

The Realm of Fern: a Mijak Colony



In the central part of the country, just above Veles there lies one of the most beautiful and well preserved, but at the same time, one of the most deserted villages in this rather populated region. Papradiste is part of the Azot area famous for subversion and social unrest from medieval Bogumils to 19th century revolutionaries and 20th century partisans. It is situated in the upper stream of the Babuna river and nestled in the Dautica mountain at 980 meters above sea level. The village was founded by families originating from the Mijak region - from Galicnik, Gari, Lazaropole, Tresonce and Selce. Together with the nearby Orese, and Smilevo (Bitola region)

they are the only three Mijak villages outside the original Mala Reka area in the western part of the country. There is evidence that the first family was the Kuzman who came here in the 1770s. The village was a midway home to the masons between their work place in Veles and the ancestral Mala Reka region. The legend says that the old name of the depopulated village was Zvezdanovo (village under stars) and the current name was given after the new settlers covered their roofs with fern instead of straw, Papradiste meaning abundance of fern. The wealth of the village was based on sheep breeding, masonry and cloth making. The soil there is generally not good for agriculture, but



near the village, in the vicinity of the river, there are conditions for growing potatoes. So the villagers became famous for that product as well. Industry and resulting wealth enabled its inhabitants to study and work abroad and to become more cultivated. They migrated to other Balkan countries, but also to Kiev and Saint Petersburg. They got a sense of the revolutionary struggle and felt the need for a national liberation. Several illustrious figures of the national history and culture originate from this village.

Dimitrija Cupovski (1878-1940) is one of the most important national figures. He was a publicist, historian, revolutionary and politician, mainly living and working in Saint Petersburg. From there he was constantly advocating for Macedonians as a separate nation and fighting for Macedonia as an independent state. He established Slavic-Macedonian societies, edited papers and magazines and wrote petitions to the League of Nations.

Other famous Papradiste persons are connected with the arts.

Andrea Damjanov (1813-1878) was one of the greatest masons in the Balkans whose churches across the Balkans

stand as witnesses of his sublime craft. His churches are masterpieces of sacral architecture. He developed his own characteristic style of a three nave church with half-cylindrical domes. He paid close attention to the acoustics of the interior and the decoration of the columns. Besides the famous St. Joackim Osogovski in Krriva Palanka, he built churches in Veles and Stip, Nis and Smederevo in Serbia, and in Sarajevo and Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In Dimitar Andonov Papradiski (1859-1954) we have at once the last *zograf* (religious artist) and the first secular painter who is famous for his historical paintings and portraits. He was born in a family of masons, stone and wood carvers. Already at the age of 20 he joined a *zograf tajfa* (group of religious artists). He was also a revolutionary who was imprisoned several times, but in 1919 he settled in Skopje and opened a painting studio. He was the first teacher of the founding fathers of Macedonian modern art Nikola Martinovski and Tome Vladimirski.

Gjorgji Zografski (1871-1945) is another last descendant of a big family of carvers and church artists. After quitting the family



craft he devoted himself to portraiture. One of his most precious historical paintings depicts an attack of a neighboring Albanian gang on a Papradiste family. Armed gang attacks happened frequently in these remote difficult to police regions. For that reason the Ottomans built a protective tower where a duty squad was based in warm seasons. Remnants of the tower can still be seen in the vicinity of the village. Another landmark is the local church devoted to Saint Peter and Paul, just as the famous Galicnik church. Having colonized this village, the Mijaks kept the traditions from their old homes. It meant that the biggest feast was 12 July, St Peter's Day, but there were a few other feast days brought by the other settlers. As they migrated further, much like Galicnik or other Mijak villages residents, they traditionally gathered in Papradiste during the summer. Yet, they tried to intermarry only among their Mijak kin.

The village has a big potential for rural

and mountain tourism. In the village there is a wonderful renovated mountain hut serving all the mountaineers on their way to the high peaks of Solunska Glava and Ceples. Mountain routes to the peaks and elsewhere are well marked. The hut is a former school that kept the traditional façade; classrooms have been turned into hostel type rooms. It is open from April to September, while in other months the stay must be arranged beforehand.

Unfortunately only a few inhabitants live in the village, despite the fact that many of the houses are in a good shape. During traditional reunion days and in the summer more than two thousand descendants return to their old homes. Yet what can be seen as a spark of hope for the future of the village is that a few people have returned there escaping from the busy and impoverished city life. In the nature they have found a new meaning of existence and a healthier living.