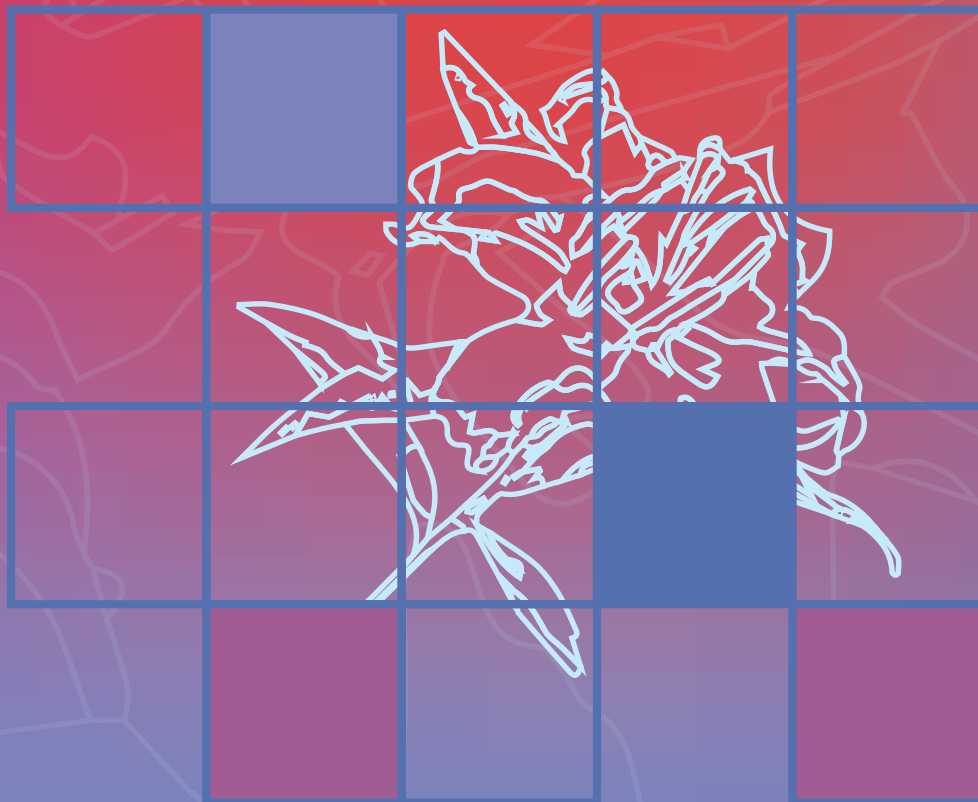


# FOR MEMORY'S SAKE



Alexandra Tsankova

Zaharinka Kutseva

With a support of:



### **ECHO III: for memory's sake**

OPEN SPACE foundation

1-st edition | Sofia, Bulgaria | 2023



Authors: Zaharinka Kutzeva and Aleksandra Tzankova

Translation in English: Maria Kadieva and Aleksandra Tzankova

Graphic design cover: Monika Ugrenova

Illustrations: Iro Athanasiou

Preprint: Ognyan Popov

Photos: Hunts of Photos, personal photos of the researchers

Copyright © 2023 OPEN SPACE foundation

9, Industrialna str. 1202 Sofia, Bulgaria

phone number: +359 889 916 483

e-mail: [info@openspacebg.com](mailto:info@openspacebg.com)

web-page: <https://www.openspacebg.com/>

License:

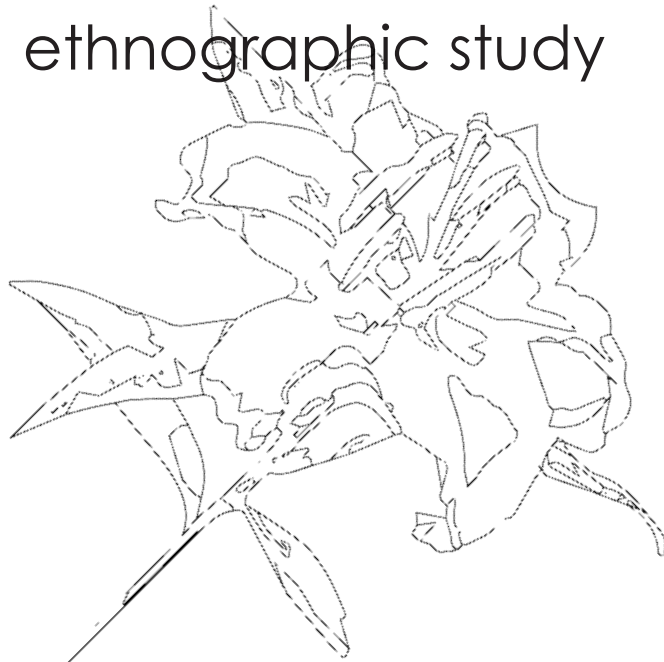
This book is published under the terms of: Creative Commons Attribution - ShareAlike 4.0 лиценз.

You will find information about the license if you visit the webpage:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

# for memory's sake

ethnographic study



Aleksandra Tzankova

Zaharinka Kutzeva

“For memory's sake” is an ethnographic study that explores and seeks questions related to important issues affecting the new generation. Examines arranged marriages, love and family in the Balkan context.

It takes place within the framework of the project “ECHO III: for memory's sake”, which aims to bring together researchers and artists working in the fields of theatre, music, visual arts and literature to explore tradition and culture through the themes of marriage, arranged marriages and nuclear families in the Balkan context. The aim is to explore gender roles and norms throughout history and how it all affects young people and artists living in Europe. “ECHO III” is the continuation of ECHO I & II (<https://openspacebg.com/cultural-heritage-bg/> )

## CONTENT

### **ARRANGED FAITH-BASED AND MIXED-FAITH MARRIAGES**

(Smolyan region), researcher: Zaharinka Kutzeva .....	5
Research methods .....	7
Basic concepts. Marriage .....	20
Christianity and Islam - historical and domestic aspects .....	21
Meetings. The interviews .....	43
Conclusion .....	74

### **THE ROMA IN BULGARIA**, researcher: Aleksandra Tzankova .....

81	
Research methodology and objectives .....	83
Types of roma .....	85
The roma family .....	86
Family within the nomadic roma communities .....	88
Customs and traditions among the roma .....	89
Wedding traditions and customs .....	89
Birth .....	96
Early marriages .....	97
The bride market .....	101
Stealing brides .....	105
The importance of education .....	108
The NorthWestern Bulgaria phenomenon .....	112
Conclusion .....	113
About the researchers .....	114





## **ARRANGED FAITH-BASED AND MIXED-FAITH MARRIAGES**

Research conducted in towns and villages in the region of Smolyan

Researcher: Zaharinka Kutzeva



*"Convince, mother, my father  
Not to give me up for marriage, nor to get me engaged  
For another year,  
Another hot summer, another spring..."*

A sad Rhodope song! The ensemble will sing it so that Nezife Bochukova's tragedy will never be repeated anywhere else..."



## **RESEARCH METHODS:**

In order to acquire preliminary preparation to conduct a study on the topic of arranged faith-based and mixed-faith marriages, I got acquainted with the work of Emilia Chengelova: "The Interview in Social Sciences", Publishing House Omda, 2016.

The interview is the most used method for collecting primary information directly from its sources. In the social sciences, it is used most often, and there are at least six types of interviews. Three of them are standardized. The other three are non-standardized. These are the so-called qualitative methods or "warm sociology". They include the in-depth interview, the narrative interview and the semi-structured interview. E. Chengelova says, "... this is a research technology taking place in the form of scientific communication and interpersonal interaction, the formal, situational and content parameters of which are pre-set by the researcher."

For the purpose of my study of the two aspects, arranged faith-based marriages and mixed-faith marriages, I decided to use the non-standardized qualitative methods. In the process of work, I had to combine methods from the three types of interviews, improvise to keep the motivation of the people I talked to, or even prepare a questionnaire with open questions for those who were more introverted. In fact, I adopted the theoretical frameworks as the basis of my preparation for meeting the people I had set out to meet, but I was willing to make adjustments in the process, as well as to stumble upon more special cases that would create situations outside of the standard scientific classifications.

As a method, the in-depth interview is the first non-standardized interview, where the goal is to create laid-back conditions for a conversation in which interviewees can share honestly thoughts, assessments and experiences from their personal lives. The researcher cannot predict the direction and results of this type of "conversation" because the subjects of the research prioritize the contents of their information and can decide to what extent they will be disclosed.

According to E. Chengelova's classification, the main types of interviews in ascending order of standardization are:

Free interview – In-depth interview – Focused interview – Open-ended questions interview – Standardized interview.

The object of my attention is mainly the in-depth interview, since its use is recommended when researching new and not well-studied facts, events and phenomena. Its characteristics, again, according to E. Chengelova, are: the framework of the interview built around a casual conversation; interviewing individuals in their usual environment; the uniqueness of the content because it is constructed subjectively and freely by the researched people; the specific toolkit which is actually a minimally structured questionnaire with the most general questions and guidelines. The role of the researcher is to provoke the interviewee /the researched person to interpret their own behavior and motives in the process of sharing their personal experiences and observations.

An advantage of this method is that the respondents have a maximum amount of freedom to reproduce and comment on their social reality as they have witnessed, experienced and assessed it. Interviewees can often surprise with their candid stories. But here are also the pitfalls of the method: the subjectivity of answers which prevents the consolidation of new knowledge in relation to groups of people or the generalization of conclusions. The analysis on the part of the interviewer and the researcher is also loaded with a dose of subjectivity. That is, the in-depth interview does not produce universally valid knowledge, but rather private interpretations of processes or phenomena concerning certain groups of people.

The main stages of the in-depth interview are eight:

1. Defining the theme or subject;
2. Defining the objectives and functions of the interviews;
3. Defining the issues that might arise;
4. Selecting the researched subjects;
5. Creating the research toolkit;
6. Selecting the techniques used in the interviews;
7. Conducting the interviews;
8. Processing, analyzing and interpreting the information.

The theme of the interviews can be one or several interrelated problems. The purpose can be the study of a process, activity, event or the experience of a group of people and their subjective attitude to the relevant processes, activities and events. The questions are formulated

as generally as possible. In the selection of research units, two methods are often used: the method employing “those who show up” and the “snowball” method. If the number of people to be surveyed is not explicitly specified, a sign that the number covered may be sufficient is that the answers begin to repeat themselves and form a certain pattern. The questionnaire is more of a set of open-ended, guiding questions that can change and be enriched during the interviewing process as the interviewer follows his subjective feeling and chooses the direction in which to “deepen” the conversation. At the beginning of the interview, one should create a relaxed, casual atmosphere. A few general questions unrelated to the interview’s topic can help create that.

When I began to think about my methods for selecting individuals and families for interviews, I had certain expectations that weren’t realistic. I started with a circle of relatives and acquaintances, counting on them to get involved or to help me set up meetings with their relatives and acquaintances. The method employing “those who show up” is actually reminiscent of natural selection: people participate or decline to do so due to circumstances beyond my control. But this method is quite naturally combined with the “snowball” method: among those who refused and among those who agreed to an interview, there were those who recommended other people suitable for my research.

The interviewer needs to focus on several things: he ought to be focused and pick up on details of the narrative and on details of the narrator’s reactions; and he should lean on the method of active and stimulating listening. It is good to record the conversation on a digital medium, but if the interviewee objects, notes must be taken.

The last stage is the processing and analysis of the information. Here comes the subjectivity of the researcher. Mastering it requires analytical abilities and special attention. Records and notes are systematized, and a general reading is done to get a good idea of the different individual perspectives and to pick up on possible patterns. The findings can be situated in the context of a particular theory.

The free interview is informal, conversational, spontaneous and not forced, without a previously developed toolkit. The researcher improvises during the conversation trying to keep it casual. The informal interview is not recorded but recalled by memory. Its cognitive function is, again, to gather some general knowledge in the beginning. Through it, hypotheses are often generated to be tested within the framework of the research.

“The narrative interview can be defined as a specific research method for reconstructing social reality through the living stories and the narratives about individual journeys occurring

against the background of significant public and political events" (E. Chengelova, "The interview in social sciences"). In this type of interview, the researcher formulates the questions that interest him and through which he shall find the solution to the issues because of which the study is being conducted. At a specific moment in the interview, these questions can be transformed into questions for the people being interviewed.

