

Melahcholic guidebook - Bulgaria

We traveled together with friend and photographer Vjara Stefanova in 2006 around Bulgaria.

I was trying to understand my own fascination with static things, things that have remained unchanged.

I suppose, I have been so fascinated by change in the 90s, by my own ability to travel wherever I wanted, that later I experienced shock by realizing how static I have remained in many parts of myself.

The stories could be read also on the website of the Vagabond magazine www.vagabond-bg.com

Content:

- 1. The island of Cuba, Haskovo**
- 2. Sunday tango**
- 3. Redzheb, passing sorrow**
- 4. A brush with horsehair**
- 5. Pepa, four dogs and cats, citycenter**

THE ISLAND OF CUBA, HASKOVO

A few months ago I overheard a boy talking about his street in Cuba. Fascinated, I wondered which Cuba he could be referring to. "The Island of Cuba District in Haskovo," the boy replied. It struck me that this was the first time I had ever heard of such a place in Bulgaria and I was eager to hear more. The lad had no idea how his district had acquired this name, but guessed it to be because it resembled an island, surrounded by ditches and a little isolated from the rest of the city.

His friends believed the name actually stemmed from the Communist era, but no one had any real knowledge of who had come up with the idea of naming this Haskovo district after the North Caribbean stronghold of Fidel Castro. It was a mystery that I immediately set out to solve.

When you reach the suburb, the **first sign of the real Cuba's influence comes in the form of a yellow taxi** displaying the company name, Havana. Then comes the Cuba Libre cafe, followed by another one named Cuba, and then a third, the Caliente. They are all fairly low-key, so you could easily overlook them while walking along the central street lined on either side with houses, blocks of flats and patches of green. Cuba district has an air of early Communism about it, rather than the salsa more associated with its namesake.

Instead of being depressingly old-fashioned, my usual impression of run-down Communist areas, it actually feels rather quaint. Even the dilapidated letter boxes, which used to house subscription newspapers, are growing old in style. Decaying housing blocks from the 1980s, my own particular era, tend to leave me cold, but these older buildings, which date back another 20 years or more, touched me deeply.

The same is true of **Haskovo's Cuba district** as a whole. Its landscape is pleasant, despite its aging shabbiness. In the 1960s, there were vineyards on this site; the first blocks of flats were built back then and the most recent in the 1970s. The suburb is indeed surrounded by gullies, which restrict any expansion. For me, this is the real charm of island geography; you can't extend the boundary to infinity so you accept the limitations, the confinement that nature imposes.

During my walk around Cuba, I come across **a number of theories about the origin of its title**. According to Uncle Genko, who is chopping firewood in front of his block, this was the area where "the most progressive people lived before the ninth of September", hence the Island of Cuba name. Dimitar, who owns a small shop and is one of the few men in the suburb born in Haskovo (most have come from the nearby villages), remembers the official naming ceremony attended by the Cuban ambassador: "It was in 1960, I reckon". He remembers that the idea originated with some of the local "kingpins".

They had ties to the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and so they carried it through. "Back then, things happened on their decision only." He also remembers the frequent visits of Cuban delegations and dance groups. It transpires **the kindergarten opposite the shop also had a Cuban name**, Celia Sanchez Manduley, officially named after Fidel Castro's associate. It became Slaveyche or Nightingale after 1989. I find the teachers have preserved everything. They open old books and photo albums showing pictures of Fidel Castro and Todor Zhivkov on the walls. The hours slip by as we immerse ourselves in Cuban souvenirs and memories. "You know," exclaims Kasabova, one of the teachers, "it's strange that nobody else has ever been interested in this."

Despite so many theories, the Cuba enigma remains. In the Haskovo history museum, I learn that the Spanish ambassador had asked the same question several years before and got the same answer as myself: no one has ever looked into it. A very interesting fact comes to light, however, and that is that the **locals have been referring to the district as the Island of Cuba since the 1920s**, long before the arrival of Communism. This name may even have appeared immediately after the Liberation of 1878.

