



Macedonian Rustic Realm and its Ironic King

This unique sculpture is a landmark of the Town of Prilep along with its clock-tower, the old bath and the mosque. It is a figure of a man perched on the wall by the drinking fountain in the middle of the famous Prilep market, the bazaar. He is leaning over the fountain as if preparing to say something to those who have come to quench their thirst. It is *Itar Pejo*, Cunning Pejo, the biggest humorous character operating at the Prilep bazaar. He tells jokes, mocks city dwellers and rural folks working at the bazaar by day, including the people coming from his native Mariovo region. Today Mariovo is the most depopulated part of the country, but it is deeply rooted in the Macedonian culture and tradition. So the story of *Itar Pejo* is a story of the folk characters, big liars and mockers, akin to the German Baron Münchhausen and Bosnian Haso. And it is also a story of the Mariovo region and its people.

Mariovo is one of the most mystic parts of Macedonia. Once full of people and life, this region divided among three different municipalities, due to modernization and

migration of the rural population into cities and outside the country, is almost empty and has vast uninhabited spaces, abandoned villages, ruined churches and hardly passable roads. But this is also the reason why today's people love Mariovo rustic landscapes and its wild nature reminding them of the ancient times. So, today it is a frequent destination for lovers of untouched natural beauty. Well in the past, Mariovo had been a lively territory. It used to be a perfect rural habitat for stock breeding and autonomous living away from the busy crossroads and lowlands where armies passed very often. The region was famous for the many traditional handicrafts mainly associated with the forest products. Mariovo lamb, honey and cheese were most wanted products in the Prilep market and further away. The fortress Peshta, the bridge at the village Zovik, the Church of St. Dimitrija, the monastery of St. Nikola and the mysterious Alshar mine are witnesses of the region's glorious past. Mariovo is mentioned in the Byzantine sources as Merihova, while the Ottomans gave it autonomy and treated it as one administrative unit. The legend tells

of a brave princess Mary who successfully resisted the Ottomans and negotiated its autonomy for four hundred years after the City of Prilep fell.

This is the context in which the figure of Itar Pejo emerges. He lives among his fellow Mariovo people, he mocks them and fools them. He is one of his people, but he had chosen a different way to survive and live his life. He makes a living by his mischief. He receives awards and wins bets with butchers, bakers, innkeepers, craftsmen and others while cleverly avoiding his obligations towards officials. He is even a successful Casanova type of lover to the wives of the personalities he had previously fooled and benefited from.

Even descriptions of his physical appearance, which establish him as a once living person, are funny. He is short, fat, with shaved head and Chinese-style pony tail. He has huge ears, big buffalo eyes, and a long moustache. He is depicted as having cowboy's legs, short hands with fat fingers, wide in the chest and short in the neck. His 'dress code' is also far from refined: long woollen pants, white hat, white shirt with wide sleeves, and a loosely tied rope belt.

But the main morale of the Itar Pejo anecdotes is not to show an alternative way to earn a living. They stress people's negative characteristics such as ignorance, lack of manners, dullness, obesity, laziness and naivety. When Pejo delivers himself from a critical situation, not only does he solve the problem at hand, but also manages to fill his stomach, make people laugh and gain respect. He is not a mean character, but one who always helps and protects the weak, the disabled, the poor. When caught redhanded he is always dignified and humorous. When the rich master asked him to return the boots, he returned them saying that he would continue walking with his own boots and went away barefoot.

In the stories Pejo is contrasted with

the Ottoman character *Nasreddin Odza* (Hodja). He actually started his social life as a home aide to this Ottoman official who always tries to mock him and show how stupid Pejo is. But it turns out that the socially deprived person is much cleverer than his master. Hiding behind a mask of stupid questions and apparent ignorance, Pejo manages to outfox him, showing much more wit and intelligence than the older and more experienced Nasreddin.

Literary critics observe that much popular wisdom is collected in and emanates through this character. He shows a way to survive through the hard times by keeping the optimism and vital energy. His is the simple morality, rationality and modesty of the ordinary people. Humour and mischief is the only way to win the social and class battle with the rich, the officials and the authorities. He criticizes his fellow people for their stupidity and makes fools of them. They climb a tree in order to drag him down, they jump in the fog, fooled into thinking it were wool, they expect a boiled fish from the cold river. Yet, Pejo is not attempting to be their leader and does not seek followers. He is aware of his unique personality and character.

In the time of mass media and pervasive sitcoms it seems that the character of *Itar Pejo* is sentenced to a slow death or, at best, to marginalization. The rural spirit that stands behind him is hard to find in the modern world. Yet, contemporary editors of folk tales and oral narratives have noticed that *Itar Pejo* has survived. In the last fifty years he has modernized himself, moved to the cities and mocked the socialist regime. He has travelled with a cruiser and an airplane to the USA and Australia where many Macedonians migrated. He has worked at a German car factory and has given his manly services to an old German lady landowner. Itar Pejo can still be an ideal protagonist for the modern media and cultural industries.