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Sofia's Not My Choice (First of Four Parts)

Dear Peter,

When I started this fellowship, I had planned to see a bit of the rest of Eastern Europe. I never made it to East Germany, and my desire to go there diminished after American friends on a Fulbright in Prague made the trip and told me East Germany has the same rude people and grayness as Czechoslovakia but lacks Prague's saving graces. An East German Czechophile from Jena told me of violence and brutality by East Germans during their demonstrations in the fall of 1989 and spring of 1990, which also discouraged me from visiting. This East German has wanted for some time to immigrate to Czechoslovakia. At first, I was tempted to see Romania, but then I asked myself what is really so interesting about enforced misery. Czechs told me stories that also served to dissuade me from a visit even to post-Ceaucescu Romania. As I listened to the news in July and August of miners sent to Bucharest to beat student demonstrators and of cholera epidemics, I am glad I decided not to go there at that time. My American friends gave Poland a good review, so that's definitely on the agenda, and so is Hungary where I hope to visit Larry Radway this fall. If one takes the Soviet Union to be something other than Eastern Europe, that leaves only Bulgaria.

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Here is a short introduction to give you an idea of the almost two dozen parts that make up the content of the this and the next three newsletters. Though I went on a couple of excursions in Bulgaria (to the Rilka Monastery and Koprivshtitsa), this letter is about Sofia and the people I met there. Before my trip I had a very limited picture of Bulgaria, which had been formed over the years from things I'd read or heard in passing and lately from what Czechs told me just before I left or what I'd read in the Prague press. My trip to the Bulgarian Embassy provided me with a glimpse of what I could expect. I describe the student residences in which I stayed and the Seminar on Bulgarian Culture in which my Czech friend, Silvia, was taking part again. I used basic guide books that I found there for additional orientation, and they are sometimes worth quoting just to give you an idea, or remind you, of Socialist prose style. Then I went out to look at, or rather look for, Sofian architecture. This endeavor included an almost futile trip to the Institute of Architecture. Well, not entirely futile, since the experience in itself is worth something although it doesn't have to do with architecture.

Also in these letters, I reproduce a lot of Sofia's street scenes for you, including its vehicular and pedestrian traffic and its posters and advertisements, which reveal something of Sofia's present style and possible direction for the near future. A trip to Sofia's last synagogue left me saddened, because its present state of decay and neglect seemed to speak of the decay and neglect of all of Bulgaria's Jewish population since the beginning of World War Two. A trip to the Jewish Cultural Center, besides augmenting my impressions of the visit to the synagogue, also left me wondering whether Bulgaria's so-called revolution had produced any real perestroika if it couldn't be seen in a place where one would have expected it. The museum in the Center was far more an ode to the Bulgarian Communist Party than a story of the saving Jewish Bulgarians.

Next is a description of the Bulgarian Museum of History where I was pleased to find a small but colorful and unbiased exhibit on the history of Bulgarian political parties before World War Two. From there, I take you to the new opposition, the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS), and specifically to their newspaper Demokracia and describe the problems that it faces. Still in the SDS vein, I describe a meeting with Georgi Minchev, perhaps Bulgaria's most popular singer-songwriter and an active supporter of SDS, or rather of its aims. At his apartment, we were joined by an engineer friend of his and the discussion took a few more twists.

The letters also contains chats with a few other Bulgarians I met, such as one of Bulgaria's main scholars in Czech studies and other Bulgarians who have lived in, or regularly visited, Prague and Bohemia. I began to suspect that there are probably many quiet personal ties between the two countries, besides the bombastic, forced relationship within of fraternal Socialist states. My last chat in Sofia is with a group of

Sofians with whom I shared a table at dinner one evening. The main guest was an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Trade who had been recalled from his posting in Cuba. There's one last, literally hairy, street scene for you, then the return to Prague and a chat with a Bulgarian friend who has been a student here for some time.

