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Heritage

Ndre Mjeda and The Nightingale's Lament: the poet who sought perfection in Albanian verse

The man from Shkodra educated in several European countries, the 1887 poem about the enslaved homeland, his part in the Congress of Manastir and the collection Juvenilia

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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Ndre Mjeda was born in 1866 in Shkodra, into a modest Catholic family. Like many talented young people of the time, he was educated with the help of religious orders and studied in several European countries, where he learned classical and modern languages

and came to know European literature. His brother, Lazër Mjeda, also became a well-known churchman.

The Nightingale's Lament

In 1887, while still young, Mjeda wrote the poem that made him known: **Vaji i bylbylit**, "The Nightingale's Lament". At first sight it is the lament of a nightingale whose young have been taken and shut in a cage. But readers soon understood the other meaning: the nightingale is the homeland, and its lost young are the Albanians under foreign rule. The poem became much loved and was sung and recited for generations.

A master of form

Mjeda was known for his extraordinary care for language and metre. He worked long on each line, sought the exact word and used classical forms such as the sonnet, adapting them to the rhythm of Albanian. Some scholars have said that, in this sense, he was among the first to give Albanian poetry a formal perfection comparable with other European literatures.

> *For Mjeda, writing Albanian well was a way of giving dignity to the language and to the people who spoke it.*

Language and alphabet

Mjeda had a great interest in linguistics. He studied Albanian phonetics and proposed writing systems. At the **Congress of Manastir** in 1908 he took part as a representative of the Agimi society of Shkodra, which had proposed its own alphabet. The Congress decided to use two alphabets for a time, and over the years the one we use today prevailed.

Juvenilia and his last years

In 1917 he published the poetry collection **Juvenilia**, which included lyrical and patriotic poems. He also wrote longer poems about figures of Albanian history and culture. In his last years he served as parish priest in the village of Kukël near Shkodra and taught in Shkodra. He died in 1937.

Why we remember him

1. **He showed that Albanian can have perfect poetic form.**
2. **A single poem can become the voice of a nation.**
3. **His contribution to the alphabet** links him with one of the founding moments of

Albanian culture.

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