

## **Hello Melancholy**

The cycle **Hello Melancholy** written and published in Capital weekly – [www.capital.bg](http://www.capital.bg) - was awarded the prize **Writing for Central and Eastern Europe** in 2005 in Vienna  
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*In her article, Ivanova captured the complicated mood after the changes in Europe. No one who experienced the changes in Eastern Europe would read her lines without emotion, remarked guest of honor Milan Kucan, former President of Slovenia, praising the prizewinner's impressive work.*

APA-news

### **"Text voller Emotionen"**

*Ehregast Milan Kucan, ehemaliger slowenischer Staatspräsident, lobte den bei der Preisverleihung Mittwoch Abend in Wien vorgetragenen Beitrag ("Frau Bulgarin") der Journalistin als "Text voller Emotionen".*

*Ivanova habe durch sehr persönliche Erzählungen die Stimmung nach der Wende in Europa eingefangen. Ihre Zeilen würden an niemandem, der zur Zeit der Wende in Osteuropa gelebt hat, emotionslos vorüber gehen, so Kucan. Ivanova habe auch spürbar gemacht, "dass heute noch immer Reste der Berliner Mauer übrig geblieben sind."*

*Die Siegerin überzeugte die siebenköpfige internationale Jury mit einem Zyklus unter dem Titel "Guten Tag Melancholie". Der im Rahmen der Preisverleihung vom Schauspieler Fritz Friedl vorgetragene Text "Frau Bulgarin" erzählt von einer in Wien lebenden namenlosen Frau aus Bulgarien, die symbolisch für die Melancholie des Fremden aus dem Osten steht.*

APA-nachrichten

## **Frau Bulgarin, Ivan Milev and Gustav Klimt**

*8 reportages, personal stories, photography*

**January -March 2005 I was a Milena Jesenska fellow at the Vienna Institute for Humane Sciences([www.iwm.at](http://www.iwm.at)).**

**I wanted to collect some personal stories about the communist time, to talk with people, friends and scholars about their ideas, notions and stories about that.**

**I had lived for 7 years in Prague(1995-2003), so coming back in Sofia in 2003, I found myself totally rethinking my past - as a woman, a journalist, a person.**

**So these writings had the aim to give first to me some more understanding of where I am now and who I am now, with all the memories of a past, not known to anybody whom I have met in Central Europe.**

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## Prague: Hermelin and Depression

“How are you?”, I ask. “Mam depku”, Karolina replies and reminds me of one of the most common expressions in the Czech Republic. It means ‘I have a small depression’.

“Mam depku” is one of the sweetest Czech expressions. It’s a friendly wink at depression.

“Mam depku” is a good test for foreigners and expats in Prague. They are on a journey to find a world without pain and they are surprised to hear all this talk about depression in the middle of Golden Prague. The Czech have their questions too. Why all the talk about a ‘transition period’, if “Mam depku” is still one of the most common expressions? Why should everyone be subjected to the change from communism, to post-communism, to democracy, if no one can be sure of their place in this process any bit more than before?

In the 70s in one of his famous open letters to Czechoslovakia’s then-president Gustav Husak dissident Vaclav Havel wrote: “Little by little we are losing our sense of time. We are beginning to forget and confuse the chronology of events. We feel that it’s all the same after all. This feeling is suffocating us.” In 1989 a more optimistic Havel said: “Time has re-emerged. It’s as if we are back in history.”

But 15 years later it doesn’t take to be an intellectual to know that for Eastern Europe there is no such thing as being going back to a ‘clean’ history. History is *your* history and *mine*. Or to put it more directly – Prague, Bratislava, Brussels and Sofia have different histories and remember different things. Isn’t that good enough reason for depression?

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In 1997 I loved touring the expensive new restaurants opening up across Prague – French, Scandinavian, Thai, Arab. I loved going to *Doli Bel*, the pub owned by Kusturitsa’s friend Vesso Jorem, where my friends and I drank Montenegrin wine for long, noisy hours. We used to laugh at the Czech who went to the cheap and smelly Zizkov and Holesovice pubs where draft beer and hermelin (Czech fungus cheese) were the items *de lux*. We liked to pontificate that no one can escape the damages of communism. We lived in a Prague of our own – golden, elitist, coldly post-communist. The good-hearted but smelly part of town was dangerous, too full of reasons for nostalgia. Then Vesso Jorem sold *Doli Bel*, opened a new pub – Gitanes, and grew more and more nostalgic (“Yugoslavian socialism was the best kind, it was the greatest time in history” – *read an interview with Vesso Jorem on the next page*). It was about then when I started to realize that our Balkan memories were not the same, and nostalgia means different things for each of us. It made me fearful in a strange atavistic way.

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### **The ‘transition period’ is propaganda**

“The ‘transition period’ is propaganda.” This statement was made by SAMISEBE, one of the most unconventional sociological projects in Central Europe.

“SAMISEBE is a revolt against mainstream sociology”, says Rudolf Schmidt, a photographer in his early 50ies who works in the field of ‘visual sociology’ and has, among other things, photographed scarecrows for the past ten years.

In 1991 eight sociologists born between 1924 and 1963 founded the SAMISEBE (Our Own Selves) association and began researching and recording their own life histories from the socialist period. They decided to turn their biographies into data bases and reflect on them together. “The [official] history was full of inadequate concepts and schemes which had nothing to do with our own life experiences”, says

Zdenek Konopasek, now editor of *Biograph Magazine*.

For five years the eight sociologists subjected themselves to a permanent workshop in which they recorded numerous autobiographical stories. They used different themes. One such theme were the various homes they had lived in during the period and the circumstances that had brought them to live there (“Every Sunday my husband and I would go to his parents’ place for Sunday lunch, to make ends meet. At the time I didn’t like that and it’s only now that I see that MY PARENTS-IN-LAW were pleased to be making a contribution to our life and that it made them feel they were needed.”). Another theme was everyone’s life between 7 and 9 in the morning (“My sister and I used to let the dog come to our bed in the morning. I vaguely remember that one day my parents found that the quilt was torn to pieces. They were not pleased.”). Stories were also collected about the meaning of the communist party for each of the authors (“When I was shouting “Glory to the Party” and “Long Live the Party” at demonstrations, I had no idea the pioneers’ organization [of which I was a member as a child] was related to the communist party.) The message of this Czech experiment is that our past and present are interrelated, that post-communism is rooted in communism and that

**the definitive farewell to our communist past is simply not happening.**

“You would think that the ‘transition period’ is a way of connecting the past and the present, of transforming communism into post-communism. But in practice, the ideology of our time isolates the present from the past and distorts the relationship.

Our autobiographical approach makes up for this. It draws the attention to apparently insignificant details [of our past]. The more fragile and intangible they are, the more important they are to us.

We don’t think the definitive farewell to our communist past in the name of the great transformation of Eastern Europe is not happening.

We have every reason to believe that the people, words and things in our ‘societies in transformation’ should be traced to a variety of ages, genres and styles.

*Ruhla Watches*

Ruda, as Rudolf Schmidt is known with friends, is a wonderful cook and likes to tell stories about scarecrows. The first thing he remembers when we start talking about socialism is *Ruhla* watches, formerly made in the German Democratic Republic. He remembers the humiliating customs checks performed by the Czech authorities on the Czech–German border – the watches were illegal imports in Czechoslovakia, as were *Salamander* shoes. I, too, have a story with *Salamander* shoes. In 1984, upon return from my first German language camp in Schmalkalden, I triumphantly brought no less than three *Salamander* pairs to Bulgaria. Different stories, different genres and styles.

A “Reflective” Revolution?

The SAMISEBE project was a harbinger of a true ‘reflective’ revolution which is sweeping through the Czech Republic. The revolutionary media are film, the Internet and oral history. I discuss Jan Hrebejk’s recent films with Vesselin Vachkov, Editor-in-Chief of *Lidove Noviny* (read an interview with him on the next page). He says Hrebejk’s films make use of “therapeutic nostalgia”: “These are the most successful [Czech] films of our time. They are set in the 60ies and the 80ies – Pelisky, Pupendo... The Czech call them *laskava comedie*, loving satires – there is a sense in them that our lives were sad, absurd and unbearable but they are also worth a laugh.”

Another clear sign of ‘revolutionary’ upheaval comes from the book publishing world. In 2004 “In the Labyrinth of the Revolution” by political historian Jiri Suk received the prestigious Magnezia Litera Award and became the talk of the whole country. Suk, born in 1966, was surprised by his book’s success and by the fact that there were no heated discussions of his main arguments, i.e. that the so called Velvet Revolution of 1989 was completely chaotic and that no one was ready for it (best prepared were the members of the communist elite, least were the dissidents). These arguments are not new but Suk has

substantiated them with numerous facts and documents and this is what makes his work ground breaking. These arguments are also supported by the work of the five-year-old Centre for Oral History in Prague. The Centre has recently funded two large-scale research projects --one of them, called "A hundred Student Revolutions", studied the student demonstrations of 1989; the other recorded the family histories of Czech dissidents and communist party functionaries. "The truth is that Czech society never had communist and dissident ghettos as many people now believe. There were numerous small islands of freedom where people lived as best they could. These people were not heroes, they did not listen to Radio Free Europe, but they didn't collaborate with the regime either. It is also true that Czech dissidents did not find an appropriate language to speak to these [ordinary] people", says Miroslav Vanek, Director of the Centre.

### **Why do we need new interpretations of the past?**

Paradoxically or not, the current president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus is also part of this new wave of post-communist reflection. "I absolutely don't agree with the idea that communist society was made of two distinct ingredients: a small group of heroic rebels and the rest of the people – the collaborators", he says in an interview in *Hospodarske Novini* in November 2004. "It simply wasn't like that. We need to be looking not just at the intentions of the communist party but at the reality of the system. The two were diametrically different. I spent 48 years of my life during socialism and I was actively observing the political process throughout most of them. I don't share this view of communist society. Communism was a social system with a life of its own. It wasn't an asteroid which came from the skies and brought about unseen, unexpected changes. Although we did not have any modern analytical literature to help us in the process, we studied various dictatorial regimes of the past and tried to make sense of our own system through them... We were greatly inspired by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset and his book *The Revolt of the Masses*, written before the time of communism and fascism. When I read it, I thought it gave a fair description of the foundations of our system."

Of course, there are those who are suspicious of the motifs behind this view: "Klaus is saying this to counterbalance the gravitational field that Havel still generates despite his withdrawal from active politics. Klaus also made a few small concessions to the communists during his presidential campaign which helped him win the presidency. But the fact that he is *talking* about the socialist period, the very fact of this discussion is good", says Vesselin Vachkov.

### **The demons we share**

Martin Smok is a documentary film maker. He is my age, 37. I met him at a party in a friend's apartment in Vinohradi. He worked as a senior consultant at Steven Spielberg's Visual History Foundation in Los Angeles for two years before returning to the Czech Republic. "I came back because I had work here but also because I did not understand the way people live in L.A. I thought I was on Mars, I simply didn't know what was going on around me. My time in L.A. changed the way I view myself and I realized I needed to live in Prague. I understand the people here. People in the West don't have the kind of memories and experiences that I have and it's difficult for me to get along with them 100%. [For example] here in the Czech Republic we all grew up playing with just five types of toys – there just weren't more... in this stupid socialist country. And these are the things we all share, these memories. We share the demons of our common past, the same hang-ups."