Under Ottoman rule, the area was called the Island of Fakiya and it was thought that migrants from other parts of the Ottoman Empire had brought this Turkish name from somewhere else. The name Cuba (with a stress on the last syllable) appeared later, during the renaming campaign, and may also be of Turkish origin. But why, if they were replacing Turkish names, should they choose another one?

After so many changes in the history of this city, and the country as a whole, it seems incredible that the Island of Cuba district may have gone by the same name for nearly a century or more, officially or unofficially. I prefer to imagine this enduring defiance is due to some unfulfilled traveller's fantasy of a sun-drenched island in the Caribbean

which captured everyone's imagination. After all, what else but a shared fantasy could prevail upon history, usually so fickle when it comes to names, to remain so steadfast?

Yes, with no evidence around to contradict me, I think I'll stick to my dreams.



SUNDAY TANGO

In a ritual every bit as rehearsed as his dance steps, **my father carefully prepares for his weekly Sunday engagement**. Impeccably dressed in his tailored green gabardine jacket, a present from a friend in London in the early 1990s, he goes dancing.

The venue is always the same: a live music hall in Sofia, but the dance and the day can vary. The tango, waltz, rumba, or foxtrot - sometimes on a Saturday, sometimes on a Sunday, although my father prefers the latter. Dancing starts at half past two and goes on until six.

It was two years ago that I first learned of my father's weekly outings and I was filled lled with happiness. He had been living alone for six years, since my mother's death, and had not allowed himself much fun. But my overriding feeling was curiosity. What exactly happened there, what were the people there like, and what did they talk about?

From his accounts, it all seemed rather exotic. **Imagine 200 or more people aged over 55, turning out in their Sunday best to tango and foxtrot every week**. I could hardly imagine it actually taking place in Sofia, and I was not alone. All the friends I told instantly raised their eyebrows in surprise and exclaimed: "Come on! You can't expect me to believe that. You can't be talking about Bulgaria!"

Intrigued by my father's secret passion, I decided to join him one afternoon. Paying our one lev entrance fee, we enter the venue. A company canteen in its everyday life, with a low ceiling and tiled floor, it may lack the smoky sensuality of the Buenos Aires tango hall of my imagination, but it has clearly captured others'. By half past two the dance floor is already swarming with people.

A guitar, an accordion and an organ provide the backing, along with a female singer. The dancers assemble for the first piece, a tango. This is followed by a rumba, and then a waltz. A horo then plays, then another, and then it all happens again in reverse order, or so it seems. Some of the couples taking part are mixed, but many consist of just women.

"A lot of women come for the dancing and prefer to do it alone rather than wait for someone to ask them," explains my father's friend Maria.

"They outnumber the men anyway. Besides, some men are rather cheeky and immediately offer their 'services'," she adds. This is confirmed by other women who are discussing the same topic in the toilets: "What do I need a man for? All they want is someone to do the chores."

Personal histories may differ, but the main theme is the same. "We are all widows," says Maria. "Our husbands are dead. **This is the only place where you can meet somebody like you**, somebody whose partner is gone too. There is another thing as well: everybody curses us senior citizens out there in the street. This is the only place where I feel like a human being. So, I come every week."

While the desire to escape their everyday lives may be strong, the impulse to share their histories is equally potent. Whether it is showing off some shoes bought from the now extinct Pirin fashion shop using the right "connections"; a fan which has hardly been used apart from the odd trip to the theatre; a pearl necklace; a dress worn for the first time since the end of the 1970s, or a shirt starched long ago, there are many stories to be shared.

Ana, a singer, remembers when the militia banned swing music after 9 September 1944, the official start of Communism in Bulgaria. "And do you know why?" she asks. "Because there were no bras at the time and when the girls danced, it was... my God! They decided to put a stop to lechery - and they did the right thing!" One of Ana's companions remembers that this is what Fidel Castro did too: he banned the rumba to stop lewdness.