Before my trip, I knew little about Bulgaria. I had only cursorily studied it as part of courses in East European politics. To me it was the land somehow connected with the man who attempted to assassinate Pope John Paul II, the homeland of the assassinated emigre writer and Radio Free Europe broadcaster, Georgi Markov, and of the man who was sent by the Bulgarian government to stick Markov with a poison-tipped umbrella. It was also the homeland of Georgi Dimitrov, who may be best known for having defended himself at the trial in Nazi Germany where he was accused of torching the Reichstag in 1933. In many East European political science texts one could read how Bulgaria had long been one of the best off of the European Communist countries in terms of food products, especially fruits. They also seemed to be to provide the Olympics with a good supply of athletes for one of the Game's most aesthetically unattractive sports, weightlifting. My Czech grandfather had been in Sofia as a young man, sometime around World War I, but he told me about it too long for me to remember. I knew that a couple of years ago, one of the best selling record albums were two volumes of Le Mystere de la Voix Bulgaire, religious singing that was said to be some of George Harrison's favorite new music. Although he introduced Indian music to the Beatles and then to much of the West's young people, his endorsement of Bulgarian vocal music doesn't seem to have led to the same wave of enthusiasm for this style. The Bulgarians are famous for their yogurt and it's sometimes claimed that the oldest people in the world are found in Bulgaria (or Yugoslavia or the Asian reaches of the Soviet Union depending on who you hear it from) and that their longevity could be attributed to the yogurt. There is a Bulgarian cultural center in Prague, but its window displays of wide leather belts, furry sheep skin vests, and other caveman apparel do not encourage further investigation. An illuminated sign still flashes "balkancar-Bulharsko" atop a building on Prague's Wenceslas Square. Czech friends told me that they used to like hiking or skiing in Bulgaria, or going to the Black Sea, but that it had got too expensive and that Bulgarians had become very uppity if they found out a tourist wasn't from the West. Thus, for Czechs Bulgaria was no longer as attractive a vacation option as it had been in the past -- besides, now they can travel west.

Bulgaria didn't come to my mind again until November 1989, when Bulgarians took to the streets in bigger numbers than the Czechs had done less than a couple of weeks earlier. When I met two Czechs with family ties to Bulgaria, I mentioned that I wanted to visit them that coming summer and rectify the deficiencies in my knowledge of Bulgaria. I decided to go to Bulgaria's capital, Sofia, with Silvia Marinovová who

was going there for the Slavonic Seminar in August. Most of my other Czech friends viewed my going to Bulgaria as a joke. One acquaintance couldn't believe anyone would go there nowadays. "I was there once, and I'll never go back," he said. "They're not European at all really. They were burning their trash right near the beach where we were bathing and the clouds of smoke blowing our way really stunk." One older woman warned me that if I go to visit a Bulgarian girl, the family will immediately consider me the fiance. "They're more like orientals," she continued in a strong warning tone. "They have a completely different mentality than we do." She told me repeatedly how they don't have any food at all and how if I'm serious about going, I really ought to bring my own provisions. The porter and the student residence in Prague warned me that "the Bulgarians are hot-tempered and very quick to draw the knife!" Another Czech friend was more moderate. "No, no," he said. "Bulgarians are really nice. But I do remember that when I was there in 1968, they frowned at me and my girlfriend when we kissed on the street. They have a different attitude towards that sort of thing than we do."

The Prague press has the occasional article about Bulgaria. The weekly magazine, Mladý svět [Young World], ran two articles side by side "Taken by Surprise" and "Do Bulgarians Want Socialism?" (33. July 1990, pp.16-17) which described Bulgarian events since November and the election in June 1990 as a well-executed exchange of leadership in what is virtually still a Communist government, and a defeat for the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS). One of the last things I read before my trip was an article in a Czech literary magazine, Tvar (19. 12 July 1990, p. 5), which had been translated from the original in a Viennese magazine. The emigre Bulgarian author, Vesela Malejeva, in her ominously titled article, "Bulgarian, the Language of Death," recalls Bulgarian writer friends who had committed suicide because, in her opinion, they could no longer make themselves heard while living in totalitarianism. She ties this into a larger symptom of totalitarianism, namely the complete breakdown of communication. In these countries, there is a tendency, even stronger than in the West, to talk to, rather than discuss with, someone, often to anyone. In the Prague Metro in November and December of last year, for example, there were some leaflets and small posters addressing this very issue. They were posted on the walls, windows, as well as doors and offered the basic "Rules for Dialogue." I was reminded of this problem again in Bulgaria, when I saw a young man handing out political pamphlets; he was wearing a sweatshirt that said in English, "Communication is the Basis of Art."

