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Welcome to Bulgaria 2000

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By Whitney Mason

With his stylishly coifed hair and well-cut clothes, Giorgi Kuzmov, known as "George" to his many foreign friends, might not look like someone interested in international affairs. My old friend Frederic, working at the French Embassy in Sofia as the *attaché audiovisuel*, had introduced me to George because, as one of Bulgaria's top TV executives, he knew a lot of Bulgarians who spoke English — and most of them happened to be beautiful young women. But one of the joys of the Balkans, for a reporter, is that here politics is not a subject of interest only to specialists but a universally fascinating aspect of the drama of everyday life.

And so it was perfectly natural that night, as Giorgi and I drove through Sofia's pot-holed streets in his Dodge Voyager van, that he brought up the subject of Kosovo, where NATO would begin air strikes a few weeks later. Wasn't it hypocritical of the U.S. to moralize about Kosovo, Giorgi asked rhetorically, while never raising any opposition to Turkey's oppression of the Kurds? Since then, I have heard that question repeated many times; I have never had a response to offer.

A cool acid jazz tune by US3 was playing loudly when we walked into El Cabana. Giorgi introduced me to three beautiful friends and ordered gin and tonics all around before segueing seamlessly back to Kosovo. "What would Americans say if blacks in New Orleans (where he'd just spent ten days) declared that they wanted independence?" Giorgi asked.

Giorgi asked what I wanted to report on in Bulgaria and I said I was interested in the "Ottoman legacy." A more specific question is why Bulgaria's transition from communism and subservience to Moscow to capitalism and the West has been so much more peaceful than elsewhere in the Balkans. "We are very patient people," Giorgi answered. "There's a joke in Bulgaria: One day the boss of a factory announces that next week the workers will receive just half their salaries; the workers raise no objection. The next week the boss announces that workers will receive no salary at all; again, silence. The next week the boss announces that the workers will have to pay half of their former salaries to him. The week after that, the boss announces that the workers will have to pay their full former salary to him. Still no objection. In the fifth week the boss announces that all the workers will have to hang themselves. Finally one worker raises his hand. 'Just one question,' he says shyly. 'Will you provide the nooses or do we have to provide them ourselves?'" He smoked quietly for a minute then turned toward me. "Want to know why there's no war in Bulgaria? Because we're pussies." This isn't necessarily a bad thing, he added.

One of the things that most impresses me about Bulgarians, in fact, is their ability to indulge their hedonism without the predilection toward self-destruc-

tive excess evident, for example, in Russia. Their approach reminds me of the attitude of most enlisted men in the military, trying to keep their heads down while working the system to minimize their burdens and maximize their pleasures. This passivity has its downside, as evidenced by nearly half a century as the Soviet Union's most loyal toady. At the birthday party of an opera singer one evening an actor in the national theater — who had spent his military service interpreting intercepted American conversations — told me: "We have a saying about ourselves: 'Bulgarians always want freedom as long as there's someone to give it to them'."

One of George's friends, a 25-year-old responsible for the French cable channel TV5 in Bulgaria, had a different explanation for Bulgaria's peacefulness. "The reason there's no war here is that Bulgarians drink too much. I'm serious — Bulgarians would never give up partying in order to fight." I told her that this might seem plausible if most of the worst atrocities in Bosnia hadn't been committed by men smashed on *rakia*, the plum or grape that is the national drink of both Bosnia and Bulgaria.

Another possibility is that perhaps Bulgarians' behavior is moderated by their individualism. "We Bulgarians are great people individually, but in groups we're a disaster," said Giorgi. (This notion echoes the Turkish expression: "*Nerede chokluk, orada bokluk*" — "Where there are many, there is shit.") An illustration of this problem could currently be found in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, where two factions regarded two different men as patriarch, or leader of the church. One claimant had been installed during the communist era and is supported by the Patriarch of Greece, while the other was freely selected by local bishops after the fall of the communism in 1989 and is supported by Bulgaria's democratically elected government.

The next day Giorgi and his assistant, a flamboyantly flirtatious 23-year-old named Eva, showed me some of Sofia's sights. Giorgi took me to look at the main mosque. Though he spoke English well, he'd never heard the word "mosque"; Bulgarians use the Turkish word, "*jammia*." Outside the city's biggest church, Nevski Cathedral, Eva showed me the tomb of Ivan Yazov, author of the nationalist classic "*Pod Igoto*," ("Under the Yoke"). She said the epic was her favorite book.

Giorgi proudly pointed out the proximity of the mosque, synagogue and Orthodox Church, suggesting that a society with such a multicultural tradition couldn't be vulnerable to interethnic strife. (I didn't mention that temples of the three religions stood equally close in Sarajevo.) Again illustrating the ease with which people in the Balkans dip into heavy political discourse, Giorgi asked why the US is determined to create "a Muslim corridor in the Balkans — Bosnia, Kosovo, and maybe in the future parts of Bulgaria?" I told him I was certain that U.S. policy in the Balkans had no such overarching objective but was a set of ad hoc responses driven by television coverage of victims with whom many Americans could identify for the simple, primitive reason that they are white.

The next morning Frederic, George and I were drinking coffee and trying to shake the effects of the previous late night together when George's prospective interpreter for me sashayed into the room. Mila — known to her friends as "Mila Tequila" — was wearing tall boots, Levi's, a red driving cap emblazoned with "Canada," and exuded the brash self-confidence of someone who began tasting success before she'd even had time to crave it. Besides being the manager of a cable-TV company that controls Bulgarian rights to MTV among other stations, she was studying law at the University of Sofia. Feeling rather quaint next to her, I told her I was interested in the "perspective of Turks in the Rhodope Mountains."

"Perspective? I'll tell you their perspective: mountains and sheep!"

Since I was considering hiring her to help me talk with people in the provinces, it was important to try to shake this attitude. I pointed out that while city people always look down on rural folk, it is often they who make history. In Bulgaria, in particular, when the Ottoman authorities didn't allow Christians to carry weapons, many bandits or "*hayduks*" fashioned daggers out of sheep's horns and many of the most famous rebels began their careers as shepherds. A few minutes later Mila declared that she was convinced that talking to Bulgarian Turks would be fascinating.

KURDZHALI

A few days later Mila and I were driving in her '96 Daewoo Racer southeast toward Kurdzhali, one of the biggest concentrations of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria and the stronghold of a powerful Muslim political party called The Movement for the Defense of Rights and Freedoms (its initials are "DPS" in Bulgarian.)

She told me she thought Bulgaria would be better off if all the Turks left. Mila's dim view of Turks came mostly from two famous Bulgarian movies, *Vremya Razdyelno* ("Time to Separate") and *Kozyatrok* ("Goat's Horn"). Set amid the mayhem that characterized the end of Ottoman rule in the Balkans, *Kozyatrok* tells the story of a Bulgarian girl orphaned when Ottoman soldiers brutally murdered her parents. She avenges them by fashioning a knife from a goat's horn and using it to kill dozens of prominent Turks. (This, of course, was just the sort of character I'd invoked to convince her that country people could be interesting.) "This is why Bulgarians don't like Turks," said Mila.

"You mean because of movies like *Kozyatrok*?" I asked, needling her.

"No, because of what the Turks did here. The movie

is true — Turks were always raping Bulgarian girls during the slavery," Mila insisted. Mila's other colleagues later told me they had never visited Turkey, which is just a few hours away by bus, because they share Mila's bias.

