were chaotic in southeastern Europe as the twentieth century dawned. Turkish power was on the decline, and various peoples were carving out new nations whose interests were often in conflict. Although the Greek Orthodox religion had long dominated the area, American missionaries began proclaiming their Protestant faiths during the second half of

the nineteenth century. Mormon missionaries were also there, and one of these was Mischa Markow. His fascinating odyssey in the Balkans at the close of the nineteenth century represents many cross-currents in Mormon history: the conflict between Mormon objectives and certain national interests; the gross misconceptions held by Europeans of the Mormons; the spirit and attitude of a devout European convert; hope of the Church to spread its message around the world; and the fact that often a lone Mormon missionary would travel from country to country in a frustrating but yet soul-satisfying effort to fulfill that dream. Markow's experiences and reactions were beautifully told in letters to Church leaders and friends.

Mischa Markow was born on October 21, 1854, to a Serbian family then living in Hungary. After growing up on his father's farm, Markow became a barber. While making a religious pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he settled briefly in Alexandria; but he was soon warned in a dream to sell his business and sail for Constantinople on the next available boat. On board he met Jacob Spori, a Mormon missionary who had recently opened the Church's Turkish Mission. Spori taught Markow the restored gospel and baptized him early in 1887, soon after their arrival in Constantinople.¹ Nearly a year later Markow was ordained an elder and sent to Belgium where he labored as a missionary until emigrating to Utah in 1892. On April 21, 1899,² he was set apart by Church leaders to return as a missionary to southeastern Europe. Extracts from his correspondence give a vivid picture of conditions he met, as well as mirror interesting aspects of contemporary history.

Markow began his work in Serbia, but soon was arrested and banished. Turning next to his native Hungary, he met a similar fate. On July 7, 1899, he wrote:

Now I wish to tell you how I got along in Hungaria. I received those German cards, "Articles of Faith," and I wrote the following on the back of the cards: "The true Church of Christ is upon the earth again, organized with Prophets, Apostles and endowed with power from on high," and then I commenced to distribute them. The people then commenced to inquire how and when the Church was again restored. I gave them the Voice of Warning, the Book of

¹Rao. H. Lindsay, "A History of the Missionary Activities of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Near East, 1884-1929" (Unpublished master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1958), pp. 21-22.

²*Deseret Evening News*, April 21, 1899.

Mormon, and the Pearl of Great Price. The Lord then raised up some friends who supported me materially. After I had spread the Gospel some, my enemies went to the city officials and two of them, accompanied by two policemen, came to see me and appeared to be very angry. They took all my books, tracts and every piece of paper I had away from me, and took me to the court where they questioned me in regard to my religion. I explained the doctrines of our Church to them, told them that God speaks again to the people on earth, but they began to get very angry at me and said that I was crazy, others said that I had either lost my senses or that I was a swindler and deceiver. Then they took me and cast me into prison. After forty-eight hours they let me out and asked me again, when I gave them the same answer. Then they forbade me to preach this Gospel, and a policeman came with me and put me on the train and I left.³

Markow then reported to the Turkish Mission president in Constantinople and was advised to proceed to Rumania. On February 27, 1900, Markow wrote from Bucharest: "With the help of God I have now baptized seven persons, one a Roumanian [sic], one Bulgarian, one Greek, and four Saxon sisters." Nevertheless Markow lamented: ". . . during all that time, I was very much afraid, I feared that they would expell me from Roumania, and I became very much concerned about the welfare of those faithful souls." Specifically, he described an anti-Mormon book circulating in Bucharest: "I was fairly astonished over the false accounts concerning the Church and the Saints, and that such reports had found their way even into far-off Roumania. The book contained pictures of Brigham Young and his wives, and all manner of evil reports."⁴

National sentiment in Rumania contributed to Markow's difficulties. On June 1st he wrote:

There are two Bulgarians here who desired to be baptized, but I told them they would better wait a little while and investigate a little more thoroughly. I had decided, however, to baptize them on Sunday evening, but when some of the Roumanians heard that both Greeks and Bulgarians were beginning to investigate and believe our doctrines, they began to get uneasy and some of them became very angry at me. They went so far as to send a secret service detective to see me, who pretended to want to investigate, and finally asked for baptism. I soon learned, however, that he only did it in

³*Millenial Star*, August 3, 1899, p. 490.