What are the demons of *my* past and who shares them with me? Do we, Bulgarians, share our own unique demons? Unexpectedly, these questions seem to acquire an exceptional importance. In search of answers I came across more surprises in Prague...

## **Rohlik, Iyutenitsa and Vaclav Havel**

*Women's Stories from the Banks of the Valtava*

*"It may sound strange but there was a certain charm about communism."*

Xenia Hofmeisterova, artist and manager of the Millennium Gallery, Prague

"I understand the people here. We share the demons of our common past. I could never understand people in the West in the same way." These are the words of Martin Smok, documentary film maker, who has returned to the Czech Republic after he worked in the United States for two years (see Prague: Hermelin and Depression, Capital, Issue No. 19). Martin puts me in deep thought – it seems that what makes us understand each other is our past, the demons of our past.

Is this valid about Bulgarians too? Are there demons I share with everybody else in Bulgaria and what are they? What is the effect of Prague's 'therapeutic nostalgia' on people like me, whose hearts and sadnesses were made in more Southern climes?

To find answers to these questions, I arrange reunions with three women I met during my previous stay in Prague: one was a friend of a friend – we were involved in an artistic project together; the other gave me private lessons in Czech, the third was introduced to me during the great inundations in 2001. Xenia was born in 1958 in Trenchin, Slovakia Dora was born in 1942 in Komotini, today's Greece; Hristina was born in 1967 in Kurdjali, Bulgaria.

### **Xenia Hofmeisterova**

February 2005. A retrospective exhibition of the works of Adolf Hofmeister (1902-1973) is on at the City Gallery in Stare Mesto. Hofmeister is a Czech vanguard artist, cartoonist and traveller from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., a Renaissance figure who was a member of the *Manes* Union of Artists (the same which organized the first French surrealist show in Prague in 1932). Hofmeister was a close friend of Picasso, Ilya Erenburg and Max Ernst. He spent the years of the Second World War in exile in New York, where he exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. In the postwar years he returned to the Czech Republic and became a member of the communist party, holding senior posts in the Czech communist party and the government until 1968. He was bitterly disappointed with the Soviet invasion of Prague the same year and protested against it, for which he was expelled from the party. He spent the next few years in a deep depression and died in 1973. Today he is almost unknown to the general public, to the young generations in the Czech Republic, to people like me.

Xenia is the wife of his son – Adam. She is the owner of a gallery in Mala Strana where I used to go a lot. Adam and Xenia are both artists and they came up with the idea for a retrospective exhibition of Adolf Hofmeister. "We were wondering if the time was right for this, if people would be ready to see him with new eyes. He remained a communist in his heart until his death, despite the fact that they expelled him from the party... These people were acting like they were under hypnosis and he hoped to the end that they would somehow come to their senses and restore him. He was a great artist. Until 1968 he had always been part of the political establishment. He needed the fame and the status it afforded. For some people fame is like a drug, they can't live without it. And that's too bad."

This is how Xenia starts telling me her version of the communist period (she calls it 'bolshevism', *see an interview with her on the next page*). She graduated in Set Design from the Theatre Academy in Prague ("We were bohemians, nothing else mattered much"). At the time of the revolution of 1989 she was already mother of two children.

### **"Communists were either social climbers or just idiots"**

I enjoy listening to Xenia. It sounds like she likes to talk about the communist period. She remembers the time well and she is upset other people don't. "There are former communists in all the parties represented in parliament today and everybody pretends that this is OK. After all these years I still wouldn't sit at the same table in a pub with these people! We all knew at the time that what they cared about was money, it was the single most important drive in their lives. They were social garbage, everyone despised them.

Communists were either social climbers or just plain idiots. The department chair came to me once and said: 'Xenia, you have potential. We will consider accepting you into the party...' I was quick to respond: 'My God! There is no way! They will kill me at home!' They left me alone. My husband had a bad reputation because of his father and they didn't bother to talk to him. Everybody says now that at the time it was impossible to get a job, [if you were not a member of the party]. It's not true! I always had a job."

### **Rohlik, Vlashki Salad and Tuzex jeans**

"In the arts high school in Brno we had the best teachers. At the time the party was chasing the good lecturers out of the universities and these lecturers were ending up in the high schools as teachers. So there was a clear sense of bolshevism around us but we refused to let it interfere with our lives, we were living on an island of hope. Friendships were great in those years! I always think it's a shame young people today will never know what these friendships were like. No one needed a food processor or a new kitchen during communism and no one cared about consumption the way everybody does today – because we had rohlik, Vlashki Salad and from time to time we got to wear Tuzex jeans. I had a pair of jeans that got me all the way through high school. My son now changes one brand with the next within months... We were saved from all this. It may sound strange but there was a certain charm about communism."

### **Dora: Literature and the Dissidents**

*Rohlik and Vlashki Salad* for the Czech is like *bread and lyutenitsa* for Bulgarians. For Xenia the Czech combination is a symbol of 'bolshevism', while for Dora, just the opposite – *bread and lyutenitsa* is a symbol of the revolution of 1989.

Dora graduated from the Department of Slav Philologies at Sofia University. Following graduation, she worked as a translator and interpreter at the Union of Translators in Sofia. "I interpreted at all kind of events organized in the former Soviet block – conferences, seminars, congresses." She translated the works of Czech novelist Iracek, the master of Czech *roman noire* Havlicek, Vladislav Vancura, and after 1989 – Vaclav Havel's plays and works by other dissidents like Ivan Klima. "I am not a fan of this kind of literature. Klima is probably the best of them, very intelligent, very humble, I learned a lot from him... but none of the works written by the Czech dissidents inspire me, they don't speak to my heart. I can't quite explain it why they didn't leave behind good literature... If there is a giant in Czech literature in this period, it's Bohumil Hrabal."

Dora has lived in Prague for twenty years. She came here with her husband when in 1985 he was appointed at the World Trade Union Organization. Until the revolution of 1989 she had a job at "Problems of Peace and Socialism" – "the most boring magazine in the world where the most intelligent people worked". The events in 1989 were a shock for the whole family – "the magazine was closed down, as was my husband's organization. He had to go back to Bulgaria with our son and I stayed behind with our daughter. We had no money, no savings... so my daughter and I survived on bread and the *lyutenitsa* we'd brought back from previous trips to Bulgaria..." Then times changed -- Dora found a job with *Orbis* Publishing. Many of the editors there had been fired during the 'de-communicization' period and Dora, who was never a party member, was appointed as Senior Editor of Translations. She was with *Orbis* for ten years until she decided to start teaching Czech privately, which is how I met her. I ask if she is different now from what she was during communism. "It may sound strange but I am ready to start all over, if the system changes again. It is a challenge you have to face. I simply knew I had to survive – the situation in Bulgaria was even worse." She calls communism 'the forgotten period'. No one talks about it – Czech or Bulgarian. "Complete silence on both sides!" I ask her what makes her so adaptable. "It's a survival instinct. My husband couldn't adapt. Someone had to adapt in the family, so I ended up doing it.", says she with a laugh.

### **"I thought you were going to ask me about socialism..."**

Dora and I talk for a long, long time. We are sitting in the Slavia café, by the river. We both like this café and this helps the conversation from topic to topic. She tells me about her beloved grandfather (read her

story on the next page), about her handsome father who saved himself from poverty by going to the army, of her authoritarian mother, who is the reason why she decided to stay in Sofia and away from Kurdjali where she grew up, of her dream to see Ghimordjina (today's Komotini in Greece) where she was born, about her inferiority complex as a student at Sofia University ("I was one of four or five people from the provinces, everyone else was from Sofia – Vera Gancheva, who was fluent in four languages, Todor Zhivkov's niece Yana, the lot"), about her first car trip to Paris in the family *Lada*.

Dora also tells me about the first time she fell in love with a Czech guy. He was called Roman and came to Primorsko, on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, in the 60ies. At the time Dora was engaged. When he returned to Czechoslovakia, Dora visited him there. He knew she was soon to be married but one day he took her to a church. "I've never loved anybody like I do you. Let's swear to God we will always love each other, even if we are not together", he said to her. "The moment was out of this world. I've never had anything like it again." "So what did you say?" I ask. "I obeyed. It was stronger than me, I couldn't help obeying..." "So what happened with him?" "I don't know. I never saw him again."

At the end, Dora smiles and says "I thought you were going to ask me about communism but you didn't..." Dora is pleased we talked about *other things*. I keep hearing this line over and over again when I talk to Bulgarians about the past. It's as if communism was a separate thing from our lives. I sense some common Bulgarian 'demon' in Dora's words. For Xenia it's different. She talks about the same things – her grandfather, her mother, her studies, Paris – but all the time she knows she is also talking about communism, about the 'bolshevism' she lived through.

### **Hristina: The Turks, Heinz and non-love**

"I admit I've never liked the Turks. I must be a nationalist.", says Hristina. I've known her for three years and I am surprised we've never talked about this. Hristina is a very successful bank manager in Prague. She was born in Kurdjali, Bulgaria, and has now been in the Czech Republic for ten years. She now has Czech citizenship.

When in the 80ies the Bulgarian government forced the Turks living in the country to change their names to Bulgarian (the so called 'Revival Process'), she was at the English Bilingual School in Plovdiv. She has no other memories of these events except her teacher announcing in class that their classmate Gyulbiaz had a new name. "She said nothing but I sensed she was hurt."

Hristina vividly remembers 1989. "I must have been possessed by strong nationalist feelings. I was very much against the government restoring the names of the Turks and was quite active about it." I ask her if she still feels the same. "You know, I am kind of indifferent to it now. I don't know..." "But Hristina, what the government did in the 80ies was a crime against these people", I say tentatively. "I am not in a position to judge this... perhaps I didn't understand the nature of what they were doing... I still don't quite understand what they did..." She doesn't know where her non-love for Turkish people stems from and she has never talked about these events with anyone in Prague. "I can't say that any one has done me any wrong... I've listened to Croatian colleagues talk about how they feel about Muslims in their country and they feel the same way. I don't think this attitude is fact-based, just the opposite... But before the so called 'revolution', I was ashamed to say where I was from because when I said Kurdjali, people always asked me if I was Turkish. It insulted me, I was ashamed." (Read Hristina's story about the visit of her Spanish heartbeat Ricardo in Kurdjali.)

Hristina realized she was a nationalist, as she calls it, on a visit to Germany where she spent time with her old friend Heinz. "One day he took me out to brunch in a really nice place in a Turkish neighbourhood. Before we went, he told me everyone in this neighbourhood spoke Turkish, even the signs were in Turkish. I was shocked. I tried to protest: 'But how could this be, we are in Germany! This is criminal, how can you allow it?' He explained that Turkish people came to Germany in the 60ies and they helped raise the standard of living in the country. 'And if we let them come at the time, we have to be tolerant now...' He was so much more tolerant than I was."

Her story makes me think that love has the ability to show us where our non-love lies.