Needless to say, the Turks' actual history — or, more accurately, the history of the multi-cultural Ottomans — was not quite as simple as the movies suggest. The Ottomans' "occupation" of Bulgaria lasted 483 years and was mostly peaceful until the last 50 years. In 1884 there were over 700,000 Turks in Bulgaria, nearly a quarter of the population. "The Ottomans offered land to immigrants from the former province, and emigration kept a steady pace. But hundreds of thousands of ethnic Turks remained, offering a challenge to the Bulgarians' perilous sense of Bulgarianness." [1]

After Bulgaria gained independence in 1877, Bulgarian intellectuals set to work to purge Bulgarian of non-Slavic words. Place names were slavicized, and mosques and graveyards were occasionally destroyed. But relations between the Muslim minority — including both Turks and Bulgarian-speaking Muslims derisively known as "Pomaks" — remained reasonably harmonious until the 1960's, when communist leader Todor Zhivkov initiated a policy of gradual ethnic-religious purification.

Early efforts were directed against the Pomaks. In words reminiscent of Ataturk's contempt for Turkey's Muslim brotherhoods, Nikolai Vranchev had predicted in 1948: "There will be a struggle between ignorance and deception, on the one hand, and knowledge and truth on the other. The bearers of the former are the old Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks), and the bearers of the latter are members of the younger generation. Some day the older generation will pass away and take their ignorance with them. The young will remain and consolidate the new system with enlightenment and culture. And then there will not be even a memory of the Bulgarian Muslim problem that troubles us today." [2]

In 1971, the 10th Party Congress began talking about the importance of *priobshtavane* ("homogeneity") and *edinna bulgarska natsiya* ("a unified Bulgarian nation"). The government and its academic toadies argued all non-Bulgarians are actually ethnic Bulgarians just deluded by Ottomans about their true identities.

In 1985, as the purification campaign shifted into high gear, *The Sofia News* reported: "The 1960s witnessed the first big wave of resurging national self-consciousness among Muslim Bulgarians, which found expression in the renunciation by tens of thousands of people of the once assumed personal names of Arabic and Turkish origin." This depiction of events reflects the Bulgarian government's official argument, still widely accepted even by non-Muslim intellectuals, that Pomaks were descended from Bulgarians who had been forcibly converted on pain of death. The more popular view among non-Bulgarian scholars, by contrast, is that most Bulgarian Muslims were induced to convert by economic incentives, namely much lower taxes and grants from the sultan of large tracts of land in return for military service, which was forbidden to Christian subjects.

In 1985 Minister of Internal Affairs Dimitur Stojanov declared: "They are the bone of the bone and the flesh of the flesh of the Bulgarian nation; although the Bulgarian national consciousness of some of them might still be blurred, they are of the same flesh and blood; they are children of the Bulgarian nation; they were forcibly torn away and now they are coming back home. There are no Turks in Bulgaria." In fact, at the creation of the modern Bulgarian state, ethnic Bulgarians accounted for only about half of the state's population, according to Hugh Poulton (referencing W. Hopken, 'From Religious Identity to Ethnic Mobilization') and in 1984 the Turkish minority still accounted for about 10 percent of the population.

In 1985 Zhivkov stepped up his policy of forced assimilation with a violent campaign to force Bulgarian Turks to adopt Bulgarian names and even to stop speaking Turkish among themselves. In Turkey the populist government of Turgut Ozal, urged on by the public, expressed outrage. Mass rallies were allowed in Taksim Square for first time since the 1980 coup and the crowds cheered Ozal's empty threats of marching on Sofia. Turkey opened its borders to refugees and in 1989 the Zhivkov regime, panicking over rising organized discontent among the Turkish community, let them go. Some 300,000 entered Turkey, where they were issued refugee cards for a year, after which they were allowed to become citizens. Despite this relatively welcoming reception, about half the emigrants later returned to Bulgaria.

Mila snapped me out of my ruminations, telling me to listen to the song on the stereo. Played by a band called BTR (the Bulgarian acronym for "armored personnel carrier"), it was a saccharine ballad about unrequited love. In Bulgaria, the names of pop bands are militaristic and hit songs are melodramatically tragic.

On the highway between Sofia and Plovdiv, we passed two haggard, sexless figures that I turned to look at. Mila explained that they were prostitutes, serving truckers coming from Romania and, especially, Turkey. I tried to picture the background of men who would part with their money in order to have sex with these roadside slatterns. Their customers must come from small conservative villages where marriages are arranged and relations between

[1] Empire's Edge, Scott Malcomson, 1994, Faber and Faber
[2] ibid

men and women outside the family cannot exist.

It occurred to me that one reason European and North American diplomats have been more inclined to sympathize with nationalists in the Balkans than with their counterparts farther east, in addition to the obvious tie of Christianity, might be that the Christians' relative liberalism made it possible for expatriate men to fall in love with local girls. How much more vigorously might the great powers have insisted on the creation of an independent Kurdistan if the likes of Charles Crane had associated the mountains of eastern Anatolia with memories of passionate romance?

Mila had assured me several times that she had in mind a restaurant that I'd like for lunch. From the plain running east and west between the snow-capped Sredna Gora range to the north and the Rhodopes to the south, finally arose that ubiquitous monument to globalization, the Golden Arches.

"Is this your secret plan?" I asked.

"Yes, I think it's very good. Is it okay for you?"

"Outstanding!" I said.

Inside Mila ordered a chicken sandwich and fries. In my pidgin Bulgarian I asked for a chicken sandwich with cheese. The girl at the counter gave me a blank look. Mila confirmed that I wanted a chicken sandwich with cheese and translated the order.

"*Ne vozmozhna*," came the response. "Not possible."

Having witnessed such inflexibility in nascent consumer cultures around the world, I smiled. "Not possible?" I asked.

"No," said Mila, "it's not possible." Mila was not your typical communist conformist: in school under the communist regime, she had gotten herself in a lot of trouble by singing the decadent Beatles' song "Yesterday" at a communist music festival and cutting her teacher's hair to conform with the students' required length. Yet even Mila was prepared to accept this expression of command-economy rigidity.

"But really it's very easy to do and I've seen it done in McDonald's all over the world — in Moscow, Korea, Turkey," I said, exaggerating a little my familiarity with the franchise.

"But here it's not possible," the girl repeated.

In virtually every fast-food restaurant one of the dozen or so staff, often the manager, moves faster than his colleagues, his face animated and concentrated; exuding ambition, he is clearly using the fast-food job as a base from which to spring to greater things. Such a person was rushing from the kitchen to the counter as we debated the viability of my special order. Overhearing us — and his pride perhaps pricked by the references to McDonalds in other countries — the manager whirled on his heel and told the girl at the till to put the order through. She and a couple of other workers stared at him, taking in this incarnation of the can-do attitude about which they'd undoubtedly at least read in McDonalds' training materials. The manager bounded toward the register and struck several keys to override the system's rejection of cheese on chicken.

"Well done!" I said; he smiled and gave me a thumbs up before returning to his less revolutionary duties.

Mila and I ate at a table outside, looking at the dusty parking lot full of Mercedes. She explained that the cars belonged to the Plovdiv mafia. When I had first visited Bulgaria in January 1997, the mafia's power had been omnipresent in the form of stickers on cars and businesses declaring the property to be protected by various insurance companies, i.e., racketeers. On this visit the stickers had disappeared and many Bulgarians told me the new liberal government had succeeded in reining in the mafia and pushing them toward more legitimate business. But as other stories and the luxury cars attested, the change wasn't hurting them.