The interview, in addition to being a research method, is also a form of communication between individuals, which is influenced by certain psychological factors: prior attitudes of the interviewee with respect to the topic; his degree of awareness of the relevant problem; the characteristics of the questionnaire; the specific circumstances such as time and place of the interview, noise, presence of third parties; the current emotional state of the interviewee, and others. The ability to self-reflect and evaluate the surrounding world are also important.

The very process of interaction between the personalities in such a case study is a process aimed at satisfying needs. The structure of this interaction has three aspects: communicative, interactive and perceptive.

The communicative aspect in its essence is the exchange of information, verbal and paralinguistic/non-verbal, in order to achieve mutual understanding. It has been proven empirically that the perception and understanding of meaning is 7% dependant upon the literal meaning of words, 37% dependant upon the tone of voice and 55% dependant upon facial expressions and gestures. That is, facial expressions and gestures can shape and change the meaning of words. If the interviewer is confused, it is appropriate to ask an additional clarifying question, but tactfully so as not to embarrass or upset the respondent which would reduce his inclination to answer. It should also be taken into account that the respondent's attention is divided between the content of the question, the content of his own answer and the non-verbal cues given off by the interviewer at that moment.

The interactive aspect is actually the interaction of the interviewer with the interviewee as they clarify their roles and the goals and form of the interview. The interaction between them is the result of their joint efforts.

The perceptive aspect of communication is realized at first glance, in the formation of the image of the other person based off of first impression, characterized by his objective characteristics such as gender, age, education, social status and subjective qualities - his temperament. It is possible that in the course of the interview, the person being researched will allow the interviewer to get closer to him and will let him into his inner world.

There is the concept of "situation in which an interview is conducted", which includes the

following parameters characterizing the interview: time, place, setting, duration, availability of the interviewee and the presence of third parties. The environment is considered favorable when only the interviewer and interviewee are present in the room,, and when there are no distracting noises or telephone conversations.

Among unfavorable factors, the presence of coworkers, friends and neighbours has the strongest negative influence. In such a situation, the interviewee may change his attitude towards the topic and the interviewer, as well as his opinion and behavior.

In two of my interviews with some very elderly women, a third person had to be present. In the first case this was extremely necessary because the woman spoke little Bulgarian and her daughter had to translate. My impression was that nothing was held back, and that there were no changes in behavior and information sharing because the two were close enough, and the daughter was well aware of the family stories which were discussed. She did a good job translating and assisting in the conversation, and did not answer from her own point of view, but translated the question, waited for the answer and translated it back as it was. In the preliminary conversation with the daughter, I tried to create the necessary trust and go through the preparation phase, which she probably shared with her mother, because the conversation went smoothly, in a nice ambiance. At the end of the conversation the daughter even mentioned her husband's interest in local history and that a meeting with the young family might be of interest to me. This was telling feedback for me.

The relationship between the two participants in the interview is dynamic and goes through four phases:

*The phase where contact is established* – in this phase the active party is the interviewer who must facilitate the initial contact by being presentable, having a great attitude and energy and being articulate. He must present himself and include information about the institution on behalf of which the survey is being conducted and what its purpose is, as well as the method of subject selection and the parameters of anonymity. The interviewee may treat the interviewer as a guest, as a researcher, or even in the course of the interview a relationship may be created that is reminiscent of friendship.

Regardless of the arranged interview location, I only had one meeting where the interviewee regarded me as a researcher. The meeting took place at his workplace. He himself is interested in the history of his native land and the families populating it, and he studies and researches documents and folklore texts. In other cases, for the most part, I felt like a welcome

guest. I myself always went to the meetings with something small as a treat, and in almost all cases I received something else in return, usually homemade juices, fruits from the hosts' gardens, and store-bought or homemade sweets. I left three or four meetings with presents: walnuts, beans, juices, fruits. With two of the interviewees we also built somewhat closer relationships. We have arranged to meet again in the future because we share common interests which we found out during our conversations.

*Mutual mirroring phase* – the interviewee and interviewer build their image of each other and take into account the peculiarities of their characters and personalities. This phase of getting to know each other is particularly intense.

*The phase where actual communication exchange happens* – it starts with the first contact, the first lines and reactions. In this phase, it is possible for the roles to be reversed at some point, and for the respondent to ask the interviewer's opinion on a question that he himself just answered. The interviewer should not share his opinion, so as not to influence the other's answers, but if he does not share it, this may contribute to the loss of trust between them, as well decrease the interviewee's desire to answer. Signs of embarrassment or worry can be purely physical such as blushing, turning pale or rapid breathing, or they can include speech changes, meaningful pauses and movements and facial expressions. Often, in the course of the conversation, the topic shifts and is even lost at a certain point. Very often this happens at the end of the interview when the it is officially over, and the interviewee calms down and starts to freely comment and recount personal stories. During this phase the interviewer can collect additional information by observing the home environment (cleanliness, order, colors, books, art objects, details hinting at hobbies...), the relationships with third parties present in the home and the appearance of the interviewed person (cleanliness, make-up, accessories, hairstyle...).

*Final phase of the interview* – it begins with the last questions, includes the exchange of courtesies and ends with the farewell, which reflects the mood and inner state of both parties at the end of this specific instance of communication.

The final phase really proved to be very telling of how the interview went. Apart from the standard exchange of courtesies, very often the conversations continued before the front door or in the courtyard. The farewell was prolonged sometimes by exchanging new essential information even, or at least by exchanging validation about how pleasant the conversation was and that "it served a good purpose, it was for the good of all...".

After the end of the interview, additional results can be reported to both participants. New knowledge, improvement of interviewing skills, development of communication skills and professional self-confidence can be positive outcomes for the interviewer. However, there is a risk of running into selective listening or making judgments, verbal or non-verbal.

Positive outcomes for the interviewed people are satisfaction and a sense of significance from participating in the interview, personal growth and changing one's attitude towards this type of research. There is a risk of creating a negative attitude or even a complex if the selection of respondents is not correct or the toolkit is not adequately developed.

Now is the time to consider the respondent's reasons for avoiding an answer or for substituting his credibility. According to E. Chengelova, the main motives are: "A desire to speak the generally accepted and permissible; need to stay within the accepted role (of father, of husband, of boss, etc.); reluctance to destroy the "image of the 'I' " and one's identity; unwillingness to experience humiliation or shame; fear of the possible consequences. "

Among the listed reasons for avoiding an answer, the one I encountered in one of my meetings is missing. I had an interview scheduled with a woman about whom I had little prior information, and in the phone appointment I explained the topic of the interview and why she was shortlisted. We did the interview at her home, at the appointed time, in the absence of outsiders, but she started her story, stopped and said she couldn't continue because for her the experience was too traumatic and she couldn't go back in time and relive it all again.

Sometimes a poorly worded open-ended question can lead to an unreliable answer. Sometimes the respondent does not have a clear and definite answer and formulates it in the interview process. Sometimes verbalizing the real answer could lead to changes in the interviewee's self-esteem and his own self-image. In such cases, lying helps him maintain his own image of the "I". Sometimes structuring the answer as abstract concepts makes it difficult for the interviewee even though the latter has the necessary information and knowledge. When the answer requires comparisons, calculations, categorization, but logically there is no time for that, the answer may also not be correct or detailed enough. If the interviewee has a strong sense of responsibility, he will try to challenge himself to give an answer at any cost.

In the interview, the researcher often asks for information related to past events. Sometimes memories "fade"; sometimes facts related to negative emotions and experiences are "pushed" out of one's memory as a self-defense mechanism. This makes the respondent describe the past in a better light or make up for what he had forgotten or erased with the

accounts or opinions of other people which he had also stored in his memory.

The most difficult questions are those that require evaluation and opinion. Most often the interviewee looks for a compromise and a soft answer, and often this is obtained by using ready-made templates that exist in the social group of the interviewed person. This is a defense mechanism: belonging to a social group requires sharing and multiplying relevant beliefs and values when it comes to a topic that is socially significant. Stereotypes and patterns protect identity and prevent too much "oversharing". If the person has an opinion different from the mainstream and does not desire to betray his principles, he may choose not to answer at all, because this would discredit him either in front of the community which he belongs to or of the interviewer.

There are purely psychological aspects described by science that influence the evaluation process and do not depend on the type of questions. When communicating, both parties react in five ways:

1. Evaluative reaction;
2. Interpretative reaction;
3. Exploratory reaction;
4. Interpretative reaction;
5. Supportive reaction.

The most common reaction is evaluative. But when he feels that his answers are being evaluated or that he himself is, the respondent may change both his behavior and his answers by observing the evaluative reaction of the interviewer. A positive observation will lead to effort, which will lead to exaggeration or distortion of the truth. However, a negative observation could even lead to the termination of the interview. Therefore, the interviewer's responses should demonstrate understanding, support and research interest, but not evaluation. This will increase the quality of the information received during the process, and the interview will take place in a comfortable environment, psychologically speaking. Calm respondents will give reliable information.

The in-depth interview ensures that the interviewees are free to choose a model of behavior that makes them feel comfortable. For example, they can choose how to react when they find out that the conversation must be digitally recorded. Some interviewed folks might



take it to mean that they are valued as important and that they are given special attention. They liken this to a journalist's interview, which for them means that their opinion will be heard by many people. Balanced and liberated people think like this and are very happy to share their stories and reflections. Such people usually participate in public life and empathize with what is happening in the social community. Some people, however, might be indifferent to the suggestion to record the conversation. And then there are also those who are embarrassed by publicity because they are not confident enough. They might not feel competent enough and refuse to be recorded. If hesitant people overcome their anxiety with the interviewer's help, they can be wonderful conversation partners. But those who vehemently refuse to be recorded are often dubious and their decision cannot be changed. But sometimes people simply doubt their ability to verbalize their memories and reasoning.

None of the interviews I conducted were digitally recorded. I showed understanding because I myself pay more attention to the external form and, when recorded, think about how my story comes off and whether it's offensive to me or to any of the people mentioned in my story. A recording device would have made the interview a lot more formal and disingenuous given the people I had the opportunity to meet.

The interviewee's preferred form of verbal communication carries informative value in the interview. Many people prefer to speak in the first person plural or even in the third person plural. In this way, they demonstrate belonging to a community, or hide their opinion behind a facade and labels, or simply use the plural form to express their true position. Some people emphasize that the position they express is personal and exclusively speak in the first person singular (I-form).

According to the chosen strategy when giving answers, there are five types of respondents:

1. Laconic type: he prefers short answers, without elaboration, details and evaluations.
2. Classic type: he are not too laconic, but not too talkative. Some of his answers may be very brief and others circumstantial.
3. Talkative type: he often deviates from the topic and, parallel to the answer to the question, talks about many other things and share comments, assessments, examples.
4. Consistent type: he has a well-defined opinion and knows how to systematize his answers logically and without contradictions.
5. Contradictory type: he has not thought about the topic and the questions in advance,

so then logical inconsistencies can occur. Sometimes simply the respondent's opinion can develop and change in the course of the conversation.

All respondents participating in my study used the I-form, which in this case can easily be explained considering the topic: marriage. Everyone told their personal story. None of them fell into the category of the controversial type. At the same time, only one of the interviewee fell into the consistent category: a young woman who even preferred to receive sample questions in advance. At the end of the interview, however, she expressed willingness to continue the conversation during another time and possibly expand on what she had related with more details, comments and assessments. Another middle-aged woman close to me, who was even initially more inclined to refuse participation in the study, was categorically laconic. The most talkative was a woman over the age of retirement who, however, still worked. Her work required communicating with many and different kinds of people, and her workplace definitely matched her personality: open, sociable, artistic, with good self-esteem and a well-defined self-image which she had crafted and carefully maintained. The rest of the respondents were of the classical type: depending on the type of questions, they gave less or more detailed and circumstantial answers.

The refusal to participate in research employing in-depth interviews is a matter which cannot be overlooked. According to E. Chengelova, this "refusal is the result of a divergence or clash of interests, attitudes and/or current needs. Refusal is also an unwillingness to break the established personal status quo, a desire to preserve the integrity of the image of the 'I'. In essence the average person refuses to empathize with and take part in an activity that they find meaningless, uninteresting, boring, annoying, suspicious, dangerous, antisocial, immoral etc. Each person's reaction to a proposition made to him will depend on the way he characterizes or sees that particular activity."

