THE SACRED FLOWER OF RUSSIA AND RUTHENIA: BY FLORENCE RANDAL LIVESAY

FLOWER with whose scarlet blossom a maiden enwreaths her dusky braids—an evanescent bloom of white and purple which, with its seeds and its milk, becomes interwoven with the gossamer fabric of a fairy tale—the sweetmeat of a child—food in religious fast—the Poppy of Russia glows or pales against the background of shadows, the past and its traditions. And in the Europe of today how often mention is made of the poppies flaming over battlefields! As the petals fell from a soldier’s letter of last Autumn one read: “These red poppies we picked were growing in between the two firing lines in the Ghosts’ Lane—many an hour must the sentries of the enemy through their periscopes have seen them flaunting.”

In the old story of the Vampire and Saint Michael the poppy is used in exorcism. A certain Czarevna died unbaptized; some say she plunged into the water and took a bath without making the sign of the cross. And for so vile a deed she became a vampire, lying in the church unquiet in her coffin. Not until one, braver than his fellows, should read prayers for the dead over her, would she rest in peace or be restored to life. Such a hero came, of course, and he fortified himself against her fiendish clutching by much incensing “and by strewing around him the consecrated poppy-seed,” which proved so efficacious that he not only rescued the vampire, but married her and lived happily ever after.

In the days before the war the Russian peasants in harvest time
took great bunches of poppies and other flowers to the church to be blessed—to be used for seed and in charms against witches. For the Ruthenians firmly believe that the cow which has just calved must be given to drink water in which the “holy poppies” have been strewn, together with carrot tops, an egg broken in its shell, and a brush and comb. All this because of the potent spells of the Vyedjma (Widma) or witch, who can do what she will with the cow’s milk otherwise.

There is a Servian tale—“The Prince With the Golden Hand”—much akin to the Russian in its association of poppies and witches. The Prince comes to the house of a Baba Yaga, or Grandmother Witch, this being a cabin set on a cock’s claw. All around are poppies thick and rankly growing, and he begins to feel sleepy. So heavy are his eyes that he has much ado to keep them open. (In another fairy story the Princess says: “Showers of poppies fall upon mine eyes.”) Spurring on his good steed, it springs forward, trampling down the poppies’ drowsily-swaying barricade and winning his way to the witch, who, as she occasionally appears in Russian folklore, proves to be entirely beneficent in her dealings with the Prince, at least, and sends him on his quest for the inevitable princess, with helpful gifts. Of all the quaint Russian fairy stories, perhaps the most charming to children is “Vasilissa the Beautiful,” for in that tale the child’s little doll when given food takes the place of the dead mother, and by her counsel and fairy-like qualities of help saves Vasilissa from the evil intent of her stepmother and the latter’s daughters. These send her to a dreadful Baba Yaga to borrow coals from the witch’s fire, hoping thus to dispose of her.

One of Vasilissa’s tasks in the witch’s house is to clean half a measure of poppy seeds. “Some one has mixed earth with these to do a mischief to anger me,” says the witch, “and I will have them perfectly clean.” With the doll’s help this is done, and the Baba Yaga sits down to a meal ministered to by her mysterious unseen servitors: “Ho, my trusty servants, friends of my soul, haste to press the oil out of my poppy-seeds!”

There is a belief in other countries, that poppy seed have the power to produce invisibility if sprinkled in one’s shoes.
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Canadians who are interested in the customs of the foreign people who have come to them in such numbers—dwellers aforetime in the Austrian Crownland of Bukovina or the Province of Galicia, most of whom speak the Ruthenian language—find at their doors a wealth of traditional lore. In an interview with Bishop Nicetas Budka, the Ruthenian Bishop of Canada, himself an ardent folklorist, he told me of the poppies grown near Edmonton and at Athabasca Landing. “If you ask my people why they sow them, they will tell you it is chiefly for ‘The Lent of the Poppies, or of Harvest,’ when no milk or meat is permissible.” The Makawijka fast begins on the first of August. Mak is the Ruthenian word for poppy, and the peasants, unfamiliar with the written word of Scripture, have confounded “The Day of the Seven Maccabaeus” (Maccabaeus) with the time of the cleaning of the ripened poppies—the Mak. The last day of the fast is the Obdormation, or Sleep of the Virgin, it being their faith that at this time the mother of Jesus fell into the sleep of death. During this period the milk of the poppy, mildly stimulating, is taken by those who must work in the fields, and that is why it is so largely grown in the gardens. The ripe seeds are crushed, and when the white liquid is secured water is added, together with honey; into this a large biscuit is broken.

In the “old country” poppy oil is to the peasants a necessity, being used to a large extent in cookery. It is a transparent, limpid fluid with a slight yellowish tinge, bland and pleasant to the taste and with no perceptible smell. For this reason it is much used in other European countries for adulterating olive oil. The inferior qualities are principally consumed in soap-making and varnish-making and for burning in lamps. Ordinary poppy-oil cake is a valuable feeding material, rich in nitrogenous constituents and in phosphorus.

