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Bulgaria (last of five parts)

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Dear Peter,

This newsletter introduces you briefly to three of Bulgaria's main scholars who recognize the older Czech contribution: Ivan Pavlov, Velichko Todorov, and Svetomir Ivanchev. It also describes a visit to a Sofian family that has lived in Prague for several years and another Sofian family that has a fondness for Czechoslovakia, which is built on family ties and several thousand kilometers of bicycling. The last part is about an unplanned dinner I had with a former representative of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Trade in Cuba. There's one last street scene (a dancing bear), disgruntled Czechs in the Sofia airport on their way home, and lastly a discussion with a friend from Bulgaria who for years has been studying in Prague.

Bulgarian Bohemists

Ivan Pavlov is in his mid 40s and one of the main professors of Czech studies at the University of Sofia. Since the events in November, he's been writing about Czechoslovakia. One article, in the newspaper of the university (January 1990, p.5), bears the dramatic title "I Want to Ignite the People". It is about the ceremony in Prague commemorating the death of the Czech student Jan Palach who immolated himself in January 1969 as a protest against the Soviet invasion. In another article, called "Czechoslovakia Before the Election: the Secret of Czechoslovak History", Pavlov reviews the exhibition in Prague "Kde domov můj" (in Demokracia 7 June 1990, p.8) organized by the Charter 77 Foundation about Czechoslovak history. He also comments on

Derek Paton, a Fellow of the Institute, is studying the arts and culture of Czechoslovakia

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Karel Čapek's book based on interviews with Thomas Masaryk, Conversation with TGM. This book hasn't been published in Bulgaria since 1947, and Pavlov compares it to the book Disturbing the Peace, Karel Hvížďala's interviews with Vaclav Havel. Pavlov translated this into Bulgarian and calls Havel the second greatest Czechoslovak politician since Thomas Masaryk. (A premature assessment, I think). In A.B.V., the newspaper about literature, Pavlov had an article on the front page stating that Jan Masaryk, until the time of his death, used to read the Bible and The Good Soldier Švejk, "those two poles of the Czech national character." (April 10, 1990). This claim seems especially farfetched.

Pavlov has, in the past, been known as a great supporter of Jan Kozák, a model novelist of the "normalization" period of Czechoslovak life from 1970 to 1989. Nowadays, however, Pavlov's allegiance seems to be firmly on the side of Havel and especially on the side of the Czech writer and publisher living in Canada, Josef Škvorecký, whose work he wants to translate as soon as he can get his hands on the books. He maintains that Škvorecký continues the tradition of storytelling established by Jaroslav Hašek. Pavlov's main work is a two volume history of Czech literature (minus Havel, Škvorecký, Kundera, Klíma, Vaculík, and other "non-progressive", non-Socialist writers, of course), published in 1986 and co-authored by Velichko Todorov. As for Pavlov's journalism, despite occasional errors or grand claims, his articles probably serve as an important source of importing and promoting the ideas of Havel, Masaryk and democracy in Bulgaria, as well as providing Bulgarians with some new literature from outside.

Velichko Todorov (mentioned in DBP-8) is a 36-year-old Bulgarian Bohemist and at the moment probably their best. A former co-organizer of the Bulgarian Seminar, Velichko is the liveliest person I met there. He is a devoted "Čapkologue", i.e., scholar on the most famous of Czech interwar authors, Karel Čapek. The former Czech dissident newspaper Lidové noviny commenting on a recent Polish conference on Čapek, was surprised to find that the most interesting contribution came from a Bulgarian, namely Velichko. After a few informal meetings with him, I decided to have a discussion that I could write about. During our chat, he brought up some very interesting points, not merely about the approach of Bulgarian scholarship to Czech studies but also about the approach of a young professor now free of politically imposed restrictions in his academic life.

Velichko had a comparatively privileged childhood. His father worked for the Bulgarian government in Vienna and thus Velichko was able to study Russian and Bulgarian history there for one year. He fell ill, however, and had to return to Sofia where he began to sit in on lectures of Emil Georgiev (who died in 1980) in Slavonic studies. For two years, he was interested only in Polish research in Bulgarian studies, which, says Velichko, is much better than either Czech or Russian research on Bulgarian topics.