The refusal can be quick and resolute when the one making it has a preconceived idea and a negative opinion about a certain situation in which he is unexpectedly placed. Sometimes we can win him over just by relating to him on our common humanity, and then motivate him to participate. Other times refusal is the result of deliberation and the weighing of pros and cons. We need to provide additional information about the intended study so that the person being invited to participate can assess both his own attitudes, and the acceptability and implications of the study in the social context.

The most frequently cited reasons for refusal to participate are a lack of time, tiredness, illness, business due to other important events, inappropriate timing and scheduling during the day, inappropriate location, inadequate knowledge of the subject matter etc. Sometimes this explanation coincides with the truthful circumstances and reasons, so if we can reach an acceptable compromise together, the interview can take place.

Very often, however, these excuses conceal the real reasons for refusal which we must infer from people's attitudes, needs and value systems. Emilia Chengelova systematizes them as follows:

1. The person being invited to partake in the study has negative general attitudes and preconceptions about social and sociological studies;
2. This person does not have a positive opinion of the scientific unit conducting the research or of the sponsor of the research;
3. The topic of the research does not arouse interest, and this person is indifferent to the issues suggested for discussion;
4. This person has an interest in the topic of the research, but considers that he is not sufficiently well-informed;
5. The research topic causes negative emotions in the potential respondent who becomes unwilling to give information on this topic;
6. This person is interested in the topic, but does not believe in his own abilities: he feels insecure about whether he will successfully cope with the interview;
7. The research's purpose is not perceived: the person either thinks that too much is being asked of him, or thinks that the research is pointless;
8. The potential respondent may be worried about the way the interview is conducted: he may prefer fill-in-the-blank surveys or telephone interviews, as a result of which he may decide that the active presence of the interviewer will disturb his inner balance.;
9. This person does not feel comfortable around the interviewer: the interviewer does not instill trust in him or is unlikeable, or, on the contrary, the potential respondent is embarrassed by the interviewer (the former perceives the latter mainly based on the latter's gender);
10. The situational circumstances are unfavourable: the location of the interview is not suitable; the selected time is not convenient; the potential respondent's current employment does not allow him to set aside time for an interview, or his job is of greater personal value to him; the presence of outsiders prevents the conduct of the interview;
11. The potential respondent has certain characteristics which prevent him from

wanting to participate: his personality, his temperament, some neurodivergence etc.;

12. The actual needs of the person can't be met during the interview process.

Refusals can be worded succinctly, evasively or with many explanations.

I received the most unexpected refusal from a woman who was around forty years old, with whom I had a very good relationship for over twenty years, something I could have even called close to friendship. I observed her nonverbal reactions during the refusal, and I noticed a closed-off body language, withdrawal, and even aggression. She asked me to tell her in detail about the people who had requested this study, about the reasons and purpose of the study, and about the project and its expected results. My friend asked for more information on the interviews which had been conducted prior to that moment. I could see her initial spontaneous refusal waver, but at the end of the conversation she still wasn't on board: she argued that there was something suspicious, and that she was unsure of the true purpose of the study and its implications.

There are tried-and-tested methods for convincing targeted potential participants.

The first is preliminary contact and getting familiarized with the objectives of the study. In this way the potential respondent's possible fear of meeting an unknown person in an unusual role or his insecurity disappears. Also, the possibility of setting up an inappropriate time and place for the interview is negated. This allows the person in question enough time to prepare and overcome the feeling of not having sufficient information on the subject. And maybe both the interviewer and interviewee can agree on a time and place that are convenient for the latter. Often the person is not motivated enough and arranging an additional meeting may simply be a way for them to postpone the interview. Some respondents have trouble saying no and may postpone the meeting and then simply not show up at the appointed time and appointed place.

Another motivating thing are small gifts which grant attention: souvenirs and advertising material such as calendars, pens and the like.

The first impression and the first words of the interviewer are perhaps the most important hidden power. The ability to select the right arguments and the right way to present them to the potential survey participant is the secret to reducing the number of refusals. One has to react swiftly and convincingly so that the person being invited to be interviewed accepts the role of interviewee.

It is necessary to summarize the factors influencing this role: the respondent's social

experience, his social status, his preconceived notions, his value system, his interest in the subject, his reasons for participating, the peculiarities of his character, and his general psychophysiological condition.

Specialized literature gives varied inconsistent advice regarding the prior knowledge of the two participants in the interview. Most texts recommend recreating a situation which is of the type "conversation in a train compartment": this type of situation facilitates a more frank sharing of opinions on sensitive and controversial topics, which makes the extracted information more credible. The interviews I was able to conduct which recreated precisely this kind of atmosphere proved to be the most successful in terms of information gathered. My initial idea was to start interviewing people my large circle of my acquaintances, but it was met with a series of rejections. The most successful strategy was to contact people whose role was close to that of the informal leader and, with their assistance, to contact the appropriate people fitting the purposes of the study.

## **BASIC CONCEPTS**

### **Marriage**

Marriage is a union or contract between spouses which is defined socially or ritually and which establishes the rights and obligations between the two spouses, between them and their children and between them and their relatives. In most cases a marriage must be recognized by a public institution (a country or a community of religious or other type), and often this happens during a special ceremony (wedding).

In some parts of the world the following practices still exist today: arranged marriages, child marriages, polygamy and forced marriages.

Anthropology employs different definitions of marriage which aim to capture the wide variety of marriage practices observed in different cultures. Even within Western culture, definitions of marriage vary widely.

In the law, according to Article 46 of the Bulgarian constitution, marriage is "a voluntary union between a man and a woman", and only civil marriage is recognized as legal.

In Christianity, marriage is considered a gift from God, but the various branches of Christianity interpret it differently: it can be seen as a sacrament and a sacred institution, or as a contract and agreement. In liturgical churches (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches) marriage is seen as a "holy marriage", a sacred sacrament that is an expression of the Divine Grace.

In Islam, unlike Christianity, polygamy is allowed under the condition that a husband has a maximum of four wives at once, and that he divides his time and property equally among all of them. The marriage requires the consent of both the bride and her guardian.

According to the Shariah, the basic responsibilities in a Muslim marriage are for the husband to provide for the wife's daily expenses (housing, clothing, food) and for the wife to raise their children in the faith of Islam. The remaining rights and responsibilities are agreed upon between the spouses and can be included in a prenuptial agreement.

The marriage must be concluded in the presence of at least two reliable witnesses and with the consent of the future spouses and bride's guardian. For this purpose it is sufficient to recite certain religious lines in the presence of a clergyman, after which the marriage can be

consummated. The wedding celebration may take place days or months later when the couple and their families decide to announce the marriage to a wider circle of people.

### **Marriage Today.**

At the end of the 20th century, conjugal cohabitation without wedding vows gained popularity, and marriage is now no longer the primary goal for many couples. The so-called de facto cohabitation is not regulated in the Family Code, but "its existence is recognized case by case through various normative acts due to the occurrence of specific legal consequences."

### **Christianity and Islam - historical and domestic aspects.**

I was born in northwestern Bulgaria, and I came to the Rhodopes in 1988 as a student. I am interested in local history, different types of lifestyles, folklore and dialect, but I do not know in depth the phenomena and processes that are the subject of this study. In those more than thirty years during which I lived in the Rhodopes, I got to know many villages and people and formed many friendships. In spite of this, however, I realized that I could not formulate and propose a hypothesis based only on my personal experience or several interviews with a limited number of people. With the consulting help of specialists from the State Archives in Smolyan, I selected archive documents and local history and research materials. I am grateful to this institution for their assistance.

The issues and concepts I explored are related to the two main religions in the region of the Rhodopes: Christianity and Islam. I explored ideas related to the theories regarding the acceptance of Islam, the relationships between people in the household, and the attitude of the state institutions during the different historical periods.

I have selected and will present information from articles, monographs and books in order to show as many different points of view as possible from different historical periods. The purpose of this part of the research is to make it as objective as possible, without pretending to have all the answers and without wanting to argue any specific hypothesis.

The first such text is Stoyan Mihovski's monograph "From the past of Varbovo", University Publishing House "Paisii Hilendarski" in Plovdiv, 2018. The first important point is from part 1.6. "The

imposition of the Turkish feudal system”:

“As noted, the Ottoman state arose in 1299 on the basis of a small beylik in the Middle East, whose territory and population was big as a contemporary Bulgarian district nowadays. However, by the end of the 14th century, this duchy conquered the entire Balkan Peninsula, and very soon, by the beginning of the 16th century, it became a huge empire that ruled the Balkans, the Middle East, the Mediterranean territories in North Africa and Asia, and Central Europe. At first, not only did they not completely destroy what they had found upon victory, but, guided solely by state considerations, they preserved entire institutions and economic organizations, adapting and using them to their advantage. This turns out to be especially important for the beginning of the Ottoman rule when the invaders outnumbered the enslaved. The main problem for the Turks throughout their rule was the constant shortage of people. They were needed both in the army and to strengthen Ottoman power in the newly conquered territories. The Turks could not count on natural growth due to their small numbers and, therefore, proceeded to convert the local population into Islam. This idea turned out to be no less disastrous than the military defeats to the Bulgarian nation. Even in the early years of slavery the Turks had already decided that ethnic origin did not matter at all as long as folks professed Islam and recognized the authority of the Sultan. In the name of this idea, the Turks adjusted all of their legislation to attract to their side as many people as possible to renounce Christianity and embrace Islam. For this purpose they used prisoners of war, Janissaries, Spahis and Yuruks, and gave tax privileges, confiscated land, enslaved people, conducted mass and individual Turkification, and performed other violent acts. At the root of all forms of Islamization, after all, was coercion, although it they appeared to be voluntary.

In this context, the words of Mithad Pasha are also worth noting. He ruled the Bulgarian lands as a grand vizier, but also was a senior civil servant thanks to which he gained access to information, documents and facts that are currently difficult to find. In one of his articles, “Turkey in its past, present and future” published in 1878 in a French magazine, he wrote, “Among the Bulgarians there are more than one million Muslims. This number does not include the Tatars or the Circassians. These Muslims did not come from Asia... These are the descendants of the same Bulgarians who converted to Islam before... These are children of this same country, of this same race and come from this same tribe. And among them there is a part that does not speak any language other than Bulgarian.”

Stoyan Mihovski mentions the following during the listing of the families in the village of Varbovo:



“Muhammadans in the town of Varbovo were from only two families, the Karov and Shahonya clans. Out of a total population of 2,926 people in 587 families, in 1879 the Muhammadans in the entire Shiroka Laka district (excluding the village of Stoikite) amounted to 432 people in 104 families. At that time there were 4 families in Varbovo with a total population of 19 people, all of whom were Bulgarian Muhammadans... The Karov clan came to Varbovo around 1800 from the village of Popradanovo in the region of Ahachelebiya. Now this village is located in Greece under a different name, but the Popradanov clan in Smolyan is still alive. The Karov clan also used the surname “Popradanov”, but the people of Varbovo began to call them Karov because they were the first to build huts along Brezkoto and to live along the river. The Shahonya clan emigrated from Shiroka Laka, where they had lived in the lower end of the village together with the Guniov clan in the upper end with whom they observed who entered and left Shiroka laka. Probably for a similar purpose some of them moved to Varbovo. Otherwise, they are originally from Beden. Another hypothesis claims they are descendants of a branch of the Zlatev clan from Shiroka Laka. Zlatyu Savov's father had two brothers, one of which for unknown reasons accepted Islam and was named Kaba Smail Shahonya. There were two Shahonya families in Varbovo, and the ruins of their houses still stand under the Preslopa region in the Karadjinkov valley. Naturally people of the Shahonya clan were stubborn people, and did not get along with the Christian population at all. Therefore, one family secretly left the village during the Liberation War, and the other stayed for some time, because the father Smail was already deceased, and the widow Emine Shahonska (born 1831) had an unmarried adult son Salih (born 1854) and three small children: Isein (born 1870), Emine (born 1871) and Ayshe (born 1872). Very soon after the Liberation, they also left for Turkey. Later they sold their properties to the Dimov and Cholakov families which lived by the river.”

The following is an excerpt from the section titled “The Weddings”:

“Weddings in the town of Varbovo were whole operas. From the start to the end, everything was accompanied by appropriate songs. The wedding rituals were conducted by all families in almost the same way, but the preparations were different depending on their financial status. Some made preliminary engagements, others directly took the bride out of her parents' home, and still others organized the bride's surne (abduction) or eloped in order not to spend on “extra costs” like having wedding guests. The expenses were not insignificant at all and sometimes the newlyweds had to pay them back for a long time. The actual wedding took place on a Sunday chosen by parents and newlyweds.”