## **My Mother**

Xenia

I am the youngest of three sisters. My father was an engineer, my mother was an actress but never really made it. She had to give up acting because my father was too jealous [of her environment]. After I was born he moved to Bratislava and started building a [family] house. He only built the first floor before he died in a car accident. I was two at the time. After that, my grandmother, my mother, my sisters and I lived in a temporary wooden home.

My mother ended up sending us to our grandparents in Eastern Slovakia, which is how I learned Hungarian [and forgot my first language] because my grandparents didn't speak Slovakian. The people there had great respect for my grandfather. He was a retired banker. When I went shopping, everyone made room for me in the line. My grandfather still had money and took good care of me, I was happy...

When I was old enough for school, I went back to live with my mother in Bratislava. School was a catastrophe. No one spoke Hungarian there. I remember standing in the staircase and saying that I needed to go to the toilet, that I was going to wet myself... but no one understood. I stayed there and cried. In the end a girl came and took me to the toilet. We became best friends after this.

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My mother never got over my father's death. She had bad luck. She had two other men after his death and both of them died. She was good looking and intelligent but with the three kids at her hands it was difficult for her to find a partner after that. She started drinking and had several breakdowns. Eventually, she was taken to a hospital where she met an Italian doctor. She married him and left for Italy. We were very happy for her because she would have ended up in a mental institution here. I was ten and stayed with my grandmother...

I saw my mother ten years later when they allowed me to go to Italy. I traveled by train for three days, going through France. When I saw her, she was really ill... She lived near Milan in complete isolation from the rest of the world, she had no friends. Here she enjoyed going to the bookstores, the cinema and the theatre. In Italy she was a housewife who had no one to speak to. I think that Italy was a catastrophe for her. She had imagined she would be happy but it was nothing like that. She discovered how important one's friends and environment are. My mother died in a sanatorium in Italy shortly after.

When I look at myself and my sisters now I always remember that no one expected anything of us, so bad were the conditions we grew up in. One of my sisters is now a script writer, the other was a dancer at the [Slovakian] State Ballet and I am an artist. When I told my secondary school teacher I had a university degree, she couldn't hide her surprise – "You?".

## My Grandfather

Dora

My maternal grandfather came from a well-to-do family. He and his four brothers spent their summers in Petkovo [Southern Bulgaria], where the family had numerous sheep and goats. The winters they spent in Ghimordjina (today's Komotini in Greece) on the Aegean. They went back and forth like this every year. My grandfather adored children like no one else I've met. I used to sleep in my grandparents' room and I remember him putting on his *poturi* and *pozas* in the morning, preparing to go to the market – men used to go to the market then. My grandmother held one end of the *pozas* and grandfather turned round and round to help her wind it around his waist. He then filled his *pozas* with candy, **strugali**, **leblebiya** beans, raisins and all sorts of other treats for the children, doubling the volume of the *pozas*. He gave the treats away to the kids he saw on his way. Everyone adored him. The children knew the time when he would leave for the market. They would line up in front of our house to await him. This is how I remember my grandfather.

I have another, very precious memory. There was a cherry tree in our garden which was always late to ripen. One summer I couldn't wait for the cherries to be ripe and kept asking day after day – Grandpa, when are these cherries going to ripen? One morning my grandfather went to buy some cherries from the market and hung them on the tree, next to the tree's own fruit. He woke me up to tell me the cherries had ripened. I clearly remember him putting me on his shoulders to let me pick the fruits from the branches. I noticed they came off really easily but it wasn't until much later that I realized how it had all happened... It's a very dear memory from my childhood...

Unlike my mother's family, my father's family was quite poor. My father's father only had money to educate his elder son, my father's brother. There was no money for my father and he didn't go to **school**. There wasn't enough even for food. When he went to the army, he decided that an army career is a way out of poverty. He stayed and did OK, he even received some education in the meantime. He left the army when he married. He was no longer an officer when I was growing up but [years later] I had to pay for his army experience... I was labeled as a daughter of a 'German army officer' and was not allowed entrance to the English Department at the university.

I had a great father and a very authoritarian mother. Everything at home happened under her dictation. I was not allowed to leave the table before I ate every last drop of my soup. My tears often mixed with the soup but I still had to eat it before I could go.

## **Ricardo**

Hristina

Ricardo came to Kurdjali at the wrong time. It was the summer of 1989 and the Turks were leaving for Turkey. Everyone was buying whatever they could take with them on the journey. There was a great shortage of all kinds of goods. I remember us lining up for juice in cardboard boxes. It was summer, very hot. The waiting made him crazy. He asked me if we could go some place else but I told him it would be the same everywhere. We did try another place and the line was just as long... He couldn't accept this while for me it was something ordinary...

Bulgaria was not a cosmopolitan country, few foreigners used to come. A 'Westerner' in Kurdjali was something worth the talk of the whole town. We were young, in love, and we walked around hand in hand... One evening my mother spoke to me and asked me not to hold hands with Ricardo in the street. I was shocked. They had called my father from the regional communist party organization and told him that it is inappropriate for his daughter to be seen walking hand in hand with a capitalist. My father was uncomfortable talking to me about it, and my mother agreed to do it. Until then, I had never thought about the communist party, they had done me no wrong. It was my first rebellion against the communist authorities... I was simply disgusted with this interference...

There were other things that also impressed Ricardo [during his stay] in Bulgaria. We went to Pamporovo and stayed in a nice hotel. [One morning we chose a table in the hotel's restaurant that had some bread crumbs left over from the people before us.] The waiter came to clean the table before taking the order. He started brushing the table cloth and the bread crumbs flew over us. Ricardo couldn't believe it...

We once went to the caffè at the top of the National Palace of Culture [in Sofia]. The caffè's terrace was full, there were no free tables. I took him to a table with two other people and we simply sat on the two chairs which were free, I didn't even ask if we could do it. He couldn't believe his eyes – how could you do that, you shouldn't do that! Yes, I can -- if there is a free chair – you can use it. At the time it was acceptable to do that in Bulgaria. Recently my son made a comment about his grandmother doing the same thing in a pizzeria – 'can you imagine', he said to me, 'she told me there was nothing wrong with us sitting at somebody else's table...' He tried to explain that 'you simply can't join other people at their table'.

## **Frau Bulgarin, Ivan Milev and Gustav Klimt**

*Die Vergangenheit war noch nie so schön wie heute.*

from a poster in the Vienna Cafe Das Möbel

The first story I hear from anyone in Vienna is about a woman without a name – she was simply Frau Bulgarin, Mrs. Bulgarian. Suzanne tells me the story while we are having lunch at the Institute for Human Sciences. Her voice is full of loving nostalgia: “Many years ago there was a Bulgarian restaurant at the Guertel roundabout near the Gumpendorfstrasse metro station in the 15<sup>th</sup> Bezirk. Rila, it was called. This woman [Frau Bulgarin] was the spirit of the restaurant. I never knew her name. She was always in haste, never quite happy with her customers’ orders and she dropped the plates on the tables with a bang... She always wore an apron, to wipe her hands in it. The place was grim and old-fashioned but we all went there because of this grumpy woman – she served the best food in the world at the lowest prices... But the pub is no longer...”

### **The West – Us and Them**

When I travel in Western European countries I see that the *us* and *them* division really exists. I always know when I am in Western Europe – the feeling of nostalgia is not forbidden there.

I have my own theory of a successful Bulgarian expat – it is how good you are in translating your nostalgia for your forbidden past to *them*, the people in the West. You are successful, if you are using these forbidden feelings to your advantage. You are not, if you shut them in and become their victim.

A year ago I met Kinga, a Hungarian from Budapest, at a seminar in Austria. She told me: “It’s just great that I don’t have to explain everything to you – communism, democracy – there is no end of it, I use so much energy in explanations. You and I can simply talk without these explanations and you know exactly what I mean...”

I am no longer surprised when I meet West Europeans who know nothing about Bulgaria. It’s happened so many times that it’s no longer a problem. I don’t even have a desire to explain anymore. I simply accept reality, just like Kinga.

But what surprised me in Vienna is that there are plenty of people who know nothing about Slovakia and have not once been to the capital Bratislava, forty minutes away on the train.

Elizabeth is in her late twenties, a web designer in a software company in Mariahilferstrasse. Wolfgang is 37, an architect, born in Bodensee, Germany. He has lived in Vienna for 12 years. Neither of them has been to Bratislava. At the Institute for Human Sciences I meet other people who have been to Slovakia just once for the last 15 years.

Austria and Slovakia are divided by the Danube but have a common future now – both are members of the European Union. What many people in either country have yet to discover is that there is more than the river that divides them -- their memories, their pasts are different. Could it be that these memories can also be points of unification? This question comes to me after I talk with two more people who have rarely or never been to Eastern Europe.

Michail Staudigal and Astrid Svenson know little about Bulgaria. Instead of trying to fill in the gaps in person, I give them the address of a website which I have recently put together with a group of colleagues in Bulgaria. The website, [www.spomeniteni.org](http://www.spomeniteni.org), is a growing collection of personal stories about Bulgaria’s communist period posted by people of different age and background.

Michail is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Vienna and a post-doctoral student at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. The effect of our website on him surpasses my expectations. After reading some of the stories Michail tells me that for the first time he has a feeling that he understands something about his

neighbours, the Slovaks (read the interview with him). “Our knowledge [about Slovakia] was very general. We know that [during the communist period] there was the intelligentsia and the common people. We used to walk along the Danube and Morava and what we saw of Slovakia was a poor wasteland. There were no ordinary people in sight, just soldiers. And factories. This was our image of the country. We never had any details. But it is exactly the details that make all the difference. There was a sense of fear because these soldiers were only 50 meters across the river from us...”

Astrid Svenson is German, a Ph.D. student in history at Cambridge University. The Bulgarian website stories bring back memories from her childhood. She was born in 1977 in Cologne. Her family has successively lived in the Netherlands, France and Belgium. Eastern Europe for her was ‘as far away as Asia’. She was 12 when the Berlin Wall fell (“I remember a long summer evening in France. My parents were discussing Gorbachov, the *perestroika*, *glasnost* with friends who were over for dinner, while I was destroying a bowl of chocolate teddy bears. My father explained to me that this was not a polite thing to do in front of our guests.”) “In school communism was simply absent from our textbooks – with the exception of the communist manifesto, the movement from the 30-ies and the Weimar Republic – all heroic images. It wasn’t until later that I realized that the history books and the discussions at home had made me internalize a great contradiction: communism in the 30ies was a good thing but communism after 1945 was a bad thing.” There was little on post-war Germany in Astrid’s history books. “I had a great history teacher but even she had a strange explanation about it: ‘The two parts of Germany have now reunited so there is no more need to discuss their history.’” At the time Astrid accepted this statement but when she went to the university and met with students from Eastern Europe, she realized how influenced her thinking was by Cold War rhetoric. She became more and more interested in recent European history and in the place of her own memories in it. Astrid saw herself in one of the Bulgarian stories on [www.spomeniteni.org](http://www.spomeniteni.org) – the story of a Bulgarian guy who went on a trip to Western Europe and discovered how provincial and isolated his own country was. “This is how I feel when I go back home to Cologne,” Astrid continues. “I’ve had the privilege to be able to travel ever since I was a child. And I always feel the same way when I go back to my parents’ home in a middle-class suburb outside Cologne. There is no excitement whatsoever, life has no pulse in Cologne. I had the same feeling when I returned to my university in Mainz after two years in France. Berlin is the only place that’s different in Germany.”

