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Bulgarian Martenitsi Bring Hope for Spring

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Though Illinois Wesleyan University’s campus may not yet be covered in budding trees and flocking birds, students who are aware of the Bulgarian tradition of the martenitsa will be ready to embrace these signs of spring.

The martenitsa is a small piece of adornment made from yarn that is worn starting on March 1. This day marks the Bulgarian holiday Baba Marta, which means Grandmother March, and celebrates the beginning of the end of winter. Friends tie martenitsi to each others’ wrists while making wishes. Wearing it brings the hope that winter will pass quickly and that removing it will bring health and good luck. These martenitsi are red and white to symbolize blood and purity, which combined, mean health. They are worn until the first time an individual sees a stork, swallow or budding tree. When any of these symbols of spring are spotted, the owner of the martenitsa either ties it to the tree that they saw in bloom or puts the martenitsa under a stone in the area they saw the forementioned bird. This is symbolic of passing one’s own luck onto the surrounding nature.

Seniors Stefan Stoev and Teddy Petrova are both senior economics and finance double majors from Bulgaria; Stoev is from Plovdiv while Petrova is from Silistra. These Illinois Wesleyan students celebrate the coming of spring by bringing martenitsi to the campus.

“Martinitza can be many variations of the red and white strings. Traditionally they are worn pinned to clothing. However, many students pin them to backpacks and the most popular fashion among youth is to tie it on their wrists. At the end of the day, especially if you are at school, you may have 30 or so tied on your arm,” said Stoev.

“Martenitsi are always given as gifts. People never buy martenitsi for themselves. They are given to loved ones, friends, and people whom one feels close to,” said Petrova “In Bulgaria, two weeks before the holiday, everyone is selling martenitsi. It’s not about having the biggest one, but about the most unique. It has become an industry because of the tradition but martenitsi can be home-made too.”

Last year, Stoev’s grandmother in Bulgaria sent him more than a hundred martenitsi that he has been sharing with friends. The martenitsi have been a way of being at home away from home.

Martenitsi are available in the International Office for anyone interested in picking one up.

For additional information, contact Reenie Bradley at (309) 556-3190.

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