⁴*Deseret Evening News*, April 7, 1900.

order to carry out his wicked designs, and that he was working in connection with a band of Roumanians who had made it up to try to find out where I was going to do the baptizing and lie wait for me, and as soon as I appeared, give me a good trouncing and then disappear in the darkness, thinking I would never know who they were; but as you will see from the following the Lord had decreed it otherwise. I have been in the habit of holding a little meeting with the members and friends every Sunday afternoon, commencing at 1 o'clock, but on this particular Sunday, having a great deal I wanted to say to the Bulgarians, it so happened that I appointed the meeting for 10 o'clock in the morning instead of 1 in the afternoon; still some of them got to hear of it and came to the meeting. They were evidently bent on making trouble, as they came to me and began to argue, telling me I had no right to teach the people, and saying that I was leading them astray. When I would not quarrel with them they went to the police to swear out a complaint against me. The police commissioner came to see what was the trouble, but he treated me very courteously; true he arrested me and started to take me away, but as we reached the street we were met by a secret detective, who stopped the policeman and inquired who had made the complaint against the missionary. The Roumanians answered that it was they who had done it. Then he got angry and wanted to know why they had done that, and said that he and some others had made it up to give me a good beating that night at the baptism. I felt thankful to the Lord that he had delivered me out of their hands. The officers who had me under arrest began questioning me, and I explained to them the universal apostasy, and how the Gospel has again been restored to the earth. They listened very patiently, but refused to let me go free. On account of this disturbance and persecution one of the two who desired to be baptized has backed out. The other still desires baptism, but the Chief Inspector has forbidden our performing the ordinance.

They took me before the Courts; first before the Chief Inspector and afterwards before the higher Court, but the Lord was with me and filled me with His spirit, until I rejoiced in even that opportunity of preaching the Gospel to them. I had two testaments in their language which I gave them so that they could read the answers to my questions. Then I questioned them about the apostasy and the restoration of the Gospel, and they listened quite attentively as I explained the same to them. I told them that the Gospel had been restored through an angel having appeared in America, and that we had been called to proclaim the same. They told me that I was not allowed to preach that in Roumania, and put me that night in prison. The next day they assembled their

judges to hear my case, and brought me again before the Higher Court, and told me to relate all I knew about the organization of the Church, etc. I gave them the testaments again and began explaining the Gospel, beginning with faith, repentance, baptism, etc. In a little while some of the head men began defending me and said: "This missionary is right, that is the true Gospel of Christ, and our orthodox religion is wrong." I spoke about half an hour with them and was afterwards again conducted to prison. Nobody was permitted to visit me and I was not permitted to write any letters. Some of the Saints, not knowing what had happened to me and becoming uneasy, went to the American Consul and related to him what had taken place, when that gentleman immediately telephoned to the Ministerium inquiring about the matter, and asking how it was that I had been imprisoned without cause; thereupon they turned me loose, but summoned me again before the officers, and I had to tell them again all about the Church, and this time they wrote it down and had me sign the paper. They did not publish my written statement, but some of the newspapers published an account of my arrest, and what I had said before the Court. One of the papers gave a pretty true account and spoke kindly of me, another published an account that was about one-tenth true, and another published an account that was nothing in the world but a lot of falsehoods. It appeared in the papers that an angel had appeared in America. I was under arrest 48 hours.

Now, dear brother, they have forbidden me to do any preaching in Roumania. They have sent the statement that I signed to their chief Minister, who is to investigate the same, and then I expect they will banish me. They say that I have no right to baptize. I do not know what will become of me as I am still in their hands. Do not answer my letter until you hear further from me as to where I shall be.⁵

Writing from Bulgaria the next month, Markow described his expulsion from Roumania:

As I wrote you before, they desired to expell me from Roumania, and they laid the plan so that I should not only be expelled from that land, but also that the police or sheriff should take me to the border line and then hand me, with my papers and the complaint against me, to the sheriff of the next county, so that I might be prevented from establishing myself there. When I heard of this scheme, I went to the American consul and explained everything to him, that I had broken no law of the land, and I also offered to leave the country of my own free will and go from Roumania. Upon

⁵*Millennial Star*, July 12, 1900, p. 433.

