

# Karadjordje as a young boy

*By*

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At the beginning of our story, little Djordje Petrovic was five years old. He had brown eyes and a dark complexion and looked like his grandmother, his Baka. Djordje also resembled his great grandfather Tripko Gurish Knezevic. Little Djordje was his Baka's favourite grand child and he and his sister Marija slept together with their grandmother. She would tell them stories about the wind in the black mountains of Montenegro and of the long and difficult trip the family had made to Sumadija. In a humble house on a small farm, in Visevac, near Raca Kragujevacka, Baka helped to take care of her daughter Marica's six children. Marica, when she was 17, married Peter whose family had left Berane at the same time. She and Petar had grown up in adjoining farms and the families shared the work load. When little Djordje the eldest child arrived, in 1762, a circular rainbow appeared over the house where he was born and everybody saw it and knew that he must be a special baby. It was considered a powerful omen. Five more children were born after that and Marica was very busy and did not have much time to take care of the eldest two children.

Baka took Djordje and Marija, his sister, for long walks and taught them which plants and vegetables could be picked and eaten; which mushrooms were edible and which were poisonous. In spring they picked young nettles (kopriva) for soup; in autumn, they collected acorns and Djordje's father ground them up into powder and mixed it with hot water which they all drank instead of coffee. Djordje had his own bee hives and loved taking care of his bees. His father Peter had taught him that God had left us on earth as his white bees to swarm and to remember the protoword of God. We were to keep it as the symbol of our origin and leave it to posterity exactly as we inherited it from time immemorial. The whole family enjoyed the luscious honeycomb and knew how healthy and delicious it was. Baka understood the language of the wolves and taught their language to the two children. Sometimes in the wintertime, in the early evening, they would climb up into an old enormous oak tree and listen to the wolves howling. Baka had made a rope ladder which she threw up in the branches so that she and the children could climb up safely. Once they were seated on a comfortable branch she would pull up the ladder behind her so nobody

could either see them or follow them! Baka taught them about the big white snake that lived deep down between the roots of the old oak tree and protected it.

Sometimes the wolves came to dance around this tree in the moonlight but the children were not afraid because they knew what the wolves were saying and they could communicate with one another. "You must learn to be aware of everything and afraid of nothing," Baka taught them, adding, "you must also be careful who you choose to be your close friends." Baka sang ballads to them and taught them the history of the Serbian people and the wisdom of the ancient ones. She recited the ballad of "Tripko Gurish Knezevic i Bechir-Aga", the children's great grandfather who fought the Turks in the seventeenth century and became a hero. He was tall and dark and fearless. Baka had a feeling that her little Djordje would have a similar role to play. She also sang the ballad called "Zenidba Dusanova" about Djordje and Marija's ancestors, the famous Vojnovici family. Baka told the children that they also descended from King Radoslav, the grandfather of Bjelog Pavla the ruler of Trebinje in 867 who created the Zeta dynasty.

"Close your eyes, children, listen to the wind and you will know your past and your future," she told them. "Be quiet and feel the energy of this tree which is a magic tree, you can learn the secrets of life."

"Baka," asked little Marija, "I have heard that some children go to school. Will we go to one?"

"No my dear, it is not necessary. You can learn everything you need to know from the wisdom of the ballads I sing to you and from nature. God created this world so all his knowledge is to be found in nature. Keep open your hearts and your ears and your intelligence and you will know and understand more than anybody".

One day when Djordje was seven years old he went off alone to sit under the favourite oak tree and did not tell either his mother or his Baka. He fell asleep there in the warm sunshine. He woke up suddenly because he heard a voice and something crashing through the nearby bushes. He jumped up and saw two boys of about twelve throwing stones at a baby deer. The deer had a broken leg and could not run away. Djordje shouted at the boys and picked up a big stick. The boys took no notice and went on torturing the little creature. Djordje rushed at the boys fearlessly and attacked them. They began to shriek with pain as he whacked them hard on their knee caps and then on the side of the head and then they ran away. Djordje's

Baka arrived at this moment and saw what was happening and at first scolded him for leaving home without her but then praised him for protecting the little deer and fighting the cruel boys so bravely. They both went up to the shivering creature and Baka tore off some fabric from her skirt and tied it round the tiny broken leg. Djordje suggested that they should put something solid to hold the leg straight, so Baka found a small stick and made a splint. They decided they could not leave the little animal behind so Baka picked him up in her arms and slowly they made their way home. When they got home the baby deer drank some milk out of a bottle and fell asleep, exhausted, on the floor. In about a month or so she was able to walk again but she was definitely Djordje's pet and she followed him wherever he went. Baka always accompanied them because there many wild and dangerous people roaming about in those days.