My first trip to the Bulgarian Embassy, which is located on Krakovska street, about a 10-minute walk from Wenceslas Square was in mid July (not long after reading the above mentioned article). The experience reminded me of a visit to the pure, unadulterated Czechoslovak authorities of the old days. After being buzzed into a nineteenth century building through a door on the street, Silvia (who came along to help) and I found ourselves on a small driveway with a view of the embassy's backyard.

There were two large piles of trash on the main courtyard. When Silvia, in Bulgarian, asked the porter where to go for visas he quite indifferently pointed to the area opposite his little office. We crossed the driveway where a dusty, dilapidated van was unloading something, and we came to a locked door that had no office hours posted on it. We looked through a large window beside the door and saw two members of the Bulgarian embassy staff sitting in a room, which was dark but for a bit of late morning summer light coming through a slightly opened shutter. The man and woman were relaxed and almost immobile. They looked at us without registering our presence. Concluding it was genuinely too late that day to get a visa, we gave up and left the building. From the sidewalk, we asked through an open window of the embassy when I ought to come back. One Bulgarian woman was preparing coffee and a man and woman were sitting at a table eating rolls and drinking their coffee. Eventually the man, a portly Bulgarian with a large black mustache and half-loosened tie, got up and lumbered to the window. "Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, between 8:00 and 11:00," he muttered, looking down at us from the window and wiping off his moustache, which was dabbed with whipped cream from the pastry he held in his other hand.

My next trip to the embassy proved much more fruitful. I waited for about 20 minutes in a large dimly lit room and read a couple of old issues of Lidové noviny (the old samizdat paper but now one of the main official ones here) and some English pamphlets about the Extraordinary Bulgarian Party Congresses where former Party leader Todor Zhivkov almost exclusively received the brunt for Bulgaria's woes of the past four decades. But for three other men, the room was empty. When a woman appeared at a little window, it caused everyone to race up to her with forced smiles and opened passports. I was surprised that I didn't have to pay any visa fee and that with a written invitation from a Bulgarian, I wouldn't have to pay the compulsory currency exchange at the border. Politely and with a smile, the official told me to pick up my completed visa in a week.

The two-hour flight with Balkan Air was smooth enough and without incident. (Czechoslovak Airlines, who booked the ticket, however, charge foreigners abusively high prices and demand hard currency). During the flight, I read bits of P.J. O'Rourke's Holidays in Hell, which the visa officer at the Canadian Embassy lent me when, while issuing my new passport, he heard where I was going. At the Sofia airport, we were met by Velichko Todorov, who is a former teacher and now a friend of Silvia's. He arranged a place for me to stay and invited Silvia and me to his home for an evening snack. When I stepped out of the airport and heard Bulgarian mixed with Czech and then got into the Škoda that was going to take us to Velichko's home, I actually felt for a moment that I was in Czechoslovakia again. The streets of Bulgaria are full of the Czechoslovak produced vehicle, and Velichko's Škoda is not the result of his love for Czechoslovakia, but of East Bloc trading arrangements.