When we part, Astrid is grateful for the stories ‘you’ve given me’. They’ve reminded her of long-forgotten words, images and smells, and she has shown her feelings to me. I am grateful too.

### **The Alchemy of Nostalgia**

It seems to me that Europe has a trap for Eastern Europeans. If they stay in Eastern Europe, they feel nostalgic for their communist past. If they move to Western Europe, they deny themselves the right of memory and this opens the door to melancholy. It’s painful and there is no easy way around it – I’ve spoken to many Eastern Europeans who feel the same way. The key is perhaps in the words of Eva Hoffman (author of novel *Lost in Translation*) who wrote after she immigrated to the United States: “To a certain extent you need to rewrite your past to be able to understand it... If you’ve been cut away from certain parts of it, you tend to see it either through the veil of nostalgia – which is an ineffective relationship with your past, or through the veil of alienation – which is an ineffective relationship with your present...”

### ***Havelka Cafe***

I keep thinking while I am in Vienna that if you don’t have your own kind of nostalgia, you need to invent it. I am surprised to see layers of nostalgia in the *Havelka Cafe*.

Any Viennese will be willing to show it to you. The place is barely lit, the chairs squeak, the upholsteries are old. But *Havelka* is full of people. Mr. Havelka is at the door showing his guests in. Mrs. Havelka died a few months ago, so you can no longer order her home-made sausages and pastries. People come here to talk to each other. There is no music in the old Viennese cafes and all you can hear are the conversations.

*Havelka* brings back to my mind the story of Frau Bulgarin, the grumpy woman with the stained apron. It's the most authentic story about a Bulgarian immigrant anybody ever told me in Vienna. The questions keep coming: why have we buried these stories, why are we running away from our past?

*Havelka* is about nostalgia, you can savour all its nuances here. Nostalgia is made up of *nostos* – return, and *algia* – pain. There must be too types of nostalgia. One insists on *nostos*, on return. It is the dangerous type, the one that makes you oblivious of the present. The other, the curative type insists on *algia* – on reconnecting with pain and accepting it as an existential inevitability. It was St. Luke who said: “Pain is a story that exists in the whole world.”

### **Ivan Milev, Adriana Czernin and Gustav Klimt**

In Vienna I also meet with Adriana Czernin, a successful Bulgarian artist who has lived in the Austrian capital since 1990. Adriana is another person who makes me think that the ‘translation’ from ‘our’ language into ‘their’ language is yet to happen. That East and West are still divided.

I come across Adriana's works at the prestigious *Albertina* Museum, as part of the exhibition *Seven Women – Contemporary Austrian Art (October 2004 – April 2005)*. I look at her paintings and I think I recognize that she, like me, is also trying to reconnect to an elusive, nebulous past. Her work reminds me of my own fears: that I have no common ‘Balkan’ memories with the Serbs (see Prague: Hermelin and Depression), that my memories of communism are different from those of the Czechs and the Slovaks, that my nostalgia for the past has nothing in common even with the feelings of my own fellow countrywomen (see Lyutenitsa, Rholik and Vaclav Havel). I fear that I've been left alone with my own memories and that I will be able to make sense of them only if I go through them one by one. Only then will I be able to connect to other people.

I really enjoy talking with Adriana Czernin after seeing the show. She was born in 1969, just a year younger than I am, and I find we have a lot in common. She also tells me a story I am not sure what think about. Here it is.

Many of the critical reviews of her work compare it to the Jugendstil and personally to Gustav Klimt. I ask her if this is intentional.

“Not really. But there is an interesting story behind it. Someone who has had a great influence on my style is the Bulgarian painter Ivan Milev. He is completely unknown here but he created his own, very personal version of Jugendstil in Bulgaria 10-15 years after the style was introduced in Vienna. I really admire his work. I used to have a book with reproductions of his paintings which at the time I studied with great attention. I was fascinated by the decorative elements, the interplay between foreground and background which confuses you and makes it impossible to tell which is which. Years later when I saw Klimt's works in Vienna I thought that Ivan Milev had more force, more tragic energy than Klimt and that Klimt's paintings are somehow more decorative. So if there is a connection of my works to Klimt, it is through Ivan Milev. ... Curiously, when I started painting in this style in Vienna no one thought to compare them to Klimt. But someone made this comment in the United States, where I took part in an exhibition of contemporary Austrian artists at Mass MOCA, Massachusetts. And the Austrian media picked up...” I ask her, if she has told anybody – the journalists, the critics – in Austria anything about Ivan Milev. “Not really.” “No one is interested?” “I don't know...”, she replies.

This is what confuses me – Ivan Milev has been replaced by Gustav Klimt and this affected no one,

absolutely no one. Why?

## ***Georgia's Friends***

*"I don't like to remember. I don't know why... I walk through my life... as if it's a vegetable market."*  
Lyubo, Bulgarian immigrant in Austria since 1990

Lyubo and I are each wrapped up in a blanket, sitting on chaise-longues by the Danube. We sip mineral water and coffee – long, blank coffee. Coffee is a popular drink in Austria.

Interviewing Lyubo is not easy, probably because I've known him for years. "Why are you asking me all this?", he asks, "What is it all for?". Lyubo was yet another friend who doesn't know what to think when I ask about his life during the communist period.

### **1989 – Austria instead of Australia**

Lyubo was born in 1963 in Bulgaria. He and his whole family – a wife and two children – are now Austrian citizens. Back in 1989 he was in Sofia, selling Bulgarian goods to Yugoslavia. He had left his studies at the Geological Institute and had unsuccessfully tried to get into the National Theatre Academy. He ended up in Austria 'by mistake'. He wanted to go to Australia but there was no Australian Embassy in Sofia, so they decided to try a refugee camp in Austria. 'We went to passport control and told them we wanted to immigrate. And they simply looked at our passports and let us in. That's how it all started.' "So what did you say? Why did you want to immigrate?" A smile comes on his face: "We made it up. We told them we were political refugees. We said we'd taken part in demonstrations against the regime and we were afraid to go back... They knew we were lying..." "Did they know?" "Of course. But the Austrian immigration service was lenient in 1990-91 and many Bulgarians ended up here. At some point the authorities realized they'd let in too many and changed the policy. We were the first Bulgarians. In just a month after we arrived there were around 20. But many of those who kept coming chose to go back... Some didn't like they had to work hard, language was a big problem too – very few of us knew German... and on the whole the attitude to foreigners was also really negative..."

### **About truth and physical/spiritual movement**

I ask him if he ever talks with anyone about what it was like to live in Bulgaria during communism, if people are interested to hear. "Yes." And what do you tell them? "The truth. That it was great...", he laughs.

Then he is serious again. "Look, I really don't like to remember. I don't know why. My memory is really poor, I remember very few things. I just like to look forward to the future. I walk through my life as if it's... I don't know what, a vegetable market, if I have to be honest."

I tell him I want to hear about his childhood, his family, his environment in Bulgaria...

"In Sofia we used to live in Zapaden park, then we moved to Lyulin. My father was an engineer, my mother an economist. I am an only child. I went to a very ordinary socialist school, they were all the same, we rode our bikes, played football and seek-and-hide... I almost never really think of those times. I am a wanderer by nature. I have no roots. I am always ready to move on to the next place, always in a process of continuous movement, not just physically, but spiritually too... And I never look back... I don't regret the past. I don't remember it. Or... I remember it but I don't care about it. I am not my past."

"Yes", I try to protest, "but you are who you are *because* of your past." "OK, but you are not just your family, your environment. You are also your genes, not just physically but psychologically. We inherit our genetic material from our immediate family but also from generations of people back in history. And it's impossible to remember all that... [On the other hand,] our personalities are influenced by childhood events that stay in our memory. The good ones we like to remember from time to time, the bad ones leave you scarred for the rest of your life..." I ask him if he wants to tell me about one such scar. "This is exactly what I don't want to." "Are these traumatic experiences?" "No, it's not that bad. I can tell you some other time when your mike is not on." I accept.

## ***Georgia's Friends***

I listen to Lyubo and look around at the black-and-white trees, the black-and-white river, the sun, also black and white. I remember *Georgia's Friends*, a black-and-white film Lyubo and I saw together three times in a row at the Druzhba Cinema in Sofia in 1988. It was a time when we still thought the world was black-and-white.

What has changed between 1988 and 2005? I feel a bit nostalgic for the period Lyubo refuses to remember. *Georgia's Friends* (1981) – this was the title in Bulgarian – is a film by director Arthur Penn. The English title is *Four Friends*. It's about a generation of post-war immigrants to the United States who in the 60-ies tried to separate their dreams and illusions from reality and to protest against American middle class values. The protagonist, Danillo, is from Yugoslavia and arrived in the States with his family in 1948, when he was 12. For him his new country was never the United States. It was always America – the dream of his childhood. Danillo and two of his friends are all in love with the same woman – Georgia, who dreams to be a ballerina like Isadora Duncan... I try to remember their personalities but all I remember is us – Lyubo, myself and another two friends holding hands in the dark auditorium at the Druzhba, listening to the hoarse voice of the simultaneous interpreter... An exalted conspiracy. None of us knew that 1989 would turn out the way it did and the world would soon be full of colour...

I ask Lyubo if he remembers the Druzhba. He does:

"I loved cinema. I joined the Amateur Film Makers' Club at the Kremikovtsi Plant by accident. Before that I used to read a lot and wanted to be a writer. Then I started going to the cinema. I used to go to the cinema a lot. Mostly to the Druzhba, you know – it was a revival theatre, but to other places as well. I wanted to be a film maker which didn't work out, but cinema helped me build my outlook. Do I regret I didn't pass the exams into the Theatre and Film Academy? Yes and no. Yes, because it would be really nice now to be doing something I really love, and no, because leaving Bulgaria and settling here has opened new horizons for me. I've found things I would never have otherwise.

I saw *Georgia's Friends* seven times." What kind of films does Lyubo like? "Films that somehow fit my views, my character. That's why I went to the Druzhba the most. They showed films which, OK, they were not exactly forbidden, but they were special, they had somehow penetrated the censorship. Times were different then and the films were different. I can now tell you exactly why I liked *Georgia's Friends* but I am not sure I could tell you at the time. Danillo was a rebel by heart – this exact word 'rebel' doesn't even exist in Bulgarian. And I... I, too, have always been outside the mainstream, no matter where I've been.

### **Weather Forecasting in place of Psychoanalysis**

"I don't like to remember. I like to look ahead of me!" I hear this often from Bulgarians in Austria and the Czech Republic. Lyubo, like Dora (see Lyutenitsa and Vaclav Havel, *Capital*, Issue No. 20), started his life in Vienna from scratch. If necessary, he, too, is ready to do it again ("I imagine Holland would be a good place to live. People there have so much more freedom than in Austria. But it's also too cold out there.").