Even my father reveals surprising details about himself. Long ago, he tells me, he learned his dance steps from two gypsy boys, his neighbours. "They were very good. They would either come to my home or I would visit them, we were close friends. Then I went on teaching myself on my own, often using a pillow or a chair as a partner." After becoming more confident, he began dancing "at more demanding events". He became well known for his moves and won several regional dance contests.

"**Dancing has helped me a lot in life**," my father says. "If you dance well, you will always make friends." This desire for human contact and friendship is echoed throughout the Sunday dance. Each individual's story inevitably touches on death and, as I watch them circling the floor, I am struck by this need to share the past, but also to

create a new present for themselves with their Sunday visits. Maria tells me about a friend who learned to dance only after her husband's death. "She had married at 17, and her husband locked her away at home and wouldn't let her go out anywhere. She came here and enjoyed it, but she didn't know the steps, so she used to come home with me so that I could teach her."

Having shared the memories and collective enjoyment of the Sunday dance, I can well imagine that my father reflects the thoughts and feelings of the entire gathering when he proudly states: "I haven't forgotten anything, even after so many years, and I feel fine."



REDZHEB, PASSING SORROW

A distinctive mark will remain between Bulgaria and Central Europe for a long time

Several months ago my job took me to the Elena district of the Balkan Range. There were four of us, the other three born in the 1980s and I in the late 1960s. We ended up in the village of Yakovtsi. Half the houses were crumbling, but there were three freshly restored ones that had been converted into hotels. The church was a ruin but there were two pubs, one for tourists and one for the locals. The first had a TV, Coca-Cola and dainty tablecloths; the second a radio, lemonade, checked tablecloths and a "no smoking" sign on one of the tables.

Without even knowing the history of this place, you felt that its vitality had been snapped off at some point, and that it had not happened recently. "Here, you are more dead than alive," says Radka, who, since her husband's death, lives alone and looks after the cows. She shows us the room which she inhabits in a house still displaying the sign "Dance hall". Then we learn that history has forced the people out of Yakovtsi several times, the last being because of the construction of the Yovkovtsi Dam, the largest in the Balkan Peninsula during Communism. The people moved out, but then it turned out that the water never reached the village. Some came back, others did not.

I am telling this story, however, because of another person whom we meet that evening: Ivan, who is actually Redzheb. Or was until the Revival Process in 1984. "This is when things took a turn for the worse in Bulgaria," he says. He tells us about himself. He is half Turkish, half Gypsy, but he feels more of a Gypsy. This is what he calls himself, he is used to it. His father Ahmed changed his name to Angel, because it started with an "A" and they all chose the family name Ivanov. Ahmed couldn't live with the unrest, however, and died soon afterwards, without ever getting used to his new name.

"Why didn't you take back your name?" I ask.

"I realised we're all in the same boat: Bulgarians, Turks and Gypsies, and it doesn't matter if you are Ivan or Hazan. Besides, I got used to it and I like it. Ivan is a name that somehow suits me; it is a very strong name, just for me. My wife, however, calls me Redzheb, and only when she gets angry, she tells me off - Ivan, Ivan!"

We try to make a joke: Redzheb means December and Ivanov, or Ivan's day, is celebrated in January, so there is some sense to it.

I am very impressed with Redzheb. He doesn't have much money because he doesn't have a permanent job, but he can easily trace back his own life and say when things took a turn for the worse, both for him and for Bulgaria.

My companions at the table are also impressed. Redzheb has a knack for telling stories which make us sit up and listen. They were all small children when the Revival Process took place and know almost nothing about it. I was in secondary school then. It is my turn to talk - I now know much more than I did back then. I even smile to myself at having to guide those at the table in our recent history, which was unfamiliar to me only seven or eight years ago. I try to recall my feelings at school then. I remember the rumours which circulated in north-western Bulgaria, where I lived, of something terrible going on, but there was nothing more than rumours. Back then, we had no chance to form an opinion about it. There were no Turkish people around, apart from one of my sister's classmates. Nobody made us think about it. I learned the truth later, at university, but again only partially, because my fellow students who came from that part of Bulgaria wouldn't speak much about it. When you learn the whole truth, you only realise then that when it happened, you did not think about it. Since then, I have felt momentary sorrow on meeting people who experienced the tragedy, sorrow for myself, because I will have to catch up on memories all my life.