"Who are they Baka?" he asked.

"They are people from another land who control the land we live in," she answered.

"But, why should they? That is not fair."

"Darling, alas there is no such thing as fair. And, no, they should not be here. They speak another language, have another religion and steal our male children every seven years. There are so many of them in our country and nobody knows how to get them to leave."

"But Baka," said the children in unison, "what is religion?"

"Religion," she answered, "means a union and a reconnection between people and God. Most of them have forgotten how to do this."

"But, if the people who have conquered our land have another religion, how do you explain that? Who is their God?"

"Ha," she said, "There is only one God, but everyone thinks his way to God is the only way. People even fight and kill each other over this theory. We are all supposed to love God and love one another but it has not worked so far!"

"But, Baka, you know that day when I went by myself to our oak tree and fell asleep? I had a very exciting and strange dream."

"What was it my child"?

“I dreamed I was very tall and I was wearing a uniform and wore knives in my belt. I was a leader and friends of mine from our village were with me and we were fighting some bad men who came to attack us and steal young boys. There were many battles but we succeeded in chasing out these dangerous strangers.”

Baka was very excited. She too had had this dream about her favourite grandson and now she believed it would come about. “Darling, you will be known as Karadjordje in a few years. Kara means black or dark and your hair will be thick and dark when you grow up even though now you are blond. In ancient Egypt, Ka-Ra meant the soul of Ra, their God!”

Next day, Djordje and Marija and Baka and the deer went off to the oak tree to listen to stories and to pick acorns. A hawk was following them and then flew slowly next to them. Sometimes he would sit on the branch of a tree and wait for them to catch up and then fly on again. Baka said that one had to make friends with hawks because they were messengers and Djordje could trust them to guide him and give him information.

Marija, Djordje’s sister was a beautiful girl and Djordje loved her very much. She was as tough as he was and they used to race together through the fields and she sometimes won. He was never rough with her and Baka told him how to respect and love women and to protect them.

“When women feel safe and loved and protected then the world is a happy place. After all, who takes care of children, of your brothers and sisters?”

“You take care of us, Baka,” said the children in unison. “And mother takes care of the others because they are tiny and they keep coming.”

Later that year, the pet deer who had now grown into an adult, ran off one day into the woods and did not return for over a year. When she returned, she came with her family because she had found a mate, had her own foal and wanted to show off her baby to the family who had saved her. A black puppy came bouncing along, as though out of nowhere, and rushed up and licked Djordje. Djordje and Marija and some of his brothers and sisters were so happy to see their pet again and to meet her family. Of course she could not live there any more and had to leave to be with her stag and the baby but the puppy stayed behind and adopted Djordje as his pet.

The date Djordje and Marija liked best was December 8<sup>th</sup> which was the family slava. This is the day of Sveti Klimentije, when the Petrovic family prepared a special family feast. As each year there were more children there were more of them to enjoy this special celebration together. These were relatively happy years but when Djordje was about 11 years old, his beloved grandmother passed away. On her deathbed she held Djordje's hand and whispered to him, "Don't forget the lessons I gave you and know how much I love you. Beware of someone whose initials are MO and always watch your back. You have been chosen to soon start the liberation of our country from the oppressive conquerors; I have known this for a long time. I wish I could stay and see your victories but it is time for me to go. May God bless you and protect you." Baka entered her deep sleep peacefully and Djordje could have sworn he saw her smile as a sunbeam touched her cheek. For many years, during difficult and trying moments he could hear her loving voice and her words of wisdom in his head and in his heart.