Like so many people, it seems to me, Velichko didn't choose Czech studies in particular, but rather fell into it. "Georgiev told us what aspect of Slavonic studies we will cover. He looked around the room and pointed to me. 'And you will study Czech,' he said." So Velichko spent four years in Czech studies. At the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s, he was in Bulgaria's third largest city, Plovdiv, where he studied and commuted with Svetomir Ivanchev, a former diplomat and the translator of Švejk from Czech to Bulgarian.

Once while cleaning an office at Sofia University as part of his summer job, Velichko found an old dissertation from 1947 by Štefka Procházková. He asked Ivan Pavlov (at that point his academic supervisor) if he could take this work home and look it over for a couple of days. It was entitled "The Reception of Karel Čapek's work in Bulgaria" and, says Velichko, the whole way home he sat in the trolley bus engrossed in this paper. Another professor then recommended a monograph by Nedjalko Dragonov, who was head of Czech at Sofia University. In that work, entitled Karel Čapek in Bulgaria, Draganov mentions the work by Procházková, but said that the essay was missing. To his astonishment, Velichko realized he had it in his hands. That was in 1985, and up to that point the only work of Čapek's he knew was Apocrypha and some short stories. He later spent one year in Prague where he met the Čapek expert, Jiří Opelík, and studied Čapek's journalism. In 1985, however, Czech studies at the university in Plovdiv were discontinued. He returned to Sofia where he got his doctorate in 1987. Starting in September of this year, Velichko is back in Prague for another three to four years (the contract was made before 17 November last year) as a lecturer at Charles University.

I asked Velichko if he felt that he and Čapek had anything in common or if Čapek as a Czech democrat influenced him, a young man in Communist Bulgaria fifty years later. "No. On the contrary," answered Velichko. "I'm completely different from Čapek: I'm a terribly closed and monothematic person. The only way we're alike is our belief in tolerance to humanity and maintaining academic objectivity." And, when he was studying, said Velichko, "I thought about nothing but preparing for my doctorate. Nothing else. I knew that if I was going to tell students something, I had to know the most about the field."

Did Czechoslovak politics affect him at all? No, he said, but twice he tried to research the Prague Spring until it turned out to be too difficult. He was afraid to ask for research materials because he feared for his friends safety, and the Czechs were afraid to share samizdat and other materials with him. After 17 November, when previously suppressed information about the past emerged, says Velichko, he then understood his Czech friends' reactions. He now finds himself overwhelmed by the amount of new historical information as well as literature, and by the thought of having to find his way around in this new flood of material. The fact alone that so much was published in samizdat is for him -- unlike Czech specialists in the West -- a complete surprise.

Lastly, I asked Velichko my favorite question regarding Bulgaria: Why was there never an underground cultural movement in Bulgaria (i.e., in Sofia) like in Czechoslovakia (like in Prague, Brno, and to much lesser degree, in Bratislava)? "The answer is very simple: no comparison is possible. Bulgarian culture is sold-out and prostituted. No one can convince me otherwise. It's absolutely corrupted. Everybody sold out, stole .... It's spiritual corruption after 45 years of Communism." Considering such a negative view of Bulgarian society (which I found to be the prevalent one held by most of the people I talked with), does he think it's possible to improve the culture? "Only in a moral and political way, nothing else. The priority should be to clean up the past and not worry about anything contemporary." Thus, he would like to see a complete revision of Bulgarian historiography. There will also be a museum of Czech aid to Bulgaria. "We and the Czechs were never brothers," says Velichko, contradicting the standard Communist line of a Socialist (and Slavonic) fraternity. "There was never a reason for it. The main place in the museum will be for Czechs, because they did the most for us in the eighties and nineties of the last century -- more than the Russians and more than the Americans. But we had a very egotistical attitude towards the Czechs. All the information on this is here but it's hidden because it doesn't suit the authorities. In 1929, the biggest chance we got was the treaty of mutual help with Czechoslovakia, and the greatest influence here was Czech and German capital. The Czech influence was not ideological. We have to start to reevaluate our relations. There are many myths held mutually about Bulgarians and Czechs, such as that every year Czechs go to the Black Sea and Bulgarians rush off to woo Czech girls. [I did, however, notice several Bulgarian men standing at the airport doors after the plane from Prague had landed, and they uttered the Czech greeting, "Ahoj!" to almost every woman stepping out of the airport]. It's a crazy mythology. We ruined many things for the Czechs in COMECON [the East Bloc's attempt at a common market]." The bad feelings go way back, explains