We drove through Assenovgrad and began climbing into foothills of the Rhodopes as they turned golden in the late afternoon sun. The mountains ahead were steep and sharp, too young to have been worn down by the elements. The villages we passed through were poor. Mila pointed out how the locals, impressed by our Sofia license plates, gawked as we sped past.

After winding through the mountains for an hour, we began driving downhill toward two reservoirs. On her mobile phone, Mila called ahead to the manager of the local cable-television operation whom she had asked to help us. At his office on the corner of Kurdzhali's central square, Pechu and his deputy, Ulianna, offered us tea and cigarettes as we discussed the purpose of our visit. I explained that my main interest was relations between Muslims and Christians.

Pechu assured me that news of problems in the area were wildly exaggerated in the Sofia papers. "It's very painful to us that people in Sofia think this area is going to be like Kosovo," said Pechu, his comparison already amplifying the area's drama beyond my expectations. "I hope you're going to explain that it's not like that here. We're all connected, we have no problems here." Uliana said that at Easter Bulgarian Christians took eggs to Muslims; on Muslim holidays Muslims gave sweets to their Christian friends.

"As we all know, peace is more than the absence of

conflict," I answered. "So if there is real harmony between Muslims and Christians, which is rare in this part of the world, I'd be delighted to write about that."

Nowadays there are more mosques than churches in Kurdzhali, but the next day Pechu promised to introduce me to an Orthodox priest, Father Boyan Seriev, who was leading an evangelizing effort that he hoped would reverse the ratio. "In Turkey the government is fighting the Islamist party, and in Bulgaria we're trying to accomplish the same thing by converting Muslims to Christianity. But it's not necessary to be fanatical about Christianity and young people understand that."

Fifteen minutes earlier they had assured us that Christian-Muslim relations were so harmonious as to be banal; now they were singing the praises of a priest who was saving souls from the fanaticism of Islam. The opening seemed promising, for my reporting if not for the region.

"At election time the Sofia papers write things like 'Once again, Kurdzhali will remain a fortress of Ahmet Dogan'," Pechu said. My background reading had informed me that the lightning rod for inter-ethnic tensions in the region was Ahmet Dogan, founder of the Movement for the Defense of Rights and Freedoms — the "DPS" mentioned earlier. Bulgaria's rumor mill linked Dogan to the mafia, and a few months before a court case revealed that before 1989 Dogan had worked for the *Sigurnost*, Bulgaria's feared counterpart to the KGB.

"In reality people here just care about who's the best candidate," said Pechu.

Statistics belie that reality. In the October 1991 elections, the DPS won over 8 percent of the vote, roughly corresponding to the portion of the population that isn't ethnically Bulgarian. The Movement gained 24 members of parliament, over 650 village mayors and 20 municipal mayors and held the balance of power between former communists and the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS). In 1994 elections the DPS won 15 seats in parliament with 5.4 percent of the vote.

Until 1985, Pechu explained, the Kurdzhali electoral district comprised just the town and its immediate suburbs. That year an almost entirely Muslim town 20 kilometers along the shore of the reservoir was attached to the Kurdzhali district. With this expansion, Christians became a minority in the electoral district. In the city, the ratio of Christians to Muslims — or, as locals say, "Bulgarians" to "Turks" — is 60-40; in the district as a whole the ratio is 30-70. There is now a movement to split the district so that Christians will once again represent a majority in the part of the district where most live.

"This conflict between Muslims and Christians made Kurdzhali the political hotspot of Bulgaria," said Pechu. At election time the papers say there are three key cities to watch: Sofia, Varna and Kurdzhali.

"For Dogan, it's an honor to be Turkish," said Uliana. "They [Muslims] believe that if the mayor isn't Turkish, they'll be oppressed again." Since the end of the name-changing campaign in 1989, Muslims around Kurdzhali have remained deeply mistrustful of the Slav-dominated national government and convinced that the DPS represents their only defense against renewed oppression. Since Muslims outnumber Christians in the greater Kurdzhali district, the DPS has a virtual lock on the area's votes. In this unassailable position, said Pechu and Uliana, the party has undertaken a little oppression of its own. They offered as an example the party's replacement of the experienced Christian manager of a military-instruments factory with a Muslim who'd spent his career in a state bakery. Predictably, say our hosts, the factory's fortunes immediately plummeted. Yet when I asked whether it was necessarily due to mistakes made by the new Muslim director, they conceded that the market for military instruments had also collapsed.

Not all Muslims in the area support Dogan. Most still scratch out an increasingly difficult living as tobacco farmers. With family incomes of between $20 and $40 a month, it's little surprise that the farmers' top political demand is state support for tobacco prices, which Dogan has repeatedly promised to push but has never delivered. They continue to hope their ship will come in after their vote for Dogan; if he doesn't achieve price guarantees after the next mayoral elections next October, his support may finally begin to waver. But our hosts were convinced that most tobacco farmers were "fanatically conservative and will continue to believe every new promise Dogan makes."

At around seven we moved from the cable company's shabby offices to a chalet-like hotel on a hill overlooking the city. The place had been built as a retreat for departed Stalinist Zhivkov, known by the officially affectionate nickname of "Tato," meaning "Papa." Now, Pechu told us with an ill-fitting swagger, it was managed by an old mate of his who had promised to let us have a big room with two beds for just $20.

During dinner the manager joined us for a few minutes and Pechu introduced him as Nikki. He was small and dark, with a swarthy, decadently baggy face that one would say had character if it weren't constantly animated by puerile affectation. He invited us to join him after dinner in the bar upstairs.

The restaurant conformed, inevitably, to the universal communist conception of high class: blond wood paneling, bright lights, quietly obsequious waiters in bow ties. The "band," two kindly-looking, middle-aged and bearded men, were playing Serge Gainsbourg's "Je t'aime

beaucoup," singing the words in Bulgarian.

There were only a few other customers, most dressed in the aggressively cheap style of Bulgaria's underworld. At the table next to ours sat three fine specimens, two men and a woman. One of the men was short with shifty eyes and a paunch, gold chains around his neck — clearly the brains of the group. The other was built like a bouncer, his neck swelling beyond the width of his little ears, his square jaw cut like a crude Soviet statue of a hero of industry. He had the posture of an automaton and the empty expression to match. The woman looked like a typical streetwalker: knee-high black boots, tights, a form-fitting miniskirt, her sallow expression set off by raccoon-like black eyeliner and mascara. That night Mila and I were kept awake by the sounds of male growling, along with a ridiculously theatrical rendition of a woman's orgasm, sounds that we both felt sure came from this trio.

For dinner we were joined by a young Bulgarian-Turkish journalist named Fekria. With a university degree from Sofia, Fekria supported the ruling Social Democrats and worked for a party-affiliated paper called *Demokratsia*. She was further isolated from the local Turkish community by the fact that nearly all her family had emigrated to Turkey, among the half-million people — half of all the Muslims in the Kurdzhali region — to leave since 1989. The youngest and most ambitious went to Europe, she said, and the rest to Turkey, where most had relatives. Since Turkey clamped down on immigration from Bulgaria in 1989, Bulgarian Turks have been paying about $600 apiece to smugglers to get them into the country. Entire villages have been abandoned.

