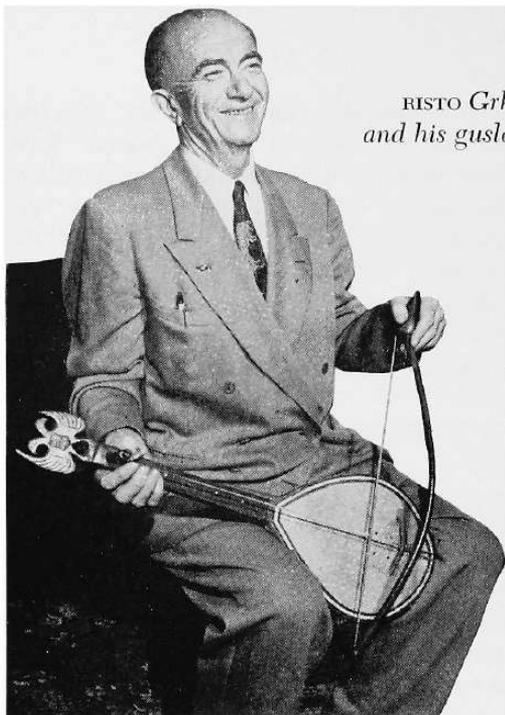


RISTO Grk  
and his *gusle*



# Minnesota *GUSLAR*

THOMAS F. MAGNER

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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PROFESSOR MAGNER is chairman of the department of Slavic and Oriental languages in the University of Minnesota.

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," Kossovo 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 preserve 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 punishment in the form of the Turk, though never by an acceptance of the Turk himself.

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 tremendous 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 *guslar* played "Kosovo 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 hoarseness 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 improvised 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 returned after a few years residence in America. The *gusle*, an instrument introduced 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 horsehair 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 associations and inherent beauty, will not completely disappear, Mr. Grk is recording representative chants for the department of Slavic and Oriental languages in the University of Minnesota.<sup>1</sup>

If you should have the privilege of listening 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 noteworthy, 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 Kosovo!

<sup>1</sup> Some of these disks will be added to the Minnesota Historical Society's record collection. *Ed.*



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