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Bulgaria’s history is filled with a variety of rich traditions, some of which date back to pagan times. Many of these traditions, like Baba Marta, or Grandma March, are still celebrated today. Every year on 1 March, Bulgarians greet each other with wishes for health and happiness. As they do so, they exchange specially prepared martenitzi as a token of their good will. This tradition is related to one of Bulgaria’s oldest pagan traditions. It is also a symbol of the end of the cold winter and the coming of spring. Baba Marta is unique to Bulgaria and an important part of the Bulgarian culture.

Starting Points

1. Hold up a spool of white yarn and a spool of red yarn. Discuss what the colors could symbolize. Find out why students perceive the colors differently. Show the students the pictures of the martenitzi (see Traditions Visual 1). Explain that Bulgarians make these tokens of happiness for friends and relatives.

2. Discuss with the class if Americans have a similar tradition of people making gifts to express their care for others. What do gifts symbolize to the students?

3. Because they were in bondage for so many centuries, it was very hard for the Bulgarians to keep their national identity and traditions. However, Baba Marta is a tradition that Bulgarians have held throughout their history. Explain that this is an important part of the Bulgarian culture and identity.

Information

Traditions and Superstitions in Bulgaria

Many Bulgarian customs and traditions originate from ritualistic and superstitious rites and practices. Dating back to 681 C.E., Bulgaria was a collection of many separate and distinct tribes, including the Bulgar tribe. Each of these tribes brought their own customs and traditions. The influence of these customs is still seen today in the frequent references to good luck and superstitions. Throughout Bulgaria’s existence, these practices have become a part of the practice of Christianity.

Some traditions incorporate both Christian ideals and ancient rituals. One of these traditions is the wearing of martenitzi. Martenitzi are red and white threaded ornaments that are woven together. Each year during the month of Baba Marta, Bulgarians of all ages wear martinitzi on their wrists, lapels, and shirt pockets. Each martenitza (the singular form of martenitzi) means something different to each person. Although many of the superstitions and beliefs about martenitzi differ, the history of their origin is generally accepted.
The Origin of Baba Marta

During the nineteenth century, Bulgaria was struggling to free itself from the Ottoman Empire’s occupation. One of Bulgaria’s main armies found itself in a predicament—they were in a fort surrounded by a relentless Turkish army. The soldiers had been fighting for many days, their food and provisions were nearly gone, and their strength was diminishing. The Bulgarian soldiers, having run out of bullets, resorted to throwing dead soldiers from the top of the wall in order to deter would-be captors. No help was in sight, and the weary soldiers began to give up the little hope they had. As a final attempt, the leader of the army devised a plan that would give them more time and also provide the aid they desperately needed.

Knowing that the opposing army was keeping a careful watch, the leader of the Bulgarian soldiers decided to trick the enemy. He tied a piece of white cloth to the ankle of a trained messenger eagle, assuming that the bird would not be shot down if it carried a message of Bulgarian surrender. He also tucked a small note under its wing. The note asked for help to be sent to the struggling Bulgarian army. Not to be tricked, the Turkish army shot at the brave eagle, which avoided all but one bullet. Wounded but not dead, the eagle made its way to a nearby Bulgarian army reserve. When they saw the white cloth with a streak of red blood through the middle, they rushed to rescue the small, weary army. As the eagle delivered the message, the enemy army planned their ruthless attack to destroy the Bulgarian army. But by the time of the attack, help had been sent to the Bulgarians. The reserve army surprised the enemy army by attacking them from behind. Following this attack, the Bulgarian army went on to triumph in the war against their enemy.