Of the ritual songs, the most famous, which Stoyan Mihovski also mentions, sings “A pine

tree is weeping and twisting, the maiden is leaving the family". The song is performed when the bride is taken out of her parents' home. On the Thursday before the wedding, the wooden chest is brought out, prepared by the relatives of the bride and her mother to the sounds of the song "Sew, mother, fasten the maiden gifts, for they will go far, through the mountains..." On the way to to the church and back, songs are constantly sung, some even specifically composed for the newlyweds.

*"I wish, mother, you had stayed with me,  
And I wish you hadn't given me  
Behind the mountain  
Where the sun sets,  
Where birds fly  
And never come back."*

Or:

*"Daughter of mine,  
why are your eyes crying  
while your face is smiling?  
Mother, my old mother,  
Love is coming my way ,  
And it is bringing me a dewy bouquet,  
But you gave me to someone else..."*

The next monograph, in which I again discovered interesting aspects related to the present study, is "The village of Shiroka Laka and the villages and neighbourhoods born from it" by Manol Manolov and Maria Manolova, published in the Printing House "Zea-Print" in Smolyan.

In "Part IV - Ethnographic and Folkloric Features", in the chapter on traditional clothing, men's and women's garments are described in the context of historical changes and directly related to the two religions and to the ethnic changes in these lands:

"The white-coloured men's and women's costumes were widespread in all areas inhabited by Bulgarians until the 17th and 18th centuries. The old white-coloured Bulgarian costume carried the components of the clothing of the three ethnic groups descendants of which are contemporary Bulgarians: Thracians, Slavs and proto-Bulgarians who inhabited our lands and gave birth to the Bulgarian nation. The main garment of the costume was the shirt,

which was richly decorated with embroidery. Under the shirt, both Slavs and the Thracians wore wide trousers which the latter tied at the waist, and the former tied at the ankle. In cold weather, they put on two or three shirts. Sometimes they wore a leather tunic over them or wrapped themselves in leather or woolen cloaks, which they attached with fibulae. The proto-Bulgarians, men and women alike, wore a "kaftan": a garment open in the front that was fastened with buttons and "petliitsi" (braided yarn belts which were folded and had an opening in the middle, and were sewn at the ends for fastening) .

From the end of the 17th century, the traditional Bulgarian white costume began to gradually darken. This process first started in the southern parts of Bulgaria and the Rhodope region. Meanwhile in those same areas and in some eastern Bulgarian regions, as well as in the Rhodopes, some Turkish designs began to gain popularity. These included the wide shalwars and low-crotch fabric pants decorated with woolen braided yarn belts, as well as Turkish waistcoats, jumpers and other top garments. According to Rhodopian folklore stories, this change in clothing is connected to the second mass conversion to Islam and the great migration of the population in connection with it. Those who changed their faith had to change their clothing as well. This is also reflected in the Rhodope folk song "Come on, Kolio, become like the Turks". One of its versions is from Shiroka Laka and it begins with the following verses:

*"Kolio, the Turkish garments  
Did tempt you a lot,  
And now you've become like the Turks."*

Not only the Bulgarians who had become muslims, but also many of those who had left their native villages and fled through the forests in order to preserve their faith and nationality began dressing in Turkish outer garments, put fezzes on their heads and wound turbans around them in order to pass for muslim while the greatest pressure for Islamization lasted. Quite a few of these refugees, as well as local residents, went to work for the Yuruks who made clothes from wool in its natural colourways (white, ochre and black) and used Turkish silhouettes. Under their influence, people living in the middle ranges of the Rhodope mountains began sewing white outerwear with Turkish silhouettes. The ochre colour was especially preferred by shepherds, farmers, carpenters and other craftsmen who did a lot of hard physical labour, and this colour was the most practical because even if clothes got dirty, it wouldn't show much. Few and only vague stories have been preserved up to date about the white men's garments with Turkish

silhouettes in the Shiroka Laka region. The oldest men's outer garments recalled in detail are the broad shalwars, which were made out of six fabrics and whose length reached below the knees. With the development of sewing and tailoring, wide shalwars were replaced by narrower ones, also called "poturi", who had deep crotches and ankle-length legs.

A characteristic feature of men's fashion in the Shiroka Laka region was the relatively early adoption of European French-style trousers, waistcoats and coats (jackets) which were sewn first using home-made fabrics, mostly ochre muslins, and then factory fabrics.

The women's white dress costume existed in the Shiroka Laks region until much later than the men's one due to the greater conservatism and closedness of women who did not go out on the streets like men. Because of this, this costume has been preserved in great detail in the collective folk memory until recently. Two types of white women's outer garments were widely used: they were known as "grishki" which included both the "saya" dress (open in the front from top to bottom), which was also called the "spread apart" dress, and the "sukman" dress (closed, with sleeves and slits on the sides). It should be noted here that besides the two types mentioned above, the white sukman grishka without sleeves and without side slits was equally as popular in this region until relatively late . According to The Bulgarian Patriarch Kiril, this type of griskha was well-preserved until quite recently in the communities of muslim Bulgarian women from the village of Isoren, in the Xanthi region. This is the oldest Slavic outer garment, worn by women in the summertime over the shirt... The side slits, characteristic of the griskhas and outer garments of muslim Bulgarian women which originate from the white open (saya) griskhas, have a Thracian origin. In the regions of Shiroka Laka and Devinsk, Bulgarian women practicing Islam wore "maskalids". The replacement of the white costume with a black costume began in the 1930s Shiroka Laka, but even after that white grishkas continued to be made and worn by girls and children, along with the ochre and black grishkas."

The term "*komshuluk*" is not territorially bound. I have come across this word continuously since my childhood and still do today, for it is specific to the Balkans as a whole. I heard it be repeatedly used during the interviews of this study, and it was used in a way that conveyed warm and compassionate feelings. But I found the best interpretation of the "*komshuluk*" in the article "The system of the *komshuluk*" by the infamous historian Prof. Dr. Tsvetana Georgieva. The article was published on the Internet and is more of a popular science text:

"Komshuluk is the Turkish name for small doors found in the inner fences which according to Ivan Hadzhiyski makes courtyards in villages and small towns "joint vessels", as these doors are

never closed. They exist to this day in many of the small settlements with a mixed population of different faith. The primary and more general meaning of the word is the act of neighbouring.

In an anthropological sense, the secondary meaning of "komshuluk" is evidence and a sign of trust between families who live in close proximity. For the inhabitants of mixed regions, the word "komshuluk" carries , combines and elevates both meanings. In 1994, in a casual but stimulated by our presence discussion in a café in Krumovgrad, the participants, Christians and Muslims alike, came to the conclusion that the komshuluk was not just an act of neighbouring, but the way of life of people belonging to different faiths and different ethnicities. Their conclusion was backed up by arguments from the past stored in the collective memory of both groups. For both Christians and Muslims, they proved to be an extremely important factor. Some elderly folks recalled the memories of their parents, Bulgarian refugees from the eastern parts of the Thracian region, who in 1913 managed to escape the repression by the Turkish army by fleeing through the komshuluk to their Muslim neighbours. The Muslim participants added that during the so-called "revival" process, most of them secretly observed the traditional sacrificial rites called "kurban". They hid their sacrificial meat in the houses of their Christian neighbors, who gave it to them through the komshuluk, after the "inspection of refrigerators" had passed. The storytellers collectively laughed off the fact that despite the suspicions of the party activists, "no one either saw, or heard" about the violations of the regulations of power.

A basic rule of the komshuluk system is the mutual symbiotic compassion demonstrated in face of the most distinct and important manifestations of the identities of each of the groups. The mandatory requirement of this system is the mutual exchange of community-specific festive foods, which are perceived as a symbol and sign of religious identity, which adorns them with a sacred character. These foods are well-known in both groups, and the food exchange is expected and regulated by an old tradition. On Easter, Christians "pass" their Muslim neighbors red eggs and cookies. During Eid, Muslims "return" the gift by offering sacrificial meat or sweets which they also "bring" to neighbors of their faith. Acceptance of the "gift" is obligatory, as is obligatory for the recipient to say the words "Happy holiday". They are the public confirmation of the conflict-free aspect of both party's coexistence.

An elderly Christian woman from Ardino recalled with a great deal of emotions the violation that occurred in the komshuluk system, which she had taken personal offense to. She said, "It was very bad when they changed the names of the Turks. On Easter I went to offer them red eggs and stopped. How could I give them to them, when they were left without a holiday? They were forbidden to make a sacrifice. I went, but Fatma looked at me and kept silent, and I

cried.”

Several people from Kardzhali and Razgrad claimed that, despite the frequent local tensions between the DPS, BSP, SDS and other parties which to a considerable extent influence the moods of the various ethnic groups in these cities, no one thinks of disrupting the mutual exchange of holiday gifts and greetings on Easter and Eid. It is seen as a guarantee of the existence of trust and mutual security during the inevitable “small conflicts” in politics. The exchange of festive gifts is the way through which personal relationships are isolated from the negative nuances in the public space.

A mandatory norm in the operation of the komshuluka system is the mutual exchange of participants between the two religious community during the usual rites in their respective holiday cycles, i.e. during the wedding, childbirth and funeral rites. The official character of this type of customs makes both the invitation and participation in them a sign of respect towards the other person, family and entire religious group. The Christian respondents claim that “if you don't have money, you might not go to your cousin's wedding, but you will take a loan and go to your Turkish neighbor's one.”

In some settlements in the Northern Rhodopes, such as Rakitovo, the respondents presented a different, in their opinion better, version of mutual participation in the wedding celebration. According to them, at a Muslim wedding Christians play the role of the “staff” and vice versa. This is explained through the desire of each religious group to be freed of all kinds of worries during their respective celebrations. The reciprocity of this exchange is evidence of complete trust between them, as the organization of the celebration and the creation of a good mood are completely entrusted to representatives of the opposing religious group.

The symmetry of mutual participation is also found in the complex systems of postpartum customs in both the Christian and the Muslim communities. Typically these customs are related to the holiday during which the newborn and his recovered mother are introduced to the surrounding female world. Christian Bulgarians call this holiday “bread loaf”, Muslim Bulgarians call it “prayers” or “duva”, and Turks call it “baby gedzhesi”. This is a traditional festive gathering of women and it is done after 40 days have passed from the child's birth. In all communities, it has the same meaning: celebration of the joyful event and acceptance of the newborn person in the environment in which he will spend, if not his entire life, then at least his childhood and adolescence. Between the two civilization's traditions there are significant ritual differences, defined by the religious norms of Christianity and Islam. These are revealed without being violated to the other community by inviting the latter's representatives to participate. According

to the respondents, these representatives' presence is not only a sign of respect, but also symbolically represents the mini-model of the mixed world in which the newborn person will live. According to an elderly Turkish woman from Momchilgrad, it is not only impolite, but also impractical to invite the Christian neighbor to a baby *gedzhesi*, "because next thing you know, you're going to ask her for salt and medicine for the child".

Caring for the child, or more precisely for the children, is the supreme duty of women, not only belonging to the family circle, but also to the neighborhood, which by virtue of the circumstances is multi-confessional. Taking care of the children is the key to the formation of many deep personal friendships between Christian and Muslim women. "We looked after the children together. Together we have rejoiced and we have suffered," is a common explanation given to shed light on the strength of female friendships not only in mixed-population settlements, but also in cases where girlfriends find themselves separated by interstate borders. In small settlements, where not too long ago female mobility was very limited, this type of friendship not only lasts a lifetime, but is also "inherited" by the next generation. "Our mothers were friends in the village, so we became friends," is how a Bulgarian and a Turkish woman from Ruse explained their friendship. They have lived in the same house ever since their husbands pass away and their children immigrated.

The joint participation in the funeral rituals of the two religious communities is another mandatory norm in the *komshuluk* system. All the people I spoke to emphasized the importance of having peers of the deceased one follow this custom strictly. Both groups observe the requirements set by their own faith in relation to funeral rites. Christian men take part in the procession that accompanies the Muslim person to his or her grave. Muslims attend Christian funerals, including the funeral prayer. Christian women, complying with the requirements of Islam, do not attend women's funerals, but visit the home of the dead. Muslim women do not join the funeral procession of Christian women either, so as not to violate the Quran's ban on women entering cemeteries, but they participate in the vigil rite and carry flowers.