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I next come across an article in the German Magazine *Merkur*. The article is by a German guy who writes of his impressions of Bulgarians living abroad (*Wirklichkeit ist Vereinbarungssache* by Thomas Frahm): "Bulgarians lose a part of themselves when they settle abroad. They learn the country's language to perfection, but they also imitate social behaviors to an absurd degree. For us Germans, that would be a problem – you have your own nature, your character, your personality and language... We are realists about who we are... On the Balkans reality is negotiable. Balkan people care little about psychology. They see going from a country to country as a change in climate, not worth any psychoanalytical mention.

### **Americans in Vienna**

I am sitting at the Prueckel cafe with some new 'Western' friends I've made in Vienna. We like coming here to talk about ourselves – our life stories and countries. I sense my friends' curiosity every time I

mention Bulgaria. Bulgaria is news for them. They want to know details, all the details. I tell them about Lyubo and my fears that my fellow countrymen here are losing their memories. Greg of San Diego asks about the origin of my surname name – Ivanova. He knows someone else with the same name. I reply that this is not my surname, it's my middle name, my father's name, and I've chosen it because it sounds better, I don't like my surname – Dimitrova. You are free to do that in Bulgaria. He is not sure he should believe this: "So your surname can disappear with time?" "For some people, it can", I reply, and I feel an atavistic fear take over me. I know I am talking about myself. The conversation is making me look at my name in a completely new way.

Emily Rorbach, an American from Boston, rescues me from these unsettling feelings with a quote from Jane Austin: "A thousand feelings *rushed on Ann from which this was the most consoling that it soon should be over, and it soon was over.*"

## **Polish Sauna**

### **Vienna-Katowice-Wroclaw**

The moment you enter Poland everything changes abruptly as though a silent order has been issued – the whole train is filled with people, lots of them, who look hard for a vacant space in the compartments and the corridors, I can feel their clothes against my body, a smell of rain, wool vest, bread. All the seats in my compartment have been taken, we are sizing up each other, a woman is knitting, an elderly couple is taking from a plastic bag sandwiches wrapped in newspaper, I am trying to read a book in German which arouses curiosity and some of my neighbours try to see the title. A little before Wrocław the woman sitting next to the woman with the knitting asks whether I will be sitting for an examination in German because she is one of the examiners. I smile and shake my head: no, I won't be. The Vienna-Katowice-Wrocław train is almost an exact copy of the Sofia-Vratsa-Vidin train – the “fat train” as it was called – which I often used as a student, a train of No Distances Between People. I smile because I can feel familiar things coming.

### **18 and 1989**

How does it feel to be born and live in Wrocław, to have been 18 in 1989 when communism collapsed, to belong to the “generation of winners”, as it is called? It feels very, very lonely, says Kamilla who was born in the 70s and has just completed a dozen interviews with people from this category. Kamilla does not suspect that her answer comes as no surprise to me. I myself belong to the same group even though my geography is different. But of course, I am curious, I want to know more. Kamilla is a sociologist and is working on her doctoral thesis on “post-communism as an experiential category and the viewpoint of today's 30-year-old Poles” – the Poles who were 18 in 1989. Why did she choose them? “I wanted to talk to people who grew up during the socialist period and whose system of values was shaped in the 1980s. Besides, these people are said to be the “generation of the winners”. When they started their careers and adult lives at the beginning of the 90s there was an urgent need for highly educated specialists on the labour market. It is said that they had opportunities like no other generation, before or after them. Personally I think that this is something of a modern myth, so it was interesting to see whether they consider themselves fortunate. And I have to tell you, after all these interviews, that they feel very lonely. They are different from the elderly and different from those who were born in the 80s because they no longer remember anything from the socialist past – the queues for everything, the food rations and the endemic shortages in the shops. Interestingly, no one mentions the censorship, the limited liberties, what they all talk about is the queues...”

### **“The helpers” and “the managers”**

The people that Kamilla talked to are all from Wrocław. She divides them into two groups – the “managers” who run a business, and “the helpers” – those who help other people (homeless, tramps, beggars, refugees, orphans, etc.). Most of them started out as volunteers and then moved on to a full-time job.

When they talk about Poland, the “managers” use the singular “I” and never the plural “We”. With the “helpers” it is the other way round.

“The helpers” in Poland are a very large group, as I was able to see for myself during my stay. All my friends and acquaintances were at some point in their lives volunteers. They all talk about Ukraine, the orange revolution and about the need to help Ukraine become a member of the European Union. Poland is the country which sent the largest number of foreign volunteers and observers during the elections in the Ukraine, and most of them were very young. This prompted many media to start talking about the rise of a new active civil population which continues the positive tradition of Solidarity in a new direction and with a different style.

### **“Solidarity”, the soul, vodka, Chopin**

“Solidarity” is a controversial word in Poland, especially after the failed government by the movement’s political wing in 1997 – 2001, but it is a name familiar to all. Solidarity is a story told and re-told. There is, for example, an interesting story about the new logo of the country.

Shortly before its accession to the European Union, Poland acquired a new logo designed to reflect the new image and rebirth of Poles. The logo is a merry kite and the name “Polska” in the typical and unmistakable characters of Solidarity. In the process of looking for images, one of the big advertising companies in Poland asked expatriates in Poland to list the words with which they associate Poland. The result was: Solidarity, Chopin, grey and cold, poor, vodka, kielbasa, Catholics, Walesa, conservative, reform, anti-Semitism, Auschwitz, pollution, soul, romantic.

It emerged that apart from Solidarity and the idea of freedom, Poland has practically no recognizable symbols in the outside world. This is why the new logo reflects the style of something familiar and adds to it something new – the kite as a symbol of individual freedom, romanticism, openness, the soul.

My visit to Poland was shortly before the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Solidarity, the first independent trade union in the Eastern bloc – it was due to be celebrated in August. I remember that back then this was the first time I had felt genuine excitement around me in Bulgaria. There was a joke in the 80s: a woman in a crowded tram asks, “Are there no men here to offer me a seat? Answer: “All the men are in Poland”. I realize too that this story never ceased to exist, that if you want to live today there is no way you can ignore it, and that your only chance, given at this moment, is to understand its relevance for you.

### **The positive things**

Kamilla showed her interviewees 8 photographs from the 80s and 90s (an empty shop from the 80s, the Pope during his second visit to Poland, the Round Table, Lech Walesa, the martial law, Kwasniewski) and let them talk.

She thinks she can detect similarities in the way young Poles talk: they refuse to talk about the Pope, refrain from insulting Walesa, confuse their personal memories with the collective ones (for example, many people say they saw tanks on the streets, even though in most cases they are reporting the words of other people). An important point: they feel the need to remember positive things and even insist on them. One of her interviewees even accused her of sensationalism and refusing to see “the good things about socialism – the glass of milk that was served in schools, the subsidized holidays, the summer camps...” But I’ve been thinking about this too, Kamilla says, “when I look at the pictures from that time, my life during the 80s and my parents, what do I see? Is this socialism? When I look at pictures taken today what I see is not democracy but the grubby streets, the shabby people, my country. “

I ask her whether her interviews changed in any way her own views of socialism, of life then and today. She does not hesitate: “yes, now I know that socialism is not over yet. We are not citizens yet. We take too many things for granted. Socialism remains deeply entrenched in the way we think and explain reality – we see the social sphere in terms of “us” (society) and “they” (the politicians, the government), and have no sense that we could make a difference, that we have a responsibility to our community. We live in grubby, ugly cities because we don’t care. We refuse to understand that there isn’t anybody else but ourselves. “

### **Tea with jam and God**

The only taste that stays with me from Wrocław is that of tea with jam served in a small glass bowl– “*konfitura porzeczkowa*”...in the cosy cafe K2 on *Kietbasniczka* street. As we walked through the city with the canals – my friends said that only Venice and Amsterdam have more canals – I saw a restaurant called “Czech Film” and I asked what that meant. My friends laughed, “When we want to say that something is totally obscure, we call it a Czech film”.

More tea with jam (this time it is *konfitura pomerancova*) and we talk about religion, God, Catholicism. I remember this: “I would go and confess very often, for me the Church was everything until the day when the priest interrupted my confession and said, “young lady, why don’t you find yourself a shrink?”

## **Wroclaw/Breslaw/, Krzyzowa/Kreisau**

I am trying to imagine what it is like to live in a place where everything has two names and two histories. I am not sure I am succeeding. It seems to me that this kind of thing creates an invisible sensitivity to history which is characteristic of the Poles for whom every narrative has a natural historical twist. There is no need to steer the conversation in that direction, it takes that turn naturally. I am not surprised that Wroclaw has preserved a tradition which disappeared in Prague a long time ago and, according to one of my Polish hosts, Irek, is one of the best things about the city – every evening a man on a bicycle lights up the street gas lanterns in the old town.

It seems to me, however, that I am beginning to understand the change of city names as a painful process which is more likely to alienate than befriend you and that to avoid this, you must promise the city to tell it both stories. I now see the change of names of so many Bulgarian cities after 1989, including my home town Mihailovgrad-Montana, in a totally different way: as an alchemical process seeking more to invite you to commiserate with them in their pain than to forget the pain, to embrace rather than reject it.

## **Sauna in Krzyzowa**

In the small village of Krzyzowa on the outskirts of Wroclaw I discover the Kreisau Circle /Der Kreisauer Kreis/ - a group of intellectuals during the Nazi period who had the intellectual courage to stand up to the regime because it was obvious to them that what was happening in Germany was “devastating not only for the cities, but in an even more horrible way for people’s hearts and minds”. The group tried to find the spiritual routes to help after the evil had struck and met in the mansion of Helmut James von Molke in the village which was then called Kreisau. Most of them were killed in 1944/1945. After the Second World War Kreisau became Polish Krzyzowa and in the place of the mansion a socialist farm was built. The end of communism in 1989 gave rise a joint Polish-German initiative to restore the place as a Foundation for European Understanding where young people from different European countries meet. See [www.krzyzowa.org.pol](http://www.krzyzowa.org.pol).

So I go there invited by my friend Agnieszka who started work there a few months before. One of the first things we did was to visit the sauna at night and then take a walk in the cold outside when everybody was asleep and the only sound came from the flock of crows. Then we took a tour of the Kapelenberg Cemetery, the Molke castle with its veranda for conversations, the standing exposition of the history of opposition against all totalitarian regimes in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – national socialism and communism. Needless to say, Bulgaria does not feature in this exposition. This is not surprising but it makes me see something else: Bulgaria is absent not only from the minds of western Europeans (as Michael and Astrid tell me in Vienna – see “Frau Bulgarin”, Issue 21 of Capital Weekly) but from the map of Eastern European history of freedom. None of my friends associates Bulgaria with “freedom” but more with pleasant things such as the lapping of the sea and delicious food. We are not on the map of freedom but on the map of smells. Irek remembers his parents saying after a visit to the Black Sea coast that Bulgarians have a higher standard of living than the Poles but he cannot unearth a single fact about Bulgaria’s recent history from his head. He finds his ignorance interesting and starts questioning me. We had a long midnight conversation about this. We realized that we had both taken it too much for granted that just because our systems were the same, everything else was too. In fact it is not. Both Irek and Agnieszka are very much interested in finding out how things actually were and what legacy we have received. We are chatting away about all this as though we have known each other for years.

