

POVESTEA LACULUI DIMBOVITA

The Story of Lake Dimbovitsa

[The Wonderlanders]

FROM: **Poems and Tales from Romania**,
by Simona Sumanaru and Michael Hart
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These poems and stories were originally composed in Romania, and will be presented in both English and Romanian. . .though many of them were originally written in each language. This is the English version.

This is a story whose roots are lost deep in the recesses of time, before such stories were actually written down, but rather passed, a generation at a time, sometimes even skipping entire generations that either were not interested, or who merely forgot, as time was quite different in those days, generations were shorter, and lives were shorter, too: as a person approaching middle age today would be said, at the same age back then, to have already led a complete and total lifespan, as likely as not with both grand-children, AND great-grandchildren.

Thus you can see that this story is populated by very young people . . .and such people do not often leave much of a mark on society, other than in stories. . such as The Little Boy At The Dike, such as The Boy Who Cried Wolf [which may or may not be true] and other such stories of this nature.

But this story centers around a girl, and not a girl who has magic inflicted upon her, as in The Red Shoes, but a girl who rather has inflicted her magic upon society, and then chooses preservation of self or preservation of society, when her magic proves very strong . . .very strong, indeed. . .only it may not have been magic. . .

This story takes place in Europe, before Columbus, but not so long before. . .and it may be the reason that ice-skating is dated back to the time it is. . . .

This is also the ballet, Les Patinagees, from the same story, with various changes, as is usually the case with ballets.

This is not solely a side-comment as this kind of artistic licence . . .as it were. . .is the true subject of our story.

Whether Lake Dimbovitsa is really named after the main character--or vice versa--has been argued by historians, inteligensia and the literati of generations. . .I'm not taking sides. . . .

Dimbovitsa was a lovely girl, in an neighborhood of where the girls were usually lovely. . .and she was no exception. . .at least for a decade or so. . .but then came a series of long winters. . .not the harsh kind that fill us with cold and fear of winter, but just long . . .starting with some early freezes in October, nothing that kept the crops from being harvested or brought to market, in fact a good many said those years produced some of the finest fall crops of all time. . .and the most beautiful fall colours.

These winters also held on an extra month before letting go into an awe-inspiring set of springs, as well. The ice not melting from an assortment of shaded ponds until well into May. . .but again. . .it was not enough to keep the fields from being plowed and planted and the Springs of that decade also must admittedly go down as a lovely addition to the nicest and most beautiful springs of all history.

The summers, though perhaps a bit shorter, were also lacking in the heat and dust that make summers sometimes unbearable, and. . .as it happened, all in all, hese were among the finest years ever.

But our story is a Wintertime story, not of harsh storms and snows, but mostly of ice. . .and of ice. . .skating. . . .

As Dimbovitsa and her generation grew up, they skated more than had and generation before, and possible since. The skated at least the half of the year. . .skating in October, November, December, and in January, February, March, April and some still in May.

Thus, skating became a part of their lives in a manner that had not happened before. . .and it made a difference. . . .

Dimbovitsa and her generation started skating earlier in life, more during each year, and within a few short years had become very much the best skaters anyone had ever seen.

A new art-form was being born. . . .

Dimbovitsa and her friends, and others for miles around, were being hailed as true artists, and Winter Carnivals or Winter Festivals of her era were something as had never been seen before. . .and SO was the skating.

The difference made in a good Winter of skating and a bad Winter of skating back in those days was just enormous. In some Winters your skating just barely got started before it was already over. . .with freezes that were too quick or too short. . .and there was never an area of good ice for a long time to practice on.

The difference now was totally amazing. . . .

Kids who started skating in the first year of this decade were much better than anyone could ever recall. . .and after a few years more . . .they were truly heavenly, or magical, depending on the viewer.

Each year their parts in the Winter Carnivals and Festivals grew to become more eagerly anticipated. . .and became larger portions of a new and already growing series of such events.

Those skaters who were particularly proficient were invited to some other such events nearby, and the truly great might spend nearly an entire week travelling

from one such even to the next as popularity and fame grew. . .along with the prizes, accommodations and general treatment of such wondrous beings.

Want a "Poster Child" for skating?

Just go back and pick one of these. . . .

Dimbovitsa and the other skaters were very much the center of event after event. . .and after a year or two were, for over half of each year, the center of attention for the entire region.