This component of the coexistence of Christians and Muslims was violated during the so-called "revival" process when civil burials in communal cemeteries were made mandatory. The interviewees thought that those were sinful, stupid and an embodiment of savagery, and that they offended both God and people. In Ardino, they showed us with great grief the general cemetery ironically called "Druzhiba" (meaning companionship), and they swore that there were neither Christian nor Muslim residing in it, because on the night after the funeral, people would dig up their deceased loved ones to bury them "where their faith and tradition dictated".

In Bulgaria, the system of mutual coexistence was created over a long period of time. It could be defined as a network of connecting lines, created through rules and practices, assessed as necessary for the two communities given the reality of permanent coexistence imposed on them. Nowadays, these rules and practices are valuable not only as a tradition, but also as a contemporary value. Its maintenance is perceived as an obligation and a prospect for each subsequent generation.”

Here is the place to present some statistics, extracted from archival units in the State Archives of Smolyan, which concern mixed marriages between two people of different religions.

- Zlatograd, 1934: out of 61 marriages during that year, only one was mixed.
- Zlatograd, 1944: out of 76 marriages, 3 were mixed. In all three families the women were Christian.
- Zlatograd, 1953: out of 92 marriages, 8 were mixed (only in one case the woman was Muslim).
- Zlatograd, 1955: out of 63 marriages, 2 were mixed. In both families the women were Christian.

Random records reviewed where I found no information on mixed marriages:

- The village of Manastir village, 1911: 10 marriages;
- The town of Chepelare, 1893: 10 marriages;
- The town of Chepelare, 1912-1913: 21 marriages;
- The village of Orekhovo village, 1901: 14 marriages;
- The Register of Households in the village of Arda and the village of Barutintsi, 1922 - 1945: there was a column called “nationality” where it was noted “Bulgarian”, but there was also a column called “religion” where everyone noted respectively “Eastern Orthodox” or “Muhammadan”.

These results directed me to my first choice location where I would try to arrange and conduct interviews: the city of Zlatograd.

Before that, however, I would like to present two very interesting books written at different times, under different political conjunctures. I am grateful to Elena Petkova, whom I was unable to meet in person, and whose study I was able to read with the assistance of the State Archives of Smolyan. The study is called “The Everyday Life of Bulgarian Muslim Women in the middle ranges of the Rhodopes”, and it was published in 2015 by IC “Gutenberg”. The author presents her research as follows.



"The analyses are the result of field studies conducted in the former Smolyan district in 2009-2010, as well as a similar study conducted in the period 2001-2003 on the occasion of my master's thesis on the topic, "Muhammadan Bulgarian women and the socialist modernization. School for Women Activists of the Patriotic Front, Smolyan", which I presented in 2004 before the Department of Theory and History of Culture, in the Faculty of Philosophy of the Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski".

Elena Petkova examines the ambiguous assignment of women as an object of a special state policy, as a gender, and as part of the Bulgarian Muslim community. In research and in fiction, the interpretations of the subject depend on the author's goals... After the Liberation, Konstantin Irechek wrote in his works called "Kingdom of Bulgaria" and "Travels in Bulgaria" about the settlements, life, language and folklore of Bulgarians. He also mentions the circumstances surrounding Muslim Bulgarians as part of the Bulgarian nation.

Even if the information in the post-liberation documents and texts was informative, serious pressure on cultural identity was still exerted by the institutions of the new statehood after 1944. The policy of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) towards Muslim Bulgarians was named differently. It was called a "cultural revolution", a "revival process", a policy of "upgrade in political, cultural, educational and economic terms". However, there was just one goal: a homogeneous population with a common ancestral root between vastly different communities, and defining a national identity.

Bulgarians may come from different faiths, but they are still Bulgarian, and the search for a different name to define the community of Muslim Bulgarians is strange and not quite adequate. According to various scientists and local historians, the two most common designated names are:

- *Ahryans* (from the Rhodope fortress Ahridos; from the Thracian-Illyrian tribe of Agrians; from the Arabic "ahara-yan", which means "the last to accept Islam, after resistance, avoidance etc.") and

- *Pomaks* (from "helping, helper"; from "beguiling, scamming"; "not keeping" one's word; "tortured, tormented").

I use the designation Muslim Bulgarian (a person who practiced Islam as a religion).

Muslim Bulgarians are not recognized as an independent ethnic community, but state policy over the years has cast doubt on their ethnicity. Ethnicity is a community of people with

common cultural and biological characteristics. Based on this, the individual can define and assert his collective identity.

The Bulgarian nation was formed during the Renaissance. Therefore, the church as an institution and one's religious affiliation became important for the national movement. One definition of a "nation" is a group of ethnically connected people who share a common territory, common myths and historical memories, a common culture, a common economy and common legal rights and obligations. However, nationalism is an ideology according to which the state and the nation coincide. Nations do not create nationalism, it is a political product. BKP's policy towards religious minorities is essentially nationalist: it does not officially recognize minorities based on their religious identities, but actually treats them as such.

Elena Petkova wrote, "Women are the ones who are given the social role of 'intergenerational transmitters' of cultural traditions, customs, songs, cuisine and, of course, mother tongue." Actual behavior also expresses ethnic and cultural boundaries. The importance for women to adopt a culturally "appropriate behaviour" takes on particular importance in "multicultural societies".

Further in her work, she presented several hypotheses for the definition of Muslim Bulgarians:

- Bulgarian-speaking Slavs, professing Islam. If they chose language as a determining factor of ethnicity, they would identify as Bulgarians. But if they chose religion, they would belong to the Turkish ethnicity;

- Descendants of Muslims who inhabited the Balkan Peninsula before the Ottoman Empire;

- Heirs of the Yuruks;

- Descendants of Ottoman soldiers married to Bulgarian women. Related to this theory is the notion that Turkish nationality is given by the father, and the use of the Bulgarian language as a mother tongue is granted by the mother.

Often in one village, in one family, or even the mind of a single person, these versions can be mixed.

At the end of the 20th century, young people in the eastern and central ranges of the Rhodopes ignored religion and defined themselves as Bulgarians.

This ambiguity in definition stands in contrast to the unyielding self-defined large ethnic groups of Bulgarian Christians and Bulgarian Turks. This explains (but does not justify) the Bulgarian nationalist campaigns carried out by the state and party structures after 1878.

I was particularly interested in the information about the activities of the "Rodina" Association, as well as the ambiguous attitudes of the different party structures after 1944 regarding the ideas and methods of this still controversial practice.

The first step towards the creation of the "Rodina" Association was the decision of a group of young Muslim Bulgarians to organize a dance in the community center in Smolyan.

The Muhammadan-Bulgarian cultural-educational and charity association "Rodina" was founded on May 3rd, 1937 in the city of Smolyan by 18 young Muslim Bulgarians and Petar Marinov who is a Christian. Their idea was, while respecting religious affiliation, to make religion understandable and accessible by translating the Quran into Bulgarian and by ending the practice of having services in mosques be conducted in Arabic. The main goal was to "assist in the agricultural and economic development of the Rhodope region".

Some of their ideas and initiatives include the following: in 1932, mosque schools gained the status of general educational institutions; textbooks were translated from Arabic into Bulgarian; additional presentation of information in the army where all young men were drafted (by communicating not only with Eastern Orthodox Christians, but also with Catholics and Protestants, Muslim Bulgarians came to the realization that their nationality is Bulgarian and their faith is Islam); dances in community centers, which was an established working model since the Renaissance.

In the first years after 1944, the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) and the Patriotic Front (OF) started fundamentally changing the policy of the previous regimes regarding Muslim Bulgarians.

In order to aid the elections, a quick procedure for the change of names was introduced, Arabic was once again allowed in mosques, and freedom was granted with regards to wearing garments of one's choice, fezes and hijabs.

With the consolidation of power and the abolition of the multi-party system, BKP no longer needed broad popular support. The advertized modernization of the lives of Bulgarians disturbed the conservative ideas of Muslims and they closed themselves off as a community in order to preserve their identity and survive.

Two campaigns took place between the years of 1948 and 1951: the emigration of Muslims from settlements in our southern border zone, with over 10 000 people forcibly resettled in different parts of the country; and, simultaneously, the emigration wave to Turkey when over 40 000 Muslim Bulgarians submitted applications to leave the country, but BKP did not allow their emigration from Bulgaria.

With regards to the policies aiming to deal with the issue of illiteracy, coercive administrative measures were sometimes imposed to send girls from Muslim families to schools. Scientists from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences were tasked with scientifically justifying the new policies of the state and party. Art works and movies were ordered for the purpose of historical propaganda, as well as books and albums for the purpose of socialist construction. The themes of forcible Islamization were widely represented in the textbooks. The so-called "positive discrimination" took place: kindergartens and schools are opened, while scholarships and acceptance letters are granted to specific groups in higher education institutions. In order to implement the literacy policy, BKP and DKMS activists were sent to areas with a dense Muslim population. Healthcare was improved, and there was work done to overcome the prejudiced attitudes of Muslim women towards seeking medical help. The trade networks were expanded even in the most remote villages. Sergeant schools and military schools increased their intake of youth from these areas.

All this prepared the ground for the "cultural revolution" and the "revival process" presented in the "Theses on the Revival Process" published by the Politburo of the Central Committee of BKP on March 12th, 1988. Despite being written quite late, this document showcased the change in the political decision-making process over the years regarding Muslims.

According to one of the most popular definitions, an ethnic community has six main characteristics:

- it has a proper collective name,
- common ancestors,
- common historical memories,
- common cultural elements,
- a fatherland and a sense of belonging to it, and
- shares a sense of solidarity.

Seen as part of the collective ethnic community of Bulgarians, however, Muslim Bulgarians did not unconditionally possess all six characteristics. Naming this group was problematic, especially if only done based on its religion. The sharing of common ancestors was sought out as historical proof of a shared Bulgarian ethnic identity, but thus Muslim Bulgarians would come to be perceived as traitors, regardless of how they had converted to Islam. Practicing this religion also led to cultural differences. These were compensated to a certain

extent by the new socialist holiday system, which was antithetical to the religious ones: Christian, Catholic, Muslim... And the feeling of solidarity was built on the principle of catching up: the less progressive community had to overcome its outdated cultural models, including its names, clothing, behavior...

The formation of the Bulgarian nation during the Renaissance was based on Christianity. The lack of statehood gave way to religion as the foundation for preserving the Bulgarian nationality. Thus, Muslim Bulgarians were ostracized and placed outside of the the Bulgarian nationality, because their religion was opposed to the the religion defining the nation: Christianity.

The role of women in the socialist society was multifaceted. Women had to preserve the family and traditions in it and thanks to it, lead and manage the modernization process of the household, participate in the contemporary education and upbringing of children, have a successful career outside of the home, participate in public life, and bring their creative talents to fruition. This role is formulated and made official in the following documents:

- The program document of BKP and OF: "The woman: mother, worker, social activist", edited by Prof. Atanas Lyutov and Rositsa Gocheva, 1974, whose slogan was, "The woman: mother, worker, social activist" .

- The program declaration of OF on September 14th, 1944, which proclaimed the equality between men and women.

- Ordinance: a law on equalizing the rights of people of both sexes.

- The Dimitrovska Constitution from 1947, when equality between men and women became a constitutional principle.

- The Constitution from 1971 which commented on the place and role of women in the socialist society.

- The meeting of the Central Committee of BKP in April of 1956, which explained how, in the process of industrialization, women had become part not only of production, but also of management.

- The meeting of the Central Committee of BKP in July of 1968, when a decision was made to improve the Party's work among women. A Committee of Bulgarian Women was established in the OF. The committee was tasked with discussing the problems of women and proposing solutions.

Women were once again seen as a combination of their roles as helpers of man, people

raising a generation, equal members of society, but also as pillars of the family who carried patriarchic values. This informed the way women were perceived and the state's position with regards to women. Again, emphasis was placed on their external features: the removal of the hijab, the removal of the window bars. The issue regarding the place and role of Muslim women was raised, men were encouraged to play out their roles as fathers and husbands who support the women in their families in their professional, emotional and creative growth.

The School for Women Activists of the Patriotic Front was established in 1959 in order to work with Muslim women, for whom courses in cooking, sewing and housekeeping were organized. Such courses had been organized even during the work of the "Rodina" association among women. Other activities at the school included poetry and dance performances, concerts, literary readings and book discussions... At the end of the training, excursions to Bulgaria, the Soviet Union and other socialist countries were an attractive idea for participants. The goal of this school was to "raise" the future leaders among women, but their level of education and their needs informed activists which relevant courses and trainings to take part in.