hearing this, the consul telephoned to the prefect not to expel me, and he vouched for me, as an honorable man, stating that I would of my own free choice leave Roumania. The prefect, however, claimed that the above was required by the law of the country. The consul replied that he would bring the case before the minister of the king's cabinet, for he would not submit to my expulsion, as I was an American citizen. On the strength of that statement, the prefect telephoned for me to appear before him personally. The consul advised me to do so and stated that if they would not permit me to go as a free man, to come back to him and he would then go before the ministerium, or cabinet. However, they set me free without any further trouble, and I desire to say that we have a very good American consul in Bucharest.⁶

From Rumania this lone Mormon missionary went to Bulgaria and began to work among the Protestants. In a letter to a friend he expressed the spirit of both frustration and hope that typified his mission:

It is very difficult to labor in a strange land, when you have no tracts in their language, but I found a few persons, who could read my tracts in the German language. They were pleased to hear my teachings, but as soon as they read in the tracts about the Book of Mormon, they turned against me, for they had been warned by publications issued by our enemies, against the book and against the Latter-day Saints. They showed me one of these publications, a large sized book, printed in Bulgarian text and language. The book is full of illustrations, tells of some seventeen wives of Brigham Young and it has prejudiced the minds of the people, though there are still a few, who wanted to hear me further. . . . I am very thankful to my heavenly Father, for in all my persecutions He has strengthened me very much, and through these persecutions, I have gained power and appreciate more the ways of the Lord. It is pleasant to labor in the Lord's vineyard.

As I have not been able to find any believers in Roustschuk, I intend to go in two or three days to Sofia, which is the capital of Bulgaria.⁷

In Sofia, Markow soon was summoned to appear before the mayor. He took the opportunity to preach the gospel not only to the mayor, but to two city judges.

. . . One of the city judges spoke the German language well, so I gave him four tracts to read. Another of the judges

⁶*Deseret Evening News*, September 22, 1900.

⁷*Ibid.*

spoke good French, and to him I gave three French tracts. They promised to read them and to give them a thorough examination, and they would then make a report to the "ministerium" (that is to the minister of Cultus), and then they would let me know whether this religion would be allowed under their laws.

After eight days I went again to them, and they forbade me to preach. I told them that I could not leave Bulgaria for I had not sufficient money to travel, but expected a little from home. They granted me my freedom, but not permission to preach. They ordered a policeman to watch my residence for some time, and find out, whether I did preach to the people or not. Bulgaria is full of foreign missionaries, mostly from America and England, namely Congregationalists, Methodists and Baptists; and when they hear about a "Mormon" Elder, they persecute him, and the authorities take their part; all the other sects have liberty to preach in Bulgaria, but the Church of Jesus Christ is persecuted and has no liberty to preach the Gospel. . . . I feel well, although I am persecuted everywhere. I have felt that the angel of the Lord has ever been with me, and shielded me against my enemies. Oh, I thank the Lord, my God, for it was His will that I should suffer persecution, for how else could the authorities in these lands have learned that the true Church of Jesus Christ has been again established. God knew best how to get the testimony to them. The Lord God has granted me strength to endure it all. Yes, I have even been strengthened by it. I believe I will have to go from here to Hungary, although I have been once driven from there, but I was only expelled from one comitat (county), and now, in the name of the Lord, I will try to preach in another county.⁸

Markow's fears were confirmed when he was forced to leave Bulgaria only three months after arriving there.

Markow met similar conditions in Hungary, and after a short time was required again to leave that country. He finished his mission in Munich, Germany, and arrived back in Salt Lake City on August 28, 1901.⁹ Even though his labors did not result in permanent mission organizations in the Balkans, or in many baptisms, they did reflect Latter-day Saint interest in proclaiming the Gospel everywhere.

In 1903 Mischa Markow was called on still another mission to southeastern Europe, and again met hostility in the countries where he had earlier labored.¹⁰ Following this mission,

⁸*Ibid.*, September 29, 1900.

⁹*Ibid.*, August 28, 1901.

¹⁰Lindsay, "Missionary Activities in the Near East," pp. 94-95.

Markow worked in Salt Lake City as a barber until his death on January 19, 1934.¹¹

¹¹Obituary in *Deseret News*, January 19, 1934, p. 16.