Wroclaw and Krzyzowa may be cold and grey but I leave feeling warm and for the first time I am ready to subscribe to the cliché of the Slavic soul.



## Southerly Wind in Bratislava

***“You can’t divorce your place of birth. You can hate it, you can leave it and try to forget it. You can even love it.”***

Frantisek Gyarfas, software developer and writer, Bratislava, author of “The First 50 Steps”

“I am a Christian, a Catholic. This is mostly why I returned to Bratislava”, says Daniel Butora. Oddly, these are the words that stick in my mind after the conversation Daniel and I have on a warm March day with plenty of southerly breeze. “This is one great thing about Bratislava – you immediately know it’s spring, just like in Italy”, Daniel exclaims. “Or on the Balkans”, I add. We are supposed to be meeting with Milan, a friend of Daniel’s who I also know, but the arrangement has changed several times in the last few hours. “These are the Slovaks for you – impulsive and chaotic”, Daniel notes and laughs.

Daniel Butora is one of the best-known Slovak journalists, former head of the Slovak section of Radio Free Europe. Born in 1967, he is married and has four children. His father, Martin Butora, is a famous dissident, former advisor of President Vaclav Havel and former Slovak ambassador to Washington. Two years ago Daniel returned to Bratislava from Prague, where he lived for ten years. He is now editor of the *Tyzden* (The Week) and manager of the international private Christian CS Lewis Schools in Bratislava. His job as head of the schools is a source of deep joy for him.

The school is in the Bratislava residential area of Petralka, in the southern part of the city. Petralka is the biggest “dormitory” in Slovakia, sometimes referred to as the “wrong side of the Danube”. Its concrete apartment blocks are home to more than 120,000 people.

“It is part of our mission to be in this difficult part of Bratislava where we can bring more light”, reads a quote from the school’s mission statement which Daniel shows me.

I’ve worked with him at Radio Free Europe and I’ve known him for nine years but I am suddenly conscious that we’ve never discussed who believes in what. His words prompt me to think that consciously or unconsciously our beliefs often determine the choices we make to go or return to a place.

### **Devin and the magic codes**

When we meet Milan, the first place he wants to show me of Bratislava is Devin – an area at the confluence of the Morava and the Danube rivers, outside the city borders. We take a walk alongside children on rollerblades and bicycles, and mothers with push-chairs. Devin is green and pleasant.

“This area was off-limits until 1989, it had the tightest security during communism. There was a wall here because Austria is just 50 metres away”. I have already heard about this from Michael in Vienna (see Frau Bulgarin, Ivan Milev and Gustav Klimt, Issue 21 of *Capital*), and know about Viennese people’s fear of the people on ‘the other side of the river’. Although communism collapsed many years ago, Michael told me many people are still reluctant to come over to Slovakia and see for themselves what the place is like. Devin is a place which still divides people – for some, like Milan, it signifies expectation and hope; for others – like Michael, it signifies fear. For Milan and the Slovaks it contains personal stories from the communist period. Tomas, another Slovak, tells me later how the Austrians wrapped chocolates in foil and floated them in the river as a symbolic gesture of friendship.

It seems that every Slovak has his own story of Devin. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, this is the first place where Milan came with his friends. Then they went to Vienna, a mythical, 40-minute trip to the forbidden city. What does Milan remember of it? ‘The euphoria of freedom’, of course, and “the Austrians who looked at us with suspicion at the border. They still do. It’s a bit better, but not by much”.

I remember the words of Marci Shore, (see “Frau Bulgarin..”, *Capital* Issue 21)

who believes that the revolutions of 1989 are magic dividing lines in the minds all of us who lived under

communism, and that because of that even minor age differences between 1989 contemporaries mean a lot today.

I agree with Marci. It seems that where you were and what you did in 1989 is a kind of a magic code that can help you understand your life after and your life before the revolutions. I am grateful that Milan brought me to Devin because without this trip I would never have been able to understand how different 1989 was for those born in Bratislava and those born in Prague, for the Slovaks and the Czechs.

Each city – with its streets, rivers and trees – determined the scale of its citizen's dreams and hopes.

Dreams of freedom always had a concrete shape – to be able go to Vienna, to be able replace the old wooden window frames with new, “Western” ones, to be able to afford 5 euros to get into a museum, to stick your tongue at the passport control officer who can no longer refuse to let you through, to buy yourself a bra from Kaertnerstrasse and other small things like that.

Today Milan likes to go to Vienna and doesn't care about Prague. With Daniel it's the opposite: he likes Prague, Vienna leaves him cold.

### **The New Freedom and The Tatra Tiger**

You are now free to choose to like being Slovak. This is a new feeling. Many Slovaks who return to Slovakia have an awareness of this new freedom.

Slovakia is a country which many people still confuse with Slovenia, or associate with Prague. For centuries the city was overshadowed by Prague, Vienna and Budapest but it is now back on the map of Europe. Last year the *New York Times* wrote: “In six years Slovakia has transformed itself from the ugly sister to the darling of Central Europe”. Economists talk about the “Slovak model” or the “Tatra Tiger”.

This awakening comes at a high price – the loss of many illusions.

“Bratislava is 60 km from Vienna. When I was a child we used to watch Austrian television, we knew what the West was like. At least we'd seen it on television. Then, in the late 1980s it was already possible to travel. Mobility was very limited but possible. So we knew that the differences were big. But there was nothing to prepare us for the changes ahead of us.

We all believed that the changes would happen quickly after 1989. We had no idea it would take so horribly long. On television they showed people who had returned from the West, American Slovaks who said, in three years you'll be in the European Union, in five years you'll be – whatever”, Daniel says. “The first years after the revolution of 1989 there was this attitude of blaming everything on the Czechs. Whenever there was a problem – the Czechs were the bad guys, it was their fault. This has its roots in the past because Slovakia was never an independent country, it was always part of something else. It was the Hungarians first, and then the Czechs. I myself was against the division of Czechoslovakia; I thought it was unwise because we are a small and provincial country. I had to shed many wrong ideas. People from my generation, who had high hopes, were gradually disillusioned: some – when they saw Meciar for what he really was; others – because they had thought everything could be achieved on the political level. Mesaryk, the president of the first Czechoslovak republic, argued that change is the result of making many small steps. He advised that instead of one big leap you should aim to make a hundred small steps. People are only now beginning to understand this.”

### **Presburg-Bratislava and nothing but sadness**

Milan shows me around Bratislava -- the Danube, the cafes, the opera. He grew up here. Like all his friends, he calls it “Blava”.

I ask about his family – are they all from Bratislava? “You know, you can hardly find anyone in Bratislava whose previous two or three generations are all from here. Most people are like my father – they came to Bratislava after the Second World War. There are practically no real “presburgers”. Before 1919 Bratislava's name was Presburg, or Presporok in Slavic. Today only the tourists speak German.

In Bratislava I see for the first time the consequences of ‘redrawing Europe's borders’, a historical cliché I remember from my history textbooks in communist Bulgaria. “The history of our town was never presented to us as a collection of individual memories. For a long time we didn't know what actually happened here. It took us a while to realize that you can't buy the feeling of being at home”, writes Frantisek Gyarfas in his book *The First 50 Steps*, which I buy during a stroll through the town.

In Bratislava you can see the consequences of crossing out various parts of history, the absurdity of the wish of immigrants to start “all over again” in a different place, the impossibility of East Europe’s romantic illusion that after 1989 we can begin a “clean history”. Or, as the authors of the Czech project OUR OWN SELVES say (see “Prague: Hermelin and Depression”, Issue 19): “15 years after the end of communism, instead of a shared historical time there is a shared feeling that “the people, words and things in our ‘societies in transformation’ belong to a variety of ages, genres and styles..”

Sooner or later, melancholy seems a natural consequence of all this. Perhaps the longer exposure to melancholy makes Central Europeans different creatures -- the escape routes and the sadnesses are different from those in the Balkans. In Southeast Europe, with its easy joy and love for the present, we face the problem of understanding that to this perception of the world Europe can add nothing but sadness.

### **Migrating Memories**

Do memories migrate with people and what happens with them when they leave the places where they originated? In a globalizing world this is a pressing question and a large number of Bulgarians are looking for an answer to it.

“It seems clear that there is no common European memory and the suggestion that we can ‘invent’ the things which Europeans should remember in order to boost our European identity sounds utopian.” This is the essence of my discussion with West German-born Astrid Svenson who studies history at Cambridge University. She remembers her initial ‘chauvinistic’ joy over Germany’s reunion and then the subsequent realization that she knew nothing about the history of the two Germanies – the material was simply not included in the textbooks in school (see Frau Bulgarin, Capital Weekly, Issue 21).

“This lack of knowledge about the history of half of the European continent may have negative consequences for the formation of a European identity”, says Timothy Shneider, another historian I meet in Vienna.

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It seems to me that Europe needs our Eastern European memories, and needs to be aware of the ways in which we handle these memories after we leave the places where the events in them originated. The quietest people in this process of memory recording are the Bulgarians. And this becomes a problem. When we wish to say who we are, we have no collection of individual memories to call ‘Our History’, no past to lean on. And so instead of looking at the last 15 or 20 years of recent history, many of us go back five or fifteen centuries ago.

“The Internet stories about communism collected on [www.spomeniteni.org](http://www.spomeniteni.org) have the potential to create understanding. Even if they do not create common memories they will at least create shared memories”, Astrid says.

### **The return of the past**

During my stay in Bratislava everyone talked about files and secret services. Following the adoption of a special law in December 2004, the Institute of National Memory has started publishing the names of communist secret service agents ([www.upn.gov.sk](http://www.upn.gov.sk)). Milan and Daniel were surprised by the huge public interest, especially by young people, in what is happening. They were equally surprised by the strong reaction against the outing by some of the churches in Slovakia, e.g. the Protestant Church.

The editor of the *Tyzden* weekly Stefan Hrib wrote that “Slovakia is finally opening a subject which has been a taboo for 15 years”. The Slovak case makes it possible to look at the motivation of the people who chose to collaborate with the secret services. “We think that the people who are in the lists should not be allowed to hold public posts”, Hrib writes. “At the same time, it is clear that the signatures of different people [under the collaboration agreements] do not have the same moral weight. Some have reported on their neighbours on their own will but there are others for whom the signatures were a necessary evil, something they had to do to save their work, family or other people. There is a huge difference between them. For society, however, it will be best if none of them holds a political, government or church post”.

Curiously, this process is taking place in the first year of Slovakia’s accession to the European Union and

15 years after the fall of the Devin wall. “The challenge today is different but it is no less important – we should not be indifferent to the evil we suffered but at the same time we must stay clear-headed”, writes Hrib. This is a new wind of change which, through lack of a better concept, I could call southerly. And a fitting name it is too – the south has spontaneity which helps you enjoy things as they are.

