

## Karl Malden's American Dream



Standing from left are Dr. Predrag Petrovic, Fr. Rajko Kotic, Dr. Aleksandar Petrov; seated are SNF President Dane A. Medich and Milana "Mim" Karlo Bizic.

by Milos Rastovic

PITTSBURGH - The Serb National Federation in cooperation with the Yugoslav Room Committee of the Nationality Rooms at the University of Pittsburgh sponsored "Karl Malden's American Dream" in the English Nationality Room in the Cathedral of Learning on December 5, 2019. The lecture was delivered by Dr. Predrag Petrovic, Professor at University of Belgrade, Serbia.

SNF President Dane A. Medich spoke about the mission of the SNF and Milos Rastovic, Cultural Outreach Coordinator, warmly welcomed everyone and presented Dr. Petrovic as guest speaker. He is a Professor of Serbian Literature of the Twentieth Century at the Philology Faculty, University of Belgrade; a member of the Council of the International Slavic Centre in Belgrade; a contributor to the Cultural Department of the Radio Television of Serbia as well as a member of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies in the United States of America. He has published several books and a great number of academic papers.

Dr. Petrovic described the life and deeds of Karl Malden (1912 – 2009), one of the most prominent Serbian-American actors in the United States of America. These are some excerpts of his lecture:

"We could begin our story about this exceptional man and actor by remembering February 22nd, 2004. This is when the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences presented the Lifetime Achievement Award to Karl Malden. The award was presented by Michael Douglas, his partner in the television series *The Streets of San Francisco*. On that occasion, Malden said something he emphasized many times before: 'I am very proud of my Serbian heritage. I am happy to have been born in a Serbian home, to have been baptized in a Serbian church, proud to be attending services there, proud to be singing in the Serbian choir. I have been delighted to carry it my whole life.' It was precisely this pride in his Serbian heritage that inspired Karl Malden to write memoirs, together with his daughter Carla, named *When do I start?* published in New York in 1998. In this book, Malden describes his childhood and adolescence in the Serbian immigrant community in Chicago and later, a successful movie career in which he partnered up with some of the greatest American actors, from Marlon Brando to Michael Douglas.

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"Karl Malden was born in Chicago in 1912. He was baptized as Mladen Djordje Sekulovic because Saint George was the saint-patron of the family who originated from Herzegovina. Of course, this was a long name for an American. The syllable "ml" does not even exist in the English language, which also makes it difficult to pronounce. At the beginning of the school year, when the teacher would call out students and arrive at the name of Mladen Sekulovic, a pause would follow. After some time, Mladen understood what the pause meant and would interrupt it by saying "That's me." When he was twenty-five years old, Mladen Sekulovic changed his name to Karl Malden, at the suggestion of the famous movie director Elia Kazan. He changed the place of the letters L and A in his name and turned from a Malden into a Malden. Here is what he wrote about that in his memoirs: 'Accepting to change my name made me feel

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## SHINING THE LIGHT: ST. GEORGE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

by Colleen Nelson  
GreeneScene Community Magazine

*Ed Note: We discovered this wonderful story and more written by Colleen Nelson when Father Rodney Torbic sent us a link to GreeneScene Magazine's Holiday 2019 issue. In acquiring permission to reprint, we exchanged several emails with the writer who shared some of her thoughts and impressions as she sent along the pictures and text. "History is too important to forget. America was and is made great by the hard work it takes to earn - and fight for - a good life for ourselves and our children. Those who worked in the coalfields and died so that others might be safer are worth remembering," she said. Log on to www.Greenesaver.com to see the original publication of this story in GreeneScene Community Magazine and read all three of Colleen's Serbian stories in their entirety, as published in the magazine's Christmas issue on December 9, 2019; they are "I Love this Place - Serbian Christmas" and "GreeneScene of the Past: Serbiantown." - str.*

"Jolly old Saint Nicolas lean your ear this way..." Sooner or later, as the holy days approach, my radio head will tune in that song and memories of grade school sing-alongs will morph into the scrunchy joy of opening presents on Christmas morning. As a kid, I could tell Saint Nicolas wasn't a right jolly old elf dressed up by advertisers to sell dolls, bicycles and toy trains to parents who had kids like me. I'd seen Saint Nick on a few holiday cards - he looked like he did some serious hiking and his beard looked pretty real. Sometimes he even had a staff and carried green branches. Hmmm! I knew Santa wasn't real. But this guy?