Fekria said that many Muslims supported the DPS despite loathing it, saying better "our scoundrels than theirs." During the name-change campaign, Fekria explained, the DPS effectively defended minority rights and at the same time became an exclusively Turkish party. Bulgaria's political balance in the '90s had been good to it, allowing the DPS's few deputies to wield disproportionate power as swing voters.

JUST DESSERTS

I paid for dinner, about $40 for the five of us, plus a bit extra as a tip, which the Bulgarians revealingly call "*bakshish*." Mila and I, rather rashly it seems in retrospect, went to the bar to meet Nikki for a nightcap. The bar was a parody of communist kitsch: red lights were trained on bouquets of dried flowers giving these dead things a preternaturally lurid vitality, like a cross between the table of *Dickens's Great Expectations* and the colors I imagined from the hell depicted in Sartre's *No Exit*.

Nikki, whose full name was Nicholai Surkov, beckoned us to join him in a booth. Mila scooted in next to our host and I after her. Nikki told us, his voice dripping with false modesty, that he had played an important role in the inter-communal strife that had attracted me to Kurdzhali. Before the telling his tale, Nikki asked us what we'd like to drink. Mila and I said we'd have whatever he was drinking and we were duly served glasses of straight vodka with orange-soda chasers.

His face animated by expressions intended to convey sagacious world-weariness, Nikki eased into his monologue as if Mila and I had been pleading with him to explain "How, how, has such a noble man as you wound up presiding over this sorry relic of a bar?"

Nikki was nearing 30 and touring Bulgaria as an illusionist in 1985 when the communist government of Todor Zhivkov launched the most aggressive phase of its assimilation campaign. Hundreds of police in armored personal carriers were deployed in Kurdzhali, enforcing a ban on speaking Turkish, which was then the first language of half the local population, and forcing Muslims to adopt Christian names and entirely abandon their Turkish ones. Members of Komsomol, the communist youth organization, and government workers were also employed to aid the name-change campaign. For four years the government churned out intensive propaganda about how Turkey was Bulgaria's inveterate enemy.

In Bulgaria the summer of '89 was known as the "Big Vacation." Fed up with years of persecution by the Zhivkov regime and welcomed by Turkey, thousands of Muslims abandoned their jobs and fields just as the crucial summer planting season for tobacco began. Bulgarian professionals had to help with the crop and Bulgarian factory workers put in 16-hour days to fulfill contracts. Ten years later, said Nikki, the Turks' behavior is understandable; but at the time, they were hated for helping to destroy the socialism in which many Bulgarians still believed. This latest betrayal, as many Bulgarians saw it, came on top of family stories of Turkish atrocities in the last couple of years before Kurdzhali was transferred from Ottoman control to Bulgarian in 1912.

Zhivkov fell in November 1989. The next month, at 7 p.m. on December 29, 1989, Nikki recalled with dramatic precision, the announcement came over the TV and radio that Bulgarian Muslims would be allowed to reassume their Muslim names and to speak Turkish. The ethnically mixed regions of the country exploded. Now 33 and working as a taxi driver, Nikki and 50 colleagues agreed not to drive Turks. The taxis formed a column and drove around town blaring their horns. Arriving in Kurdzhali's main square, someone produced a manual typewriter on which Nikki began to hunt and peck a sort of manifesto asserting that all loyal Bulgarians should have Bulgarian names.

"Leading the strike was a huge responsibility," said Nikki, illustrating the point with the rather distasteful

non sequitur that during this period he hadn't changed his socks for 11 days.

"The truth about Kurdzhali," said Nikki, "is that the town is dying. In 1985 the population was about 70,000; now it's just 29,000. This is the tragedy for people like me who've decided to stay here."

Nikki manifested the demeaning consequences of this "tragedy" in a predictably pitiful way. After finishing the epic of his anti-heroic stand against cultural pluralism, Nikki leaned toward Mila and talked earnestly at her for several minutes. Back in our room Mila explained that Nikki had urged her to "join him for a drink" after I'd gone to sleep. Surely she didn't expect to have a romance with me, he'd said; I was obviously gay (!). Needless to say, Mila had no interest in seeing any more of our charming host. Around two in the morning the phone rang. Mila answered. It was Nikki, pleading with her to join him for that drink. She declined and returned to bed. About an hour later the phone rang again. This time we both ignored it. But this wasn't the last injury we suffered from our brush with this little man who'd chosen the wrong side in a dying town.

When we checked out the next morning, the receptionist said the manager — our friend Nikki — had phoned to remind her to charge the full 60-dollar foreigner rate for the room — over three times the Bulgarian rate we'd been guaranteed the previous evening. Mila was furious, feeling like a prostitute-in-reverse. But since the hotel held our passports and we had interviews to get to, I paid up.

KIRKOVO

After a quick breakfast of *burek* (the meat or cheese-filled pastry ubiquitous in the Balkans and Turkey), Mila and I head south toward the small, half-abandoned tobacco-farming town of Kirkovo where we have an appointment with the town manager. Two young women in nice-looking long skirts and coats are hitchhiking and we pick them up. One is a young mother staying at home, the other works in the personnel department of a building-materials factory. Both support Ahmet Dogan, saying that his Movement for the Defense of Rights and Freedoms is the only protection they have from the harassment they experienced in the late '80's, when both women's families kept them inside the house for months and soldiers shot several Turks in the area.

We drop the women in the local hub of Momchilograd. Further south the road turns bad and in places is washed out entirely. Armed soldiers are walking along the road. The buildings are decrepit. The civilians look darker, perhaps because they have more Anatolian blood, or maybe from long hours working under the sun. The area looks almost like a war zone, or at least as if it wouldn't change much if it became one.

An hour's drive from Kurdzhali we reach the concentration of crude breezeblock buildings and chicken coops that is Kirkovo. City Hall is a two-story structure in the center. The only light inside comes through the windows; the electricity is out. We find the young city manager, Fikret Hussein, in his upstairs office.

In 1989, Hussein tells us, 47,000 people — all ethnic Turks — lived in Kirkovo and its surrounding villages. Ten years later the population is just 27,000, and still shrinking. The main problem is unemployment. Under the communist regime there were a number of factories in the area. After the fall of Zhivkov nearly all of them shut. These days there are 2,000 professional positions in Kirkovo, half of them in the state health service.

After four years as Kirkovo's city manager Hussein is among the best-paid professionals in town, earning $90 a month — gross. After taxes he has $60 left. With this amount he can eat lunch in a cheap restaurant every day and keep himself in cigarettes and coffee. He also owns a little café, which brings in another $90 a month. Officially, it's losing money; by thus evading taxes, it makes a little over $100 a month.

The other 25,000 people in Kirkovo depend on tobacco and are not living nearly so high as Hussein. Most of the farmers grow a rich, expensive tobacco called "Zhebel Basma." Until recently, all the best Bulgarian cigarettes included some Zhebel Basma as a flavor enhancer; nowadays, cheaper artificial flavor enhancers have rendered the rich tobacco obsolete. With current prices for tobacco, the average family in Kirkovo makes between $20 and $40 per month. A loaf of bread, cheaper than in Sofia, costs about 40 cents.