Velichko. Bulgarians addressed the Czechs who came here at the end of World War One using "Herr", because most names in the Austro-Hungarian passports were Germanized. This form of address remained and was used pejoratively. Later, the Bulgarians began to call them Slavonic Jews, trying to insinuate that they were traitors to the Slavonic peoples. "What we didn't know we praised and what we knew we condemned, and we knew each other only in part. It's the same with Poles and Hungarians, although different with Yugoslavs. It's the problem of being a neighboring state. We have to change the Bulgarian stereotype about Czechoslovakia. Our literature is xenophobic, too; even towards the Slavs. We always make fun of them. Ivan Pavlov doesn't agree with me, and maybe I'm wrong, but for the next little while the past is the most important period to study here."

Two more aspects of Czechoslovakia in Bulgaria are the Czechoslovak Cultural Center and the Czechoslovak Club. The Culture Center had Czech copies of Havel's Disturbing the Peace as the most prominent item in its windows. Apart from that, it had the typical coffee-table books of photographs and some classical records, but nothing really representative of the current state of Czech and Slovak culture. Inside, half of the store was closed off for "inventory" -- just like in Prague. Another institution, the Czechoslovak Club is in a stately old house on a quieter residential street. Pavlov told us that their library had novels that weren't available anywhere else in Bulgaria and often not available in Czechoslovakia. Unfortunately, when we arrived at the front door, we met a worker who said that the club will be closed for the rest of the summer for restoration. (This must be the Bulgarian restoration period because the Museum of the Revolutionary Workers Movement was also closed allegedly for the same reasons).

The last aspect of Czech life I noticed in Bulgaria is the magazine published by the Czechoslovak Cultural Information Service, Czechoslovakia. This magazine appears in Bulgarian six times per year and is available free of charge. It has an attractive 8 x 10 inch format and is printed on very good quality paper. A staff of more than a dozen people gathers and adapts material from the Czech and Slovak cultural press. The issue I looked at published President Havel's speech to the US Congress, an article on the political scene and pluralism in 1990, an article on Masaryk, some poems by the scientist-poet Miroslav Holub, two articles by the old-guard literary critic Štěpan Vlášín, and a biographical article on the contemporary film maker, Jiří Menzel (whose film Konec starých času [The End of the Old Times], will be showing at the Czechoslovak Cultural Center in Sofia). Velichko Todorov contributed one of the few exclusive articles, an interview with his old teacher, the translator Svetomir Ivanchev. This man's diverse and colorful career includes being a diplomat shortly after World War Two, which he gave up because of, he admits, a lack of economic and legal training. Ivanchev commented on the deficiencies in Bulgarian Czech studies. What was needed, he said, was a Czech-Bulgarian dictionary, a good grammar, good translations, e.g., of Vladislav Vančura (an interwar period novelist) and Jan Amos Komenský (the famous Czech pedagogue from the seventeenth century), a history of the Czech contribution to Bulgaria's development from 1878 on, an encyclopedia of Czechs who worked in Bulgaria, and an archive. Rectifying the deficiencies cited by Ivanchev will be difficult, I think, since they all have to compete with the foreign language that is most in demand, English.

Sofians in Prague

I also had the opportunity to visit a few Bulgarians in their homes. Mrs. Antonova and her 19-year-old daughter, Anna, have lived in Prague for seven years. Mr. Antonov works there for Bulgarian TV. Mrs. Antonova, an acquaintance of Silvia's, invited me to their apartment in Sofia to judge her daughter's progress in English, which she's been studying at Charles University for three years. Mrs. Antonova brought a large bowl of gorgeous fresh grapes, peaches and apples, then later coffee, cake, and red vermouth.

I was curious to hear their impressions of Prague. "At first I didn't like it," said Mrs. Antonova, "but now I'm happy." She asked me how I liked Sofia, and I told her that for one thing I thought the food was better and pointed to the fruit on the table. "That's one of the things we miss in Prague," she said, "the fruit and the sunshine." I looked around at the bare walls of their apartment, which was very sparsely and modestly furnished. They didn't seem to be rich apparatchiks. Mrs. Antonova got up again and left to go shopping. Anna left the room for a moment and came back with a survey of English literature, published by Yale University Press in 1950, which was the only book of that type available at the university library in Prague.