Skaters from other regions nearby heard of this marvelous weather--and soon a migration was on--but the natives had had a head start--and were more at home, more comfortable, and thus were skating more and better than everyone else.

People began taking their lunches with them, out to the places such skaters would practice, and eventually quite a crowd would show up, complete with vendors so that you didn't even have to bring a lunch . . .you could be sure to find something there. The vendors had so much business, and were so thankful for it, that they could feed on the skaters, so to speak, that they fed the skaters for free. . .in return. . .and were glad of the opportunity.

So for a few more years things continued to grow at this rate. . .a rate that would have been totally impossible under other conditions . . .in other times. . .or other places.

The vendors, to insure that the skaters would come practice, made a sincere effort to keep the ice clear, and eventually even clean, as they began to bring water to cover or replace the rough spots.

Some particularly far-sighted vendors took the skaters on tours, to see all the lakes and ponds they could find, and once in a while to set up a new practice area that had the right combination of things for skating, viewing, and travel, to attract everyone to come.

Thus there were now more places to practice, and thus more time, as not all the skaters went to the same place any more, and the trends of incredible growth in ice-skating continued.

However, as they say, all good things must come to an end, and this time it was for all the right reasons, though it didn't work out in quite the way anyone expected. . . .

For some, the economy, you could say, was booming. . .for the other part of the population, you could say they were losing control, and not many people like losing control, once they have it, whether, or not, they really should have it now.

Thus came the beginning of the end.

The vendors wanted control, after all, they had built the places to do much of the skating, and had a right to know if they should plan on enough business to keep things going. Thus, they wanted to know who was going to be skating, when, and so on, so they could prepare for coming days.

The parents of the skaters wanted control, because even though most of the skaters who were passing the age of 10 when all this began--were, through no fault of their own--now at the age when most would be moving away from home. Even though nearly all the skaters would always give virtually all their prize winnings to their parents all of the time, the parents, as parents are wont, wanted to plan ahead . . .just as did the vendors.

And so did the mayors and burghers of the various towns, where most of the Winter Festivals and Carnivals were held, and so did persons who ran the Winter Festivals and Carnivals. . .etc., etc., etc.

Except for the skaters. . . .

They just wanted to skate. . . .

Of course, there were SOME who desperately wanted the prizes, and a few of THOSE want ONLY the first place prizes, but most all of such skaters as these mostly want to skate, and it doesn't really matter as much to them that they win, as that they skate the way they want . . .and whether or not the judges agreed, was a different thing.

So. . .as more and more "control" was placed on these events, and a few of the original skaters got married, had kids or moved away for for other reasons. . .there were also few less of those originals--the ones everyone KNEW would draw a big crowd, either for practice, or for one of the Winter Festivals and Carnivals.

Which led to an even greater attempt to control them. . . .

Which led to a few more of them leaving for various reasons. . . .

Which led to an even greater attempt to control them. . . .

and you can see how that kind of thing might lead to. . . .

Some of the skaters eventually went back to practicing in locations of their own choosing. . .places that were either not suited to the vendors purposes or for other reasons not generally used.

They would skate in the moonlight at night, or bring candles to set on the ice, and would skate around them like faeries in the forest.

All in all, it was some of the most beautiful skating of all time--and anyone today would undoubtedly consider themselves blessed if a chance to see anything like it came along. This was simply a group of artistic persons, freed from the pressures of society, presented with an extraordinary opportunity in their chosen field. . .skating more for themselves than for each other. . .more as team than as in a competition. . .just them. . .mostly for themselves. . .and a few friends who

might come to tend the lights and ice, bring food. . .a group of friends. . .doing what they like to do best. . .alone.

And as they grew apart from the rest of the now crowded arenas, the friends felt less pressure not to make mistakes, a more comfortable atmosphere in general, so they tried more and more things they were less likely to try in front of everyone, and, thus, yet another one of the great leaps in skating began.

With this kind of unrestricted opportunity the skaters blossomed in all directions, inventing new leaps, jumps, spins and positions, in ways they only the truly artistically expressive can do.

When the time came for that year's Winter Festivals and Carnivals--virtually every prize was won by one of the "Winter Wonderlanders," as they had come to be known that year. . .those for whom a skating life was a joy. . .not work. . .those who wanted to skate more than they wanted the prizes or recognition.

That year the other skaters were of course affected by such changes . . .some in one way. . .some in others.