### **The first fifty steps**

The quiet beauty of Bratislava has one very reassuring aspect – it takes you back to your own limitations. Everything that you can do is within the limits of the city, its cobblestones, stairs, streets, pavements, trees, roofs and rain pipes. To paraphrase a favourite quote, “We are in the city and the city is in us”. “Every day”, says Frantisek Gyarfas, “when we leave our homes, we lose the security they provide and enter the city. The first fifty steps we take walking out of our front door are very important because they give us the courage to enter the world. In the evening we return and repeat those fifty steps. We do this so often that in the end we begin to *be* like these fifty steps. This is why it matters whether they are beautiful or not.”

## **Uzbek Pilaf Rice and Funeral**

### **Oriental stories from Buhara, Urgench and Izmir told in Vienna and Prague**

*Diana Ivanova*

*“I have three dreams – to ride a white horse, see Medina, and bathe in the sea. I have never been to a sea coast”.*

**Feruz**, born in Buhara, lives in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. She is a mother of two and has a degree in Arabic Studies.

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How are the Uzbek stories relevant to my efforts to understand myself as a Bulgarian and part of an increasingly complex European context? If you have never met anyone from Central Asia you may well ask yourself such a question, but if you have been invited even once to an Uzbek pilaf dinner or traveled to the country, you will have experienced the emotion of coming into contact with someone with whom you share many things in common, a feeling you never have when you meet a Western European. (A similar experience in Britain is described by Vesselin Vachkov, the editor of the *Czech Lidove Novini* in the story *Hermelin and Depression in Prague*, published in Issue 19 of *Capital*)

Now I know part of the answer: the common history of communism has created invisible links and closeness whose depth, and strength, were totally unsuspected. I know many Bulgarians who experienced a similar “culture shock” in the centre of Europe – you go there to shake off communism and all of a sudden you find yourself attracted by people from a different cultural geography, who drink mostly green tea, know practically nothing about wine, eat mostly pilaf (a dish of rice, meat and spices) and live in close-knit communities (the family and the neighbourhood remain important factors in making ‘personal’ decisions in Uzbekistan to this day, although their role has changed somewhat).

I am not sure we know what to do with such feelings and discoveries about others, so I decided to record

### **The stories of Shuhrat.**

Shuhrat was born in 1963 in Urgench, western Uzbekistan. He is an artist who has several exhibitions in Western Europe after 1990 to his name. In 1999 he had to leave Uzbekistan, in 2002 was given political asylum in the Czech Republic and is currently a journalist with the Uzbek section of Radio Liberty. He grew up in a large family with six children, which he describes as ‘liberal’. When I asked him what that meant he said, “My father belongs to the generation of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party, which exposed Stalinism, so he felt the changes. He drank vodka, did photography and was one of the first people in the neighbourhood who bought a TV set and a refrigerator”. Does this mean that his income was higher? “No, our neighbours earned as much as he did, but they bought animals. For 400 rubles you could buy either animals or a TV set. If you bought animals 6 months later you had 800 rubles, if you bought a TV set 6 months later you had nothing.”

### **Love for the motherland and the KGB**

Shuhrat studied graphic design in the State Institute of Education in Tashkent where he first learned the meaning of “love for the motherland”. “We had a faculty of Crimean and Tatar Literature. You probably know that Stalin once deported the Tatars to Tashkent. It was for their sake that this faculty was created. The students there organized demonstrations, hunger strikes and all the time they were surrounded by special security, the KGB, we had to produce a student card to be allowed into the building. And I understood love for the motherland during a cotton-harvesting stint, or “brigade” as it was called. This “brigade” was obligatory, it lasted for three months in the autumn during which we were put up in wooden bungalows. (See “The Funeral of the Donkey”). In a kiosk I saw a painting with a Crimean landscape by a Russian artist which I liked very much so I bought it. I put it up on the wall in my bungalow. Then a man came and asked me, “Do you know what is in on this painting? Crimea. Crimea is my motherland and Stalin took it from me. Will you let me have this picture?” I did and asked myself, how come I don’t have

such a feeling? It is because no one has taken my motherland from me and I have always lived in my home. I had never experienced this feeling before.

### **Gifts for the “Comsomol”**

Shuhrat never joined the Comsomol because he changed schools and this created bureaucratic confusion. “When I applied to be admitted to the Institute I had to attach Comsomol papers too. We promised we would bring them and said that my home town was very far from Tashkent, 1000 km; we pleaded, we brought a gift – a ram, and the matter was settled”.

He filled his free time with photography and the cinema. “I shot 16-mm films. I went to a course and I had my own Krasnogorsk camera. I would send the celluloid film to a laboratory in Riga where it was developed for a few kopeks and sent back to me. This was in school. In the institute landscape painting took up most of my time. We studied psychology, history of education, dialectical materialism, scientific communism, scientific atheism, history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. I do not regret any of this, this was basic science and it is thanks to those years that I know a lot about politics today. Many people say, why was all this necessary, surely this was all a useless exercise of the brain? It was necessary, from today’s vantage point I know it was. Apart from these studies we also did a lot of painting; I took private lessons from a great artist and I helped him in his studio making copies of his paintings. The two of us made some money painting deer and mountains for private homes. We used this money to go to Surhandarya on the border with Afganistan where we made drawings of the mountains. Then, after 1983 I organized an exhibition in the Institute of my canvases with the mountains, the old villages, the people who are very different from what you see in Tashkent with their turbans and dark, exotic faces. This was when they sent me on my first visit to Moscow; there I went to museums and met artists who are big names now. It was in Arbat that I first saw an exhibition of alternative art”.

### **1989 – depression in East Berlin**

With a group of artists Shuhrat put together the first exhibition of independent Uzbek art in 1988. It was closed by the KGB a few days later. East German dissidents invited him to Berlin where he witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989. “This was a very interesting group of artists, intellectuals, a very different picture from Moscow and much more sad. There was little liveliness about them and a great deal of depression. In Moscow the *perestroika* was in full swing and suddenly I found myself in an environment of depression. I remember Schonefeld Airport – spooky, deserted, not a living soul, just a few soldiers walking about. Then the Trabants on the streets. My friend had a Volga which he had bought from a Soviet general and you could say he was the richest dissident”.

Then Shuhrat was commissioned the design of a book of Uzbek fairy tales in Berlin, then he exhibited work in Berlin, Munich, Erlangen, Saarbrücken. In 1997 he returned to Uzbekistan. In his home-town of Urgench he founded the first independent television in the country. It was closed down because it disagreed with the national policy. A criminal lawsuit was filed against him in 1999 and he was expelled from the Union of Artists.

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He is not a man given to nostalgia – “the Putin media create nostalgia, they want people to suffer for the empire”. While we talk in his spacious house in Prague his two daughters are making the salad and his wife – the pilaf. The house is Czech, everything else – the smells, even the music, the quiet conversation of the women - Uzbek. Shuhrat has the aura of the emigrant’s humble acceptance of the fact that you cannot buy the feeling of being at home but there are ways of approximating that feeling wherever you may be. What makes emigrants different is the humility of knowing that some feelings are only possible in certain places, and the stubbornness of trying to prove otherwise. To live in Europe is to realize that you are always surrounded by people who move from one category to the other.

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### **In love with socialism**

Asly Baikali is a 32-year-old doctoral student of social anthropology in the University of Boston. She is studying the social, economic and cultural change in Uzbekistan after the changes. She was born in Izmir,

Turkey. I met her in Vienna and my first question was, how did her interest in socialism start, considering that she had never been to a socialist country. She told me an interesting story.

“My parents in Turkey had left-wing views, today they are social democrats. When I was a child we had a big trade fair every year in my home-town, Izmir. It lasted more than a month. Every country had a large pavilion there. My parents would take me to the fair, especially to the Soviet pavilion and they were so proud when we saw documentary films about the cosmonauts and so on. They thought that this was the alternative of capitalism and it was a good thing to have an alternative to America because Turkey was a member of NATO and they could feel America’s interference. They thought that socialism was indeed the better system because it agreed with human nature. But they knew it only from what they had read, without knowing the context, and they had never been there. And the first time I went there – to Uzbekistan, I realized that things were very different. Moscow was exploiting Central Asia and today this has appalling consequences for the environment, the system doesn’t work, people are under enormous pressure and so on...”

### **Disappointed with 1989**

When 1989 came her parents were disappointed that “now everyone would interpret this as a victory of capitalism, because when one system collapses the other one is declared the winner, and whatever problems it has are totally ignored. So people stop asking themselves whether there really is an alternative...”

My parents were idealists. They thought socialism was attractive as a philosophical system. When you do not know how it works in practice, when you hear that people don’t need that much, that consumerism isn’t necessarily good, that children are provided for, that there is work for all and social security – to them it sounded very good, and they didn’t know anything that was better. What they knew about Turkey was that it was a corrupt system of doing things.”

### **Wanting different things**

Asly and I talk about our different experience – one of us remembers the shortages and the queues, for the other one this is totally unfamiliar. “I remember not having the money to buy things but the things were always available”. One of us (myself) remembers wanting things, the other one – wanting money. “I think this affects people psychologically in a different way, and it is very interesting because not having access to something is very different from not having the money to buy it. I don’t know which is better, whether to be young and not be able to buy is better, but again – psychologically it is a pressure to know that you can’t have what you want”

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I am not sure I understand, rather I realize how different we are, even though we are “neighbours”.

We are divided by our memories of our desires. And so, it seems to me, is Europe – divided by people with different desires. What brings us together is the realization that desire is a problem. And no one on either side of the memories, it seems, has found the solution yet.

## **The funeral of the donkey and Brezhnev**

Shuhrat Babadjanov, 42, artist, political émigré in the Czech Republic

There is a place called Murzachul – it is 200 km from Tashkent. Once it was a desert where nothing grew. Then the communists decided to dedicate the steppe land to cotton production. In doing this they destroyed the eco-system and as a result the Sea of Aral no longer exists.

The only thing that grew in Murzachul was cotton but when harvest time came there was no population to do the work. So they called in the students. This was a world cut off from the rest of the world with no drinking water, electricity, or telephone. We lived in wooden bungalows and slept in plank-beds. I had a special responsibility – organize life in the bungalow. I had to make tea and ensure power supply. The tea was brewed in a large, 50-litre samovar. The power came from a Soviet generator and it was on for two hours in the evening. The main bungalow, or ‘headquarters’, was 10 km away and I had to travel every morning for supplies of drinking water, kerosene for the samovar, and petrol for the generator. At first I had a tractor to make those trips. Then it was taken away. I replaced the tractor with a donkey which had been hanging around for some time. The two of us carried the water, the gas and the kerosene across the ten kilometers. I had to do this every day.

The autumn of 1982 in Uzbekistan was a cold one. At the end of November there was snow everywhere. This was a hard time for the donkey and it soon died. It died on the same day as Leonid Brezhnev. We were staying in the bungalows but we were not harvesting cotton because there was no cotton to harvest. It was all a charade for Moscow’s sake. Moscow wanted the world to know that everyone in Uzbekistan was harvesting cotton and this was why we were sent there even though the cotton was gone. There was a television set on which we watched Brezhnev’s funeral. This was when I suggested that we organize a funeral for our donkey. We were bored and had nothing else to do. There were about 80 of us. Everyone embraced the idea. We saw that in Moscow a special committee was set up to organise Brezhnev’s funeral. So we set up a funeral committee too. Everyone said, “You should be the committee chairman because you were the donkey’s last master”. I accepted. Three meters from the bungalow we dug a hole and buried the donkey in it. I read a short speech at the grave. I said that the donkey helped us through hard times, that thanks to it we had hot tea, electricity and so on. A young man sang a traditional Uzbek funeral song. Many people made speeches recounting memories of the donkey. A girl from Samarkand told us how she rode the donkey and now felt very sad at the loss. An artist painted a portrait with a caption in three languages – Uzbek, Russian and Tadjik. It said, “Farewell, donkey. You will not be forgotten, and so on”. Then we left.