Into the Ghetto

Studentski grad [Student Town], where the students from the seminar and I stayed, is a huge complex of prefabricated, eight-story concrete buildings. With a seven-foot steel fence along its front and with two disused guard houses and the stubs of mechanisms for zebra-striped barriers at the main entrance, it is quite literally a student ghetto on the edge of Sofia. There are lecture halls with names such as Karl Marx Hall, of course, and a couple of supermarkets. (On my first day in the dry August heat all I wanted was a cold soda water, but I was lucky to be able to get a very warm beer). There were also, thankfully, a few private fruit stands with delicious plums and peaches. The grounds around the buildings are parched fields of weeds, crab grass, plastic cups, and other trash. The trees that were planted not too long ago seem to have never received what they need, especially water, so are stunted and offer no shade. The absence of greenery means one feels the dreadful summer heat all the more. One part of the grounds has stylized sculptures of a giraffe, a camel, and a buffalo beside a dilapidated playground with a rickety swing and ramshackle gazebo. Nearby, soldiers in army fatigues, on break from a nearby base, play ping-pong on an outdoor, steel pingpong table with steel net. There is a small cafe with a patio, where bored-looking students, mostly Africans and Arabs, sip strong espresso and nibble on "banitsa" (Bulgarian strudel filled with sheep cheese) and Bulgarian pizza. There's also a post office around the corner, and though it looks like it's in the middle of a small construction site, it is functioning -- sort of. In fact, there are several construction sites with unfinished buildings all over. Silvia remembers some buildings that look the same as they did when she was in Sofia a few years ago. The construction cranes perch idly over the hollow shells of concrete and rebar, and the buildings are no nearer completion than they were back then. A couple of years ago, Studenski grad was even the home of children from all over the world, when Ludmila Zhivkova, the former Communist leader's celebrated daughter, hosted International Year of the Child. Do you know where your children are?

The rooms of Studentski grad have thin doors and thin walls. For a good part of the evening, I heard one guest in the room beside me suffer the effects of either too much drink or of food that didn't agree with him. Wallpaper that seemed to be from the 1950s was peeling off the walls. At least each room had a bathroom with a toilet, sink and shower. The shower, as is common in Sofia, has no stall of its own and simply sprays all over the concrete floor. This environment, naturally, is cockroach paradise.

"The Twenty-eighth Seminar of Bulgarian Culture"

This seminar or, more precisely, summer school takes place every year in Sofia from 1-31 August. It's part of the University of Sofia, but almost all lectures and

seminar meetings take place right in Studentski grad, hence the students never have to leave the ghetto. About 170 students take part from all around the world, including one elderly Chinese professor, a half-dozen Germans, but mostly Russians and Americans. The director is Ivan Bujukliev and the assistant director is Ivan Pavlov.

The seminar is divided into three levels on the basis of language ability, and there are also special seminars every day in the following areas: Contemporary Bulgarian, Bulgarian Dialectology, Old Bulgarian Literature, New Bulgarian Literature (i.e., from 1878 on), Bulgarian Folklore, Translation, Bulgarian History, and Slavic Byzantine Civilization. The special lectures seem to cover every possible topic an academic can invent within the realm of linguistics, ethnography, and literature, including such grabbers as the "Nominative Case", "Linguistic and Social Questions", "The Cultural Meaning of Apocrypha", "The Ethnogenesis of the Bulgarian Nation", and "Linguistical Geography in Bulgaria". The last special seminar they gave could never have been given in previous years, namely "The Motif of National Destiny in Georgi Markov's Reportage and Vaclav Havel's Dálkový výslech [published in the English as Disturbing the Peace], because of Havel's and the assassinated Markov's obvious significance as opponents of Communist regimes.

While the seminar has played and will continue to play valuable roles, such as providing foreigners a chance to learn Bulgarian in its native setting, as well as to meet Bulgarians and students of Bulgarian, I noticed at one of their large seminars, despite my ignorance of Bulgarian, that there was a definite lack of two-way communication. One journalist from Radio Sofia, who, I was informed later, has her doctor of law and speaks fluent Italian, spent the whole seminar wobbling from speaker to speaker in her high heels and leopard skin outfit and thrusting the mike of her large taperecorder into each of the main speakers' faces. Her admiration for one speaker in particular was more than apparent. (Perhaps, Bulgarian body language is not the language of death). At one point, she went to one of the far walls to test her tapedeck's playback ability. We heard that it was working perfectly as the noisy taped sounds of a few minutes ago reverberated off the back wall. Besides this obstacle, the moderator himself cut off a couple of dialogues, just as a meeting of the minds was finally beginning, and steered the talk into a dead-end. His last bit of destructive moderating was to end the seminar because the dining hall was opening for dinner. This was not done with tact or with the suggestion of any other option but to abandon debate for the pursuit of food.