There is not much information on the clothing of Muslim Bulgarians in ethnographic studies. Typically, the clothes of Muslim Bulgarian women in the mid-19th century were made up of homemade woven fabrics like cotton, wool and hemp. The garments included a shirt, long pants or shalwars, a jacket with long sleeves of red homemade cloth or velvet over the shirt, a woolen waistcoat decorated with embroideries, a wide and knee-length outer garment (called zhyube or kalamo) made out of wool which was black, red or green, and a hijab made out of black cloth. The veil was put on when the girl got engaged. Married women's niqabs were worn so that they covered the face, and only the eyes could be visible. Later, costumes naturally began going out of fashion. But during the 20th century people still wore the headscarves, most often colorful and with flowers, as well as long wide trenchcoats in black, blue or brown. Gradually, headscarves began to be worn only at home or in the closed community of the village. One of the reasons for this shift were the bans, but the more probable reason was the natural change in the dressing style of women when they were at work or traveling. The policy about the change in clothing mainly affected women, because men had long since changed their traditional costume: they had left the home, the village or the region because they had gone off to study, to be drafted in the army, to work etc. A change in women's clothing was thought to bring them a sense of freedom, a change in their self-awareness and the status quo. For a long period of time this change took place with the consent of the men in the family. The process became more natural when women started working in the workshops and factories in

the light industry. Winning a salary also gave these women another sense of self-confidence.

In the conclusion of her work, Elena Petkova summarized, "It can be said that the subjects of the controversial oppressive state policy also react to it controversially." The subjects:

- create their own versions of their origins;
- abide by their traditions in their households in order to preserve them despite these traditions being banned in public;
- take advantage of all protections and privileges when it comes to work, education and financial benefits.

"For a large part of Muslim Bulgarian women, it is not the enforced name changes or the clothing bans in the past that have been a problem; the problem for them lies in the fact that during the socialist regime they had jobs, but nowadays they don't even though the state does not interfere in their personal matters, such as their name, their clothes, their practice of Islam. In this way, in my opinion, the newly created expectations for materialistic success among women allows for new influences and interventions to come in and create pressure among women in society, because these attitudes are permanent. However, it seems to me that this trend does not solely apply to the community of Muslim Bulgarians in the post-socialist reality, but is valid for the majority of Bulgarians".

"Thus, in their (Muslim women's) daily life, there is a differentiation between their representations in public and private, but the differences do not affect their cultural identity. Their representations are a constant game, an incessant juggling of symbols in the public and the private spaces: that is their response to the state's intrusion into their private lives."

A slightly different point of view on the same issue is presented by Vladimir Ardensky in his book with autobiographical elements *Native, not foreign*, published in 1975. He was the editor of the magazine called "Rhodopes", and he is currently over ninety years old and lives in the city of Sofia. Even in the beginning of his book, the author emphasized that the Bulgarians who professed Islam had actually preserved their language, customs and family ties, and had protected the Christians during the Liberation War against the Turks and participated in war committees... He writes, "In short, the Muslim Bulgarians have preserved everything that makes a Bulgarian 'Bulgarian'".

He then presented the historical aspects. The Imperial Gate (Sublime Porte), supported by Western European countries, created diplomatic drama scenarios by playing on the notion of "Muslims" versus "Christians". One of the arguments for the division of post-liberation Bulgaria is

"taking care of the Muslims". After the San Stefano Peace Treaty, thanks to the treachery and the forgeries of Hadzhi Muftia from Arda and the Greek Radyu Chorbazhi from Raykovo, the administrative unit of Smolyan fell again under Turkish control.

After the Liberation, Turkish propaganda began, Turkish schools were created, and people were implored to emigrate to Turkey. It is interesting to note that the Turkish authorities did not allow immigrants to settle in the European territories, only in the Asian ones. And even when accepted, in each village or town no more than 1012 families were allowed to settle, as the authorities did not want Bulgarians to create large communities. These immigrants were still seen as "foreign" at the end of the day.

According to statistical data, the literacy rate of Muslims in Bulgaria in 1905 was 3.67%. But the Berlin Treaty also emphasized that the chief Islamic spiritual leader and the local Islamic spiritual leader controlled and inspected the Muslim boards and schools, as well as the Sunni Islamic schools in Bulgaria, and gave orders for the opening of new ones. There were Bulgarian teachers who with great passion taught children how to read and write, taught them science... Parents realized that this was good for their children, but they were met with resistance by the Muslim clerics.

In the chapter "Parting with Allah", Vladimir Ardensky shared some of his personal experiences that had led to his decision to change his name. He said, "Allah was hiding somewhere in me and was following my every step, judging my every move." As a young boy, his teachers had told him one thing, while the priest and his mother had told him the opposite. "Whom should I have believed? Where was the truth?", he was asking. He had been given a lucky charm by his mother, which he decided to use while being tested, but the charm was of no help, so he threw it in the fire pit... Then he started skipping the daily prayers, but he had a subconscious fear... The local Muslim priest described hell (jahannem) with terrifying words, but described paradise (jannah) with beautiful words. His school, however, gave out a lecture on the topic of "Is there a God?", during which Christianity and Islam were compared. The boy was impressed by the similarities in the sacred books of the two different religions, and he came to a conclusion too terrifying for his not yet fully matured personality: "If there is no God, there is no Allah." Vladir said that as soon as he entered high school, saying goodbye to Allah was inevitable. "There was no room for two truths in one soul."

His mother casually mentioned his great-grandfather's name during a casual conversation between Vladimir and her. "Stoyu. To forget his name... he was a Bulgarian, a Christian." The young Vladimir pondered, became interested, began reading and thinking. The



"Historical Notebook" written by monks from Athos in 1661-69, spoke about the islamization of the district of Smolyan and the refugees in Sivino where there were local regions with names like "Mirkovo" and "Danchovo". In a conversation with Usen, a 90 year old man whom he shared a passion for hunting with, Vladimir was told about the name of the local region of Emirsko. It came from the Turkish word "emir" which designated the man who "converted" the village to Islam. While studying journalism at the Sofia University, Vehbi Mehmedov Shekirov chose to change his name to his current one: Vladimir Ardenski.

I will take the liberty of abbreviating one of his stories based on true events, which is titled "When they don't ask the heart".



"One of the salons of the "Hristo Botev" community center in Smolyan was making echoing sounds. The permanent district's ensemble for folk music, created in 1960, was having its first rehearsal... At last, the conductor was satisfied and gave them a break. A dozen of young singers, most of them Muhammadan Bulgarian women from different areas of the district, cheerfully entered the garden in front of the community center.

Suddenly one of them, dressed in a neat blue coat, who had long brown braids, broke away from the group. Her face got darker, and, with tiny, quick-paced steps, she walked towards an old, tortured woman who was leaning against a bench and looking around with timid, moist eyes.

"For you, Nezifinko," cried the old woman and squeezed her daughter's fingers in her dry bony hands. "Your father beat me up because you ran away. I passed out twice. If they hadn't called a doctor from Devin, who knows if my aching heart would have survived. And now again, after a fight, he sent me here to take you back. He says that if you don't come back to Nastan, he will disown you. Come on, Nezifinko! You know what your father is like!"

The eyes of both the mother and the daughter filled up with tears. As soon as she saw that Nezife was also crying, the mother felt a beam of hope flash in front of her eyes for a moment. She felt hopeful that that maybe she would persuade her daughter to leave the ensemble and return to Nastan. But that only lasted a brief moment. For Nezife raised her head proudly, threw back her braids, and said resolutely:

"No, mother, I will not leave the ensemble. I won't listen to you this time. You messed up my life once... That's enough. If you want to, you can have me as your daughter, if you don't want to... don't. I have not committed any sin against you. What's wrong with me coming here

to sing? No, I'm not coming back!" ...

Nezife Bochukova from the village of Nastan in the district of Smolyan was only twenty years old, but she had already experienced great misfortune. She had been forcibly married a year ago. And it was outsiders who were the ones to force her to swallow this bitter pill, but her own parents and most of all her father.

But how did it happen?

Nezife worked as a nurse in the hospital in Shiroka Laka. Consumed by her work, she did not feel the passage of the week days, but when Saturday came, her heart would begin to dance madly. Often, out of impatience, she did not wait for a truck or any other vehicle to pick her up, but walked to Nastan by foot to see her boy as soon as possible. They liked each other very much and would make love.

One Saturday she returned to the village, and just as she was getting ready to leave the house to meet him, her father Raim Bochukov sternly asked her, "Where to?"

- I'm going out, father.

- No going out! We're having guests over tonight, and you need to be here!

- What guests, father?" Nezife flinched.

- You'll see, said Raim in a bad mood, but suddenly something crossed his mind and he softened. - You are lucky, daughter, we should not let this slip. Osman Mutev wants you as his wife, and we will give you away. The boy is good, and most importantly he is from a rich family.

- But I have another boy, and you hurt him - Nezife did not finish her sentence, collapsed on the floor and started sobbing.

- Shut up! her 50 year old father Raim Bochukov said angrily again. - Am I not your father? Whatever I say, that's what's going to happen!

- But how, father, will I live with him when my heart does not want him?" asked the girl with tears in her eyes as she stood up.

- Do you think your mother and I once married for love? But look, we do live together.

Nezife knew well what her parents' life was like: incessant quarrels and physical fights.

- Just so you know, if you embarrass me tonight in front of these people and say that you don't want Osman, I will cut your head off like a lamb," said the father while gritting his teeth.

- Listen, listen to your father, Nezifinko! You shouldn't go against a man's will. This is your destiny. Well, it might be a good thing," added the mother to console her.

Nezife still wanted to believe that this was all a joke, and that they would not force her

to get married, but when Osman came to their house in the evening with his father and other relatives, all of her hope disappeared.

The elders negotiated the dowry and discussed how much should be given for the maiden's honor, but no one asked Nezife if she wanted to marry Osman. Finally, the parents decided that the wedding would take place on Monday, "on a good day".

...

The procedure in the civil department was short. The clerk hastily reviewed the documents of the newlyweds. After receiving Osman's unambiguous answer that he agreed to marry Nezife, the clerk turned to her as well:

- And you, comrade Nezife Bochukova, do you agree to marry Osman Mutov? - he asked.

Nezife was silent. Her father answered instead:

- She agrees, comrade, she agrees, but she is shy, - said Raim Bochukov with an exaggerated smile and put his hand on Nezife's shoulder, supposedly to comfort her, but actually secretly pinched her so cruelly that she almost cried out in pain. - Say that you agree, daughter, why are you ashamed?"

- I agree - barely said Nezife.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief: the father Raim Bochukov, the groom Osman Mutov and the witnesses. Only one heart, Nezife's heart, which no one took into consideration, which no one asked, shriveled with insult...

Hard days were ahead of the young bride. Right after the second day after the wedding, the father-in-law and mother-in-law started nagging Nezife to give up her job in Shiroka Laka.

- What are you going to do in the hospital? It's not for you. You are already a woman and outside men should not look at you. A woman should know her place. House chores and in plowing the field: that's your job!

Nezife hoped that at least her husband Osman, as a young man, would not prevent her from continuing her work in Shiroka Luka, but he also supported the elders.

- My father and mother are right, you must leave! - he said.

Nezife quit her job. Then she was forbidden from going to the movies and attending gatherings, and so she was gradually deprived of all the joys she had acquired as a young girl. Her beautiful, ringing voice, which the inhabitants of Nastan couldn't get enough of, was more and more seldomly heard. And even if she sang sometimes, she would only sing sad, sad songs...

The abyss that had existed between Nezife and Osman since the beginning, got bigger

in the fourth month after their wedding. The artificially created marriage chain which connected them had become extremely thin, and one evening Nezife decisively broke it off and returned to her father's home.

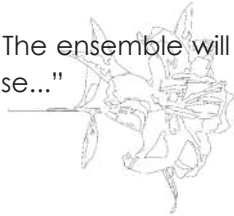
Thus, life rejected Raim Bochukov's outdated philosophy, who thought that just as his wife and he had once married without love and had managed to live together, so would his daughter come to terms with the man who had been forcibly imposed on her...

...