It wasn't until later, in the late 1990s, that I made an important discovery: our Communism ended with a stigma, which, because of the rapid changes that followed, few of my contemporaries, then aged about 20, took seriously. What mattered to us then was to travel, to see the West, or study abroad. What is worse, few take seriously their participation in demonstrations and rallies against the restoration of Turkish names. I have had a number of discussions about this in Prague and Sofia. I have friends who remember being marched to such events and even shouting "Turks, go back to Turkey!", but they don't know against whom they were protesting or why - everything is now hazy.

I gradually came to realise that the culture of rapid transition, which did not care about the past, had gradually settled into our bones and infected us all, and had changed into a heavy, invisible sadness.

For a generation like mine, which has acquired the confidence to be victorious and successful anywhere in the world, this has remained an inner drama, this acceptance of the sorrow of our own country.

None of my friends were ready for this in the late 1980s or the 1990s; nobody even suspected that to be successful anywhere you had to deal with this sorrow. I think this sadness will remain as a distinctive mark between us and Central Europe for a long time, as a new wall which separates us, the people on either side of melancholy.

Otherwise, the Elena district of the Balkans and the area around Yakovtzi is one of the most attractive for foreigners visiting Bulgaria. "This is when the country's economy began to deteriorate, this is when unemployment began... the country went to the dogs. I felt more insecure. I probably became more spiteful too," says Redzheb. How many of us can recall the beginning of our own insecurity?

We remain silent.

Then we talk again for a long time and, when darkness falls over Yakovtzi, I pluck up courage to ask if I can record what he says. I record for over an hour.

We remain silent.

And then the story ends.

"What's your name?" he asks finally. "Diana," I answer. "Oh, you have a very good name too, very strong," he says earnestly.

I don't remember anybody reacting to my name in this way.

We laugh.

This is how we part - he is smiling and I am struck with a passing sorrow.



A BRUSH WITH HORSEHAIR

If Bulgarian melancholy could choose the site of a museum, it would be this very place

"Nobody comes for a shave these days!" Boris says sadly, emphasising "these days". Boris is the barber in the only barbershop in Vurshets, which we came across a few months ago, just opposite the bus station.

If Bulgarian melancholy could choose the site of its museum, it would be right here.

Vurshets is a small town with mineral springs in the northwest of the country. I have known it for a long time but, for some strange reason, I find it is the first place I have ever felt excited about. So I decide to go back and find out why.

The bus station is empty, half of it is derelict and has fallen into disuse. The barbershop is located in the building across the road. By the door there is a huge panel with a portrait of Bulgarian poet Penyo Penev and several lines of his verse: "I care not for immortality or easy ways / Nor for a quilted jacket on a winter day / But may what I've here built / Remain for ever and a day." Before entering the barbershop, you read this and the strange combination of Penyo Penev and the old, sootcovered barbershop awakes a feeling of affection and a quaint charm that I find perplexing.

Boris has been a barber all his life, that is since 1974, and has been in the barbershop in Vurshets since 1984. When we visit him, he is cutting a boy's hair "at promotional prices", for one and a half leva, because the boy has not got the two leva to pay the full price. "It often happens, we sometimes cut their hair for free. What can we do when they have no money?" Business is poor and seldom amounts to 15 leva a day. His customers are mainly poor people, men. The others go to the two or three modern beauty salons in town.



Four people work shifts here, cutting hair. Everything is old: a woodburning stove with pipes, mirrors, wainscoting, hangers, and a Rediffusion radio. The stove plays an important role in winter, because there is no hairdryer. When the stove is not sufficient to keep the cold at bay, customers have a "dry" haircut. There are jars with beautiful silvery lids that I haven't seen anywhere else. The hairdresser's chairs are even older and look like they belong in a movie. Upholstered in green leather, they have white porcelain legs and special contraptions used only for shaving, to keep the head upright and fixed. It is obvious that they don't get much use. They look alien, abandoned on the table like the object of someone else's love,

from another time.