The blood from the eagle’s leg colored the white cloth that hung from it. Since that battle, the Bulgarian people have used the white and red piece of cloth as a symbol of the blood-stained white cloth. They wear this in memory of the day Bulgaria won its independence, 3 March 1878. Bulgarians wear martenitzi during the entire month of March. When this tradition first began, people greeted each other and exchanged red and white cloth on 1 March in celebration of the freedom and independence they had obtained. They celebrated a time when the old system of bondage had failed and a new bright future was ahead. Today, Bulgarians use red and white thread instead of cloth, but the meaning remains the same. The day has also come to symbolize the end of the cold winter and the beginning of spring and new life.

Baba Marta, Martenitzi, and Modern Bulgaria

Martenitzi have deep symbolic meaning in Bulgaria. Many Bulgarians believe that the intertwined red and white yarn assures the wearer of special power. The red coloring protects against disease and sickness throughout the coming year, and the white symbolizes a long, healthy life. Bulgarians give martenitzi to members of their immediate family, relatives, and friends. On 1 March, people exchange the martenitzi and say, “Chestita Baba Marta,” or “Merry Grandma March,” and then express their wishes of health and happiness for the other person. In some areas, friends and family gather around bonfires and sing and dance late into the night.
Baba Marta is an important time of year culturally. Bulgarians believe that the month of March is personified by Baba Marta, an old lady. If somebody is not wearing a martenitza, one might warn him or her by saying something like, “If you don't wear a martenitza, then Baba Marta will bring evil things against you.” Baba Marta is considered the most powerful month of the year because she brings in the spring. She is happy when the sun shines and mad when it gets cloudy. Some Bulgarians do a thorough spring-cleaning because, according to legend, Baba Marta only visits clean houses. The traditions and customs practiced during the spring are for the purpose of pleasing Baba Marta.

According to tradition, everyone must wear their martenitzi until they see a stork. Much like our Groundhog Day, the first sighting of a stork returning from its long winter in the north symbolizes the return of spring. At this first sighting, a Bulgarian takes off his or her martenitza and hangs it on the nearest tree branch—an action believed to make the tree fruitful.

During the entire month of March, everyone seems happier than at any other time of the year. Although wearing martenitzi is only a symbolic tradition and each person wears them for different reasons, Bulgarians are united in the belief that the martenitza brings good luck and the promise of a long, healthy life.

During the month of Baba Marta foreigners are even encouraged to wear martenitzi. Visitors to Bulgaria during Baba Marta may be overwhelmed with the generosity of Bulgarians as they receive numerous martenitzi from friends and strangers alike. The Bulgarians appreciate efforts from foreigners to understand their ancient traditions and history.

Instructions for Making Martenitzi (see Traditions Visual 2)

You will need:

1. 1 spool white yarn
2. 1 spool red yarn
3. scissors
4. tape

Preparation:

1. Cut one twelve-inch piece of white yarn.
2. Cut two twelve-inch pieces of red yarn.
3. Tie the three strings together at one end and tape that end down.
4. Braid the strings and tie them at the other end to hold them together.
5. Tie your martenitza around your wrist.

Activities

1. Have the students create their own way of making martenitza. Have a martenitza contest in class. After the contest, they should give it to a friend and greet him or her in the Bulgarian traditional way by saying “Chestita Baba Marta” and sharing their wishes for health and happiness.
2. Assign the students to write a paragraph about martenitzi, focusing mainly on what the martenitzi symbolize to Bulgarians.

3. In groups of five or six, have the students invent a tradition based on the colors red and white. Since each student will likely come up with different traditions, this will give the class an opportunity to recognize how easily traditions change and adjust according to an individual's background and purpose, much like Bulgarian traditions have changed and adjusted throughout generations.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What do you think has helped the Bulgarians to keep the tradition of Baba Marta throughout their history until the present time?

2. Why have traditions about the symbols of martenitzi changed over time?

3. What do the colors red and white symbolize in our culture? What do the colors mean to Bulgarians?

4. What are some American traditions that are similar to the Bulgarian tradition of wearing martenitzi?
Traditions Visual 1: Martenitzi
Traditions Visual 2: Tools for Making Martenitzi