Find me a Guide

Sofia (according to 1978 figures) has a population of 1,031,597 people. This is almost one-eighth the population of Bulgaria. Sofia is 1280 kilometers from Prague, and at 1990 km. from Moscow, it's also geographically far from the heart of Russia.

The distance between Sofia and Belgrade is 403 km. In the other direction, to Istanbul it's a mere 560 km. (When we heard the news of Iraq's attack and occupation of Kuwait, it became clearer to me that Turkey is the only country between Iraq, Bulgaria, and myself). I learned these facts from a couple of books, Bulgaria: 1300 Years and Sofia: A Guide, which I had borrowed from the small library in the student residence. They were both written in English, and were more often a source of amusement (and sometimes aggravation) than of good advice. Considering all the references to the horrible days of prewar, "monarcho-fascist" Bulgaria, it was odd, for instance, to find the Central House of the People's Army, which was formerly the Military Club built in 1907, described in the guide to Sofia as having "a big salon which used to be the most elegant one in the city." The guidebooks are also heavy on hyperbole, political and otherwise. The monument to the Russian liberators of 1878, is a Russian officer on horseback in the middle of the Parliament Square in front of the "Parliament" and "Sofia" hotels. It is described as "a magnificent architectural and sculptural masterpiece [...] an expression of the profound gratitude of the Bulgarian people to the Russian brothers and liberators." This gratitude, however, took Bulgarians 26 years to express, i.e., from 1879, after the signing of the treaty of San Stefano until the statue's unveiling in 1905. It's hard to agree with the guidebook when it says, "For its architectural and sculptural qualities, the monument is one of the best in Europe." I also thought if I read the oft-repeated phrase "under its branchy wild chestnut trees" one more time I'd toss the book out the window. For a nation that boasts more than a 1300-year existence, it also seems ridiculous to call the history of the University of Sofia "long" when it was only founded in 1888. The book heaps lavish praise on the university students, who, it says,

> have always been the most progressive and active part of Bulgaria's intelligentsia. In 1907, at the opening of the National Theatre, the students hissed and hooted Prince Ferdinand and at his orders the University was closed down for six months. During the years of monarcho-fascist tyranny the university students joined the progressive Bulgarian All-People's Student Union.

(So, what did its authors think of the students' present activities or inactivities? I wondered). Maybe the translations have distorted the authors' real eloquence, but when the Communists heap their vindictive on the old order, it always seems to have that "special" ring: "In January 1944, the District Committee of the Workers' Party came out with an appeal to the Sofia citizens to chase away the nazis and their stooges. Decisive days set in."

Besides the Alexander Nevski Cathedral, the other churches and synagogue, as well as the now pitifully dilapidated Mineral Baths ("under reconstruction"), the university is one of the most attractive buildings in Sofia. It is based on a plan by a

Parisian architect who won a competition held in 1906, but with the usual Bulgarian speed, it seems, construction was not begun until 1920 and the first stage was not finished till 1934. You can imagine the pleasure Bulgarians must have had while trying to study in the midst of construction clamor.

Among other curiosities, Bulgaria still has a street named for the Czech Communist, Klement Gottwald (leader of the wing of the Czechoslovak Communist Party that accepted the Comintern's 21 points and thus split the Party in 1921; President of Czechoslovakia after the seizure of power in 1948). The Czechs, earlier this year had removed statutes of Klement and returned to the town Gottwaldov its original name, Zlin.

Of all omnipresent Soviet symbols, the 34-meter-high Monument to the Soviet Army (with its Soviet soldier, Bulgarian worker, woman and child) protruding obtrusively in a downtown park, is overshadowed only by the 41.5-meter-high Monument to the Anti-Fascist Fighters built in 1956. It's fair to say that Sofia (and Bulgaria) is preoccupied with monuments. They are everywhere. The parks have almost as many small sculptures as they have people. There are statues of naked women lost in contemplation with finger on chin, of toiling workers with legs spread wide as they brace themselves against monarcho-fascist exploitation, and a special favorite is the sad granny with elbows on knees and hands propping up her weary, shawl-covered head.

