

A TYPICAL WEDDING IN BANAT, SERBIA

This original account was obtained during a recent trip to Yugoslavia by Field Researchers Ethel Raim-Zinser and Martin Koenig. Translation by Dorothy Pribichevitch.

As late as the 1920's, the custom of using a marriage broker was preserved in Banat. The broker was usually a relative or close friend of the prospective bridegroom.

In the late fall, when the harvest was in, the broker called on the prospective bride's parents. Since the visit had been announced in advance, the girl's parents prepared a formal welcome for the broker, with plum brandy, a special flat bread, and cheese. They first discuss everyday topics, and tell jokes to establish a cordial atmosphere. Gradually the broker leads the conversation around to the bridegroom and his family, praises them, and announces the real purpose of his visit. At this time the girl is out of the room, although she has greeted the broker on his arrival, and helped serve the guests. Sometimes negotiations take place without the knowledge of the young couple, and often even against their will.

The broker's role is to arrange for a visit by the young man's parents to conclude agreement on the wedding-date, the amount of the bride's dowry, the number of witnesses, etc. When a day is set for this visit, there is general celebration, the girl is called in and told that she is engaged, and wished happiness. She expresses her gratitude by kissing her parents and kissing the broker's hand. The whole ceremony is accompanied by cries of "Good Luck!"

On the prearranged day, always early in the evening, the young man's parents call, without the

bridegroom. They are dressed in national costume. The host greets them at the gate with kisses and leads them into a festively decorated room. The girl is in another part of the house, also dressed in holiday clothes. Plum brandy is served, and conversation begins about work, daily events, and then gradually turns to the young couple. The bridegroom's parents describe their son as hardworking, honest and home-loving, emphasizing all his good points. At the same time, the girl's parents praise their daughter. Both parties usually exaggerate. Unobtrusively, they introduce the subject of the dowry.

The bride's father tells his friend how much land he will give his daughter, and there is usually some bargaining. The bridegroom's father haggles a bit, hoping to get more or better quality land, or land nearer the village. When agreement is reached, the girl's mother talks about her daughter's hope-chest and often produces some of the girl's needlework.

The next important moment comes when the bridegroom's father talks of his property, that is, the land, livestock, house and tools that will fall to his son. If the son is not an only child, the father announces how much he will transfer to his son upon his marriage and what he will leave him in his will. It sometimes happens that the girl's father is dissatisfied with the distribution of property, hoping to get the best possible situation for his future son-in-law. When they finally agree, the young man's father calls in his future daughter-in-law, kisses her, congratulates her and gives her an apple, while she kisses his hand. With the words "Long life, daughter," he takes money from his wallet and gives it to her. They then celebrate with singing, dancing, eating and drinking. Before departing the new friends arrange a date for the girl's parents to "see the bridegroom's house," and set the wedding-date.

The preparations for the wedding begin. The girl's parents impatiently await their visit to the young man's house. His parents prepare a welcome for the future in-laws: the house is painted, the yard is cleaned up, and the barns and stables put in order. An hour or two before lunch, on the set day, the girl's parents arrive in a cart, which is decorated for the occasion: the horse is adorned with large coverings and the cart has leather seats covered with rugs woven by the girl. A driver sits on the front seat dressed in holiday clothes and carrying a decorated whip, while the girl's parents, also formally dressed, sit on the back seat. It is the custom to turn the cart two or three times in a circle in front of the bridegroom's house. The driver then whips the horse to a gallop and enters the yard. Standing in the yard are the close relatives, a bagpiper, and the host. Brandy is served to the arriving guests, followed by greetings and kisses.

The guests are ushered into a gaily decorated room. After a gala lunch, with plenty to drink, the guests inspect the house, the stables, and the livestock. Neighbors eagerly watch to see whether the girl's parents who have come to "inspect the house" stay to lunch as this means that agreement on the marriage has been reached.

In the afternoon, the girl's parents are escorted home by their host. Eight days later the young man's parents, with the broker, visit the girl's parents and exchange gifts.

When all this has been completed both families begin the real preparations for the wedding.

A few days before the wedding the bridegroom's father sends his son's closest friend to invite the guests. This young man carries a stick on which he hangs a woven bag containing apples. He is called a "*Legijas*" (*Legiyash*). He goes first to the bride and formally invites her to the wedding and gives her an apple, while she in return gives him a towel which he hangs on his cane. The "*Legijas*" then goes to the

Kum, the chief witness and the best man to the wedding. They go to the bride's house, accompanied by the musicians. They usually go by cart fitted with leather seats and covered by rugs or if they cannot manage this, then the cart is filled with corn cobs covered by rugs. The horse is adorned with bells and kerchiefs. At the girl's house, they are greeted by the bride, her parents and close relatives. After the greetings, all of the witnesses, except bridegroom's parents, enter the house for plum brandy and cakes. Following the first toasts, the *Kum* is handed a censer containing live coals and incense. He says the Lord's Prayer. The bride and groom then say goodbye to the bride's parents and other relatives. The bride's brother (or another male relative) and the best man lead her to the cart. They are wearing shirts given by the bridegroom. At this point they sing "*Lepu Smilju izvedose*" (Lovely Smilja is being Led Out). All the witnesses, and the bride and groom, go to the Registry office of the bride's birthplace for the civil wedding. Then they go to the church. The bridegroom's guests enter his house, while the bride's guests go to her house for lunch.

The bride is welcomed by her husband's parents and gifts are exchanged. The mother-in-law ties an apron on the bride and gives her two loaves of bread and two jugs of wine. The bride cannot enter the house until she is given a baby boy by her mother-in-law to toss a little in the air three times. The bride has a shirt for the baby.

The bridal couple, the bridegroom's parents and all the witnesses enter the house where they are served much delicious food and drink. Musicians play throughout.

Around 10:00 p.m. the bride's relatives arrive, bringing bread which they break over the bride. All the young men and girls try to grab a piece of bread, which signifies that they will quickly marry. Supper is then served. Around midnight the wedding gifts are displayed. The gifts are usually described by one of the witnesses who acts as a kind of jester, permitted by the *Kum* to say whatever he likes to anybody. The laughing and joking lasts for hours. The bride dances a special wedding dance with anyone who will pay. Her partners usually pay well because everyone wants to show off. The celebrations continue until dawn when the bridegroom refuses to pay the bride so that she will no longer dance.

The bridegroom's father then lights a bonfire in the village street, and all the guests dance a "*kolo*" around the fire. The bridegroom's mother scatters feathers on all the witnesses, especially on the bride's guests. These guests are then escorted home, followed by the *Kum*, the chief witness, the best man.



Bride and bridegroom with close relatives. Photographed in 1908 in Banat.

"*Kum*" (who will also be godfather to the couple's children), to the other witnesses, the best man and the other guests. He gives each an apple, and everyone gives gifts in return.

On the eve of the wedding, usually held on Sunday, the bridegroom's young guests and the musicians go to the girl's house to bring her the wedding dress, veil, a wreath and shoes. They usually stay to supper and there is much gaiety and music. Around 10 p.m. they go to the bridegroom's house, and then to bed. Around 9:00 a.m. the next morning, friends of the bridegroom go to escort the