... The choir started rehearsing again. The conductor gave the tone, and the choristers sang,

*"Convince, mother, my father  
Not to give me up for marriage, nor to get me engaged  
For another year,  
Another hot summer, another spring..."*

A sad Rhodope song! The ensemble will sing it so that Nezife Bochukova's tragedy will never be repeated anywhere else..."



## **MEETINGS. THE INTERVIEW.**

### **Rozalin Hadzhiev, Zlatograd**

I met up with Dr. Hadzhiev at his workplace, in the house that serves as a veterinary clinic. We had scheduled in advance the meeting, but it was evident that many of the books about local history and genealogy had not been brought here solely for the purpose of the upcoming conversation. It turned out that he had his own publications and appearances on thematic television shows. He listed the names of more people who, professionally or not, researched and wrote about local history, culture and folklore. He exchanged information and materials with some of them.

In fact, his interest in these topics grew as he practiced his profession. As a veterinarian, he traveled around the region and got to know people who told him things about their lives, including interesting events and facts about the surrounding settlements. Gradually, he got carried away and began looking for information in books and documents, doing his own research. Our conversation afterwards was very intensive. He tried to tell me as much as possible, printed out pages from his laptop etc.

Dr. Hadzhiev began by quoting Georgi Mitrolov, a dialectologist who presented an Ottoman document from 1569, in which the results of a census were recorded and according to which two thirds of the population of Zlatograd were Eastern Orthodox Christians at the time. Many of them subsequently converted to Islam and became Muslim. He said that this had been the case with the Dombov family. A man whose family name was Domba was a Christian according to the old document, but the current members of the Dombov family are Muslim. These are the same Dombovs mentioned in the song about the local leader Delio. The song goes, "Dele the rebel went out with the Dombovs and the Karadzhovs..." Hadzhiev commented that both the churches and the mosques in Zlatograd had women's and men's sections, but recently fundamentalist ideas had appeared, which led to the creation of a fence between the two compartments. He said, "The Lord/The Creator is one, and in both religions the prayers end with 'Amen'..."

As his thoughts wandered in this direction, Rozalin Hadzhiev listed more arguments in favor of the peaceful coexistence of people from both religions. The first argument was the "komshuluk": the imams preached not to harm one's neighbor and that "one [was] not fed if one's neighbor [was] hungry." It is very popular to have a non-blood related "sister" or "aratlik" ("brother") of a different faith. It is customary for the two to exchange their entire outfit in a ritual. And according to Hadzhiev, the two religions also share very ancient common roots because they mix religious rituals and customs with pagan ones. For example, even nowadays grandmothers say, "May Miryana kill you", which is the name of the Slavic goddess of cold weather; the symbolic sign of Sabazius is made up of an upright thumb, index finger and middle finger, which is also the symbol of the holy trinity. There is such a carved sign on the Crocodile Sanctuary (according to Hadzhiev it's actually a snake or a dragon), which is located near the village of Dobromiritsi, in the municipality of Kirkovo. People of both religions worship the rocks in the shape of wombs in the area or worship the "proviralkis": rocks or roots of ancient trees, inbetween which one passes for health, for his sins to be forgiven etc.

In Zlatograd the clans of both faiths are mixed, Hadzhiev assertively said, and added that they remember their roots and know their common origins. The costumes and customs are similar, and the dialect is the same... An example he gave was that of the "beshbeshi" fur-monster games in the village of Dolen. Then he went into detail about a holiday shared between both religions: St. George's Day/Hadrales, which is actually a contemporary version of the celebration of the Thracian horseman and the first ritual bathing of the year. The legend talks about the trail of St. George's horse in the region of Kushleva, which gave birth to the idea of the contemporary "cheverme" (a type of roast meat) holidays in Zlatograd nowadays. The swings built on this day were one of the few opportunities for socialization between young people in the past, because any guy who liked a girl could swing her on these swings. That way he could both officially and publicly "touch on her", and also declare that the two were "engaged", jokingly said Hadzhiev by using modern jargon.

And he went on about the relationship between people and the religions they professed. In 1834, the first secular mutual school was opened and brought together children from both religions to study together. Until then, Christian and Muslim children had studied separately, in "schools" belonging to their respective churches. In the 19th century days, Zlatograd developed in accordance to the trades practiced: wool working, embroidery of rope-like yarns, weaving and felting of woolen fabrics... The people of Zlatograd were wealthy. Some

say half the city was made up of "hajdzhis" or wealthy businessmen and traders who had visits to the Christ's tomb in Israel. After 1912, as a result of the historical development of events and independent Bulgaria acquiring this region, the two religions became "truer": their influence on the people strengthened. But two things played a key role here: on the one hand, along with the development of mining, many people and families from all over Bulgaria came and settled here, and on the other hand, the communists declared religions to be the "opium of the people" and made efforts to limit their impact by banning rituals and even temple visits.

He showed me an article about the "Dervish Mosque" in the Tabakhna neighbourhood of Zlatograd which talked about the hypothesis that the mosque used to be a Christian church because metal candlesticks, typical of Christian temples, were found during a big cleaning. Upon its popularization and imposition, each religion used the sacred sites of the previous one. Thus, Christians used pagan sanctuaries, Muslims used Christian temples... And in Zlatograd, Hadzhiev said, they share a common cemetery...

Slowly we moved on to talking about mixed marriages. More than half of the city's population comes from such families: with many religiously mixed marriages. This wasn't impressive for anyone since many years, and was hardly even commented on. It was only spoken about here and there when an adult would be opposed such as the parents of his cousin who married a Christian man. But her grandmother and grandfather were very happy. Hadzhiev's opinion was that sometimes the problem was not even about religion, but about the proximity, or more precisely lack of such, between the two spouses: the elders preferred their children to get married to someone as close as possible. There is a saying that goes, "They may be a fool, but they must be from our neighbourhood."

Dr. Hadzhiev's son got married in Burgas to a Christian woman. He even accepted the Christian faith and was baptized immediately after his daughter.

My interviewee's thoughts went to one of the common clichés: that the girls from the village of Startsevo were beautiful. This myth started with Hatidzhe Hatun (the Hatinov family was named after her), about whom the legend says that she was not only beautiful, but also noble. She had belonged to the sultan's harem and, according to the custom, received land as a gift after getting old and having to leave the harem. There was a silver mine in her property (as described in an Ottoman register from 1869). Another legend talks about two Anglo-Saxon miners (Hutman and Hurdin) who worked in the mine, got married, stayed there and melted down.

Hadzhiev's great-grandmother Hatidzhe Hatun inspired a song: "Love, they built a house

without doors and without shutters" (window shutters). She got engaged to a family of hadzhis (wealthy tradesmen), got married, gave birth to two children and died very early.

With time, with the development of the city, with the changes made in the education of young people, came the end of arranged marriages. Dr. Hadzhiev added, "And nowadays - there are also many foreigners (many Greeks, Russians, Germans, Frenchmen, Brazilians etc.) —" and then changed the subject again, thinking of more local stories.

He recalled a story from the village of Kushla, 1958 – Binyaza and Redzhep loved each other. She urged him to flee to Greece. He refused, so she fled illegally, but met another man in the camps and both of them fled to Canada. In 1989 she returned to Bulgaria to look for a man for her daughter who was young, white, beautiful... In the meantime, her family had become devout Muslims, so Redzhep chose the son of a Turkish man and they returned together to Canada.

And he also recalled the story of the bride Kadra whose brother was captured by the Germans at the end of the Second World War. His family thought he was dead and Kadra even prepared a memorial for his soul (with pancakes), but at night she dreamt of a horseman who said that her brother was alive. She went to her neighbor who was helping in the church, told her about her dream, and the woman advised her to go to the church and light a candle. If the candle continued burning down, it meant that her brother would return. And so it happened. After that, Kadra made a decision and got baptized. She also baptized her daughter.

Then Hadzhiev printed a page for me with his notes:

"From the collective family memory, it is known that three Christian sisters from the Hekim family married Muslim Bulgarians. One resides in the village of Kitna: the Izmirliiev and Rustemov families are her descendants. The other two sisters live in Zlatograd, in the current Little River neighborhood which is called "Balet". The Alabash and Efendinyo families originate from these women. According to local traditions, even though they were married to Muslims, they had to continue "wearing their dresses", that is, they had to keep wearing the Christian costume. Even though their descendants are Muslim, the mother tongue of these people remains the Bulgarian language, which is a victory for all the residents of Zlatograd who kept speaking Bulgarian throughout the time of the Ottoman invasion, regardless of the religion they practiced."

"A saga from Zlatograd about the Greek woman Smaraida (Victoria) and the man Isen (Hussain) Karipov

The two lovers from the Rhodopes, who practiced different religions, inspired the creation



of a song about them. The song is quite interesting and shows that there were cases of voluntary conversion to Islam out of love:

*Horie, white girl,  
Beautiful doll from the Urumska region,  
Are you following me faithfully,  
Are you bringing me my coat?  
Isen, my love,  
I shall bring you your coat,  
And I shall follow you faithfully.  
Will you, Isen,  
Get me through Xanthi,  
Get me out of Xanthi,  
Then bring me to Dahan,  
And from Dahan to Deridere...*

The story described in the song took place around 1912-1913. The Greek woman Smaraida from Xanthi fell in love with Isen Karipov, a native of Zlatograd, who worked in the tobacco warehouses there. She came with him to Zlatograd. Here, according to the Shariah law operating at the time, they got married by two imams to legalize their union. Up until November 22nd, 1912, Zlatograd was still within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Victoria converted to Islam and changed her name to Horie. During the First Balkan War in 1912, Bulgaria and Greece were allies. Smaraida's brothers came to Zlatograd in the winter of 1912, when the city was liberated from the Ottoman rule. They took their sister back to Xanthi, but took revenge on the imams before that. One of them, who was for certain killed and thrown into the Great River, belonged to the Effendiev family and was called Kyazim, while the other belonged to the Hafuzaliev/Imamkin family (whose nickname was also the Hakov family).

According to the data of the local historian from Zlatograd Velichko Pachilov, they were distant relatives of the Hekimovs. Kyazim's grandfather insisted that they be spared because they were his relatives, and he cried a lot when they were killed. According to another myth, the other imam from the Hafuzaliev family hid in the "Rupite" cave near the city and thus saved himself.

Hadzhiev had saved the best storjdy for last. This was the story of Delio's song, which is now floating in space sung by the singer Valya Balkanska. He handed me a printed sheet of

notes and in the meantime shared with me a lot more details.

“Thanks to the hard work of the local historian Velichko Pachilov, a native of Zlatograd, many facts have been clarified about the life and work of the legendary voivode (warlord, chieftain) called Delio. Descendants of old clans from Zlatograd have kept in their collective family memories many legends about him. Some time ago, in a conversation with an heir of the old Dombov family in Zlatograd, I was literally told the following, “You know, when I was little, grandfather used to say that Delio was a shepherd in the hut belonging to the Dombovs.”

Myths and legends have made it known that Delio was an orphan who was left without parents. Then, in those times, such orphans, and even children from big families, were usually given as shepherds to farmers who had many sheep and goats. There are still living elderly people from the village of Kushla who say that they worked as shepherds for certain families from Zlatograd when they were kids... In all versions of the infamous song about Delio, people from the Dombov and Karadzhev families are mentioned. The information describing him as a shepherd in the Dombov family hut, which borders the property of the Leskov family and that of the Arshinev family on the other side facing the village of Kozarska reka, suggests that he knew this area well. Here he felt at ease. He knew everyone and was welcome among the local people. Again, according to the collective folk memory, the Arshinev family from Kozarska Reka bought their properties from the Karadzhev family.. All these facts prove that Delio was very close with the Dombovs and the Karadzhovs. In recent years, new facts about the region of Zlatograd have come out. In the public inventory of Christian families in Zlatograd from 1570, in a translation from the Istanbul archive, one can encounter the name Dumbi Yorgi (or Georgi Dombov) whose family was then Christian... Only three centuries later, the family had already entirely converted to Islam. The Dombovs lived in the so-called Babichet neighborhood on the left bank of the Great River. The name “Babichet” most likely derived from the Muslim missionary “grandmothers” who lived there. These were mostly Dervish-Bektashis and Alians (or Alevis), who carried over the wisdom of Sufism and were distinguished through their tolerance towards Christians. This neighborhood is connected to the opposite neighborhood through the so-called Babichet bridge. Delio’s beloved lived in the Babichet neighborhood. She was the beautiful Gyulsime from the Etyuv family, who is related to the Dombov family. They seem to have fallen in love when Delio was a shepherd boy and had already started to mature. Apparently, Gulsime’s relatives did not like this very much, and, in order to stop the two from communicating, sent Delio to be an apprentice with his uncle in Enidzhe (now Geniseya) on the border of the Aegan Sea.