Some asked to be allowed to practice with the Winter Wonderlanders, and most of them were welcome. A few just wanted in on the secrets of the Wonderlanders, to enhance their own competitive position, so were not so welcome. However, the Wonderlanders were willing to do what they could to find nearly anyone a place to practice, and they appreciated anyone who wanted to practice. . .but sometimes it was, and still is, the motivation that makes the difference.

Most anyone could come watch the Wonderlanders skate, just follow a few of them and you would eventually end up where they were going.

And since they weren't very competitive, they didn't actively chase away those who wanted to see what they were trying to accomplish.

Thus came yet another period of huge growth in skating as new moves were catapulted onto the scene every year, sometimes every month as progress begets progress, and the Wonderlanders skated for the love of skating. . .and were willing to share with everyone.

But those who wanted control continued to want control yet the more . . .as more and more prizes, money and fame were made available.

Vendors couldn't make money on practice sessions they couldn't find . . .and parents pretended they didn't want their kids going off in the woods to skate all night alone. . .when it was JUST THAT that a parent owed it all to. . .for that was what had created this, which they were now all trying to control.

So the Wonderlanders found a few places no one would ever find, and practiced in public enough to satisfy the vendors and parents.

Thus they continued to practice night and day both in public and in private. . .and thus continued their growth.

But eventually there was just too much money involved, and practice sessions were too profitable, so the parents and vendors both alike tried even harder to control when and where practices were held.

The Wonderlanders were forced to make a decision. . . .

Do we skate for them. . .or for us. . . ?

They tried out several possible solutions.

They spent a week skating only in public.

Doing exactly what everyone told them to do.

It was a pretty boring week, and not much happened, other than that the parents and vendors had very little to complain about since the vast majority of them really didn't know enough about skating; they could not possibly have noticed the difference between inspirations and perspirations.

Then they spent a week skating only in private.

No one saw them. . .at all.

They did not even come back for the weekend events.

The week was not boring. . .neither for the Wonderlanders nor for a new set of prize winners. . .nor for the parents and vendors. . .an already nervous breed. . .now considering their own extinction.

The Wonderlanders didn't really care about the prizes all that much and this way they all got to actually skate more than they could in the various competitions, where they actually only skated just very little, when it came down to it. . .a little warming up. . .a short skate. . .and a longer skate. . .perhaps totalling 10 minutes, then maybe something at the end, maybe not.

Not much skating.

As for the prizes. . .each of them had more prizes than they really could ever hope to wear or display. . .most of the time a box under the bed held them all. . .not one day out of a hundred did it get opened. . .other than to put more prizes IN. . .not take any of them OUT. It was like a black hole. . . .

The next week the Wonderlanders returned and faced everyone openly.

The two weeks did NOT balance out well. . . .

The Wonderlanders explained that for one week they had done ALL the things asked of them, perfectly, without complaint, had turned over ALL the prizes and

money to their respective families, the vendors, those involved with their particular events, had done very well.

But no one had really thanked them very much, and no one had really noticed whether or not they were enjoying their skating. . .

For the other week, they had simply skated. . .albeit away from the eyes of anyone but themselves and their friends. . .as they had for many days and nights before they had become so famous. They had to say, for the record, that they enjoyed the second week much more.

They offered to skate in public every other week, and not to keep a cent for themselves, just so they could skate alone for themselves.

They offered to skate in public on the weekends, 9 times out of 10, and not to keep a cent for themselves, just so they could be alone, skating for themselves, or just living, the rest of the time.

There was not even a mumber of approval from amongst the vendors or the parents. . .who wanted control virtually all of the time.

And so the Wonderlanders came to a fateful decision. . . .

They would skate as much in public as was expected. . .and lull the parents and vendors into a state of false complacency. . .while the time was spent perfecting their plans for a permanent escape, as it was now a decade since this had all begun, and every one of them in the group should have long since started their own life and family.

They found places to skate that were several times more remote than their most secret places to date. They made arrangements with some people near there for food and housing. . .people so far from their homes that they only knew of them by name. . .and they never, never used their real names.

Their lessons of privacy were learned well. . .and over a period of 10 years. . .yet they practiced the art of privacy even more. . .to spread out their sources of supplies, and the times when they would need them, and how many were being supplied. They masqueraded as a band of wandering gypsies, working hard in the fields in summer and making sure they looked nothing like the pales ice-creatures all of the world knew them as. They pretended to be part of a much larger band of gypsies, who lived even more in secret, then they would buy only from those who would not reveal them, and would only pay extra for the secrecy when they came back for supplies the next time.