When the Antonovs first arrived in Prague, Anna enrolled in the Soviet school (right near the Russian Embassy), because the Bulgarian School in Prague had classes only up to the eighth grade. "When I'm in Prague, I like Prague," she says shyly through purple lipstick, while constantly pushing back her long brown hair in a typically teenage nervous gesture, "but when I'm in Sofia I don't want to leave." One problem, she says, is that she has no Czech friends. Her best friend in Prague is a Polish girl. (I know the same young woman and some of her Polish friends, all of whom aren't particularly fond of Czechs and would rather associate with their compatriots or Americans or Yugoslavs. They think that Czechs are too nationalistic, too materialistic, too snobby, and too cold -- "they're Germans with Slavonic names"). Anna told us that her mother also had a hard time making friends in Prague. "Here, we know everybody in the apartment building. In Prague, when we first arrived, my mother asked our next-door neighbor for coffee. She came over to our place but never invited us to her home." One has to wonder whether they were snubbed because they were Bulgarians, or because the dubious generalization of Czechs being cold is true, or because Mr. Antonov is a Communist, or because of some other reason.

I asked Anna about the problem with Turks. She had two Turkish friends who lived in her apartment building in Sofia. They were forced to change their Turkish names to typically Bulgarian ones. The Bulgarian Turks, said Anna, were moving out of the villages with refrigerators, stoves, carpets, televisions, everything. Most came back, because, she said, they had a dream vision of Turkey, but when they saw the reality, they returned to Bulgaria. Anna felt that the law on changing Turkish names was wrong, and even ridiculous, as when the authorities went so far as to force families to change the names on gravestones in an attempt to Bulgarize their minorities retroactively.

How do you feel about the Russians? I asked Anna. She, too, felt that they acted as if they were superior to Bulgarians, and she considered it an insult when they unthinkingly address Bulgarians in Russian. On the other hand, she likes Moscow and its architecture. And although she was also unable to recommend even one Bulgarian singer-songwriter to me, she loves the songs of the Russian protest singer Vladimír Vysockii.

Asen Zidarov and his family are also friends of Silvia. He knows Czechoslovakia and has quite a different attitude to the Czechs. I first met his mother, who is probably almost 70, on my first tram ride -- filthy and dusty -- through Sofia and was surprised to find a Bulgarian who spoke some Czech. A few days later, we went to visit her on one of the many, very hot afternoons I spent in Sofia. After we climbed several flights of stairs, she and Jenny, her English spaniel, greeted us at the door. She offered us each a tall, cool glass of soured milk, and then she and Silvia caught up on news of friends, family, and politics. I nursed the soured milk and passively received an intensive lesson in Bulgarian. It was hard to keep my eyes open as the milk, heat, and drone of a language I couldn't decipher all began to take their effect.

On our next visit, Asen, a tall and sinewy 45-year-old, came to the door. He was wearing Adidas and shorts because he had just come in after his evening bicycle ride through Sofia. He invited us in and then, with his wife Zlatka and their two daughters Sirma and Kristina, quickly prepared the dinner table for us in the small area that serves as a dining-room, living-room, and bedroom. Asen spoke to me in Czech and sometimes in French. He studied French philology and lived for two years in France. He uses French in his work for Radio Bulgaria, as well as in dubbing French films into Bulgarian. In addition, he prepared a French course for TV, which has been rebroadcast often during the last several years and has presented the news for French speakers in Bulgaria. After his sister, who is a musician and singer, married a Czech and began to teach at the music conservatory in Ostrava, Moravia, Asen began to visit Czechoslovakia. Since then, he has been back more than ten times. When I met him, he had just returned to Bulgaria after his third bicycle trip within Czechoslovakia, a journey in which he, Zlatka, and Sirma covered 1500 kilometers in three weeks. Apart from some rests along the way, they covered about 85 kilometers per day. This took quite an effort from Zlatka, who was on her first long cycling trip, and from Sirma who is only 14.

Asen's love for Bohemia was obvious as he spoke emphatically and with great gesticulations. Though he has never actually studied Czech, his speaking ability -- albeit Czech and Bulgarian are both Slavonic languages -- is quite astonishing. Even Sirma was beginning to learn a bit of Czech. She is lively but serious for her age and her main passion is wildlife, especially African. She is particularly fascinated by Kenya, but information on it is scarce in Bulgaria.