When Mila and I visit the farmers are on strike, demanding that the government guarantee a decent price for their crop. The land belongs to the government and the government negotiates with buyers on the farmers' behalf. When the buyers renege on a contract they've signed ahead of the harvest, the government does nothing to enforce the contract. Hussein says Bulgarian middlemen are exploitative, often refusing to buy until the warm spring weather threatens to spoil the tobacco and make it impossible to sell. This year there was a surplus of 1,000 tons of tobacco, which the government bought at a low fixed price. "The government doesn't do anything to improve the system because all the tobacco farmers are Turks and when the rest of the economy is bad, they get the lowest priority," said Hussein.

In such conditions it's not surprising that those who haven't physically moved to Turkey spend an increasing amount of time thinking about it. Those who can afford it — 2,000 to 3,000 people, Hussein estimates — receive Turkish TV by satellite dish. Many children study

Turkish four hours a week after regular school hours. Every year about a thousand people leave Kirkovo, most of them for Turkey. Hussein believes the rate of emigration among the young will increase, leaving only old people.

In early 1990 the Turkish embassy in Sofia was giving out 6,000 visas a month, the sole criterion being knowledge of Turkish. As happened in Bosnia before the war, poor Bulgarian Muslims were swiftly moving from the country into the city; unlike Muslims in Bosnia, most Bulgarian Turks preferred Turkish cities to Bulgarian ones. In 1992 Turkey tightened immigration requirements and in 1993 only 70 to 80 people were allowed to immigrate to join family already in Turkey.

Reflecting on the assimilation campaign, Hussein says with no sign of irony: "My personal opinion is that it's impossible to ask someone to choose a new name for himself, because a name is like religion — it's something you're given by your parents." Indeed, during the communist period a religion was only something inherited from one's family, since everyone in practice was an atheist. The 46 mosques in the Kirkovo region were all closed and bars became the places where people gathered, there to imbibe the state-sponsored opiate of the masses, plum brandy.

Nowadays, says Hussein, the government is supporting (Orthodox) Christian missionaries who come to areas like this and create social problems. The missionaries offer presents of money, clothes and food to induce Muslims to convert. "They're pushing people to do something they don't want and creating social tensions," says Hussein.

"TAKING BACK" BULGARIA'S MUSLIMS

The most successful such missionary is a burly Orthodox priest in Kurdzhali named Father Vanya Seriev. Born a "Pomak," a Bulgarian-speaking Muslim, Seriev studied law in Sofia before receiving his calling not merely to convert to Christianity, but to become an evangelizing priest. Seriev tells me he studied theology for two years before taking vows and returning to Kurdzhali. What Seriev neglects to mention, but I learn later in Sofia, is that between law and theology he worked for the secret police; this prompts me to wonder whether in this instance God may have chosen to work through an officer in the *Sigurnost*. For nine years now he has been working on converting Bulgarian-speaking Muslims "back" to the Orthodoxy of their distant forebears.

"When I was young I was a nonbeliever, but I was never really an atheist," Seriev says. "I always respected religion. But it's only God, who can make miracles, who gave me this chance to save souls. The thoughts I had came from Jesus; if they'd come from Mohamed, I would have become a Muslim.

"I felt called to become a priest and save my brothers who were forcibly converted by the Turks, says Seriev. "This is both an historical and moral imperative since centuries ago these people were Orthodox. Now God has decided to take them back."

This phrase, used as it usually is as a euphemism for death, gives me a chill. He refers to the conversion of Bulgarians as "a huge loss of blood from the body of the nation." Seriev is most interested in young blood. "It's not kind to change the beliefs of old people," he explains. Seriev's own parents remain Muslim.

For all his serene demeanor and references to his humble dependence on his God, Seriev's modesty rings false. He emphasizes that he is not paid (which can only be true in a narrow technical sense, since someone obviously puts food on his family's table). He pronounces that his work is very difficult, but well worth it. (Difficult in comparison with what, I wonder — his desk job in the *Sigurnost* or farming a near-worthless tobacco crop?) Seriev says further that he is sustained by the conviction that he is the right person for this heroic mission. And in case his visitors haven't gotten the picture that we were talking with a living legend, Seriev mentions that an organization called the American Biographic Institute has named him as one of the 500 most influential leaders for the beginning of the 21st Century.

Despite Seriev's imperious tone when talking about evangelizing, he expressed respectful sympathy for the Muslim supporters of the DSP. "They still have a clear memory and fears from 1985. So they're looking for protection, because based on hard experience they don't trust the Bulgarian government." But he said there is no danger of tensions between Christians and Muslims escalating unless it's provoked by outside influence.

The deep mutual distrust we had heard so much about seems to me dangerous enough, without any outside help. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger has written: "Where the state can no longer enforce its monopoly on violence then everyone must defend himself. Even Hobbes, who concedes almost unlimited executive authority to the state, says of this situation that: 'The subjects' duty towards their sovereign lasts only as long as he is able to protect them through his power. Man's natural right to protect himself when no one else is in a position to do so cannot be withheld by any treaty'."[3]

SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE

Our last stop before leaving Kurdzhali was Pechu's office where our enthusiastic host wanted to interview both of us

[3] *Civil Wars*, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 1994, The New Press.

for a local cable-news channel. He'd given no indication of what he wanted to talk about and Mila and I, not being fussed about being on camera, hadn't given it a thought. Pechu introduced us to a heavyset young woman with dyed blonde hair who would interview us. Everyone seemed quite excited. Mila and I sat on one side of a long table with the interviewer and cameraman on the other.

In a cheerful tone, the interviewer asked me how I assessed the political situation in the area. I answered that the lack of trust and communication between Muslims and Christians struck me as potentially dangerous. The interviewer looked a bit bemused, as if I'd deviated from the script. As if trying to prompt me back toward the agreed-upon scenario, she asked another question about local politics, more slowly so as to give me time to remember the correct response.

Still thinking that she wanted a serious answer to her serious question, I told her: "The main danger as I see it is that the Muslims' mistrust of the government leads them to uncritically support the DPS. This concentrates power in the hands of the DPS without the DPS effectively being held accountable. As the saying goes, 'absolute power corrupts absolutely,' so inevitably the DPS's lock on power will lead to abuses. These abuses — for instance giving Muslims preference in employment — will naturally lead to resentment among Christians. Given that they're outnumbered locally, disaffected Christians might turn to Sofia for support."

As I spoke, my interlocutor's eyes widened with alarm. "How long have you been here?" she demanded. "How do you know all these things? Who gave you these ideas?"

I said that I'd spent almost a year in Bosnia and had studied the Balkans before arriving in Bulgaria two weeks before. But the main points of my analysis, I explained, were based on what we'd heard from local people in the 24 hours I'd spent in Kurdzhali.

Her face twisted with a mix of fear and fascination, as if she were regarding a mutant, the interviewer asked for my prognosis for the area; was it really so bleak? Still oblivious to her craving for soothing words, I answered that although civil war may be unlikely, it was essential for local people to face the latent dangers in order to defuse them. Specifically, they had to bear in mind that if interethnic unrest in Kurdzhali turned violent, the Muslims may well be offered support by Turkey — particularly if nationalists gained power in Turkey (as happened in the April elections).

The interviewer looked aghast. "For my final question, do you have some positive impressions from your visit?"

Mila forced a smile. "*Please* say something nice that has nothing to do with politics," she said in an exaggeratedly light tone of voice.

"Ah, well, certainly..." I stammered, wracking my brains for plausible compliments. "The landscape is absolutely gorgeous," I said, smiling as cheerfully as possible. "And people have been very kind to us. And the landscape really is beautiful," I said, repeating myself.