Finally. . .the time was right. . . .

At the end of one year's run of Winter Carnivals and Festivals they announced they would give their own event, and invited everyone.

The vendors were invited both to watch AND to profit, and they even hired other outside vendors to work for them so they would watch in even more detail.

And then. . .they gave the performances of their lives. . . .

They made sure EVERYONE was there, and the skated their hearts out.

Moves no one had ever seen, or would ever see again, were made in a manner that showed months or years of heartfelt practice, and every such move was dedicated to a particular friend or loved-one in that audience that day.

Every friend and family member had a move named after them that day . . .a day every one of them remembered all their lives.

Every friend and family member, and even the vendors, were taken on the ice and presented with prizes and money, and told how much they were loved or appreciated by the Wonderlanders.

And finally, when all was said and done, the Wonderlanders went out on the ice and set their candles down, as they had done for years--in private--and let everyone see how they skated for themselves.

They skated the moves THEY liked best, in the ways THEY liked best.

And. . .as each Wonderlander finished his or her part of this show, they took off their skates, put on their shoes, and picked up their candles, and walked out back into the forest, stating they hoped to be back next weekend for their next performances, but they knew the hope was in vain, that no one would let them skate for themselves.

Because this was most likely their final public performance, effort was not spared, and many jumps and leaps and spins were carried out in ways never seen before or since.

Finally, there were only a few Wonderlanders left, and these gave a few performances that actually told stories; one of which suggested that the skater was running off into the woods to live as suggested by the use of a Pan flute as a prop and since the skater's name was Peter, it is possible, given the nature of these performances, with the faerie-like use of the candles, that this was the origin of the story of Peter Pan.

After Peter had flown off with his candle, there was a girl, Belle, who had a bell tied to her wrist, and tinkled as she skated, which, is certainly possible was the origin of Tinkerbell, as it was known she had affections for Peter, and was of a jealous nature.

When Belle had tinkled off into the distance, there was no one left, except Dimbovitsa. . .who was a different kind of skater than most, leaving most of the leaps and jumps to the more athletic of ability and inclination. . .and followed her heart more in the direction of art and sculpture. . .concentrating on long graceful glides over an expanse of ice. . .and on exquisite positioning of arm and leg in a graceful combination further accentuated by her motion.

And she could spin. . . .

Sometimes she was such a blur you would think no force on Earth may ever be able to stop her, trying to count the number of times round and round she went was as much a topic for people such as scholarly mathematicians and philosophers as for those who actually saw spins that night that actually left them dazed.

Her balance that night was such that she could hold a spin from one position to the next, only slightly pulling in one arm or leg to do enough conservation of momentum to even further the illusion of the spinning lasting forever.

Since this was the last performance of the year, temperatures would be naturally rising, and the sun would be rising earlier every day, which had been calculated by the Wonderlanders, who had now lived a decade or more in these woods, and could tell you to the day if the ice would melt or not.

And today turned out to be a very special day indeed, moreso than I would bet any of the Wonderlanders actually knew.

They had all stayed up so long, and it was so late in the Spring, a sure thing was that some of this audience would not be getting home before dawn, and most would at least see the lightening sky.

But this day was special. . .for so many reasons. . . .

The Wonderlanders had placed their torches and candles is just such a way that each of them melted most of the ice used by each of them in their performances, so that by the time they had waited out each final applause, and then taken their candle with them into the edge of the darkness, their own patch of ice was very much melted away.

As Dimbovitsa spun and spun, she melted away each of the last edges of ice remaining. . .until she was spinning on the only piece left, and as her candle

grew shorter and shorter, she took on more of the appearance of a faerie, apparently flying over the ground suspended just a little. . .by her skates.

Finally she entered her last spins, designed to take her over those few remaining patches of ice that remained, lit only by her single, very low candle. . .and each set of spins reduced one more piece of ice to slush. . .a slush that would look like mud in the sunrise.

And so. . .as she completed her performance, put on her shoes, went off in the darkness, it appeared the sun would be coming up shortly . . .so many of the audience simply waited for the sunrise to start their trip home. . .the Eastern sky lightened. . .but the sun would not appear for more than an hour. . .it was the aurora borealis, or the northern lights, that were lighting up the sky, and which, even more than the Wonderlanders had planned, made their illusion a very much greater success than they had planned.