Several recipes have been given me by Russian and Polish servants, into which poppy seeds enter largely. For a rich poppy cake twelve eggs, a cup of butter, and two cups of sugar are needed, with two cups of the seeds mashed well and beaten to a cream for half an hour; a yeast cake, four cups of milk, and flour to thicken are added; the dough is allowed to rise like bread and then it is baked an hour in a slow oven. A dish much liked is macaroni with a sauce made of pounded poppy seeds, a little sugar and butter—the whole beaten until it is “as white as milk.”

In Winnipeg on Christmas Day, Ruthenians who still keep up their old customs prepare for breakfast a dish of whole wheat; they grind poppy seed and add a little sugar, mixing it with the boiled wheat. As each comes to the table he or she dips a spoon in this
“HOW LIKE TO THE POPPY-SEED is this world!
It blossoms, it blossoms to-day;
Tomorrow a stormy tempest blows
And the flower has vanished away.”
"NOT POPPY, nor Mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou ow'dst yesterday."
—Shakespeare.
"ONLY THE POPPIES with their dancing keep sweet memories of romance and of June."

Edward Wilbur Mason.
"WE ARE SLUMB'ROUS POPPIES,
Lords of lethe down.
Some awake and some asleep,
Sleeping in our crowns;
What perchance our dreams may know,
Let our serious beauty show."

—Leigh Hunt.
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“pudding” and throws a morsel up to the ceiling, where it sticks, saying at the same time, “May we have better luck next year.”

In the small boutiques of Petrograd a Russian lady told me that she had often seen children buying poppy seed or little tarts filled with a paste made from it. The cake is very flat and thin; in preparing the seeds boiling water is poured over them and allowed to remain for an hour; then the seeds are dried and mixed with sugar, egg, etc.

Katerina, of Warsaw, begged for all the poppy seeds in my garden, “just to eat like that,” in her hand. In her own home she would have shaken out a head from those put away for just such a treat in the long winters. As a little girl, Katerina helped to gather the poppy harvest near Siedlce. (I saw the name of that place recently mentioned by a correspondent as ravaged by war.) Perhaps a hundred acres would be sown with the beautiful flowers. In reaping them possibly fifty men would go out with sickles; stooping low, they would cut the stalks, handling the pods very carefully. These would then be placed in canvas-lined wagons, taken to the granary, and stacked as high as a man’s head.

The next morning at dawn the girls to be employed would hear the call, “Chody vidrizaty mak.” (“Come and cut the poppies.”) Arriving at the place designated, they would sit cross-legged on the floor in two rows, facing each other, each girl with a pile of stalks at her side. Soon hands were busy slitting the poppy heads with pen-knives and shaking the seeds, blue-gray or white, into earthenware bowls. The stalks were thrown into the ever-heightening space between the rows. Once the bowls were filled—and no doubt a good many pinches of seed found their way into the mouths of laughing young girls—they were emptied into sacks and stored away ready for transit to the big cities. As they worked the young women sang, here a quartet and there another. Perhaps one of the airs chosen would be this:

Song of the Poppy.

How like to the poppy-seed is this world!
   It blossoms, it blossoms today;
Tomorrow a stormy tempest blows,
   And the flower has vanished away.

O sad for the forests and willow-trees
   That hark to no nightingales:
O woe for the house of the widow young
   When the voice of her husband fails!
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O sad for the forests and willow-trees
When no nightingales awake
The rest of the little singing-birds
When the rays of the morning break.

And sadder still is the quiet house
Where the lonely widow sleeps:
Where the little children none shall rouse,
Since the grave their father keeps.

Or, in another corner, one might have heard this plaintive song, interesting from another standpoint. For it shows how the shadow of Conscription has always haunted the thoughts of womankind in the countries where the system obtains:

How sad, O my Mother, how sad,
To think of the roses blown by the wind
And the petals all swept away!

How sad, O my Mother, how sad,
For the war-horse in battle array!
But sadder my heart for the soldier young
Who must go for those three long years—
Must go at the call of his King.

"And far and wide, like a scarlet tide,
The poppy's bonfire spread."
—Bayard Taylor.

Ruthenia is not alone in strange superstitions about the poppy, for this silken-petaled blossom that glows bright as a flame, burns like blood, shines like silver, or rivals the golden sun, has, besides its changeable beauty of color, a demoniacal power—one that robs men of their reason and sends them to a brutish sleep of forgetfulness. We know it but as a garden favorite, one that produces a fairy sunset mirage over our flower borders. The Swiss lake-dwellers value the brilliant papaver for its beauty; the shores of the Mediterranean flame like a sacrificial fire when it blooms in the spring; China seeks forgetfulness through its dream-producing quality; England’s wheat fields are famous because the poppy blows red against its gold; California’s meadows are spread with this flower gold; the Romans and Greeks feasted upon its seeds (which have no narcotic qualities); many, many folk use its oil as food; artists like its clear oil for mixing colors; horticulturists like it because they can enlarge, double its petals, give them freakish form and strange colors. Wherever found, and in whatever form, it seems surrounded with magic halo.