We ate tomatoes and goat cheese (both omnipresent in Bulgaria that August though there had just been -- and would be other -- food shortages), as well as cold frankfurters and potato salad. After dinner, the television was turned on, and the "modern stone-age family," the Flintstones with Bulgarian voice-over, competed, unfortunately, for the attention of almost everybody at the table. Asen didn't have much to say about, or for, Bulgaria. Preferring French literature, he doesn't read post-WW II Bulgarian literature, because, he says, it's weak in style and ideas. As for Bulgarians, they're not used to working, he says, so in this period they're not doing anything but strolling around. He preferred to talk about the Bohemian countryside, where he now has many friends, and especially about the town of Český Krumlov, which he said is the "perfect medieval town." He also observed that Czechs in the countryside were no longer as keen on President Havel as they had been, because they were worried about price hikes in food and insecurity regarding the future.

Home from Havana

The Orpheus Restaurant has a large outdoor patio with big oak trees growing here and there between the tables. The waiters stand around smoking, gawking, and gabbing. Occasionally, one waiter takes it upon himself to serve some customers. It was quite late in the evening, when Silvia and I decided that we stood as good a chance here as anywhere in Sofia in getting some dinner. We looked for a free table, and not having had any success we began asking other parties who had free chairs if we could join them. Two dubious looking young women were seated at a table for four but their voices, appearances, and the looks they gave us (the feeling was mutual) were so unwelcoming that we continued our hunt for free places. We eventually found a table for eight where only five people were sitting, and they graciously surrendered their extra seats.

Our longing glances towards the cluster of waiters and our drowning-man's gestures didn't yield any results for quite some time. In the interim, however, we witnessed a couple who tried to sit with the two single women. About thirty seconds after having sat down, one of the newly arrived diners crashed to the ground as her folding chair folded beneath her. Her partner scurried around the table to help her up, while the two original tenants looked askance at one another. The more we stared at any waiter the more scarce he made himself. Eventually, after a bit of help from the original party at our table, a waiter sauntered over. Their gesture to help was the Bulgarian ice-breaker that led them to enquire ten minutes later if I was English. The young man to my left spoke passable English.

Most of the attention, however, was focussed on the man directly opposite me. He appeared to be in his fifties and was fit and smiling. When he found out I was Canadian, he told us that he was often in Montreal while on his way to Cuba where he had been for ten years as a representative of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign trade. He had just arrived back in Sofia three days ago. "How are things in Cuba," we asked. "How's Fidel?"

"Not so good," said the trade rep with a smile. "The intellectuals have been against him since the beginning of this year, and the ordinary, poor people are confused. They don't want to be without food coupons." "How's Fidel's health?" one of the others asked. "It had been good," he told us, actually speaking to everyone at the table. "The previous prognosis said he would live beyond the year 2000. Now, they say he won't live until the end of this year. The Americans say he has cancer. The Cubans in Miami are ready to help Cuba, but only if Fidel leaves."

While, Frank Sinatra was singing from loudspeakers by the entrance to the restaurant, we learned that the head of the table had been recalled from Cuba to Bulgaria, in April, when the ex-Socialist countries stopped supplying Cuba. "Fidel said he didn't want Socialist rubbish, when he can produce excellent goods and sell them on whatever market he wishes." There were chuckles all round. Silvia recalled a similar boast by Ceaucescu two years ago: When asked why all the shop windows were empty, the Rumanian dictator didn't deny the fact, but rather explained it as a result of all the goods being in peoples' homes, and of warehouses being full. "'We don't need to show it all just to prove to tourists and Westerners that we have the goods,'" Silvia quoted Ceaucescu as saying.

I asked the trade rep for the impressions he had upon returning home. He didn't like Parliament with its small conflicts and petty arguments, which prevent the government from starting any serious program. "Well," he shrugged, "I've been a Communist for 20 years." The friend on his right, a large man in a safari jacket with a big, black moustache and holding a pipe, patted him on the back and said, "No. You're a socialist." On the trade rep's left sat a handsome man with a huge black moustache, probably around 40, and chain smoking. He hardly said one word all evening. The youngest one, on my left and opposite Silvia, said, "No. You're a humanist."

