

The Saint Honoured by Many

The Day of St. George, or *Gjurgjovden*, as we call it, is one of the biggest religious holidays in Macedonia. It is connected with many traditions and has many levels of complex cultural meanings. The holiday is celebrated by Orthodox Christians and Roma, but some Muslims also observe it, especially those who converted from Christianity in more recent times, that is since the 18th century. Macedonian Orthodox Church as well as the orthodox churches in some other countries, celebrates it according to the Julian calendar, so that the feast falls on May 6 of our civic Gregorian calendar. The churches using Gregorian calendar celebrate St. George's Day on April 23, the traditionally accepted date of the Saint's death in 303 AD.

Although this is a fixed-date holiday, due to the closeness of the movable feast of Easter, it may be postponed to the first Monday after Easter, the so-called Monday of the Bright Week.

Saint George is usually depicted in frescos and icons as a mounted warrior killing a dragon with a spear. This representation has many symbolic and cultural layers. The dragon represents paganism, but also winter, chaos and pure nature. St. George inspired many chivalric orders in the medieval age and strengthened their ethos. The historic personality of the saint speaks of him as a great military commander, whose braveness in battle was highly honoured. However, when he learned that Emperor Diocletian would persecute Christians he revealed his religion and was put to torture. He proved



his faith and love towards Christ and died like a martyr, beheaded.

GJURGJOVDEN

Christians celebrate St. George with a prayer, and those whose family or name day falls on this holiday welcome relatives and friends at their homes. People often go to monasteries dedicated to the saint and spend a few days there with monks and attend the liturgies. Everybody is in new clothes and traditionally girls wore flowers and young tree blossoms as necklaces or wreaths.

In the Macedonian tradition, *gjurgjovden* celebrations have integrated many layers of older traditions. The majority of them are connected with the

end of winter, the cleansing from sins and old life and the festive preparation for a new life. It is a holiday for peasants and shepherds. Folk songs depict St. George as the one who unlocks the Earth, lets the raindrops in and makes the summer warm and the crops bountiful.

On the social level, the whole rural economic cycle is also connected with St. George. It is the date when the man goes out into nature. It was the time when nature turned green enabling the working cycle. It marked the start of the new season for shepherds, peasants and construction workers. Their salaries for the season's hard work were usually paid on November 8, another big holiday, St. Demetrius, when the winter returned.

There are many older cultural layers added to the holiday, varying from community to community. Some of them resemble magical acts invoking the supernatural powers. Basically, this is a day of fertility and health. Many rituals are connected with the symbolic power of nature to heal, to keep strong and to give birth. Homes are decorated with flowers and twigs in bloom in order to welcome spring. Cleansing has the meaning of purification which the new spring is carrying. So people take bath or just wash their hands in the waters infused with flowers and herbs.

EDERLEZI

St. George's Day is an especially big holiday among the Roma population from both Orthodox Christian and Muslim religious backgrounds. In the Romani language it is called *Ederlezi* as variant of the Turkish *Hidirellez*. *Ederlezi* is a symbolic celebration of the return of springtime but also an expression of the respect for the dead.

The celebrations among the Roma last for a few days. They begin on the night of May 4. Fires are lit and people stay up until dawn, and on the morning of May 5 they go



to a meadow with a creek. At the creek a ritual ablution takes place, and then willow branches are picked and various herbs are harvested. The branches would be used for decorating houses, and the herbs in the morning ablutions the following day. Older people go to cemeteries and remember their dead. Then they go to the market and buy a lamb. The lamb must be beautiful and white, because black lamb brings misfortune. The lamb is carried home alive and then the whole house is decorated with willow branches.

The next day people wash themselves with willow branches, with medicinal herbs and finish off by "washing", or circling, the face with carefully preserved red Easter eggs. For lunch they eat roast lamb with onions, peppers, cucumbers and other vegetables. The specialty of the day is *drob* or *djar sarma*, a spicy dish of fatty membranes stuffed with chopped organ meat, rice, and young garlic. The second and third days are reserved for visiting other people's homes. It is said that the feast lasts as long as there is lamb to eat, and the head of lamb is eaten on the third day.

Serbian film director Emir Kusturica made a worldwide cultural icon of the Roma *Ederlezi* celebration with his film *Time of the Gypsies*. Another well known artist, musician Goran Bregovic, has arranged a traditional Roma song devoted to the holiday and made it into a Balkan and European hit *It's St. George's Day, and I'm not with the One I Love*.