

The Legend of Babouschka

By Ruth Ker

Author's Note

From 1995 to 1997, I traveled to Russia several times, visiting different areas of that vast country and offering courses on Waldorf Early Childhood education. It was a new experience for me to be in a country where the original archetypal stories and the local handwork were still being practiced. Reports from colleagues who are continuing these visits to Russia tell me that this may be quickly changing, so I want to share with you one of the treasures which came my way during my journeys there.

It is the story of Babouschka, and the setting for the story is imagined by the Russian people that I met to be in the northern part of the country. Although I did visit Norilsk, (a city north of the Arctic Circle which experiences polar night, 45 days of total darkness), the translation of this story came from a young university student living in Rostov, a city situated on the Don River near the Sea of Azov. There I met a small group of educators and medical practitioners who were studying Anthroposophy in English, French, German, and Russian. These devoted and hardworking individuals were trying to start a Waldorf kindergarten and incorporate some of the Weleda remedies and ideas into their medical practices.

It was telling this story of Babouschka at Epiphany one year in the presence of the intent shining faces of kindergarten children that gave me a deeper understanding of this story. I have only changed a few words from the original translation. I hope that you also find this story of benefit to your work. Accompanied with a Babouschka circle, there can be a wellspring created for the "kings" in your mixed-age groups.

Babouschka lived in a little cabin in the coldest corner of a cold and frosty land. Her tiny little house was sitting right in the place where four roads came together. When Father Frost (King Winter) was in the land, then Brother Wind howled at her windows and piles of deep snow piled around her house and hardly anyone ever came to visit her or passed by on those nearby roads. Babouschka's heart yearned for the warmth of summer, the fragrance of the flowers, and the song of the birds, and for her friends.

One year Babouschka decided to prepare a party for her friends. "Then I won't be lonely", she thought. "I will invite all of my friends. I will cook and clean and clear a path to my door through the snow!" Babouschka set to work. She swept her floor and dusted her shelves and washed her whole house. Then she began to cook the most delicious things—her good bread and cookies and cakes—and she also went to her storeroom and brought potatoes and apples and jars of cabbage and tomatoes to her kitchen.

As the day of the party drew closer, Babouschka began to clear the snow away and make a path to her house. When she was outside, she thought she could hear in the far off distance the tinkling of bells. "Oh dear, she thought, my guests must be arriving early. I still have much work to do. I'm not ready. I must hurry!" So Babouschka quickly went inside and began to set the table for her party.

She was just putting the plates on the table when the first knock happened. Babouschka went to her door and opened it, but the person standing there was someone she did not know. Babouschka was surprised to see that he was wearing a magnificent crown, and he bent his head to her and said, "Babouschka, we are following a wondrous star in the sky. A special baby is soon to be born. We think He will be a king and that that shining star will lead us to Him. Come with us Babouschka, and you too can see the newborn king." Babouschka looked past the king and she saw two more kings sitting on camels. She could hear the camel bells ringing as the large beasts stomped their feet. But Babouschka thought of all her friends who were coming, and she said, "I will go with you later but now I have to get ready for my party." The king sadly turned and left, and Babouschka closed the door behind him.

"Now I must take my bread out of the oven and put the candles on the table," thought Babouschka. That is when the second knock happened. Babouschka once again opened the door and

peered into the darkness. She thought she could hear the voices of her friends in the distance, but in front of her out of the darkness appeared another king. His clothes were from a country far away from Babouschka's land, and she thought she could see the light of that star the other king had mentioned shining in his face. Sweet smelling wisps of smoke floated around the king as he waved a golden censer. He too asked Babouschka to go with him to see the newborn king. Babouschka felt a great stirring in her heart, and she longed to go with the kings, but she looked around her, saw the warm candles of her house, smelled the fresh bread, and said, "I will go another day but I'm too busy preparing for my party now."

Babouschka closed the door once again and became very busy sweeping the last bit of her floor.

Then she heard the third knock. "My friends are finally here," she thought. Babouschka ran to the door and threw it open and was surprised to see yet another king. He was young and Babouschka liked him instantly. His smile was a wise one for his young years, and when he too asked Babouschka to come and follow the star, she knew she wanted to go very much. "Stay with me tonight and come to my party," she said. "Then I will go with you tomorrow to see this wonderful king." But the wise king sadly shook his head and said, "We must follow the star. You have many things to offer this newborn king, Babouschka. Bring them with you and come with us too." But Babouschka shook her head. She could see that her friends were arriving. As she welcomed them, her gaze followed the Kings as they mounted their camels and set off on a path toward that great star that filled the whole night with light.

Babouschka had a wonderful party with her friends. They ate the good bread and most of the food, and they danced and they sang.

But when her friends went home the next day, Babouschka thought about those kings and that Baby, and a terrible yearning began to happen. Babouschka quickly gathered up some presents and some of the food leftover from her party, and she set out to follow the path of the wise kings. The footprints of the camels were all covered over with snow, but Babouschka trudged onward looking for that great star. She did not find that star or the Baby, so Babouschka gave her presents to a poor family that also had a newborn baby.

Babouschka returned home, but all the rest of that long cold winter and even when the warm time came, Babouschka prepared to go with the Kings when they visited her again the next year. Babouschka waited for the kings the next winter, but they did not come. So she set out on her own taking gifts that she had prepared the whole year before. She searched and searched, and again she did not find the Star Child, but she noticed how the children she did find loved the gifts that she brought.

Again Babouschka went home, and she followed the longing that was growing in her heart to find that Child of Light. So it came to pass that with every returning year, Babouschka set out to find that Child the three kings had told her about. Each year, she prepared something for Him, and each year she gave her gifts to children who smiled and delighted at her presents. Babouschka grew to love the children greatly.

One Christmas, Babouschka had hardly anything left in her house to give. She was old now and had given much to many children and their parents. She had found an old toy and was busy polishing it when she heard a soft cry outside her door. "That sounds like a baby," she thought. "Who would leave a child outside on a cold night like this?"

Babouschka quickly went to her door and opened it. She looked out into the cold dark night and there, on her doorstep, she saw a basket. In it was a shining Baby, and when He saw the polished toy in Babouschka's hands, He held up his little hands and cooed with delight. Babouschka's heart filled with joy. Then she looked up and saw that there, standing around the Child, was an adoring mother

and father, and behind them were the three kings who had come to her door on that night long ago, and around them were all the children and parents whose hearts Babouschka had lightened. They had all come to Babouschka's hearth. . . and then, Babouschka knew that nothing had been wasted. She knew that all of her efforts to find the Child of Light had been worthwhile. Her heart was full of love.

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