Two days later I was summoned to ‘headquarters’ before the Comsomol committee. They said, “You organized a satirical performance and made fun of Brezhnev and we now have to expel you from the Comsomol”. Then they had to find my name in the Comsomol lists when the cotton harvest was over and they found themselves in bureaucratic chaos. Soon after this Andropov started railing against Brezhnev and it was no longer fashionable to accuse someone of making fun of Brezhnev.

This was how I did not get expelled from the Comsomol, whose member I had never been anyway, but this is a different bureaucratic story.

The donkey’s grave can be found to this day in the Gagarin Region, Sovhoz 22, three meters from bungalow number 471.

## **Hello, melancholy**

*“The best part of you are your memories, so is the worst one...”*  
overheard in a London street

A few days ago I received an e-mail from artists in a distant Western European country asking if I could help with an art project they had launched to help Bulgaria’s representation before the accession to the European Union in 2007.

The authors described the importance of the project in the following way:

“Bulgaria is one of the less well known countries in the east ... events from Bulgarian history have not become part of the European consciousness...”

I smiled because this sentence brought back memories and conversations from previous months, as well as several pleasant personal experiences.

I remembered my efforts in my first years in Prague to be received not as an ‘Eastern’ European, but simply as a European, a citizen of the world, and the time it took to come to terms with my own sense of discomfort with the word “eastern” and with being different, which increasingly made itself obvious in things like preferred foods, climate conditions, parties, smells, sounds, fears, etc.

A month ago we organized in Bulgaria an experimental discussion on the topic “Does the European Union need our Eastern memories, and do our Eastern memories need the European Union?” The participants in the discussion were Bulgarians and Poles. It became clear that many Bulgarians have a problem with the word “Eastern” which the Poles do not. For them it was clear that their memories and stories are “Eastern”, different from those of the others in the European Union and that this was a problem which deserves to be discussed. Many of the Bulgarians protested against this division of memories and saw no difference between theirs and those of Western Europe, and Europe in general. “What difference will it make to our children whether they are Eastern or not ”, was how a young man echoed these sentiments.

In the discussions which followed the Poles wanted to know why this is so, asked questions about our recent history, personal experiences and finally Irek, whom the readers know from Polish Sauna, Issue 21 of Capital Weekly, suggested a topic for the next discussion: ”Which facts from your history would you like us to know and associate with you?”

### **“Meditating” on the European Union**

I would suggest the next valuable exercise. Stand before the mirror and tell yourself, “I am from the East. I come from the least-known country in Europe. No events in my country have become part of the European consciousness. How does that make me feel?”

I think it is really important to ask ourselves not what am I doing/this is not on the agenda now, but how do I feel. This dialogue has yet to take place anyway and even if I strongly disagree with a statement like the above, i.e. even if my mind protests, it is useful to know what my body feels about it. Actually, as the accession to the European Union approaches we will finally have to start discussing– with ourselves - this conflict (if it is a conflict) between the mind and the body and the relations between the two. We shall finally have to start talking about the feelings of several generations of Bulgarians which have subsided in our bodies and will now be articulated in a curious, and at the same time bored, tired and worried European context.

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### **The cynical strategy – live in the present!**

Europe is dominated by a worry that history is slipping out of control, that it is beginning to happen very, very fast. A few months ago I came upon the Finnish magazine about art FRAMEWORK

/www.framework.fi/. What attracted my curiosity was a conversation with the Russian artist Viktor Mesiano from the Moscow Art Magazine entitled “**Faster than history**”\*\*. Mesiano described how in the 90s the Russian transition deprived history of meaning because the sheer speed at which it happened became problematic. “My own life was such that the need to survive had anchored me firmly in the present. This was a cynical strategy, the 90s were marked by the obsession for personal success. Look at the result of the neo-liberal reforms: the country and its economy belong to a handful of people, the so-called oligarchs. The same is true of art: there is no institution, no reforms in earnest, just a couple of brilliant international careers – art-oligarchs. It is not surprising that the official ideology insisted that the 70 years of Soviet rule were a black hole: you see, when you take a period outside history the goods and the ownership created in that period are of little importance and value, which means that they can be given away for nothing, but of course to the right people. History as a phenomenon was ignored because it is a system of values, an ethos which reins in wild privatization. But today we have a new context. Things have changed. We need History, a systematic structure of the past, a new perspective focused on the personal voice and individual position. We need to develop this quest for a new past. “

### **A passion for a new past**

In my conversations in Europe, both Eastern and Western, I meet many people who think in the same way. There is a passion for meaning, which I hesitate to call a “wave” or “wind” but is nonetheless disturbing because it runs deep. Perhaps the quest for a new past is utopian? Why is it that so many people are obsessed with it? I remember being myself a-historical at the beginning of the transition and being certain that I needed no history because this was “their” history”, the history of an elite to which neither I, nor the people around me could relate and now I have the terrific chance to get even with them by living in the present, here and now, in the new and visible time despite history and faster than history. Most Bulgarians I meet in Western Europe have done precisely this: they call socialism “forgotten time” which is not worth remembering, and have connected to a different time – the fictitious time of genuine, or European history. The connection was fast and successful. The results vary: from strong anger - with what Europe is now and/or what Bulgaria is now, strong nostalgia for what Bulgaria was then and strong melancholy towards Bulgaria and Europe today. Because, as Vesselin Vachkov, the editor of the Czech *Lidove Noviny* says, “when you’ve lived in a place for five years you begin to understand things, and then you start losing the outlines”.

### **“If you don’t like it here, go to Moscow!”**

The most interesting thing about disconnecting from one time and connecting to another is that neither “we” understand “them”, nor “they” understand “us”. I talked about this to Thomas Schaerer, a documentary film-maker and historian born in Zurich, Switzerland in 1968. Thomas spend 4 years working on the largest ever project on oral history in Switzerland (called *L’histoire c’est moi* - [www.archimob.ch](http://www.archimob.ch)) which collected 555 personal narratives of the Second World War. (see the conversation with him) He turns out to be deeply interested in the topic “memories of socialism”. Why? Because he has memories himself. And interesting memories they are too.

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“The expression “iron curtain” had a strong emotional significance for me but I didn’t really understand it, it was more like a metaphor. When I was a child I thought that there were many large curtains made of iron and I tried to picture them. Behind those iron curtains there was the *terra incognita* which acquired an emotional significance too because there was so little information about it, it was as though this part of Europe did not exist. What did exist was the news about the cold war, the weapons, the threat of a new world war and nuclear apocalypse. I was afraid of this. So when I grew up I realized that the two categories of “socialism” and “capitalism” were too polarized in Switzerland with too much ideology attached to them because most people are terribly conservative and see the socialism after the Russian revolution as something terrible. I myself tried to see the good things, I read Marx, saw the dreams for a just society and was impressed with their ideas. This is why I sometimes defended the positions of the eastern bloc which would prompt the comment, “If you don’t like it here, go to Moscow!” These words were often addressed to the left-wing intellectuals in Switzerland. Swiss citizens who traveled east were

watched closely, telephones were tapped to paranoid proportions: 800 000, nearly one million, people were watched by the Swiss secret police, which did not call itself that, but this is what it ultimately was.”

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I am both surprised and wonder at myself – with all the people I know, and with all the trips I have made to Switzerland I had to hear this now and in Bulgaria. Perhaps I was not interested in hearing it. I think I am beginning to understand one more of our Southeast European demons: the flight from history, from your own time makes you insensitive to the history and time of others. And you are not the master but the slave of the transformation. You move to the imaginable clean time of “real” history where the pain and demons are different and, because they are not dumb, want to find an audience too.

“I know a young man who went to a film festival in 1965 to Moscow, if I am not mistaken, and when he came back was beaten up at the railway station simply because he had been to Moscow.” At this point Thomas laughs – can you imagine this? “Of course, this changed at the end of the 70s and the 80s, but at the end of the 60s anti-communism was very strong. In fact there are many migrants from Czechoslovakia and Hungary from that time because they fitted perfectly the philosophy of the establishment, which was, “these poor people from the communist countries – we need to help them start a new life in Switzerland.”

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So what has happened is that people have stopped believing in the pain of others. This is the Europe of which we are a part today. Hello, melancholy.

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With Dana Hronkova, one of the most passionate Czech specialists in Bulgarian Studies in Prague and among the best experts of Bulgarian literature in the Czech Republic we are discussing whether there is a different option from melancholy and what the Bulgarian nostalgias are. I write down her answer:

“Bulgarians are nostalgic for “the different stories”, the stories that are their own.

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### **A beautiful end**

For this process of remembering to happen, to take out the “the postponed memories”, as one Bulgarian ambassador in Latin America put it, surely you need to slow down time, but, then, is this possible and what is the point anyway if the result is not known and not necessarily beautiful?

One possible answer which is both beautiful and Bulgarian was given to me once again by Dana Hronkova with a love story between Dora Gabe \_ a famous Bulgarian poet and Vyateslav Nezval she discovered.

In the autumn of 1931 Dora Gabe and Vyateslav Nezval met at a matinee in the Vinohrady Theatre in Prague. Dora Gabe, who already had two books to her credit, was on a visit to Czechoslovakia to promote Bulgarian literature. Nezval was called a world poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even though in the 50s he wrote odes to the communist party. Dora Gabe visited Prague a few more times, then traveled to Brno and Bratislava and on those trips was invariably accompanied by Nezval. *Pis mne, Dorusko, touzim po kazdem Tvem slove, jsem stale s Tebou*, Nesval wrote affectionately./ “Write to me, Dorushka, I yearn for your every word, I am with you all the time” /.

“May be I live to remember./ This makes life mirrorlike ./And the biggest miracle is that I see through invisible eyes” – Dora Gabe wrote later in her poem Invisible Eyes (1970).

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### **A philosophical end**

Where, indeed, is our place as Southeast Europeans with socialist memories and post-communist dreams in the large and expanding European space? Do Europe and the European Union really need us, our eastern dreams, our translation of this history?

Who needs this, in the final analysis? The Austrian Michael Staudigal who teaches philosophy at the University of Vienna offers an answer which I diligently write down and remember: “The need for translation is very important for our understanding in modern societies. Because I would say that ideologies change and perhaps it is no longer totalitarianism but neo-liberalism that tries to see the world

from a total and totalized viewpoint. So you live inside this and are even incapable of seeing that you are inside. From this point of view it seems to me important to start such a process of translation, of explaining the logic of the everyday world.”

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To say that facing to our recent past, our personal experience and perceptions is the only possible new European project of Bulgaria is undoubtedly an exercise in adventurist thinking. But surely this should not be a problem in today's world, where everything is upside down?

End of series