

The Golden Leaves



There is a leaf, a plant, and a tradition, by which Macedonia is very famous, despite its notoriety. The country is considered the home of the best tobacco. It's a special tobacco of the oriental type that is highly appreciated and much demanded by the industry. Already in the beginning of the century, when Macedonia was still not an independent state, nor was there a nation by that name, in advertisements the name "Macedonia" referred to the origin and quality of tobacco and was used to attract potential customers. Tobacco is grown in almost all parts of southern Macedonia. From Radovish to Strumica and Prilep, the sandy and dry soil combined with hot climate gives superior tobacco, which is used in the blend of many domestic and international cigarette brands. Prilep with its agriculture and developed tobacco processing industry is considered the capital of Macedonian tobacco. The first warehouse for purchasing and processing tobacco in Macedonia was built there in 1873. It had the French name "Régie Ottoman de Tabac". Out of it the modern tobacco factory, Tutunski Kombinat Prilep, emerged. Over the decades the factory has produced many brands which became part of the popular heritage.

Tobacco was brought to Macedonia in the times of the Ottoman Empire in 1574. Tobacco originated in the Americas and was introduced to the Ottomans by the Spanish. The Ottoman peoples developed their own method of growing and using tobacco, and Macedonian types are part of the same tradition. The oriental tobacco plants usually have a greater number of smaller sized

leaves. These differences can be attributed to climate, soil, cultivation and treatment methods. The majority of the regions in Macedonia had perfect soil and climate for growing it. But the success of tobacco was not determined just by the climate and soil. By 1930 a special Experimental Tobacco Station founded in Prilep in 1924 created the first local oriental tobacco varieties, and in 1932 it was legislated that tobacco should be grown only from the seed gotten from the Experimental Tobacco Station. In 1936 the Experimental Station was transformed into the Institute which survived four states which replaced one another during the turbulent 20th century. Today the institute is part of Bitola University and in 1998 it opened a master's and doctoral programmes thus becoming the only scientific institution in Europe which carries out postgraduate educational activity for the needs of the tobacco industry.

Today, 60% of the areas planted with industrial crops in Macedonia are occupied by tobacco. More than 40% of the total agricultural export falls on tobacco. Even wines, which have become a real brand in the recent years, are still in the second position. The two tobacco subtypes, Prilep and Jaka, constitute more than 80% of production. Prilep tobacco has a pleasant sweet and refreshing aroma, and is used in the blends of many of the world famous manufacturers. It is a protected type with registered geographic origin.

Growing tobacco is a very labour intensive process. The tobacco plant needs careful cultivation until it is ready for harvesting. As the harvest falls on the hot summer, people



need to wake up at dawn while it is still cool. They pick the lower ripe leaves first leaving the upper parts of the plant to mature for a few more days. The harvested leaves are then threaded, preferably by hand. This process takes hours. Families and larger producers have introduced machines for threading tobacco leaves, but the best quality is still achieved by hand. Then tobacco threads are left in the sun to dry naturally during the whole summer and autumn. In the cold winter nights dried tobacco is rearranged, carefully packed and taken to warehouses, the notorious "monopolies", where it is classified and priced.

The hard life of tobacco breeders inspired socially engaged poets such as Koco Racin, one of the founders of the Macedonian contemporary language and poetry, who in 1936 wrote "Tobacco Harvesters". The poem lamented the hard life of the agriculture workers and their unfair treatment by the capitalists, reflecting the egalitarian sentiments of the soon to emerge socialist Macedonia.

Prilep is not only the town where the best tobacco is grown and a factory and a unique institute are located. It also has a special Tobacco Museum founded 40 years ago, long before such industrial heritage practices spread across Europe. In 1973 the decision to form a Tobacco Museum with 1600 artefacts was taken. To this day there is an impressive collection of pipes, chibouks and cigarette cases exhibited at the Museum alongside the art collection consisting of 150 paintings and sculptures and two old house models. The exhibits were purchased from various institutions and individuals throughout Europe, some even from Asia and Africa. Many were donated. The exhibits are distinguished for their artistic value and expressiveness. They reveal many extraordinary stories. One of them goes back to the 1920s, when Turkish and Dutch entrepreneurs decided to open a factory in Holland. In those days many people grew tobacco in their gardens. But

the Dutch product wasn't good enough for commercial use. Then the Turkish partner supplied tobacco from Turkey and Macedonia and that was the reason the factory was named Turkish Macedonian Tobacco Company, locally better known as the Turmac Factory. Soon Turmac cigarettes became quite famous. They had a golden coloured mouthpiece and came in colourful packages with pictures of palaces of sultans and nonchalantly smoking women wearing turbans. This image for Turmac cigarettes, known popularly as the "Old Mac," utilizes a fancy, oriental-looking cover to provide the Turkish blend with a more exotic image. Many of the early brands of cigarettes were made mostly or entirely of oriental tobacco. Oriental tobacco has a much milder flavour and contains less nicotine and fewer carcinogens than other varieties. But today, cigarettes containing only oriental tobacco, like Murad, Helmar, Balkan Sobranie or those supplied by urban tobacconists like Fribourg & Treyer or Sullivan Powell in London, are no longer available.

Another curiosity is connected with the famous fictional spy 007. James Bond smokes cigarettes made of Macedonian blends. Ian Fleming's character has cigarettes with "three gold rings around the butt. He carries them in a wide gunmetal case. He lights them with a battered black oxidized Ronson lighter".

The Prilep bazaar and Bit Pazar in Skopje are two locations where one can still find tobacco leaves packed for sale in the pure form with no additives and at prices which are almost symbolic for the quantity one gets. The tobacco is sold in one kilo boxes packed and shredded to stay fresh for longer. But these places are more familiar to foreign visitors than to domestic smokers. Because for some reason Macedonian consumers prefer factory made cigarettes. Yet, small local communities of users have developed their own rituals. One of their tips to stop tobacco from drying out is to cover it with a few cabbage leaves.