

Kyiv Konnection

As I have travelled through east, central and south-eastern Europe, wherever there is an Orthodox church, I have found myself in it. I take a kind of rest in the homely peace that settles over me, I sniff the remnant whiffs of incense and beeswax, gaze at the icons who gaze back at me, and mumble the lines of text I know from the hymns and prayers of the Orthodox Liturgy.

I had been baptised Orthodox and all these churches were open to me, as were their prayers, their Feast Days, their saints. In Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, and Greece.

St Demetrius, for example. On the icons, he is young and pretty-faced, beardless, with thick hair tucked behind his ears. He wears the green tunic and red cloak of a Byzantine army officer and holds a round shield and long-armed cross. He died young, speared through his right breast, in the basement of the Roman baths in the northern Greek city of Thessalonica, for the crime of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This was the year 304, his name was Demetrius, and he was going to become a saint.

As Demetrius of Thessalonica, he would be one of the most powerful saints in all of Christendom. But he had been hastily buried in the red earth of the baths, then the little shrine marking the spot fell into ruin, the relics disappeared and, after a time, the details of his life and death vanished from living memory. But he came back three hundred years later to perform miracles, and the greatest of these – was the defense of his beloved city, Thessalonica, Solun, from the repeated assaults of the barbarians at the gates. The barbarians tried over and over again to crash through the walls and gates but to no avail. Demetrius appeared miraculously on the ramparts and saved the day. He and the Thessalonians had thrown back the enemy, which is to say the Slavs, which is to say me.

Then the barbarians became Christians and embraced the saints, including Dimitriy *Solunski*.

Toronto

Oct 26, 2000

St Demetrius Day, New Calendar

On St Demetrius's feast day, the lumbering bus travels north of Pape, picking up little old Greek ladies, and me, along the way to St Demetrius Greek Orthodox church. At first, we have the church pretty much to ourselves, so I seat myself where I have a good view of the fresco of St Demetrius painted on the wall to the right of the iconostas. I'm curious how Greeks see this hero: he's a comely beardless youth wearing a peach-coloured garment, seated on a kind of bench,

his body turned to his tormentors, the Roman soldiers. They are armed with spears, and he raises his left arm, bent at elbow and wrist like a ballet dancer, as if to invite their blows. He wears a halo, he's already divine.

The cantors arrive, three elderly gentlemen and a changing number of young men in black cassocks who wander in and out of the sanctuary to peer, draped over each other's shoulders, at the hymnals laid open on the rotating lectern.

An hour later the church is jam-packed, mostly with middle-aged women, all of us bathed in candlelight, sitting and standing at the command of a little bell behind the iconostas. The woman next to me is seized by a paroxysm of genuflection, her right arm flying around her torso in arcs as she crosses herself at her forehead and breast. A bishop and two priests officiate. Periodically the entire "cast" emerges from the sanctuary, through the royal doors and walks up and down the aisles, bearing the censer, a cross, and candles swaying in glass lanterns.

There is a sermon, and I strain to hear words I understand. Only these: *Agios Dimitrios* (Saint Demetrius), *Thessaloniki* (Thessalonica), *barbariki* (barbarians)... and Maclean's magazine.

We are so crowded together that I cannot move from my position and so I move as though in a shoal of fish, out from my pew, out into the aisle, up to the front to venerate the icon of St Demetrius laid out on a lectern (in this representation he's a pudgy boy in a suit of armour), and past the bishop with his basket of bread clutched in his two hands. This I understand, and I'm grateful for it. I take two big pieces.

"One monk, almost a vagabond, came from Kiev to Moldavia," noted a Salonica resident who met him in 1727, "and from there wandered aimlessly through Hungary, Croatia, Dalmatia, Venice, then returned from that unnecessary peregrination to Moldavia, and from there to the Zaporizhian Sich whence, by way of the Black Sea, he came to Constantinople and to Mount Athos."...Salonica – writes historian Mark Mazower - lay in the centre of an oikumeni, [commonwealth] which was at the same time Muslim, Christian and Jewish...such an extensive sacred geography.

October 22, 2001 Thessalonica

"Day One of St Demetrius's Feast," I write to friends from the internet café just down from the Basilica of St Demetrius. "One icon procession done, and three Matins, three Vigils, one Epitaphios and one Divine Liturgy to go."

The bulletin posted at the Basilica said that the procession of the Icon of the Virgin would start at 4 PM from the famous Byzantine White Tower down on the waterfront. I arrived at 3:45 and milled about in the humid heat in a crowd of matrons, priests, nuns head to toe in black, soldiers in combat outfits and helmets, shouldering lethal weaponry, and choir boys in running shoes. Priests opened briefcases, spilling out their vestments, or stood around yakking into their cellphones.