From inside the shade grove of their practice pond, the sky was not terribly visible, even in the daytime, so it is not hard to realize how much the northern lights looked brighter than the darkness of a grove of trees.

By the time the sun really did come up the pond had totally melted.

And the illusion was complete. . .where there had been ice skating, now was a lake. . .the lake they now call Lake Dimbovitsa. . .after the last of the Wonderlanders who skated their that night.

So many people came and went in so many directions that night and a period of the first few hours of the following morning, that it was impossible to follow any tracks a week later, when people began the realization that the Wonderlanders were not coming back.

Lots of things were done to find them, but nearly all had been well prepared for, and the addition of spring rains, a quick thaw, a lot of mud travelled by a lot of people, made it even more impossible a task to find someone who had already gone to great pains not to be.

Who, in a camp of gypsies might recognize that the hooks from which pots of stew were hanging looked something like skate blades? Who, in their right might thinks of skate blades being any other than in bright, shiny silver? These black sooty hooks were on all of these fires, all looked the same. . .just black sooty hooks.

There were some efforts to follow the major bands of gypsies for an extra year or two, but these were in such a small band, that anyone would know an entire band of ice-skaters could not hide within. It would have been just too obvious. No one considered that the whole band of dark-skinned gypsies might be ice-skaters. But they were.

If you want to see where I live in Romania, just find a decent map--look to the upper left very near Bucharest, and there is the lake.

Follow the Dimbovita [the t is really a ts] River toward town, it is going to go right through the middle of town.

As it approaches town it turns very slightly to the right, and, then again very slightly to the left.

Then more strongly to the right.

That's it. . .don't turn to the right there. . .go just another bit, the same direction the river was flowing, and you should find a mark for a church. Our windows look out right over that church.

In closing, back to the ballet for a moment. . . .

Many of you may be familiar with this ballet under a different name: Giselle, or Giselle of the Willys, as it is more properly called. A few changes have been made, but with anything approaching traditions of choreographing Giselle over the years, it is still obvious that a great many of the traditional postures, motions or symbolic gestures in Giselles throughout the years are actually the postures, motions, and other gestures more commonly associated with ice skating.

Quick reflection, even for those of you who haven't seen it for years will remind you that the opening sequences of the Willys are in fact some ice skaters out in a pond in the woods, and that they are obviously, and basically in a practice session for themselves. . .practicing in a series of long glides you only see in ice skating. . .and switched footings that only take place in ice skating. . .which. . .once this becomes obvious to you, explains the extremely awkward nature of the opening moves in Giselle, moves that are totally natural in skating, but were difficult in translation to ballet.

Of course, there is the addition of a romantic theme, one which I am sad to say I had to leave out of the version I related above, but on some future occasion I may do another version that includes it. The basics are that a few of the skaters are enamoured with Dimbovitsa--and at least one of the townspeople--most notably one of those whose role is to bring materials for torches to the hidden practice sites, and who, after watching for years, eventually makes some suggestions to Dimbovitsa, which lead to some of the new moves that come from an assortment of these practice sessions over the years.

It later came to her attention that these suggestions were rooted in paintings the boy would make of her from memory, and once she saw the paintings, a new respect for what the boy had in mind was born, and a new respect for his talent, and a dim, but growing awareness of the attention he paid to her, to be able to paint her in such beautiful details, from memory. The paintings rarely actually showed the skates themselves, as he often portrayed her as a faery floating above the ice, in much the same ways as others imagined her, but this in more concrete form. . .a form that may well have been the root of the Giselle ballet.

If you actually extrapolate from such paintings, it becomes obvious, in the extreme, that the choreography, costumes, set and setting all are in reality those of the practice sessions of the Wonderlanders.

One more detail. . .after years of searching for the Wonderlanders--the name slowly changed to Neverlanders. . .as their neighbors found less and less reason to hope they would ever be found.

And yet. . .so they say. . .if you go out into the woods in a Spring or Fall that is coming or staying late. . .they say you can see them . . .the Wonderlanders, Neverlanders, or Willys. . .floating above a wispy swamp or pond or even a small lake. . .and just think for only a moment of the water actually being ice. . .and. . .there they are!

End of

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