THE THIN WAIL of the gusle drops in volume and the stiff figure of the tall guslar opposite you sways and gives voice to the tale of "Karageorge and the Black Arab."

Black Arab inscribes a letter,
Sends it to the Serbian land
To the hands of Petrovich George.

You are listening to an epic poem of the South Slavs, sung in the Serbian tongue by a Herzegovinian guslar, though you are in South St. Paul! Your guslar, drawing the horsehair bow over the one-stringed gusle, his voice sobbing in grief or ringing with triumph, is Risto Grk.

Hear me, Petrovich George!
Note well what I say to you!
You have wronged me sore
In taking my Serbian land.

Mr. Grk, a sturdy six-footer, who was sixty on March 25, sits tensely in his straight chair, his face a mirror of the emotions expressed in this heroic tale. The harsh notes from the gourd-shaped gusle blend with the threatening words of the Black Arab, as the Turk is described.

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You leveled our mosques and minarets
And built churches and altars.
This I shall never forgive.

Minnesota may justly be proud of having in Mr. Grk a representative of the ancient calling of poet-singer. The epic tales he chants from memory represent the magnificent contribution of the Serbian people to world literature.

These narrative poems, handed down from guslar to guslar by word of mouth, have been the object of study and admiration since they first were brought before a wide public by the great Serbian scholar, Vuk Karajich, in the early part of the last century. The late Milman Parry, a Homeric scholar at Harvard University, recorded three hundred and fifty of these heroic poems in Yugoslavia in an endeavor to understand the development of the Homeric epic by studying this living epic tradition of the Serbs.

The tale chanted by Mr. Grk when I visited him relates a conflict between the Turkish rulers and the Serbian rebel, Karageorge, who led an uprising in 1804. For Serbs this is but recent history, since their greatest songs take them back to the bloody "Field of the Blackbirds," Kosovo Polye,
where in 1389 their forces were routed by
the Turks, who then began their five-
century rule over Serbia.

During the centuries of cruel Turkish rule
that followed, the Serbs developed this
oral poetry to record their history, to pre-
serve their unity, and to voice their hopes.
The poems are distinguished by a high
moral tone and by the moving acceptance
of the infliction on the Serbs of God’s pun­
ishment in the form of the Turk, though
never by an acceptance of the Turk him­
self.

One cycle of these epic poems, which
naturally reminds Minnesotans of the Paul
Bunyan tales, revolves about the exploits of
Marko Kraljevich (Marko the King’s Son),
an adventurous Serbian knight of tremen­
dous prowess.

Marko, his black mustaches as big as a
six-month-old lamb, smites the Turk with
his mace of a hundred and eighty-five
pounds, squeezes drops of water out of dry
wood of nine years seasoning, and can leap
from mountain to mountain on his wondrous
piebald horse, Sharats. Whenever Marko
drinks wine, which is often, Sharats quaffs
his allotted half from the wine skin.

WHILE spending the night in a private
home in Montenegro (Yugoslavia) in the
summer of 1953, I was overjoyed to find
that my young host, a blind veteran of
World War II, was a guslar. For many
hours, with an audience composed of his
ten-year-old son and myself, the blind gus­
lar played “Kossovo Maiden,” “The Fall of
the Serbian Empire,” and other epic songs.

Though that Montenegrin guslar and
Risto Grk are separated by thirty years in
age and by thousands of miles, their voices
and singing styles are the same, both men
singing with the guslar’s stylized hoarse­
ness and the choking sob alternating with
piercing notes of triumph.

You may still see an occasional guslar
surrounded by a group of rapt listeners in
the back country of Serbia, Montenegro,
and Bosnia-Herzegovina, but this ancient
tradition is fast losing ground before modern
diversions radiating out from the cities.

Our Minnesota guslar, Mr. Grk, a retired
packing-house employee, emigrated from
near Stolats in Herzegovina to this country
in 1908, at the age of fourteen. He learned
many of these epic chants at the feet of
his guslar uncle in the old country and
other songs from the noted Montenegrin
guslar, Petar Perunovich, who lived in
South St. Paul in 1926.

During his early years here, Mr. Grk im­
provised a gusle from large tin cans, but
in 1933 he became the proud owner of an
excellent instrument fashioned by the late
Father Teofan Beatovich, who went to
South St. Paul from Yugoslavia and re­
turned after a few years residence in Amer­
ica. The gusle, an instrument intro­
duced into Serbia about the tenth century from
Asia Minor, is shaped like a banjo with
a gourd-like sounding box, has but one
horsehair string, and is played by a horse­
hair bow.

Occasionally Mr. Grk plays for small
groups at the Serbian Home in South St.
Paul, but there, as in Yugoslavia, the art
form of the guslar is slowly disappearing.
So that these songs, with their historic as­
sociations and inherent beauty, will not
completely disappear, Mr. Grk is record­
ing representative chants for the depart­
ment of Slavic and Oriental languages in
the University of Minnesota. 1

If you should have the privilege of lis­
tening to Risto Grk chant these ancient
songs, take along a Serbian friend. You
probably don’t understand Serbian and the
music of the gusle is not in itself note­
worthy, but watch your friend. He will sit
unmoving, his eyes on the guslar’s lips,
lost to South St. Paul, but feeling and re­
living with the guslar the tragedies and
triumphs of the Serbian people.

All was honor, all was holy!
God’s will was done on Kossovo!

1 Some of these disks will be added to the Min­
nesota Historical Society’s record collection. Ed.

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