

Traumas and Miracles – Portraits from Northwestern Bulgaria

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The presence of others, who see what we see and hear what we hear, reassure us that the world is real and we ourselves are real.

*Hannah Arendt*¹

If we believe, as the American sociologist Kai Ericson does, that collective trauma is “a blow to the basic issues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together”² then what is happening in Northwestern Bulgaria is exactly that – trauma.

Many of the region’s women have been leaving it for years, seeking temporary jobs in Greece, Spain and especially in Italy (where they are employed as care workers for old people – the so called *badante*³). Left behind them are husbands, children, parents⁴. The population is diminishing in numbers and getting older. Currently, the Northwest is the poorest region in Bulgaria and in the whole of the European Union⁵.

This is nothing less than a crisis of intimacy – families are falling apart. Most of these women experience their employment abroad traumatically and see it as something that was forced on them by the weakness of the state. Their life paths were interrupted by the collapse of communism and especially by the economic and political crisis of 1997, “when poverty stroke”. “Thank God I am very strong psychologically, I might as well have gone bananas. Many people in Bulgaria couldn’t cope with the change. Many in my apartment building died – the ones with lower incomes and more unstable psyches.” (a teacher from Montana who works as *badante* in Pisa, Italy).

The family is losing its old meaning. Many women believe that if you love your family, it’s better to leave it for the sake of everybody’s economic survival.

The Northwest is going through several crises simultaneously – the withdrawal of women, the loneliness of men, the abandonment of children, and the overall crisis of the village and the small town which have ceased to be seen as places of personal future.

It is this quiet layering of trauma upon trauma that drew our attention – mine and that of photographer Babak Salari – to our subject. Our interest was rooted

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1958.

² Angela Kühner, *Trauma und kollektives Gedächtnis*, Psychosozial-Verlag, 2008.

³ Italian for care worker for old people, comes from „badare”

⁴ I am studying the phenomenon in my doctoral dissertation at the Sigmund Freud University in Vienna since 2008.

⁵ The six poorest regions in the EU are in Bulgaria and Romania, with Northwestern Bulgaria at the top of the list with a GDP which is 25% of the average for the Union, Eurostat, 2007.

in events we had experienced in our own lives. My father had to cope with my mother's death on his own, as I was working abroad as a journalist; while a cousin of mine employed as *badante* in Italy missed the funeral of her father upon which she came back to Bulgaria and decided never to return to Italy again. Babak Salari was deeply moved by this shuffle of human fates which reminded him of his own trauma of being forced to leave his native Iran. He sought political asylum in Canada more than a quarter of a century ago.

After many conversations, Babak and I both realised we wanted to find out what, in this situation, was happening to the eldest people, as they were now the most numerous age group in the region. They were also possibly its "last guardians" – a generation which has lived through at least two collective breakdowns: that of the traditional village family following the collectivisation of the land by the communist government in the 1950s and the breakdown of communism itself – which structured most of their lives – in 1989⁶.

Proportionally, the Northwest continues to provide the highest electoral support in the country for the Bulgarian Socialist Party (the former Communist Party) and political pundits often label it as "the red bastion". The fall of communist dictator Todor Zhivkov was met here mostly with common silence and fear, rather than the collective euphoria experienced in the big Bulgarian cities – Sofia, Plovdiv, Rousse and Bourgas. 1989 marked the beginning of a hard-fought struggle for survival (triggered by the closing down of industrial capacities) and the conflicting experiences and feelings resulting from it have not been articulated in any depth⁷. Worse than that, they seem to be buried under the circumstances of more recent crises – the retirement of the elderly (many of whom have moved back to the villages where they can live on lower budgets) and the collapse of families (caused by economic migration of family members abroad).

In short, the elderly of the Northwest are not so much the guardians of tradition as we romantically want them to be, but the bearers of heterogeneous traumatic experience, which remains unspoken of and muted.