In contrast to the two examples of praise for Sofia, one by the deputy editor-in-chief of the Warsaw newspaper, Tribuna Ludu, and the other by a university student from Birmingham, which are quoted in the guidebook, I wasn't so struck by Sofia's charms. I thought perhaps I might be looking in the wrong places, so when I heard that Silvia's Bulgarian teacher was employed in the Institute of Architecture, I asked if she could help me out in my search for Sofia's better buildings. The teacher was eager to help and -- despite another appointment she had that afternoon -- brought us to the Institute of Architecture's library.

The Institute of Architecture is in a drab building whose interior appears to be disintegrating before one's eyes. There was a huge hole in the floor and ceiling where they were apparently carrying out some construction, but there wasn't a worker in sight. The columns inside the institute were once painted to look like marble but this finish is chipping off. The stairs are severely worn with age. After Silvia's teacher introduced us at the institute, the librarian came out from behind her glass teller's window. She assured us that their library was rich in material. "In all languages, too." she said with a sweep of the hand over the card catalogue drawer. Most of the entries, however, were in Bulgarian and Russian. The few books in German were mostly translations into German done in Sofia by Bulgarians. We found nothing like a survey or even a specialized book on the architecture of prewar Bulgaria or Sofia. (In

Czechoslovakia, by contrast, the state printing houses published many good and attractive books on local architecture). The librarian then led us to a conference room, which had two reasonably sized bookcases. In a relatively new edition of the Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects we finally found some concise and presumably reliable information on Bulgarian architects of the interwar period and the buildings that they designed (mostly for the government offices and community functions). Interestingly, of the eight Bulgarian architects in the encyclopedia, six graduated from polytechnical schools abroad (Berlin, Munich, Vienna, and Prague) where they were studying in the 1890s and 1900s. One of the best things Bulgaria and the other East Bloc countries could do for themselves right now, if they could afford it, would be to make a practice of sending their best students abroad.

Street Scenes

The streets of Sofia are not only full of Škodas, but there are also many exhaust-spewing and unshapely East-Bloc-manufactured automobiles: Moskvitches, Zhigulis, ZILs (which stands for "Zavody Ilyichi Lenina" or the Factories of Ilyich Lenin), and Polski Fiats. Many fashionable Sofians, however, won't be caught dead in these relics. Hence, what first appeared to be an abundance of West German tourists on Sofia's streets was really prosperous Bulgarians who've taken advantage of the new laws permitting the import of foreign autos. When a Bulgarian buys a second-hand BMW or, more often, Mercedes (curiously, most often they were the color of coffee with cream), he is sure to leave the 'D' for Deutschland on the trunk or rear fender. On the section of Vitoshe Boulevard that is still open to private vehicle traffic, these German luxury imports are double-parked and tripled-parked, while on the sidewalks in front of the cafes their owners sip espresso from little plastic cups and ogle each other and each other's designer jeans, Benetton T-shirts, and skin-tight miniskirts. The visible application of facial cosmetics for macho men also seemed to be in vogue. Small outdoor cafes are numerous and all serve cherry drink and espresso coffee in disposable, plastic demi-tasses. Many of the cafes also have the same plastic chairs, and along the side of the armrests are hundreds of little black spots melted in where Sofian café goers prefer to butt out their cigarettes.

Small crowds are always clustered outside the cinemas, as people crane their necks to read what films are, and will be, playing. Sofia has 39 cinemas but only 28 were showing films. A typical cinema has between three and four screenings a day. At the time I was there, 34 different films were playing. The critically acclaimed Spanish film by Pedro Almodovar, Women on the Edge of a Nervous Breakdown, Bertolucci's Last Tango in Paris, Emanuelle (this, by the way, is the first erotic film to be shown publicly in Czechoslovakia probably since their own Ecstasy of the 1930s; perhaps is making a point of promoting Emanuelle in Eastern Europe), Mike Nichol's Working

Girl, the critically acclaimed Sex, Lies and Video Tape (which hasn't made it to Prague yet), Terry Gilliam's Baron Munchausen, and, what is touted as the best Russian film of the perestroika period, Town Zero were among the better films I was able to recognize.

