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Ukrainian Summer Solstice—*The Ivan Kupalo Festival*

By Lubow Wolynetz, Curator



Summer Solstice (Midsummer Night) celebration in Ukraine, known as *KUPALO* or *IVAN KUPALO*, dates back to the pre-Christian days and are among the most joyous, boisterous, and merry-making festivals, especially for the young people. Sometime after Ukraine accepted Christianity (988 A.D.), this ancient festival merged with the Feast of St. John (Ivan) the Baptist which falls on July 7th (Julian Calendar) or June 24th (Gregorian Calendar) and so received the name *IVAN KUPALO*.

In pre-Christian Ukrainian mythology, *Kupalo* was the god of youth, beauty, marriage, and fertility, for all living things. He was venerated at the time of the Summer Solstice as the giver and caretaker of gifts which both the natural and human world needed for their well-being. During the festival his effigy was made from a freshly-cut tree and decorated only by young maidens, with seed, herbs, flowers, multi-colored ribbons, wreaths, and lighted candles. Maidens carried the effigy through the village and out into the meadow and to

the river bank – accompanied by singing and dancing. At the end of the celebration, everyone broke off branches from the Kupalo tree and kept them in their home for protection against evil. They would later plant them in the garden for better crops the following year. Maidens even placed a branch under their pillows, hoping to get a glimpse in their dreams of the man they would marry.

It was believed that Midsummer Night was one of the most magical nights of the year. The various magical and medicinal herbs were at their most potent time. They were gathered by young girls to make love potions, by young mothers for bathing their infants to make them healthy and strong, and by village medicine women to make medicinal tonics and brews.

This was also the time when girls used all kinds of methods to foretell their future. One such ritual was the making of wreaths from fresh flowers and herbs, to which they attached lighted candles and let them float down river. The maidens divined their future from the way in which

the wreath glided, where it banked, how long the candle stayed lit, and if and what kind of young man caught it.

According to legend, at midnight of Midsummer Night the fern blooms. Anyone lucky enough to pluck this bloom would become very fortunate,

prosperous, would learn the secrets of nature, and so forth. But in order to get this bloom, a young man had to go deep into the forest, sit by a fern foliage on a ritual cloth, draw a circle around himself and the fern and then wait for midnight. But, nature does not want humans to know her secrets, and evil spirits do not want humans to be lucky; and so, when the flaming bloom appears and the young man stretches out his hand to pick take the flower, all kinds of spirits, sometimes dressed as fair maidens, appear and try to entice him out of his protective circle. Once the young man steps out of the circle, the magical bloom disappears.

Bonfires are lit by the river banks and young people sing specific *Kupalo* songs, dance around the bonfire; and when the flames of the bonfire subside, young people jump over the flames. This was a symbolic form of purification. Singing and dancing continues throughout the night until the early dew falls. The maidens gather the dew and wash their faces with it for beauty, good health and good

luck. During the festival an effigy of *Marena* – the goddess of rain, cold, storms, and winter – is also made. Maidens dance and sing around her, but at the end of the ritual they drown the effigy of *Marena* in the river or in a well. People believed that in venerating the goddess and then drowning her would appease her cold anger and slow down the coming of winter.

After the Summer Solstice, *Kupalo's* power begins to wane. He did his job, he brought about the good harvest, and now he can rest until springtime. On the other hand, the goddess *Marena's* powers begin to increase as the days become shorter, nights longer, and the warmth of the sun lessens.

Kupalo rituals encompass the veneration of nature, the ushering out of summer, the conjuring up of good luck for the future, the selection of marriage partners, and the purification by fire and water. People believed that the performance of these rituals would ensure good luck and protection against harm and adversity. ❖



Photographs illustrating this article were made in 1982 when *PLAST*– Ukrainian Scouting organization, held a Jubilee Jamboree celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of *PLAST*. It was held at the “*Vovcha Tropa*” campsite in East Chatham, NY. As part of the Jubilee program a showcase of achievements – both practical and artistic took place. *The Kupalo* ritual was performed as part of the program in which 500 *Plast* girls, from the United States and Canada participated. The program was prepared by the “*Ti shcho brebli rvut*” women’s *Plast* unit. This year also marks the 70th anniversary of the founding of the “*Vovcha Tropa*” Campsite.

For more information about *The Ukrainian Museum and Library of Stamford*, please, visit www.ukrainianmuseumlibrary.org, call 203-324-0499 or 203-323-8866. The Museum is open Wednesday through Friday from 1 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., or by appointment, and is located at: 161 Glenbrook Road, Stamford, CT 06902.

First Solemn Holy Communion 2023



HARTFORD, CT—SAINT MICHAEL

First row, left to right: Victoria Kuchanska, Diana Tereshkevych, Elizabeth Stetskiv, Emiliya Zborovskiy, Veronika Marchuk, Oleksandra Chubenko. Second row: Valeriy Geleta, Andrii Senkiw, Ihor Malashenko, Andrew Rudyk, David Gogacz, Danyil Zubarev. Pastor: Very Rev. Pawlo Martyniuk, Catechist: Iryna Bobriwnyk.



RIVERHEAD, NY—ST. JOHN, MAY 14, 2023
Marko Kaniuk, Denys Stetsyk, Rev. Bohdan Hedz.