In the summer of 2008, Babak Salari and I travelled to nine Northwestern villages in the area locked between Vurshets, Svoge, Vratsa and Montana. These are Gorna and Dolna Bela Rechka, Gorno and Dolno Ozirovo, Lyutadjik,

⁶ For more on these subjects see: Gerald Creed, *Domesticating the Revolution: From Social Reform to Ambivalent Transition* in a Bulgarian village, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998; and Mihail Gruev, *Reploughed Boundaries: Collectivisation and Social Change in the Bulgarian Northwest in the 1940s and 50s*, Institute for Studies of the Recent Past / Ciela, 2009.

⁷ See also „1989 – places of memory in the Northwest“: a project of New Culture Foundation which brought together students born after 1989 to talk about the political changes of 1989 with their parents and teachers. A book is due to be published in 2010.

Milanovo, Druzhevo, Zanozhene and Chelyustitsa. Babak photographed; I talked to the people.

As we were already using one piece of technical equipment – Babak’s camera – I decided to take notes and simply observe my interviewees. I wanted to preserve the fragmentary nature of our meetings and the spontaneity of the conversations, and let the current of events wash over me.

This is how we made more than 50 portraits and 2000 photographs.

It seems to me that photography is an excellent medium to reflect on such a complex phenomenon, as it listens – in addition to everything else – to the deep voices of shyness and discomfort that Northwesterners experience when making themselves – and their stories – the centre of attention.

Traumas and Miracles – Portraits from Northwest Bulgaria is a project made by fragments. Its aim is not to offer a comprehensive narrative for the region but to open a space for words, sentences, images, faces which give a sense of the place. The French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs believes that we are all, without knowing it, “echos” from events which occurred before our time. “We don’t remember on our own”, he points out, “but with the help of other people’s memories; we grow up surrounded by objects, gestures, sentences, pictures, landscape and architecture inherited from those who preceded us.”

So this project is a reflection of what I as a Northwesterner am an “echo” of – that which preceded my understanding of the world and to some extent has defined a special kind of helplessness, of which I am about to talk.

There is a miracle for each trauma. I carry this thought with me from childhood. I remember my father loading me onto his Lada after a skating accident and taking me, and my mother, to a local *chakrukchiya*⁸ who would fix my ankle. All it took the man was one swift rotation of the ankle, and the joint snapped back into place. I remember my best friend’s grandmother, *lelya*⁹ Bozhidara, reading the cards and giving medical tips to everyone in our neighbourhood. I remember her love-counselling the women sitting on the bench in front of our apartment block – “the only cure for the lovesick is love”. I remember her telling me one day that “your mother should catch you a saint to look after you” – and then, astonishingly, my mother taking it to heart, as if it was the most natural thing to do. And indeed, she and my grandmother did “catch” me a saint – Sveti Trifon – who “looks after me” to this day.

⁸ Joint fixer.

⁹ Aunt Bozhidara, a title of respect.

To continue with this series of mysterious little fragments, a few years ago my father told me that when he was a child his mother – grandma Tima – had told him that if he should see something extraordinary at night – like white animals or human figures dressed in white – he would better “stay put”, that is – not say a word or tell anyone, or he would lose his speech. One night he saw a white dog which hovered over the water in the local river, and another night – two miniature women in white garments who were going out of the neighbours’ chimney. My grandmother’s warning had affected my father so strongly, it had taken him more than half a century to talk to anyone about it.

I wasn’t conscious of the influence this nebulous background had on my own understanding of the world until very recently. I grew up in an atmosphere of hushed murmurings, understatements and silences, filled in with cheek pinching and doughnuts on Sunday. I never thought of the Northwest as a place where I’d be living my life. I always wanted to leave, to go some place else. And so did all of the kids at my school. It seemed like the natural thing to do was to go to university in Sofia and then look for work that would cement our situation in the capital. I don’t remember any strong feelings of regional pride or a sense of belonging to the place. There was a feeling, instead, of living in the periphery of history, that „we are no good” – something I would hear often when I was growing up.

