

Work in progress, no citation!

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Celebrating the spirit of urbanity and tolerance:

The Jevremova Street – Street of Meetings Event

The event I intend to describe belongs to a sort of *invented tradition*. Although the festival is held on Palm Sunday, the content of this public event is secular, and it was established three years ago by the administration of the central Belgrade municipality of Stari Grad.

Like other rituals, this one is also understood as representational and at the same time didactic, fulfilling several important functions: 1) latent political intention of the municipal administration to represent themselves in a good light as caring for fellow citizens and tradition; 2) presentation of cultural and professional content characteristic of this local area, with the intention of strengthening its importance and visibility in everyday public life; 3) to stimulate, through entertainment, companionship, a sense of community and belonging to this part of the city as a carrier of specific cultural identity.

So, the very name of this public event explains its aim and purpose: *Jevremova Street – Street of Meetings*.

The discourse of *meetings* can be interpreted in manifold ways. First, it is a meeting of residents among themselves, second, with representatives of the municipality administration as well as with important individuals and institutions that belong to Jevremova Street and its neighbourhood, and are part of the specific cultural and social milieu. It is, also, a meeting with history, which gives purpose and meaning to this manifestation.

Precisely in the historical and cultural context of this area, the *concept of meetings* comes to light. The goal of this happening is to impact on awareness, memories and the urban spirit of tolerance towards the different and Others. In the past, for several centuries, this oldest part of the city was the hub of Belgrade's civic life, and was also multiethnic and multiconfessional – side by side there lived and worked Serbs, Greeks and

Tzintzars as representatives of the Christian Orthodox population, along with other members of some European nations who lived, temporarily or permanently, in Belgrade, such as Muslim Turks and Sephardic Jews. The multicultural spirit of the Balkans was reflected in the languages, customs, costumes, cuisines, shops and taverns, and in neighboring temples – the church, the mosque and the synagogue.

Though this central city municipality is now called „Old Town“, the area around Jevremova Street bears a Turkish name to this day– „Dört yol“ (pronounced „Dorcol“) – which means approximately „Intersection of Four Roads“.

The character of this part of the city changed, however, during the second half of the XIX and in the XX century. Former ethnic diversity gave way to, for the most part, ethnic uniformity. Still, it is on Jevremova Street that the only remaining mosque from the Ottoman period, built in the seventeenth century, is located, as well as the Jewish Museum and the building of the Jewish religious community, while the synagogues were destroyed during the German bombing in World War II.

In addition, in this area are situated some of the oldest and most important Serbian cultural and educational institutions, established in Serbia after the liberation from Ottoman rule in the early nineteenth century.

So, as we can see, this event intervenes in the culture of remembrance, since it „revives“ a historical tradition through performance on the narrative stage, but not in fact in reality, which is now radically changed. However, invoking such history, it has an effect on the civic spirit of tolerance and good neighborly relations among residents of different ethnic backgrounds and religions.

The celebration begins with an early morning rite at the main Belgrade church not far from Jevremova Street. Then it continues with the Mayor and her guests walking through this neighborhood and Jevremova Street itself. After the official opening of the program, in the next few hours different segments of the celebration simultaneously take place along Jevremova Street.

The concept of the event is interesting. The linear space of the street is treated as a phrase of "the story of Dorcol", and is transformed into an intersection of different segments of time and of the cultural, confessional, ethnic and professional identities and practices that used to exist or are present to this day in the life of the street and the entire neighborhood. Various scenes and events that are something like "images from a mobile exhibition" simultaneously take place:

a) from different historical periods, e.g. the Renaissance music ensemble, wearing medieval costumes and playing medieval music, walk along the street, while at the other end of the street a rock concert takes place; some participants of the performance are dressed in nineteenth-century town costumes, and among them are young men and women dressed in peasant folk costumes, while old-timers from the Automobile Museum drive along the street, etc.

b) the participation of members of various confessional and ethnic groups; thus outside the mosque are offered food and artifacts specific to Islamic culture, the Jewish Community Choir perform their program, and the same is happening in front of the embassy of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;

c) different professional and social groups perform their parts - children from nearby schools sing, dance, play, draw on the street or sell their handicrafts; museums and galleries in the area open their doors to visitors with free admission to the exhibitions; artists exhibit their work and put on appropriate conceptual performances; memories of writers, actors and other public figures who have lived in this part of the city are revived; the staff of the local health care center measure the blood pressure of citizens free of charge, and provide guidance on health and healthy eating; clowns and jugglers entertain audiences, and so on.

d) at several points different foods and drinks are advertised, etc.

The whole celebration takes on the character of a carnival, where the audience is not a passive observer but an interactive participant in street fairs, contributing to a vibrant communication that takes place throughout the event.

It is clear enough that the *Jevremova Street / Street of Meetings* event has an evaluative and ideological character. On the one hand, the absence of cultural and social themes from the socialist Yugoslav period is noticeable, as well as a careful avoidance of any signs of former conflicts and hostilities which inevitably arose during certain historical periods when civic tolerance gave way to inter-ethnic and inter-confessional conflicts and differences. On the other hand, the event underlines those cultural values that could be characterized as the urban sensibility of civic society, leveling different experiences in the spirit of mutual tolerance. This idealized image of coexistence that feeds, in Belgrade, the well known "myth of Dorcol" as a quite distinctive part of the city, was constructed with the undisguised intention to revive the spirit and allow its representation through this festival.