We were mostly middle-aged women with a sprinkling of the young with their arms around each other, and the faltering elderly. We shuffled and stepped on each other's heels but there was no meanness nor impatience. No one was particularly solemn either, although the women all around me, walking arm in arm, were singing hymns of the Panagia and of Saint Demetrius, in stiff competition with the oom pah pah of the male marching band out in front. Every church we passed rang out its rapturous bells, people stood on balconies making the sign of the cross. Traffic stalled at our passage, giving me an experience of immense and gratifying power.

Outside the basilica, banners of the Greek flag and the Byzantine double-headed eagle and of St Demetrius as guardian-warrior flapped on long lines in the forecourt. There was nothing private or intimate about this veneration of a patron saint, and I was a little disconcerted, thinking of how the veneration of saints in Ukrainian-Canadian churches is positively clandestine. And an enormous blue incense stand let off puffs of frankincense as the bells clattered and clamoured at our entrance to the church.

It wasn't until I walked up into a side gallery and looked down that I could see the whole assembly as a swirl of movements that together made the choreography of veneration. The exits and entries of priests at the iconostas, the putting on and taking off of vestments, their black stovepipe hats and gorgeous brocades of imperial red and gold, orange and white, their luxuriant white beards, the firm, unwavering song of the deacons, the worshippers at their genuflections, and then the surge up the centre aisle to the icon, to kiss the enormous icon of St Demetrius and the silver hand of the Panagia who was holding it up in the gesture of showing the way.

The collective memory of St Demetrius of Thessalonica is 1697 years old.

October 24 Wednesday

The bulletin at the church door said 7:30 a.m. and so the bells rang once, twice, and I was there at 7:45, but we were very few, mainly women, the icon of the Panagia still in front of the altar with her garland of pink and white blossoms. Presently, a young priest, hatless, hair pulled back into a knot at the base of his neck, wearing gold and white vestments, emerged from behind the iconostas with the censer.

This is a big basilica - 5 aisles wide - and up and down them all he went, hell bent for leather, swinging the censer like a yo-yo at the scores of icons distributed throughout the church. The worshippers turned their bodies as they followed his progress, crossing themselves as he sprinted past them. He remained expressionless throughout, gazing off in the middle distance. Maybe he isn't the point, I thought, but his action is?

On Wednesday evening, a multitude of the faithful gathered for the service of the Epitaphios, the carrying of the relics of the saint around the nave in his silver box. And once again I stood in the gallery so I could look down on the proceedings. This was my first glimpse, I realized, as a woman in an Orthodox church at what goes on *behind* the iconostas.

Some 50 priests donned their luxuriant red and gold vestments there, as though it were a theatrical dressing room and, lining up with lighted tapers, made their way out into the nave. Here they moved about in synchronized patterns performing different tasks - censuring the relics, genuflecting before the Bishop, refilling the incense burners, singing. They handled wicker baskets into which the Bishop plunged his hands and flung flower petals all about like a blessed sprinkling of rain, while one poor priest, assigned the job of handling the Bishop's long red robe, fussed with it for all the world like a bridesmaid at a wedding as the Bishop got up, sat down, turned this way and that and back again. The voices of the chanters and priests together were clear and powerful and, although the Byzantine style of ecclesiastical music is not pleasing to my Slavic ear, it is mesmerizing, and by the time the crowd of black-robed deacons arrived at the ululating Lamentations, I was practically on my knees.

The delivery of the Sermon was a signal for a general milling about again and so I walked out into the night time streets - into a traffic jam, and sidewalks crammed with shoppers, popcorn sellers, a merry-go-round, and a woman with a huge bouquet of balloons for sale, including one of Tweety Bird.

Archbishop Isidore of Kyiv, 15th century: “*St Demetrius is for us food and drink and all things enjoyable to eat; he is the sun, the sky, the earth and the sea, and everything that is essential to us.*”

But I had a hunch there is another way of thinking about Demetrius, linked with Demeter, the corn goddess of the ancient world. I pursue this link with Dr. Nora Skouteri-Didaskalou, social anthropologist and folklorist at Aristotle University in Thessalonica, who has done field studies in the villages of western Macedonia, once populated by Slavs as well as Greeks.

Specifically, she is interested in the connection between folklore and the seasonal changes in the agricultural year, so I ask her about St Demetrius. What do the “folk” believe about him?

