

Forgotten Craft

By Jasmina Mazgalieva



Many women regularly visit well-known shops in remote corners of the Old Skopje Bazaar looking for cheap but beautiful imported silks. The silk available at the bazaar is of an excellent quality as the merchants have long traditions of trade with Turkey and other countries of Asia where silk is being produced. What the customers do not know is that in the past silk production was one of the most important occupations in Macedonia, and almost every family grew silkworm. Macedonian silk was an important trade article, and in the 19th century silk business contributed to the appearance of the rich class of Macedonian tradesmen who led the national awakening and were at the forefront of the forming of the modern national sentiment.

The method of cultivation of silkworm



and silk processing was a special secret skill which was carefully fostered and handed down from generation to generation. Now it is totally lost, although there are some grandmothers who remember how in their early childhood they were also included in the process of cultivation and manufacture. No doubt, they would be happy to witness an old craft revival initiative that would restore this craft, at least for the purposes of cultural tourism.

Silk is animal fibre produced by silkworm. There are two types of silkworm: wild and cultivated. Hair of the wild silkworm has a rough structure and is solid brown, as opposed to the yellow to gray thread of the cultivated variety. Wild silkworm lives and feeds on oak wood, and its natural environments are in India, China and Japan. Cultivated production blossomed in Macedonia primarily due to its relative simplicity. Between insemination and mature cocoon there is a period of approximately forty days, so that the silkworm afforded a relatively fast income to a family, while also allowing the cultivating families to be engaged in other activities, silk remaining a side business.

The processing of silk was women's work. Maybe because cultivating silkworm requires a lot of care. From egg to moth, their life span is only two months. During that period, they go through four stages



of development: egg, larva, cocoon and moth. The eggs are kept cold for about six days, and then soaked in hot water and air dried. From each egg a small white larva emerges eating countless times more mulberry leaves than its weight. During this phase the silk worm moults a few times. At the end of the month the larva stops eating, attaches to a piece of straw placed in front of it and begins spinning a cocoon, creating a long continuous fibre strand that we know as silk. The next 15 to 20 days the larvae sleep inside the cocoon. It was at this stage that the women's skilled work started. They used hot water to kill the pupae and degum the silk and separate the fibres to make them ready for spinning.

Silk production emerged in China and is a very old craft. The oldest silk sheets and pieces of clothing found date back several thousand years. The Chinese kept the secret of breeding silkworm, and the secret of manufacturing the fabric from its fibre, for over two millennia. Exporting live silkworms from China was considered a greatest crime. However, Chinese immigrants spread it all over Asia. But it did not go further, except by means of trade in finished goods. Caravans carrying silk regularly crossed India, Persia and Turkestan. Archaeologists found silk even on an Egyptian mummy.

The silk worm appeared in Macedonia when it was part of the Byzantine Empire. According to a legend, Justinian I, Byzantine Emperor (527-565), persuaded

two Persian soldiers who had lived for some time in China to return there and smuggle silkworm to Constantinople. They did it by concealing some worms in bamboo sticks. This happened around the year 550. But open silk production began only in the 16th century, as the secret of silk was jealously guarded for centuries, so that weaving and silk trade remained a royal monopoly. Best weaving workshops were housed in the palace complex in Constantinople, and the cloth produced there was used exclusively for royal garments and gifts to foreign dignitaries. Little by little, silk production spread and put down roots in many areas. In Italy Venetian merchants traded silk and encouraged its cultivation. By the 13th century Italian silk became an important part of national commerce.

In Macedonia, the south-eastern towns of Strumica, Valandovo and Gevgelija also became known for the production of silk. All pre-World-War-Two houses in the small town of Bogdanci are built to the same pattern perfectly adapted to practicing the once most widespread craft in this region: silkworm cultivation. Each house entrance faces south. In the front of the house there is a slightly elevated spacious porch open to all three sides. Behind the porch there are family rooms and one special large room called the 'house' for the cultivation of silkworm. The roof and ceiling over the porch and rooms are made in such a way that the 'house' has just the right ventilation needed for the worms. The whole town used to be surrounded by mulberry plantations resembling a floating green carpet. But in late April the plantations turned ochre because of the silkworm eating the leaves.

Yet, with the post-war industrialization this old craft was left to die with people cutting down the vast plantations. Today, if you pass through the region, you will see only few mulberry trees standing here and there as mute witnesses to the extinction of silk craft in Macedonia.