From street vendors, people were buying corn on the cob, which was almost dayglow yellow. They ate it while walking and often tossed the horribly dark brown cobs on the side of the road or on an overflowing trash bin when they were finished. Old ladies with scarves on their heads were sitting by the sidewalks and selling paper cones full of sunflower seeds. One night, we saw an old couple scolding teenagers who were sitting on a bench in the park in front of the super-modern and grandiosely conspicuous Ludmilla Zhivkova Cultural Center. They pointed to the shells that the kids had spit or tossed all over the path and shouted at the indifferent teens. Ice cream, which is like colored, sweet, but otherwise nearly flavorless ice-milk, is also sold everywhere, often from street vendors who use old-fashioned balances with brass weights to measure out an exact scoop.

Rat Race

It's easy to get around Sofia by public transport. The trams and buses come at frequent intervals. The trams for the most part, however, are filthy. The floors are thick with caked-on dust and the paint on the seat frames and hand-railings is almost all chipping off. At night the tram cars are illuminated by light bulbs whose transparent glass and little glowing filaments look like something out of the 1930s. The ride is not only jerky in a back-to-front motion but also shakes from side to side. True the bus tickets in Prague, printed on thin newsprint or with blurry ink from the automatic dispensers, may look like toy tickets compared with those in America and Western Europe, but in Sofia what passes as a bus ticket looks like the fortune from a fortune cookie or like a laundry ticket. The bus is almost always a stretch "Icarus" made in Hungary, with "EcoBus" written on the side in bright letters in English and Bulgarian. This is a lovely sight to behold as the bus lets out a thick cloud of black smoke. I've been inside the bus when a blast of the exhaust has wafted in through the little sliding windows. Once at the stop, the bus starts leaving again as soon as the last person boarding has but one foot in the door.

The driver sits in a little cabin, but since the weather is so beastly hot in summer, most of them often keep the door to this cabin open by tying the handle to the railing that divides the stairway and leaves the driver a narrow entrance and exit of his own. In Prague, where the buses are also Icaruses (with a name like this does the company also produce aircraft? I wondered), there isn't the same kind of arrangement. Nor is there the same amount of decoration in the driver's booth. In Prague, the driver

decorates his booth with small soccer pennants or sometimes with plastic flowers or a little figurine whose head bobs on a spring. In Sofia, the drivers cram their cabins full of cigarette ads from German and English magazines, which bear the images of lithesome women, waterskiers, and racing cars. The only poster in the rest of the bus (and placed in the window where we would otherwise see the back of the driver's head or a polyester curtain with a loud floral print) is often of a Bulgarian movie star or provocatively posed rock singer. Another difference is that the little cabins in Sofia's buses often contain not only the driver, but also anywhere up to six young people, usually girls, and not less than two visitors at once. The driver's companions will escort him for many stops and, it seemed, this is an evening in itself, not just a ride to another location. Dressed in T-shirts and jeans, puffing on cigarettes and chatting with their friends, the bus drivers often look like they're taking the Dodge pickup out for a joyride.

Late one night the bus back to Studentski grad finally pulled up to the stop. I boarded and then slumped down into the front seat by the door. It took a long time for the bus to pull away, but shortly after getting in motion, the driver brought us all to an abrupt halt. In no time at all, he had leapt up out of his seat and little cabin-cockpit and was down the stairs and on the sidewalk. "It's a rat! It's a rat!" cried the woman behind me. Sure enough, down on the sidewalk was the busdriver, hopping on one leg like a corpulent soccer player or someone dancing a jig. With one swift but dainty kick he sent the rat sailing towards the store fronts and apartment entrances. Then, in hot pursuit and appearing to get a certain sadistic satisfaction or relief of pent-up anger out of the endeavor, he delivered one more kick that sent the rat flying along the edge of the building. Still after his prey, the driver booted it one more time before rejoining us. He scrambled up the stairs into the bus, slapping his hands together indicating the job was done and done well, and he resettled himself into the driver's seat. With only the slightest hint of a grin, he quickly picked up the bus phone, presumably to report the night's victory to his colleagues. Voices behind me in the bus muttered their bewilderment during the next few minutes, but the driver never once turned round or looked in his rearview mirror to see our reactions.

Yours, Derek

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