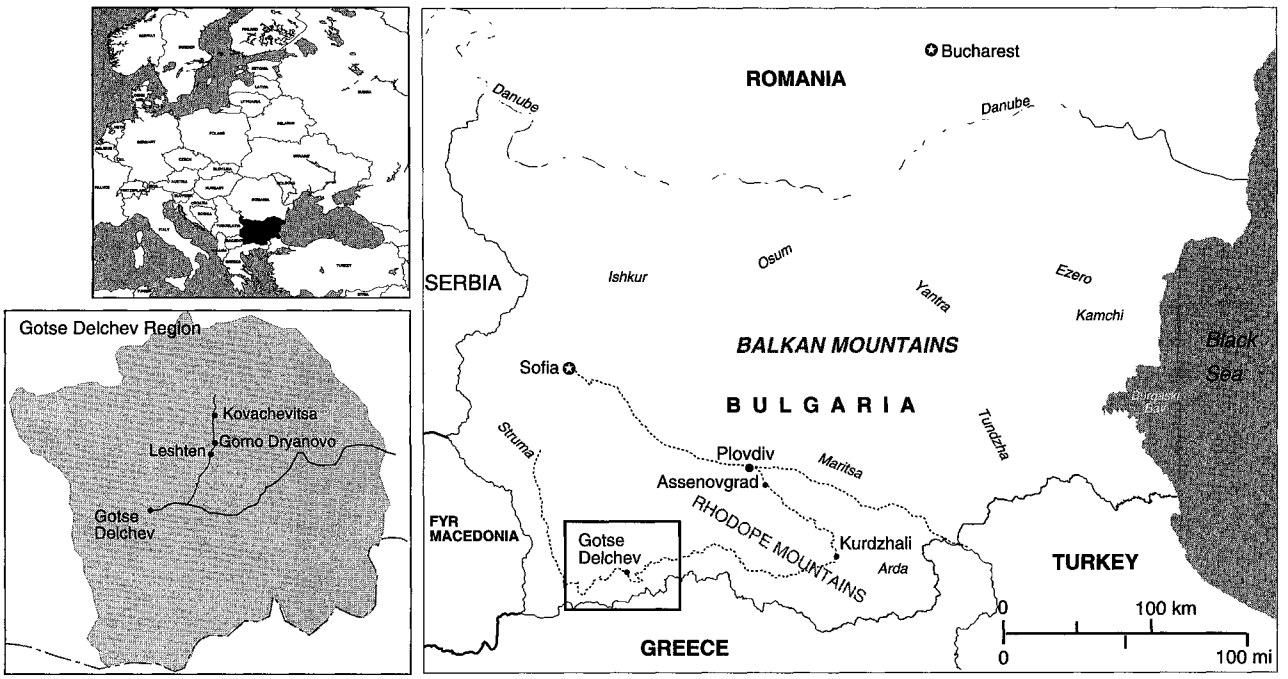
When Mila and I got into her car she shot me a reproachful look. "You should never have talked about civil war. That's not at all what they wanted to hear. They just wanted you to say how much you'd enjoyed your visit."

As we climbed the mountains behind Kurdzhali, Mila continued to argue that I'd planted a dangerous idea in people's minds; violent unrest could never come to pass as long as no one was allowed to speak its name. Suppression of such rhetoric, of course, was the strategy that from 1945 to 1991 had generally maintained peace among the various peoples of Yugoslavia. While I agreed entirely with Mila's reading of the interviewer's expectations, I rejected her conclusion that I should have given her the groundless optimism she wanted to hear. Whether the taboo against expressions of national consciousness in Yugoslavia was essential to the decades of peaceful co-existence or merely delayed and exacerbated the inevitable day of reckoning is debatable. My own conviction is that the suppression of resentments is as disastrous in communities as in families. Not talking about the potential for interethnic conflict before the name-changing campaign in 1985 may well have helped to forestall the problem; but silence will certainly not put the genie back in the bottle. What is more likely than violence, in any case, is that the Bulgarian Turks will continue to emigrate, leaving behind a desolate wasteland that many Christians will inevitably describe as "peace."

DRIVING TO LESHTEN

We are driving south from Sofia, Bulgaria toward the village of Leshten in the Pirin Mountains near the Greek border. My old friend Frederic Jugeau, the *attaché audiovisuel* at the French embassy in Sofia, is driving. In the passenger seat is a friend of Fred's named Marc who's just arrived from Lille to assess an educational program sponsored by France's top journalism faculty. I sit in the back with Ressa, a brilliant 18 year-old whose father had recommended her to be my translator.

Just 40 miles out of Sofia we stop at a roadside food stand where I order a sandwich of small cylindrical pieces of ground meat that the Bulgarians, like the Turks, call *kepabchi* and the erstwhile Yugoslavs call *cevapchichi*. Fred and Marc are going to Leshten just to relax, while I'm going to explore the village of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, known by the mildly pejorative term "Pomaks," just up the road. It occurs to me that Frederic and Mark will be in an unusual position to critique the portion of my



newsletter devoted to this place, since they'll see it for themselves.

"You do understand that as a journalist I'll naturally be inclined to invest the place with a bit more political tension than may be immediately evident to you," I say with mock self-consciousness.

Frederic laughs. "You're going to make this beautiful place sound 'picrocoline'," he says, referring to the bellicose primitives in Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel.*

"Jean Baudrillard wrote a ridiculous book called *L'Amerique* which he begins by confessing, *'Je cherche l'Amérique sidérale'*," I say, "so why shouldn't *I 'chercher les Pirins picrocoline'*?" This becomes a great joke for the next 24 hours: based in the almost uninhabited and idyllically beautiful village of Leshten, Ressa and I will devote the next two days to searching for seeds of conflict in the serenely bucolic community of Gorno Dryanovo.

For another three hours we drive south between snow-capped mountains. After passing through a largish town, Frederic makes a fish-hook-turn to the left and we begin climbing into the mountains. After a couple of minutes we see groups of rough shacks on either side of the road, which is crowded with milling people as well as a donkey or two and several goats. These people are gypsies.

A few minutes later we see a man making a feeble gesture to hitch a ride. Fred asks whether we should pick him up and I say I'd rather not because he looks smashed.

After reaching Leshten we are shown to our rooms in beautiful restored houses ranged against a steep hillside, then sit down in the only restaurant for a dinner of *shopska* salad — tomatoes, cucumbers and Bulgaria's delicious crumbly white cheese — along with two kinds of homemade sausages and fried potatoes. Fred makes some remark about the particular bad taste of the recorded music, to which Marc takes exception, arguing that that the offense is not to good taste but to the very notion of taste. Frederic is visibly roused by the challenge and they are off, immersed for the next 40 minutes in the sort of scholastic debate on aesthetics that only Frenchmen can sustain.

Ressa and I, meanwhile, discuss the Macedonian question, an issue about which she has managed to develop surprisingly strong feelings in her 18 years. Ressa argues that Macedonia is culturally and historically indivisible from Bulgaria. She regards the Macedonian sense of nationhood as a sham propagated by Bulgaria's enemies and its continuing independence a tragedy that Bulgaria must continue to try to overcome. She supports her argument with reference to obscure aspects of Bulgaria's medieval history. For all I know, they may all be accurate. What strikes me as more interesting and important is that this bright young woman feels so passionately that they are relevant.

