



My Second Home

Sharing Macedonian village life

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December 22 was cold and bright, and there was freshly-fallen snow on the ground. We all rose early that day, and as soon as breakfast was over, Aunt Darya wrapped a freshly-baked loaf of bread in a clean white linen cloth, Uncle Toma poured hot sugared brandy into a small flask, and Cousin Trpana prepared a small bowl of boiled wheat grain sprinkled with sugar. When all was ready, Uncle Toma and I, dressed in our Sunday best, collected these items and followed the sound of the tolling church bell up the narrow winding stone-walled streets of the village until we arrived at a white-washed little Eastern Orthodox church.

Almost all of the men-folk of the little village had gathered in the church; the women had visited the church the night before. Each family carried a loaf of bread, a bowl of wheat, and a flask of brandy like our own. The bearded and black-robed priest chanted and read the short service to us. Then he blessed our small round loaves of bread topped with their shaped-dough crosses, and each of us in turn kissed the small silver cross he held as we filed out of church.

Everyone then gathered in a back alcove of the church, and members of each household approached a neighbor. Each took a small bite from the other's bowl of wheat, a tiny sip from his neighbor's flask of brandy, and then each wished the other health and prosperity in the coming year.

That was on St. Nicholas Day in 1973. It was the first Macedonian village saint's day celebration I had ever experienced. It took place in a small agricultural village in which my ancestors have probably observed some form of this celebration for nearly a millennium. It is one small part of the ancient mosaic of village culture in their homeland and my adopted second home.



I visited the Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia for the first time out of curiosity, but because I was free to stay and explore their society, to take the time to get to know their ways beyond the superficial images in tourist brochures or through the primitive communication of pidgin and sign language, I was rewarded by insight and understanding available only to the patient few. I still laugh when I remember the day my uncle told me the Albanian village up the mountain was so primitive that an anthropologist had come to live with them! (I never could get myself to tell that dear old uncle precisely what it was I had studied in college.) Yet, for all that the study of anthropology did to prepare me to view their society without preconceived notions, I have never been a detached scientific investigator in my second culture. I made an emotional as well as a physical leap into their society that no scientist I know would allow him or herself. If this often leads to subjectivity, I'm not so sure it doesn't also lead to deeper growth and awareness on levels many scientists must deny themselves.

The particular choice of a second culture could have been done with a world map and a blindfold, but anyone looking for a second culture will find that gratuitous circumstances will nearly always guide their way. I had been promising myself a visit to my father's half-brothers and their families in the Macedonian Republic for years. Finally, in August of 1973, I arrived for the first time at my Uncle Toma's and Aunt Darya's home in the village of Neproshteno on the east slope of the Shar Planina mountain range in southern Yugoslavia. I met my cousins Trpana, Mitra, Trpko, and Bogdan for the first time. Later, I was to meet my father's other brother, Boris, and his wife and my cousin Zhivko, as well as my aunt Toda and her children. In the months to come, I helped Toma bring hay in from the fields with an ox-team. Trpana and I harvested chestnuts on the mountain. I spent two weeks in a stone-walled thatched-roof shepherd's hut on the higher slopes of Shar with a cousin who tended and milked a flock of 100 sheep. A feta-type cheese was made from the milk, and once a week a donkey carried two wooden barrels of cheese in salt brine down to the town farmers' market in Tetovo. My cousin Zhivko and I

went trout fishing in the Vardar River and hunting for wild boar in the Suva Gora mountains with his hunting dogs. I attended weddings and religious celebrations. I was a guest and a foreigner, but one who was taken into the heart of the family and given every opportunity to understand the language, culture, and society of that Slavic land intimately. I stayed six months that time, until my savings were exhausted and my father, who joined me there at Christmas time, suggested that maybe I had free-loaded off his poor village relations long enough!

Needless to say, I've never been the same since that visit. At times, I become absolutely obsessed with getting back there. I start to dream in Macedonian at those times, and I visit the villages in my dreams and have long conversations and get re-acquainted with cousins and aunts and uncles. Eventually I do return for anywhere from six weeks to three months. I've done so four times now since 1973, my most recent visit being in August and September of 1986. When I'm not there, I read newspapers, magazines, and books from my second culture and listen to their songs, and for several years now I've been translating Macedonian literature into English. Since 1980, I've translated a number of short stories, plays, poetry, and three novels. Some have been published in international literary magazines or anthologies in the US; others have been of interest to Yugoslav publishers of English translations for export.

By now, some readers may be asking themselves "Who and where are these Macedonians"? Honestly, I didn't invent them. Our world is still littered with hundreds of small and somewhat obscure languages and cultures like the Macedonian. Despite the empire builders' efforts over the centuries at homogenization, Spanish, French, English, German, Russian or Chinese have not replaced most of these lesser-known languages in their homelands. There was an ancient race of Macedonians most often associated with the ancient Greeks. Their society was Hellenized and later Romanized and, after about 600 A.D., Slavicized. The region of Macedonia today is divided among Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Greece. The Macedonian people of Yugoslavia have what is called an autonomous socialist republic, one of six in the Yugoslav federation. The local language, which is basically Slavic and most closely related to Bulgarian and Serbian, with a certain amount of Greek and Turkish influence, was first standardized into a written language in 1946 from the dialects of the two to three million people who identify with this language and culture. (Though Macedonian may be the most recent Slavic language to evolve, it may also be the direct descendant of the oldest written Slavic tongue: Old Church Slavonic.)

My choice of adopting such a society as my second home strikes many people as a bit impractical. The "languages of empire" obviously have far larger populations of speakers and so it would seem that they should present many more opportunities for work or study. Perhaps so. I certainly would never discourage anyone with a bent toward one of these languages or societies from pursuing it. But there is something to be said for adopting one of the lesser-known cultures, too. Chances are that you will be introduced to a culture which is outside the mainstream of modern industrial society, most often a peasant agrarian village culture with as many things to teach the inheritors of the industrialized world as we have imagined that we had to teach them.

In some very real ways, my adopted second home has altered the way I live in America. My wife Susan Prescott and I live in a rural community on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound. Our home is a simple, permanent three-room cabin in the architectural style of a Mongolian yurt. We don't care to live in the 19th century, but we prefer to pick and choose from among existing technologies those which we believe genuinely enhance our lives. We've installed a solar electric system for lighting, and we have an electric pump, while we've managed to resist the temptation to own a television and have limited our use of the automobile and the store. We've been rewarded for our efforts by a new appreciation of books, artistry, and the spoken word.

Of course, I reject some of Macedonian village culture most vehemently: certain forms of prejudice, village gossiping, crude joking. I sympathize with some of the socialist government's campaigns to change these attitudes. But picking and choosing is fair. I am not a Macedonian, nor do I accept all of what I was born to as an American. We pay our local taxes for schools, roads, and public services and contribute time and energy to public volunteer efforts. We never earn enough to pay federal taxes, and yet we do most of what we enjoy and what seems to contribute to our growth and awareness, including an occasional stay in my second culture. To live simply and well, to avoid the wasteful consumerism which pervades American society, and not to help pay for death-dealing weapons, weapons which would be rendered unnecessary by enough mutual understanding of the kind we've been trying to sow and reap in Eastern Europe and at home - that's my idea of the good life!