In writing this story about Christianity's ancient roots, I am thrilled to run into Saint Nicolas again, this time in his proper historical niche - 4th century AD - as guardian of children, families, the infirm, the outcast, the sailor and yes! a giver of gifts. And later, I learn, a miraculous protector of faithful miners not once but twice, in 1907.

Saint George Orthodox Serbian Church

sits in a broad field along Old Route 21, with a drone's eye view of Hatfield Power Plant to the left, a cemetery consecrating a field that stretches to the tree line on the right and a woodsy view of the Monongahela River.

The church's patron saint, St. George, earned his spiritual spurs as a Roman officer beheaded in AD 303 for not renouncing his faith. He seems to be a good match for those I meet today who have persevered in a new land and not lost the faith they brought with them.

This is the only Orthodox Church, Serbian or otherwise in Greene County. Church board president Stan Brozik, owner of Dolfis Restaurant in Mason-town, tells me some of its history as we linger over coffee with Father Saša (pronounced Sasha) Nedic and others in the basement after services. My senses are still charged with the energy of the beautiful call and response between Father Saša and the choir hidden in the



"Father Rodney (Torbic) shows how he lights up the face of anyone who gets near him," said Colleen Nelson. Father Rodney, former pastor at St. George, is pictured here with musician Paul Milanovich.

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# Karl Malden's American Dream

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tremendous guilt. I spent the majority of my movie and television career trying to alleviate that guilt. This is the reason why I put the surname Sekulovic wherever I could, in the movies and series where I had parts.

"Malden's father Petar Sekulovic was born in the vicinity of Bileca, in Herzegovina. He moved to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, as did many of his compatriots from that era. From New York, he arrived in Chicago where he started working in a carpenter's workshop. Soon afterward he moved to the City of Gary, thirty miles from Chicago, on the shores of Lake Michigan (in Indiana). Petar got a job in a steel mill. The Serbian community was mainly concentrated around Connecticut Street and they mainly worked in steel mills. This was perhaps not the American dream, but for many people, it was an American way of living which paves the way to the American dream. In his memoirs, Karl Malden describes the life of the Serbian community in Gary during the second and third decades of the past century. The Serbs put effort into saving their customs, the Orthodox faith, and the language. Petar Sekulovic always said: 'He who is born into a Serbian house and who does not care about being a good Serb will not be a good American either'. Petar Sekulovic founded the first Serbian choir in the United States – the Choir 'Branko Radicevic' as well as a Serbian gymnastics club named Soko which regularly organized events and parties. It was thanks to his father that the boy Mladen Sekulovic came to love the theatre. In the Orthodox Church, Petar sometimes organized events with a mandatory short theatre play inspired by Serbian epic poems. Even in his later years, Karl Malden reminisced about these plays and described them in his memoirs: 'Those plays would, without exception, be about some evil Turk who annoys the Serbs. I played the Serbian hero who lifts his sword and shouts: Go! Then the whole army – consisted of two or three skinny boys, would start attacking the Turks. Well, that was the beginning of my theatre career. Despite the shows being modest, the audience loved them because it reminded them of their home and origins. It was a part of their history and national identity' – says Malden in his memoirs. An important part of his upbringing was also singing in the 'Karadjordje' Choir, performing regularly in Chicago and the surrounding areas. The choir sang Serbian national songs and played an important role in the boy's developing love for music and stage performance.

"In high school, he became a member of the drama section and the basketball team. Even though he was a good basketball player, he knew the theatre was his biggest passion. However, after graduating from high school, Mladen had to find a job. He found one in the steel mill, where he worked a painstaking job at a plant that made wheels for trams and trains. He spent the following three years saving up and, having had collected \$340, he decided to go where his passion for acting was leading

him. On a September morning in 1934, he arrived at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. (There) he got his first serious roles in school plays. He had the chance to act in smaller parts in Shakespeare's and Ibsen's plays, as well as in Tolstoy's play *The Light Shines in the Darkness*. In this theatre, he met his future wife, Mona. After having graduated in acting, Mladen returned to Gary. He worked as a milkman for a full year there, having had no acting roles. But things changed in October 1937 when he received an invitation to visit New York. He had a role in a Broadway play, but only for a short while since the play was not on for very long.