Ressa, who is studying political science at the university, says most of her professors are old communists who have embraced their vague notion of American democracy with the same uncritical orthodoxy as they did communism. She and her peers, on the other hand, are left to wrestle alone with the substance underlying the new rhetoric. "I've always felt I was a member of an experimental generation," says Ressa. "Even the first vaccine I received was an experiment, and everything after

that was an experiment too: different ways of teaching — American and French and German. We should just decide on one model. The point is not to develop some warped hybrid of cultures, but to develop our own unique Bulgarian model — built on our own traditions. Bulgarians are very conservative people; our way of life is based on the family and we should base the whole system on that."

The next morning Ressa and I wake early and by 8:30 we reach Gorno Dryanovo. We park Frederic's Peugeot between two old Russian Ladas in the main square before a row of old men who are sitting along a rough bench and talking quietly, or just sitting. The sun is shining and the temperature mild.

Ressa and I begin ambling down the road. We see two older women, their heads loosely covered by scarves, and an old man in a beret. *"Dobro utro,"* ("Good morning") we say to them. To Ressa I say: "Ask them where we can get a cup of coffee?"

Further along the road, they tell us, we'll find lots of cafes. We thank them and walk on. On our right we see a low building with a small sign on the door announcing that it is a café. We open the door and enter the dark room. There are four or five booths, one of them occupied by a teenage couple cuddling each other, another by two girls who look to be in their early twenties. Pictures of half-clad women decorate the walls while on the inevitable TV play traditional musicians.

Gorno Dryanovo has a population of 1,200, all of them Bulgarian-speaking Muslims or "Pomaks." Unlike neighboring Christian towns, which in the last 20 years have become ghost towns inhabited on weekends by Sofia's bourgeoisie, Gorno Dryanovo is growing. Sonia, our waitress, tells us that few people leave and "We had seven new babies just in February."

Sonia herself studies education in a university in a fair-sized city an hour's drive away and works in the café on vacations. She seems very happy to talk. She tells us that there will be a wedding later, between a local girl and a Muslim boy from another village. Though the marriage may have been partially arranged, she says, the couple probably met in a disco. Discos, Sonia says, are very popular. She goes all the time.

Trying to picture what a disco here might be like, I ask whether people in Gorno Dryanovo drink.

Sonia laughs. "Of course we do," she says with a surprisingly cool self-assurance. People know the Koran, she says, but they don't follow many of its rules. Most also eat pork.

After a couple of cups of very tasty coffee, Sonia offers to introduce us to some more people. As we walk along the main road, an older woman accosts us to say that Sonia is the brightest and best-educated young person in the village. She tells us that several others are studying at universities in Bulgaria and three boys are studying in Istanbul. Only two families, though, have emigrated to Turkey.

Sonia takes us to a very small shop near the entrance to the village and introduces us to its proprietress, Ferda. Beneath her bright headscarf, Ferda's eyes shine with mischief. She says we've come on a good day, since everyone will be out for the wedding. Twenty years ago, she tells us, she defied her traditionalist mother-in-law to become the first woman in the village to be married in a white dress. Her husband supported her desire to be "modern."

After some minutes Sonia returns with the village imam, Arif. He is a robust 27-year-old who's as comfortable chopping wood for his family's stove as he is reading the Koran in Arabic. He has bright green eyes, a dark black beard and fair skin. As I suppose one might expect of a backwoods imam, he is wearing a heavy sheepskin coat.

"When I was nine years old one night I dreamed I had to go to a cemetery that was a couple hundred yards from our house. I half awoke and walked to there. Next to a stone, I found two sheets of paper and took them home. The next morning at breakfast my uncle showed me the pages and told me they were from the Koran. 'Don't try to control him,' his uncle told his parents. 'He's a special person and will go his own way'." Since then Arif's only desire had been to become an imam. Under communism he studied the Koran in secret. After Zhivkov fell in 1989 he studied religion in Sofia for five years.

"People's attitude toward Islam changed under communism. Most young people don't know the tradition, the ritual or the Koran. I feel like a missionary trying to revive Islam here. But according to Islam, you can't force people to accept it." Nowadays around 30 kids, about a third of the total in Gorno Dryanovo, come to after-school religion classes.

TWO WEDDINGS AND AN ENSLAVEMENT

By mid-morning the entire village has turned out for the wedding. The wedding party is dancing its way to the mosque to the accompaniment of a traditional kazoo-like instrument called a Lorna. In the wake of the revelers the younger people of the village, Sonia conspicuous among them, form a circle and begin dancing. Holding one another's fingertips above their shoulders, the dancers take four steps to the right, pause, make a feeble kick to the right and one to the left, then take another four steps right. Repeating these steps over and over, the dancers appear serenely happy.

Ressa and I follow the wedding party to the mosque.

I see a kind-looking man in a purple suit and a hot-pink shirt who seems to be close to them and I ask Ressa to ask him who the newlyweds are. Mehmet turns out to be the bride's brother. After just a few minutes inside the mosque, which we didn't see, Mehmet seems ready for a break and asks us to have some tea with him.

His expression weary but peaceful, Mehmet tells us: "Under communism we were materially better off than now. But what I like about this period is that although I'm poor, I'm spiritually free." The most obvious sign of this freedom is Mehmet's use of his Muslim given name: until 1989 he was officially known as "Kazimir." But in fact Mehmet says his name isn't important to him. "You can call me 'Donkey' as far as I'm concerned. My son-in-law is also named Mehmet, but everyone calls him 'Johnnie'."

I ask Mehmet for his theory on the origins of the Pomaks. The official state explanation is that the Ottomans forced Christians to convert on pain of death of worse. But Mehmet, like other Pomaks I talked with as well as most non-Balkan scholars, argues that some Christians were induced to convert by a combination of political and economic incentives. Mehmet argues that most of the ancestors of the Pomaks belonged to a dualist sect of heretical Christians known as the Bogomils. Because they were occasionally persecuted by both Orthodox and — especially — Catholics, the Bogomils welcomed protection of the Ottomans in exchange for conversion. (In his landmark study *A Short History of Bosnia,* historian Noel Malcolm offers the same explanation for the origins of the Muslims of Bosnia.)

During the Communist period some Pomaks converted to Christianity for a similar combination of political and economic advantages. Others resisted. During the Christianizing campaign in the early 70's — which was aimed at the Bulgarian-speaking Pomaks 15 years before it was turned on the Turks — Mehmet's father evaded the authorities for a year by hiding in the mountains.

Mehmet blames the former communist regime for the persecution, not Christian individuals. One day his brother suffered a ruptured gall bladder and needed to be driven from Gorno Dryanovo to the hospital down the mountain in Gotse Delchev. The government authorities who were in town to enforce the name change policy refused to help; a Christian friend took him instead. Mehmet used to be the only Muslim in a factory making phones. "It was a great job," he says. "It was very responsible — I worked with a computer." The Party tried to push him out for refusing to convert but his Christian boss defended him.

Mehmet's life took a strange twist in 1992 after a visit to his grandmother's sister, who in 1913 had moved to Izmir on the Aegean coast of Turkey. He was very impressed with the standard of living he saw in Turkey — which he describes as "a complete clash with the propaganda" about Turkey in Bulgaria. But people seemed to have to work harder and Mehmet was reluctant to learn the language or leave his family, so he returned to Bulgaria.