"Humanist?" I asked, while the man at the head of the table beamed being the center of attention. "What did Marx say about Humanism?" The large pipe-smoker jumped in with a reply. "Marx said, socialism can succeed only in a truly developed country, and this country is not developed at all. So the mistake of the Communists is that they've been too human and they didn't throw out people who don't work properly! And, this has lead the country to its present state." The young guy quickly picked up the chance to criticize Communism. "Did you read Armand Hammer's memoirs? The second part of the book?" he asked eagerly and with a hint of superiority. "No. Just the excerpts from it in Time," I confessed. "He was a Communist," the young guy informed me. The large man in the safari jacket wanted to set the argument straight: "In business, it doesn't matter what ideology or conviction a man has, because in business there are so many people who are cheating and doing anything just for the deal." While I was muttering something about the Soviet spy ring in World War Two, "Die Rote Kapelle", whose ring leaders ran the very successful Universal Rubber Raincoat Co., the big guy added that he, too, was a business man. This was a prelude to find out what I was doing in Bulgaria, although they assumed that I must be a business man, hence the "too" in his remark.

Once I explained how the Institute of Current World Affairs granted me a fellowship -- will anyone in Eastern Europe ever really believe that the Institute is what it says it is? -- and why I'm interested in the area, they were especially curious to learn my impressions of Bulgaria. I told them that I thought Bulgarian cuisine has a better sense of what is tasty than Czech cuisine, although the variety of available food was inferior. The streets of Sofia, I said, were extremely dirty and it was so unnecessary that people just litter the parks and streets of Sofia and even the mountain trails. I sincerely praised the natural beauty of the Bulgarian countryside with its mountains and forests. On the negative side, I said that unfortunately people in Sofia were especially rude. And lastly, the absence of really good books and other culture was discouraging.

The trade rep then expressed the disgust he felt when he walked downtown one night near the Town of Truth. He saw an old friend, who was an alcoholic who hadn't done anything constructive for years. He was not pleased. "I can't put my future into the hands of people like that," he said shaking his head. The only woman among their group spoke up and said that she agreed that Sofia was filthy and that it never used to be this bad. (Back in Prague, my friend Jarda said that I was unfair to Bulgarians in this respect; Parisians, for example, are the filthiest urban dwellers he knows, but the difference is that in Paris a streetsweeper picks up the litter every couple of hours). The others at the table wanted to hear more criticism. "That's it?" they asked incredulously. "You're so mild. Please, don't be afraid to tell us what you really think. It's not every day that you can do that. Not everyone wants to hear such frankness as we want to hear." "Really, that's it," I assured them. "I have no reason to keep my opinions to myself in front of you. Really." "You are too polite, you people from the West." I added one last observation, namely that I was very glad to meet some Bulgarians who really desired an objective picture of their country and were willing to think things through and hear the opinions of foreigners. They wished us a good night, and we left.

The Old Bear Can Still Dance

It's late afternoon and I'm sitting in the outdoor cafe of the restaurant Kristal, one of the places that serves the best desert in Sofia, a chocolate cake that goes by the unappetizing name of Garage. The café borders the Kristal Park, which has become a large flea market full of the trashiest jewelry, ceramics (e.g., a hookah-smoking skull, whose top is removed so that it can be an ashtray or some other kind of receptacle -- perhaps the hated Turk?), and tawdry paintings of weeping clowns and sleazy, awkward nudes. Coming down the walk in front of the restaurants and hotels is a scruffy man bowing a balalaika. At the same time, he's singing an equally strange semi-tonal melody. I'd seen a similarly attired man a few days before with a balalaika and "dancing" monkey. What really has everyone's attention is not the man but what he has with him: a haggard old bear, toothless and hunched over, who has to respond to his master when he jerks the leather leash connected to two rings in the bear's nose. The musician stops about ten feet in front of me and begins to stare me down. He maneuvers the bear into a position so that it, too, can stare at me. The man plays and sings with a slightly heightened intensity, till I'm compelled to get up and give him some money. Unfortunately, I had run out of Bulgarian leva, so I had to give him one US dollar. The musician looks at it somewhat suspiciously and stuffs it into the balalaika, probably before his partner, an elderly woman in a long dress, wearing large dangling earrings and carrying a red plastic cup for contributions, could catch a glimpse of the greenback as she followed in his wake.