"After the success of the theatre play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Elia Kazan directed a movie with the same name in 1951. Malden and Marlon Brando kept their roles, while Jessica Tandy was replaced as Blanche by Vivien Leigh. Malden got an Oscar for his performance as Mitch in the category *Best Supporting Actor*. In the early 1950s, American Academy Awards were not as big a deal as they are today. The awards ceremony was not as glamorous, and there was no live television broadcast of the event either. In his memoirs, Malden tells an amusing story from the awards ceremony. Before going on stage to receive his Oscar, Malden had asked Humphrey Bogart, who sat next to him, to keep his coat for him. After receiving the award, he went backstage to respond to the journalists' questions. He was quickly joined by Bogart, who had won an Oscar for Best main performance in the motion picture *The African Queen*. Malden asked him: 'What have you done with my coat?' Bogart then looked at him, smiled and said 'Who cares about the coat, man, you won an Oscar!'

"As Malden calls it in his memoirs, popularity according to American standards, would come to him after his role of Lt. Michael Stone in the television series *The Streets of San Francisco*, filmed between 1972 and 1977. Malden loved San Francisco because of a deeply personal reason. When his father Petar Sekulovic arrived at Ellis Island, the United States in 1906, he desired to go to San Francisco. The brother of one of his friends was already stationed there and worked as a server. But fate had something different in mind for him. Petar arrived in America on the very day a great earthquake occurred in San Francisco, on April 18, 1906. Immigrant workers had explained that he couldn't continue his journey as the city was now in ruins. Petar thus decided to leave for Chicago, a city the majority of Balkan immigrants went to. Karl Malden loved San Francisco because of that – it was the very city his father never saw. Exactly at the time of filming *The Streets of San Francisco*, Petar Sekulovic had died. Malden visited his father on his deathbed in Gary. Petar then told him: 'You see, for many, you are Karl Malden. But for me, you are a Sekulovic. And the Sekulovics were destined to live in San Francisco. That one was – you.'"

"In the late 1980s, Malden was elected president of the American Academy of

Motion Pictures. Karl Malden's film career lasted for sixty years. Karl Malden – Mladen Djordje Sekulovic – died on July 1, 2009 in his Los Angeles home, aged 97. He owes his longevity to his mother, who died at 102 years of age. He left behind his wife Mona, two daughters, three grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. Mona Malden passed away in July 2019.

"The legacy of Karl Malden is preserved in the Yugoslav Movie Archive in Belgrade. Some of his items can be found here, as well as costumes worn by him on set. The collection also houses letters received by Malden from Marlon Brando, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and George Bush, Sr. The hat he wore as Michael Stone in the series *The Streets of San Francisco* is also there. A monument inspired by Malden's role in this series stands in front of the building of the Yugoslavian Movie Archive.

"Karl Malden's life and career were the American dreams come true. A poor immigrant boy from a community on the outskirts of Chicago, he became a great actor and outstanding artist. And just as Malden himself would be proud of his Serbian ancestry, today the Serbs are proud of this extraordinary man. Dan Tana, Malden's friend, rightly said: 'For the world of acting, Mladen was what Nikola Tesla is to science and what Novak Djokovic is to tennis.'"

After the lecture, Dane Medich, President of the SNF, and Deborah Studen-Pavlovich, Chair of the Yugoslav Nationality Room Committee at the University of Pittsburgh, made presentations to and thanked Dr. Petrovic. It was an great joy to learn something new about one of the greatest Serbian-American actors of all time.



Deborah Studen-Pavlovich, Chair of the Yugoslav Room Committee of the Nationality Rooms, presents a gift to Dr. Petrovic



Dr. Predrag Petrovic, Guest Speaker



Dane A. Medich, President of the SNF, presented the book *Serb National Federation Firs 100 Years* to Dr. Predrag Petrovic



Karl Malden Monument in front of the Yugoslav Movie Archive in Belgrade



The audience in the English Nationality Room, University of Pittsburgh