



## The 200th Anniversary of the Birth of Josif Pančić

Two centuries separate us from the birth of Serbia's most famous and most versatile scientist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – naturalist Josif Pančić. By looking back on his life and work, today we revive memories of the beginning of scientific enthusiasm and the establishing of the institutions important to the national identity of the newly-liberated Principality of Serbia. Josif Pančić was born 5 (17) April 1814, in the village of Ugrini, in the foothills of Mt. Velebit, in the Austrian Empire, present-day Croatia. Love of nature, especially of plants, marked his boyhood and from that tender age traced the course of his life. He collected his first plants in his native region, in Lika and on Mt. Velebit. The great craving for knowledge of natural sciences led him to study medicine in Pest, where he gained a fundamental education in botany, at the Faculty of Medicine. He completed his medical studies presenting his doctoral thesis in botany (“Taxilogia botanica”). However, in search of employment, he first worked as a tutor for aristocratic families in Ruskberg, Banat (present-day Rusca Montană, Romania), spending his free time on “botanizing”. He then spent some time studying plants at the Museum of Natural History in Vienna. This was the turning point in the life of Josif Pančić: he met Serbian linguist Vuk Karadžić, who persuaded the inquisitive and curious thirty-year-old physician to accept the challenge and set out into the unknown country, newly-liberated from Ottoman rule, which he had heard so much about from notable learned South Slavic people in the cultured circles of Austrian capital. In 1846 Josif Pančić found himself in the young Principality of Serbia, forever linking his life to this country.

Pančić settled easily in the society of his time; he changed his Austrian citizenship for that of Serbia and soon after adopted Orthodox Christianity and Serbian language with its Cyrillic alphabet. In everyday life he was a man of great devotion to his family and to his professorial duties alike, and was remembered fondly by the common people that he encountered on his many study trips.

Among his contemporaries Josif Pančić was considered a person of pleasant disposition and a steadfast character, decisive and reliable, self-sacrificing and dedicated to his calling, both as a physician and a scientist.

Consistent and serious in every work, he systematically visited unexplored regions of Serbia, collected plant material, which he then analysed and described in detail. He also consulted with botanists from across Europe, sending them newly-discovered plants, always open to their opinions and suggestions without any vanity. His scientific correspondence consists of thousands of pages written in German, French, Italian and Latin, testimonies of his willingness to share and exchange botanical knowledge. This attitude and the scope and soundness of his studies gained him high appreciation in the wider botanical community of his time, and would later on be honoured by botanists who named after him newly-determined plant species of their own finding.

During his botanical excursions to various areas of the Principalities of Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria, Pančić found and described more than 200 new species

of vascular plants, of which the present day international and European phytotaxonomic classifications recognize more than 60 plants as being new to science, with the rank of species or subspecies. His most significant and by far the best known discoveries, are the “living fossils” in contemporary flora: the coniferous spruce tree (*Picea omorika*), and the herbaceous resurrection plants from the *Ramonda* genus (*Ramonda serbica* and *R. nathaliae*), endemic to the Balkans. Undoubtedly no less valuable and significant are the numerous other newly-discovered endemic, relict and rare plants of the Balkan Peninsula.

Pančić was primarily a botanist, but he did not neglect other branches of naturalist biology. His works on fish, birds, orthoptera and other groups of animals that he collected and described, as he discovered them during his botanical study trips, confirm the range of his interest. Thus he is also considered the founding father of zoological disciplines in Serbia. It is remarkable how well-designed his studies were, and his observations and descriptions sharp and in accordance with what we today consider the modern approach to scientific analysis. Pančić's works and his scientific legacy have stood the test of time, and remain today the cornerstone of the further development and progress of natural sciences in Serbia, of biology as a whole, and of botany in particular.

As a professor of the Lyceum and the Great School in Belgrade he founded the departments of natural sciences, established herbariums, started collections of animals, rocks, minerals, and he continuously added new material to them. In 1874 he succeeded in creating the first small botanical garden in the Dorćol neighbourhood of Belgrade, where he lovingly cultivated plants. However, he longed for something more, the realization of his dream – a large botanical garden similar to those that other European countries had at the time. Up to his last day this cheerful man with a powerful mind kept editing his treatise about the Belgrade Royal Botanical Garden (*Regius hortus botanicus Belgradensis*), whose founding he unfortunately did not live to see. The Botanical Garden “Jevremovac” (at its present-day location in Belgrade, on the former estate of Jevrem Obrenović) was donated to the Great School in Belgrade (today the University of Belgrade) by the royal decree of King Milan Obrenović, a year after Josif Pančić passed away.

It is not a surprise that Pančić, who was born beneath Mt. Velebit, desired another mountain for his last resting place, one that he had returned to so many times during his studies. This was Mt. Kopaonik, whose abundant nature and beauty had long thrilled him. His wish to be buried on this mountain was fulfilled in 1951, when his remains, in a casket made out of Serbian spruce, were transported to the top of Mt. Kopaonik, which has since been known as Pančić's Peak.

Josif Pančić devoted four decades of dedicated work to Serbia. He was the first academician and the first president of the Serbian Royal Academy, the highest scientific institution in Serbia, from April 1887 until his death in February 1888. Pančić remained wholeheartedly committed to his calling and famously modest. “I was only doing my duty,” was his response when he was subject to praise or his merits were extolled. He used all his accolades to ensure for his people and for his country, whose natural riches were at the time hardly known at all, a significant place among the peoples and cultures of Europe and the world. In other words, Pančić managed to put Serbia, the small *terra incognita* in the mysterious Balkans, on the map of natural sciences as a place of importance and great interest in the study of the wealth and diversity of the world that surrounds us.

Built on the knowledge gained in the time of Pančić and enriched by his successors, present day natural sciences and developed biological disciplines, applying state-of-the-art scientific approach, are firmly establishing their place in the scientific world. In pursuing the desire to explore and preserve nature, today's generations of naturalists in Serbia, honour the rich legacy passed on to them and pay homage to Josif Pančić, the coryphaeus of Serbia's scientific community, who stands at the beginning of it all.

Commemorating the bicentennial of the birth of Josif Pančić, *Botanica serbica* in this issue brings several papers related to his scientific legacy.

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