Not long after the musician, the bear, and their agent have departed, a group of drunken young soccer fans arrive. They sit down on the window ledge of the Kristal and start singing and shouting a Bulgarian football song, while accompanying themselves on a guitar: "Olé, olé, olé, olé, Johnny, it's all flowing, it's all flowing, olé, olé, olé, olé." An old woman comes up to them and appears to be lecturing one of the young men. The rest have now launched into a drunken, Bulgarian rendition of the Beatles' "Let it Be." A tall skinny man with a black T-shirt bearing the English words "Airbase International," "USA", and "New", gets up from his patio table and heads over to the boys to get his guitar back. The singing and the dry heat don't diminish one decibel or degree, and I get up to leave, feeling it's high time to go -- at least back to Studentski grad.

Back to Europe (?)

A few days later, in the Sofia International Airport for my departure, Silvia and I looked around for a place to drink a coffee. Since it was only 11:00 a.m., the dining room was closed. We tried to find a seat in the coffee-shop/bar which, without one window and completely under the cover of a cloud of smoke, looked like I'd imagine an opium den. One can have a sandwich there, which is literally two slices of bread with one slice of ham, and drink coffee or cherry softdrink.

Later, at passport control, the traveller in front of me was speaking Bulgarian but holding a US passport. She was being questioned for a long time and didn't leave before being stuck with a high fine for not having one of the necessary police stamps in her passport. When I finally got through, I went to the gate indicated to me by the airline staff. Even though there aren't more than half-a-dozen gates, there was no sign for Prague on the gate they had sent me to. I stood in line with a few confused Czechs who spent their time cursing Bulgaria and Socialism. Later, when we were in the waiting room at the edge of the runway, three Czech girls arrived and began to tell some of their compatriots, who were returning home, how awful their stay in Bulgaria had been. "It's such a mess!" Each confirmed the others words or used them as a launching pad for her own tirade. "There was nothing to eat!" "We had no hot water the whole time!" While most of this in their case was undoubtedly true, I asked myself if it really was so much better in Czechoslovakia or was this just the Czechs' chance to vent their criticism on someone worse off than they were? Would I be hearing the same sort of remarks by Westerners about Prague or Czechoslovakia? I guess for the main part they were simply telling it like it is. I just didn't have anyone to complain to. Besides in two hours I knew I would be in technologically advanced (well, relatively speaking), capitalistic (any day now) Prague, Czechoslovakia (or some refederalized variant of it), Europe.

Plovdiv is the Place

When I got back to Prague I talked with Lambrina Khatsechev, a Bulgarian linguistics student who has been living in the student residence in Prague for a few years now. She gave me her literary overview, telling me about Bulgaria's two best known literary theoreticians who both live in Paris, Tsvetan Todorov and Julia Lalsteva, as well as about Atanas Slavov who lives in the USA. Lambrina slowly wrote out the list, partly because she was cautious and wanted to be precise and partly because it's hard to think of many Bulgarians in the world of literature. The interwar period, what the Communists call the monarcho-fascist regime, had Jordan Jovkov and Elin Pelin, who many in literary studies often compare and contrast, as well as Dimitar Talev, Georgi Rajchev, Emilian Stanev, and Dimitar Dimov. The Bulgarians also had a writer who the Czechs compare to their own Karel Čapek: Svetoslav Minkov. The post WW II period has very few good writers, namely Jordan Radichkov (who some people compare to the Czech, Bohumil Hrabal), Anton Donchev, and Nikolai Khajtov. I read some of Khajtov's short stories in Czech translation. He is, by the way, one of the few Bulgarian authors to be translated into English and is to be recommended to people who love depictions of nature and the truly skillful personification of animals, trees, and mountains. Some of the best studies about Bulgarian writers, Lambrina told me (and is in accord with Velichko), come from Poland, especially by Vanda Smokovska, who taught for some years in Sofia and then slipped out of sight.

Lastly, Lambrina told me about a theory by the historian, Nikolai Genchev, which is interestingly provocative but apparently not well documented. He maintains that Sofia should never have been chosen the capital of Bulgaria, because it was never the center of Bulgarian life. Plovdiv holds that title and is the natural choice for the capital. Lambrina thinks that Sofia is just an oversized village (I was thinking about Toronto compared to Montreal or Chicago compared to New York, as she told me this) and hence even today the people act like pushy, uncultured peasants because that's in essence what they are (I don't take the North American comparison this far). Lambrina, you might have guessed, is from Plovdiv.

Yours,

p.s. One thing I could say that is really positive about Sofia is that the mountains around it, e.g., Vitoshe, full of well-maintained trails through quiet coniferous forests, are wonderful. They're the perfect place to get away from Sofia.

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