"Nobody comes for a shave these days!" Boris repeats, and this simple sentence sums up the current history of Vurshets. It is one of Bulgaria's oldest health spas, dating back to the period of Ottoman rule. At the beginning of the 20th Century it became a favourite spot for relaxation among the Bulgarian aristocracy. It flourished under Communism, when the villas of the rich were nationalised and it became a centre for mass tourism. Each household would let out rooms to tourists and for many years they had a good standard of living. "There used to be a lot of work, both haircuts and shaving. It took holidaymakers from southern Bulgaria two days to get here, so when they arrived at the station, they would come right here, to have their beards shaved. They would come to us to tidy them up and then off they went to the spa!" says Boris.

It is no longer so: there are no holidaymakers, there is no work, and there is no money. The town is falling into decay. There may be new, modern shops and hotels or renovated buildings, but the melancholy of the town is growing. I remember a girl relating the following a few months ago, at a discussion about the EU: "My father still can't adjust to the fall of Communism and he won't adjust to joining the EU either."



We don't talk about this much with Boris, we concentrate on the other interesting objects in his shop. The brush for cleaning customers' necks is made of natural horsehair. Boris remembers the exact date and place where he bought it, "in Samokov, from a private producer, in 1988." He likes this brush and often straightens it out with a comb. The brush has a kind

of proud, aristocratic standing amongst his other tools. It seems to me that this is so because it is the only object whose history he remembers. It has pride of place in the barbershop among the mirrors, chairs and jars with silvery lids of a more humble and inconspicuous appearance. I find it remarkable that an ordinary brush of horsehair can appear truly impressive among the pile of odds and ends in a barbershop. I also find it remarkable how easily Boris remembers the details of its life, and I feel a true connection to him and satisfaction with my decision to come back.

What is more, I seem to understand the charm of this place. Here, nobody pretends they have become a different person since the transition and there are no artificial changes. Here, there exists a natural admission about our own helplessness, and melancholy can find the room it has long been looking for. Here, it is welcome.



PEPA, FOUR DOGS AND CATS, THE CITY CENTRE

I don't remember how I first felt when I been a strange, depressing feeling. Vitoshka Street and then go into the One of the women made my heart sink. beg. It seemed to me that she sat there, looking down, only to be alone within begging bowl - I felt that their tinkle Sometimes an old man with a grey people sold flowers on the opposite loaded with paper to the nearby scrap evening, they disappeared into the three-storey house with architecture with a padlock, a yard with a parasol, a table, some rubbish and a stone littered path, behind which nothing else could be seen. There was never any light there.

came to live in this street, but it must have People would beg on the corner of entrance opposite my apartment building. I had never seen a more beautiful woman on the corner, wearing a headscarf and herself. I never dared put any coins in her would somehow hurt or embarrass her. beard would squat in her place. A couple of pavement and occasionally towed a cart yard making an unbelievable noise. In the same entrance to the magnificent old typical of 1930s Sofia and a metal gate

The house was inhabited by homeless people. It was the first time I had lived close to street people and beggars and I did not know how I should feel about it.

I tried to establish what their begging schedule was. Several times I even caught myself making wishes before going out - if the elderly woman was there, they would come true.

It took over two years for me to venture to talk to them. A friend even advised me to give it up, "you'll only get into trouble". It turned out I was the only neighbour who didn't talk to them. Everybody in the neighbourhood already knew them and would often give them food, clothes, cigarettes, household goods or furniture. I had not even suspected I lived in a place seething with social solidarity. There are things you never learn unless you make a gesture of good will.

As it happens it is very easy to meet them: you simply cross the street and say "good afternoon, may I introduce myself, we are neighbours."

