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Beyond legend. An ethnographic landscape from a Prahova settlement*

Starchiojd is a village in northern Muntenia, a quiet place away from the noise of cities, where people have always lived through honest work and in the middle of nature. They practice a little agriculture, only on the arable land near the houses and at the bottom of the hills, apart from this, raising sheep and cattle being the basic occupation. They are the descendants of the free peasants who settled in these lands many centuries ago, people with love for the land inherited from their ancestors.

As a teacher at the local school, since 1980, I have been a mentor for many generations of pupils for twenty years. My training (plastic education) allowed me to know everything that can be related to artistic, beauty, in this area rich in folklore and of an unimaginable diversity: folk costumes, traditional towels, household items, songs for gatherings and for some holidays of the year, callings, secrets from the elders to make good cheese and plum brandy, renowned and with a local specificity.

At first glance, one can see the villagers' homes, tidied, elegant, with animals and birds in the yard. Many houses have the foundations made of river stone, and the plank fences in plain sight, and the oldest ones have the famous porch and fir shingle on the roof.

If you climb towards the forest, you meet people who shepherd animals accompanied by two or three shepherd dogs. They wear a band on their belt, sheepskin coat and hat, wide sleeve shirts, necessarily having the habitual flute, relieving their loneliness with songs passed on from father to son. Sheep flocks are far from the village, with a wooden enclosure and the habitual house (room) made of fir or oak tree where the shepherds sleep at night. There they keep their reserves of corn flour for polenta, the salt for cheese, wooden buckets and vats for milk, and cheese products. Staying with the shepherds, especially at nightfall, when they cook food in pots,

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listening to them singing from the flute, it is a pleasure known by anyone who becomes their guest.

Children in Starchiojd help their parents raise animals, they shepherd them, participate in mowing, gathering hay, but also go to school in the village. As a teacher, I met pupils closely in a healthy and unaltered environment in the countryside. Young people coming from the Posești-Starchiojd area have a more prominent predilection for physical labor, they believe in old values, and have a special behavior: decency, hard-working, modesty, attachment to the traditions and customs known in their families.

At the cultural events in Starchiojd, we met authentic old peasants, dressed in an old national costume, the only ones who knew the traditional old dance and danced the famous band dance.

In their homes, the children now keep their grandmother's dowry box, and, rarely, gatherings are still being made where the elders recount from their memories, where boiled plum brandy and boiled corn kernels are served. All this accompanied by song and good will.

To the center of the village, you, traveller, also see aspects of modern needs: asphalt, well-supplied shops, minibuses and buses for connecting the village to the city, personal cars, houses with newer architecture. But I advise you, traveller, to climb above the heart of the village, towards the hills and forests where you can find modest houses with a porch and wooden staircases, with stone cellars, and on the streets where you can see the carriages drawn by the horses, herds that return from the pasture. To the forest area you will hear songs played by the flute, the barking of the sheep dogs, the sheep's cries and the cows' bells. It is a sign that tradition still exists, withdrawn at the bottom of the mountains. In the place where the murmur of the forest and the chirping of the birds are eternal, and the man feels happy and free.