I recently discovered a long-forgotten *Spomenik*¹⁰ -- a notebook with memories and wishes for future love and happiness written by female friends in my German secondary school. I was greatly intrigued to revisit it. It was like an object from a former life. A photo from a Serbian fashion magazine was stuck on its cover with green celo tape; inside were Russian postcards bought from the Russian bookshop in the centre of town. It took me some time to realise that it really *was* a former life: I was born in Mihailovgrad (which is now Montana), I had studied at the Rosa Luxemburg German Secondary School (now the Petar Bogdan Secondary School), I had been a member of the *Komsomol*¹¹, I had gone to an international youth brigade in Banska Bistritsa in Czechoslovakia. None of these things existed anymore.

I sometimes feel helpless – the helplessness of someone who cannot sort out their own history. And this may be one of the reasons why I’ve returned to the place I wanted to leave in my youth. I’ve returned to look for the clues I wanted to run away from.

In 2003, after 7 years of living in Prague, I returned to Bulgaria and – together with colleague and friend Mariana Assenova, another native of the Northwest –

¹⁰ Book of Memories.

¹¹ The communist youth organisation.

we set up the New Culture Foundation. Mariana and I started the GOATMILK International Festival of Memories in Bela Rechka (which is my mother's birthplace). Our goal was to draw public attention to the subject of collective and individual memory and its dependence on local conditions and to invite different approaches to the topic via the arts – film, theatre, photography, music, dance and literature – while keeping an eye on the most recent developments in the expanding debates on memory and history.

Perhaps what I wanted to confront myself with most was the poverty of the region. I asked myself whether it was possible to do something new and modern – which had a meaning for both myself and a larger community.

Gradually, the festival became a place for inspiration for many young people from Bulgaria and abroad. We published several books containing our experience of studying local memory in intercultural context.¹²

The GOATMILK festival in Bela Rechka was also where I met Babak Salari (after coming across his work on the web), who was twice our guest.

The idea for a project on the elderly in the Northwest came up spontaneously, in the midst of numerous conversations on death, the dying villages, the places we call home, and the traumas caused by migration and return. Bela Rechka reminded Babak of his native Shiraz in Iran, where he could no longer go. For me, my return to Bela Rechka was an attempt to understand my late mother and her fear of change after the political changes of 1989.

Looking at the notes I took during the project, I see a chaotic collection of details – the stunning stories of women who kept saying, unanimously, they did not marry for love (*did not marry for love*, underlined by me, with exclamation marks). The birthdays of my interviewees as well as the dates of their admission to the Bulgarian Communist Party, which many of them still remembered clearly. Stories about fortune telling and incantations against *uroki*¹³ and *cherven vyatur*¹⁴, which three of the women we met practiced. A formula for beans reading and the name – *zaliz* – of a herb capable of protecting you against “all sorts of evil things”. Stories with conflicting narratives: “deep down I am still a communist”, “the communists were evil people, you can take it from me; they tortured my husband for nothing”. Work as a central theme under communism (some of the women had never taken a seaside vacation). The most senior person of the people we met – the 102-year-old Nikola Avramov from the village of Milanovo – who had clear memories of the governments before the communist coup in 1944 and the forcible collectivisation of the land which followed it.

¹² Among them are: *Notebooks from Bela Rechka*, New Culture Foundation, 2006; and *How to Do a Bell. A guidebook*, Janet 45, 2009.

¹³ Evil eyes.

¹⁴ Erysipelas (med.).

When I travelled to Italy to meet with some Northwestern women working there as *badante*, I was stunned to find out that a group of them had paid and organised for an old man to come all the way from a village in Northwest Bulgaria to comfort and reassure them with his mercury-readings.

This took me back to my childhood and the sentence "there is a miracle for each trauma". I was deeply intrigued by the strategies these women sought to live their lives as best as they can, and to seek help when they couldn't manage on their own. I couldn't get rid of the feeling that, like my father, many of the people born in the Northwest had encountered something in their childhoods which they couldn't understand, and they still didn't have the courage to break through the taboo of not talking about it.

I can't get rid of the feeling that poverty can't just be the Northwest's own problem and that there should be solutions we can look for collectively.

So *Traumas and Miracles* is a personal attempt to uncover the lid on the trauma I have witnessed in the Northwest in recent years, and to share with you the reality of my own emotional landscape – the bewilderment, hesitation and discomfort that come with the realisation that I come from the poorest region in Bulgaria and the European Union.