Back in Gorno Dryanovo Mehmet used contacts he'd made in Izmir to start a business trading furs. At first it was very successful (from the standpoint of the business, of course, not the animals who had lost their hides): in two months it exported six truckloads of furs. His Turkish partner, Mahmood, visited, fell in love with a local beauty named Semra and married her "against all odds", as Mehmet says.

"But," he adds, "everything ended in tragedy."

Mahmood and Semra had planned to live in Gotse Delchev for five years, then to join his brother, who was living in Germany. Mahmood invited his brother to come and look at the factory, in which he was talking about investing. Instead, the brother stole all the furs. The police found the cars used to transport the furs but also discovered that the brother had bribed some police along the way for protection. Mehmet consulted lawyers in Sofia and learned that Interpol was after the brother from Germany for other crimes. The furs were gone forever and Mehmet had lost his life savings, about $50,000.

But Mehmet was lucky, compared to Mahmood and Semra. "Mahmood at first resisted, but as they were brothers, he eventually supported the thief," recalls Mehmet. He and Semra fled to Turkey. There, in Bursa, out of God knows what desperation or vertiginous temptation to plunge further into depravity, Mahmood *sold* Semra for 10,000 DM (about U.S.$7,000). Years later a Bulgarian from Gotse Delchev who happened to be in Bursa recognized Semra working in a cabaret as a hostess/prostitute. He bought her from the cabaret and brought her home. "But she was already crazy," recalls Mehmet. Mahmood was later killed in connection with another crime.

After being financially ruined, Mehmet worked for five years as what he calls "a mushroom broker." He is now starting a company that will sell lumber to Greece. His ambition is much humbler than in the days when he dreamed of getting rich in the fur trade: if all goes well, Mehmet hopes to earn about $60 a month from his new venture. The maximum he could imagine earning would be less than $200 a month.

Though people in Gorno Dryanovo have very little money, Mehmet tell us, everyone has his land for growing food. "And most have a horse or a donkey so they consider themselves quite rich," he adds.

For some reason the local Muslim communities seem to be flourishing while the Christian villages decline. Thirty years ago the two Christian villages on either side

of Gorno Dryanovo, Kovachavitsa up the road and Leshten, were much bigger than Gorno Dryanovo. A few Muslims do move away; Mehmet's sister-in-law married a Christian in Gotse Delchev and another man married a Serb he met while hiding in the mountains during the name-change campaign.

But, echoing what Sonia had said, Mehmet insisted "I will always come back here. I dream of traveling, but that's probably not realistic. The lesson I learned from my business tragedy is not to be too hopeful." As we finish our conversation, all the young people of the village are continuing their circle dance around the central square.

That evening Ressa and I walk back from Leshten to Gorno Dryanovo, picking our way among deep puddles and piles of animal dung as the mountains to the west turn from purple to deep violet to black. As we enter the square we hear the same music we heard in the morning, with the same people still dancing in the same way and with the same enthusiasm. I glance at my watch and see they have been at it for over ten hours.

We step into Ferda's shop to say hello. She is visiting with a couple of friends her age, similarly dressed in the Pomaks' festive-looking pantaloons and headscarves. Ferda serves us white rolls and a gray-colored drink that tastes like pureed, sweetened wheaties. Ressa tells me the drink is very high in calories and is often drunk by girls to make their breasts bigger.

We tell Ferda we're planning to go to the disco and she advises us to hurry, since all the girls will have to be home soon. The usual curfew for girls is 9 p.m.; for special occasions, such as birthdays, a girl may be allowed to stay until 9:30. It's important for girls to be home early to protect their reputations, Ferda says; the limitations also make the atmosphere more highly charged. "The forbidden fruit is the sweetest," Ferda says with a bright twinkle in her eye.

"That extra half-hour must be just delicious," say I, trying to get into the spirit of medieval eroticism.

"I think that's right," says Ferda. "All the young people love the disco because they're hoping to go from *that* disco to the *other* one," she adds, cocking her eyebrow naughtily.

Ressa explains shyly: "By the other disco she means ...the bed."

All this *risqué* innuendo has made me keen to see this den of young love. It is only 30-yards away in a two-story, featureless concrete building we'd passed several times without guessing its function. We climb a short flight of stairs under a bright fluorescent light and step into Gorno Dryanovo's single nightspot. The tables around the sides of the rectangular room are all full, mostly of men. The "action" is in the center, where young men and women are — can you guess? — dancing in a circle. The only difference from the dance outside is that now they are facing outward. Aside from this small variation, it is numbingly identical to what we saw the same people doing all day: four steps right, kick, kick, four steps right...

Ressa astutely notices that none of the drinks on the tables appeared to be alcoholic and advises me against ordering a beer. We order two bottles of water and a waiter seats us at a table with a great view of the circle dance. The dancing that had seemed charming by day — at least for the first few hours — has come to appear nightmarish in its sameness. I could not imagine what the dancers could find appealing about repeating these simple steps over and over and their obvious enjoyment gives me a chill of deep alienation. Full of cigarette smoke, blaring "turbo-folk" music, the "disco" strikes me as an abstemious version of Nikki's horrible bar in Kurdzhali. After 15 minutes staring around and looking futilely for some intelligible cultural artifact to ponder on, I give up. Ressa and I have killed our waters and neither of us can think of any reason to delay a moment longer our walk in the dark along the road whose improvement topped the agenda of the village's would-be mayor.

The next morning Ressa and I wake early and again take the 40-minute walk back to Gorno Dryanovo. We head straight to Sonia's for coffee and invite her to join us. She says she often stays until five in the morning with her 22-year-old boyfriend. I tell her about our conversation with Ferda and ask whether keeping such late hours doesn't provoke gossip. "Of course it does," she says with a smile that mixes coyness with defiance.

The day before I'd told Fekrit, the deputy mayor, that I'd like to meet his boss. Ten minutes after we arrive at Sonia's café, in the mayor walks, in the company of another man we'd met. Our acquaintance explains that people who'd seen us walking along the road had immediately gone to find him for us.

Shukri Pendev has been Gorno Dryanovo's mayor — loosely affiliated with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms — for nine years. He is disappointed in the party. "At election time they make lots of promises but then they don't do anything." He thinks that in the next elections the DPS will lose in the village and most of the region.

I ask why he's leaving his job in mid-term. Pendev explains that he's just won the green-card lottery and in just a couple of weeks he'll be taking his wife and two teenage kids and moving to the United States. Straussburg, PA, to be exact. The mayor has been abroad only one time, on a ten-day trip to Hungary in 1980. But he has a Bulgarian friend who's been living in Straussburg for as long as he's

been mayor — and has a lot more to show for it.

The friend tells him an apartment will cost $700 a month, more than three times his current salary as mayor. Pendev plans to support his family by making furniture. "It's a great risk to move with my family. Furniture making is very profitable around here, but I can't be sure about the U.S. But I have to try."

But why exactly does he have to try? I ask.

"Because everybody says it's better to live there," answers the mayor. He will give himself five years to succeed and if he hasn't made it by then, he'll return to Bulgaria. "In America I'll have a chance to furnish my home and buy a car," Pendev says, brightening. "My friend did it!" ❑

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INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Shelly Renae Browning. A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. **[SOUTH ASIA]**

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Paige Evans. A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Whitney Mason. A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called The Siberian Review in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the Vladivostok News and wrote for Asiaweek magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam. **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." **[sub-SAHARA]**

Jean Benoît Nadeau. A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization." **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Susan Sterner. A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Tyrone Turner. A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. **[EAST ASIA]**

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