Well, for a start, St Demetrius is twinned with St George. The two saints are celebrated in the late Autumn and the Spring, respectively, the “high points” of the revolving wheel of the seasons, both saints riding it around and around as we pass into the cold and dark of winter and then out of it into the sun and the warmth of summer. There is Demetrius at the high point of transition, “signalling, ‘We had a good summer, we have our produce, the wheat, and everything is stored away, we are looking ahead to the dark, to the short days and long nights, to the bad weather. But we are also *planting* the winter seed in the cold earth and it is sleeping there until the Spring.’”

The two festivals became a means for illiterates to organize their life – to rent land on St George’s Day, to bring the flocks down from the alpine meadows on St Demetrius’s Day, to plant and to cease planting, to set out on a journey on St George’s Day to look for work, and to work until the feast of St Demetrius.

And, in a sense, the Feast of St Demetrius was a way for the villagers to organize their dead:

“The dead are our ancestors,” Skouteri-Didaskalou continued, “and they come out of their graves not as ghosts but as protectors – on the so-called Holy or Spiritual Saturdays, the *Psychosabada [Zadushni Suboty]*, such as the one before the Feast of St Demetrius. In the old cult of Demeter - in Greek she is Dimitra – she is the goddess of earth and under-the-earth, of the dead souls, the ancestors, and her followers are called *Dimitri*. So it is not by coincidence that we have Demetrius (Dimitrios in Greek), an ancient name meaning a dead man who comes out of the earth to protect the living. As a saint he personifies someone who died for the good of the community.”

November 8, 2004 **St Demetrius Day, Old Calendar**

The roadway from Edmonton to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of St Demetrius in Jaroslaw weaves through a desolate countryside under a low, slate sky: lifeless fields, bony limbs of leafless trees, a light layering of snow on the frozen furrows, the tumbledown barns and farmhouses of abandoned homesteads.

My mother and I entered the nondescript church. There were perhaps thirty worshippers, all elderly, the women gamely singing the service with their thin and quivering soprano voices, the cantor occasionally overriding them with a stentorian bark. This is a Ukrainian-Orthodox church but the style of the painting

on the iconostas and the framed religious pictures hung here and there on the walls seemed Roman Catholic to me – I mean the over-production of crucifixion scenes, the slack faces of the archangels, and the sugary loveliness of the Mother of God. In the right-hand corner of the front wall within his own elaborate frame hung a painting of St Demetrius as a teenage warrior – big, wide-open eyes in a cherubic face – astride a stony landscape, meant to be Greece, I supposed.

Father Palamarchuk, young, stout, florid, had arrived at his sermon: “What is it we learn about human nature from the life of St Demetrius?” he began, leaning on the lectern with one arm. “Here was a guy born with a silver spoon in his mouth: that kind of kid usually doesn’t amount to anything these days! But here we have a young man born into a rich but modest family, his father the governor of Thessalonica and region, and a Christian. Here we have a young man who gave up his life at 28 years of age but who had already lived a lifetime. He finished school, took his father’s position in the city, and made a big name for himself far past Thessalonica, right up to the Roman emperor, who decided to see what was going on in Salonica...”

This was a very odd text, I thought, less the Life of a Saint than a chatty obituary by a family friend that he was making up as he went along. But then I began to hear something new and creative at work – the retelling of St Demetrius’s life for us here and now, humbly assembled in the Alberta countryside, as though this saint had evolved a new identity for our needs and purposes.

Next, the priest sang a *Panakhida* for the dead of the Second World War, facing the small altar in the nave set with a crucifix pricked with red poppies and a stack of three braided breads pierced by a candle. He arrived at the place in the little service for the names of the dead: Fred, Harry, Steve, John, Harry, Mike, Frank, Fred....sixty years ago, and I supposed their mothers who bore them and then sent them off to die are now in their own graves.

I had a view through the narrow stained-glass panel on the north side of the church out onto the stubbled field with its protective grove of spruce and the sheltered graves of the little cemetery. This was St Demetrius’s Day and he was not on the battlements of a Byzantine city but loping across the frozen furrows of a western Canadian quarter-section. For all his eternal beauty and youth, he is someone ancient, a divine companion of the generations of the tillers and sowers and reapers, and he stands with them, his feet in clods of earth, cupping grains of wheat that sift through his fingers and fall into the furrows, the chernozom, the quarters of the dead.

The souls of the dead are trailing behind him, their good shepherd, while we, warm inside the little church with the big dome, watched the earth open up and receive its inheritance. The god is young and beautiful, and pushes up the green sprouts of spring. The farmers will reap this crop, and call it Demetrius.