The beautiful elderly woman is ill and we don't see her, but Pepa, a 50-year-old slim and smiling woman, invites us into the big house. It was she who found it empty in the autumn of 2000. At that time, she had already been evicted from her state flat in Druzha 2, a district on the outskirts of Sofia, because she could not pay for the electricity and water and she had to live in the street. She saw the house, something made her walk in, and then she moved in, followed by five more people: her present husband, her daughter with her boyfriend, the beautiful elderly woman and an old man. Plus four dogs and four cats. Nobody has ever asked them why they are here and nobody has wanted his house back either. The neighbours have told them that the owner is probably in London, but it is not clear if this is a fact. They live without water or electricity - without owing the state anything. Heat: a stove burning wood or coal; light: candles in the evening; water: rainwater and from the Central Market; bathing: once a week in the Gorna Banyia baths.

Pepa is joyful and when learning that I come from northwestern Bulgaria, became more so, because she was also born there, in Miziya. I sometimes feel you can never leave the place where you were born. I know everything in Pepa and her partners' house from other houses in the northwest that I have lived in: the wood-burning stove, the slightly askew icon, the needlework depicting deer, the framed cutting from a women's magazine, the heavy wardrobe and the multitude of objects, cushions and makeshift flower pots. All these houses in the northwest are now empty and padlocked by their owners, who have "shelved" them for some other time. With Pepa it is the opposite: she has brought the spirit of the northwest into an empty, "shelved" house in Sofia. Poor, warm, like a hut, but cosy in its own way. Pepa hardly has any teeth left in her mouth and reminds me of a cousin, from the northwest, who in 1998, at the age of 37, decided he would never go to the dentist again, because otherwise he would never manage in life financially.

I don't tell this to her; instead, I ask her when she decided she could not manage in life, when she first felt helpless. "In 1998, when they took my flat away." Has she always been poor? Always, "I was poor and I am poor now." Her dreams when she was a child? "To sing, but they cut out my tonsils and that was it." When was she happy? "When I got married the first time, at 16 and a half, in Miziya." She has been married twice and has six children. Her eldest son is in London and the youngest is in Miziya, in a home for children with disabilities. Two others are married and live in different parts of Bulgaria and two live with her. For a long time she has been without a job, without social security, without a pension, without anything.



Pepa has hit the bottom, but there is no tragedy about her. This is probably the reason why the whole neighbourhood secretly loves the homeless people's house - what we are all afraid of is much more human than we actually imagine. Or possibly for another reason too: their inner feeling of helplessness which many of us have also known.

I ask her whether she has imagined that her life could change for the better. She doesn't know how this could happen. She doesn't expect anything. I tell her about my father, who was born with some white hair on his head, and a woman present at his birth told my grandmother that "this boy would have good luck, but late in life" and this was indeed the case. Maybe she has a similar fate. She brightens up and says that a woman has told her something of the sort. Then she remembers a dream. "I dream I am in a courtyard, in something like a house but without a roof, and I see a friend's boy, a junkie who is now dead, asking me what I am doing there. Then I see a house which they have decided to give to us and I enter it and see a lot of people who have moved in and I ask them: 'What are you doing here? This house is for us.' But they look through me as if I am a ghost. Only I can see them. Then I go to a woman who has made a kind of bar, but she doesn't see me either, as if I don't exist."

She tells me her dream and asks if it means something good. I ask her if there are other such houses and people in Sofia. "A lot, but a lot of them die too." Has she ever thought of going back to the country? "No, the people there sometimes ask me for a cigarette, can you imagine? Sofia is like a paradise, I've been here for 25 years and everything is completely different."

She says she doesn't enjoy begging, this is what she hates most. "I can't look people in the eyes; I wish I were no more. So, when I see a beggar, I don't give him a dime but two 50 stotinki pieces so that he can go and buy some food. I feel sad."

We are separated by a cobbled street and two gates, a minute to walk across, and the two years it took to talk to them. I still can't tell if there is a difference between now and then apart from knowing their names: six people, four dogs and four cats. My melancholic neighbours in the very centre of Sofia.