Before Easter, Delio came back for one night, took clothes for his uncle and met up with Gyulsime... According to the legend, when he took his salary from his uncle, he was robbed by thieves. They stopped him with the words, "Kefir (infidel), hold my horse!". After that incident, Delio became a rebel, a terrifying rebel. In the song, his beloved Gulsime warns him:

*"Listen, Delio, be weary,  
Because they are coming for you, Delio,  
They're casting a silver bullet for you,  
So that they can kill you, Delio.*

And although in the song Delio replies that the one who shall kill him has not been born yet, according to the legend, he was shot in ambush just as he was secretly going to meet his Gulsime...

Rozalin Hadzhiev concluded his story about Delio with the words, "All of these facts kept in people's collective memory speak to the turbulent and chaotic times during which Delio lived, and to the struggle of Bulgarians to defend their spirit which found expression in the song about Delio: 'in our village I have two aunts. Don't you dare make them Turkish or black'. The song about Delio was not created by chance. Apparently the tumultuous events that took place in that era created too many emotions which had to be commemorated and sung about in a truly 'cosmic' song."

### **F., 72 years old, the village of Gevren**

When she was eighteen years old, the father and mother of a boy who was her age, nineteen years old, came to her house to get the two youngsters engaged. She had older brothers who insisted. They didn't ask her. Someone had even spread a rumour that she liked someone else from the village, so one of her brothers beat her up for it. They didn't marry her for money, for they were as wealthy as the other family. She lived by obligation. Her life was not easy, and she raised three children. She tolerated her suffering because of them. F. skipped over a large period of time and summarized her life, then returned to the story of her engagement. They were only supposed to be engaged and get married after he returned from his military service two years later. Here I must note an interesting fact for me: F. believed that they had not

been married because the hodzha (local wealthy tradesman) had not “written to them at all”, but she believed they had had a civil marriage just in case someone wanted to “steal” her. At that time, there were many cases of “stealing” and “running away” in the village of Gevren.

She was given a manual sewing machine, but it was left with her mother-in-law.

Her fiancé had left to join the army. He only came back for a little while once: after his oath. She didn’t read the letters he was sending her from the army either because she didn’t want him.

She didn’t even know that another rumour had been spread about her again: that she would run away from her fiancé with someone else. That’s why she didn’t suspect anything when one of his five sisters called her once for her to fix a pair of trousers on the sewing machine. She went over to her house. She didn’t know that her fiancé had come back, that he was hiding and waiting for her. He had heard the rumour and had lied in the army that he had to go home to get married because his girl couldn’t wait any longer and had threatened to kill herself. When F. entered the room and sat in front of the machine, the sister exited and locked the door outside. Then the fiancé came down through an opening in the ceiling, which was an unpleasant surprise for F. She was hoping for her parents to come look for her, but she wasn’t aware that her fiancé’s sisters had gone to her father in the meantime to inform him that she was going to sleep at their place, and that she was going to help them pick potatoes the following day. Her little sister came looking for her in the morning, but his relatives sent her back to her house to tell everyone there what had happened the night before, and that everything was over now.

Then the hard part began. At first F. complained to her parents, but they advised her to be patient because “what [were] people going to say...” Her husband controlled her for fifty two years. She did not live well with him. He started drinking and only stopped when he was old due to illness. He was now stranded in bed. Their children had witnessed their lives and were aware of her situation, but were now taking care of him.

I asked her if there were any mixed marriages in the village. There were, F. answered. She said some parents caused issues, but only in the beginning. “Nowadays nobody can control anybody”, she said. And she explained to me that even if the girl was a Christian, she could be legally married under Islamic rules to her Muslim husband if she asked. It was a little more difficult for a Christian man to marry a Muslim woman... Well, such cases existed, but mostly in Plovdiv or in Sofia, not in the villages.

But in that moment, F. herself began to tell me about her neighbors who were Christians

from Shiroka Laka. The two families were together all day long; they relied on each other for everything; their children played together; they celebrated holidays together. Her family brought them "sadaqah" during Eid, and their neighbors gave them eggs and cookies on Easter. And there was mutual respect between her family and the Christian teachers who had come to teach the children in the village...

Behind the warmth in her words, I was able to grasp and recognize everything I had ever read and heard about the komshuluk, the community spirit, the sisterhood and the brotherhood in that mountain.

### **Safine Shalganova, village of Kasaka**

Safine was born in 1966. She first mentioned his sister who had ran away to be with her lover in the village of Chavdar, on the Greek border. They had three kids. Her sister had a hard time living with her husband, but her parents kept repeating, "Be patient, my daughter!" Many young women had heard these words from their parents, and had watched the example of their mothers who tolerated everything for the sake of their children, in the name of the family, "to uphold an image in front of people"...

That's why Safine defended her choice. Her love affair with her future husband began when they were in the seventh grade. They got married when he returned from his service in the army. At that time she was already 22 years old. As by tradition, he sent over to her house people to ask for her hand. They issued them a "nikah": a document that was certified with a seal from the Muslim legal administration after the two young people and three witnesses from each side had agreed upon the terms of the marriage in front of the hodzha. They discussed the terms of the future marriage and wrote them down. Lastly, they noted down what "mahr" the girl wanted: that is, what amount of money did she want that she would receive in the event of a divorce, and which would cover her expenses for three months. This amount has no limitations and standards: it is whatever all parties negotiate in front of the hodzha. Once recorded, however, it is immutable and forever owed. Even if many years pass after the divorce, and even if the groom dies, the children owe it to their mother. After "writing the nikah", the girl stays for a week at her parents' home to get ready.

This was where grandma Atidzhe cut us off. She was 91 years old, and had gotten married in 1955. No one asked her if and whom she wanted to marry. Whatever the adults

agreed upon, that was what happened. She was lucky because she married a good man. Her life was easy and good, and she spent her years in the house, in the fields and with the animals. She raised children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. However, she was satisfied that the world had changed and that nowadays young people decided for themselves whom to get together with. Once upon a time it was different: the man chose the woman. He sent people off to ask for her hand. The hodzha came with them and wrote "nikah". The girl got engaged, but stayed with her mother for another extra week during which they prepared the girl's "luggage" which fit as many things as possible (a set of bed linens, underwear, blankets...). Grandma Atidzhe was about 20 years old when they married her off. There were also younger girls who got married. They didn't study...dn

Safine commented that during her time young people had already started choosing each other mutually. Only wealthier people still organized arranged marriages for their children to be brought together to preserve and multiply their wealth, but these were isolated cases. Other than that, the morals and values were still very strict: young people met during gatherings and adults were always present. The meetings took place outside, in front of other people. The two young people did not have the opportunity to meet in private, and they did not look for one: this is how they were brought up. Safine only regreted that she was not allowed to study. Out of all of her sisters, she did the best in school. She liked the Russian language very much. Her teachers advised her father to send her to the Russian high school in Plovdiv, but he refused because he had not sent off his older kids to study, and he did not have enough money to send them off, too, if they showed such a desire.

"How would my life have gone if I had studied!", she said with a thoughtful sigh. During those days very few girls continued their studies beyond the eighth grade. Safine laughingly recalled how her mother and the mothers of other girls would cleverly ensure they kept their control over the girls who went to study in Dospat, by each week requiring each of them to knit two meters of lace for the edges of sheets, carpets and rugs...

Safine told me about her mother-in-law Salie and her father-in-law Ali. Salie's parents married her sister into Ali's family, but Salie was not allowed to marry Ali. Then she went with the copper buckets on her shoulders to the water spring where Ali was waiting for her there. They left together and went to Dospat to get a civil marriage. Then they returned, confessed to their parents and wrote a "nikah". This happened during that time when adults still decided who should marry whom!

Before we parted ways, I also asked about mixed marriages between people of different

religions even though I already knew that there were no Christian families in this village. They told me about Yovka and Boris. Baba Yovka was still alive, but she was over 90 years old and was walking with two crutches after her stroke. She was from Pleven. She had come here to work as a teacher. She was married at the time and had two children from her first husband. However, here she fell in love with Boris from the village. He was married, too, with three children. He left his wife, left his children and married Yovka. Both of them took her two children to look after them. They lived in the upper part of the village. For the people from this village, the unusual bit in their story was the breaking up of the two families, and not so much that Yovka was a Christian...

Safine and I were conversing in the new house of her grandson Yorhan. He worked in Chicago. He had left as a student for a brigade and had decided to stay in Chicago, to work as a driver for some other Bulgarians from Dospat. He had become part of a new trend for the region and especially for this village: the young men were working abroad, but had married women from this village or from other nearby villages. Women stayed in the village and took care of the home, the children, the parents. Yorhan's young wife said she would follow him to Chicago, but also added that if she didn't like it there, she would come back, go to university, work and live like the other women here. I wasn't too happy internally, but I was careful not to show my spontaneous reaction. Then I thought to myself that this beautiful home, built with the labor of the young man next to her, needed to be full of life, and that their children would feel happier amidst the vast mountains and the supportive presence of all their relatives and where their roots were. In my mind I make a wish for Yorhan to return alive and happy from the U.S. and for them to enjoy their children and grandchildren together in Kasaka. I just want to add that this is one of the most populated villages. Just a few years ago, the school was being renovated to accommodate all the children in the village. We all know that this is surprising given how many village schools have been closed down and how many villages have been slowly "dying".

### **Habibe ("Shukriyka"), the village of Chepintsi**

This woman, born in 1950, welcomed me as a guest in her home. Everyone addressed her in the traditional way women were addressed in the past: they used her husband's name, Shukri, and called her Shukriyka. And her personality, as was quickly revealed to me during our conversation, refuted the notion of the subordinate position and depersonalization of women, a notion which her nickname implied.

Her future husband and she fell in love in school. Both were equally poor. However, it turned out that her future father-in-law did not want Habibe as a daughter-in-law. He offered his son two other women. However, the boy was determined to win Habibe over, and told his father that if he did not agree to take her in, he would go live with her himself. This would have been a disgrace for their family, so the father agreed. Shukri left to join the army. Habibe lived with his parents for two years. It wasn't easy. Her little sister was with her so that she would not stay alone without her man.

They did not have any children for ten years. They decided to adopt. They searched, waited, insisted... They found a girl. As is often the case, Habibe became pregnant soon after. They had a second girl. When she went into labor, she made sure no one found out. She told of an old belief according to which it was easier to give birth that way, if there was no one to think of you and worry about you. And if someone saw the woman go into labor, that person had to give them a yarn from his garment so that the baby's umbilical chord wouldn't get wrapped around it.

Here Habibe stopped her storytelling and showed me excitedly many photos: one of one of her daughters, another of her other daughter, some general photos and photos of the grandchildren.

And she started telling me about her eldest daughter Fimia.

She went back in time. Her grandfather on her mother's side was from this village, but had left for work in to Greece. Her grandmother from Greece was named Fimia, a typical Greek name. That was also the name of Habibe's boss in the factory where she worked. That is why she named her eldest daughter Fimia.

Habibe's mother returned from Greece to Bulgaria. She married a local carpenter, Redzhep. They had seven children: five girls and two boys. Habibe was in the first grade when her father died.

So the story of the younger Fimia turned out to be very interesting. She first got married to someone from this village. Habibe had heard that the boy was drinking and asked his mother, but she said that wasn't the case. Then it turned out to be true. There were other problems as well. He was also guilty of domestic abuse.

Habibe and Shukri took their girl back home. After a while, she started dating a man from the village of Kran through social media. Nobody knew why she had introduced herself as Lenche. When Habibe found out, she made her explain to that man who she was and where



she was from. Her explanation for having introduced herself as Lenche was that she liked that name better and wanted to be called that. Now in Kran she was known as Lenche. Habibe had no logical explanation for this decision of hers because according to Habibe, religion was not and should not be an issue in relationships between people. The in-laws from Kran had never made any comments on this topic. On the contrary, the two families got to know each other, visited each other, and Fimia/Lenche felt happy in Kran. Habibe showed me photos which confirmed her words, and added that in Chepintsi it's been a trend for many years for young boys to leave the village to go work in other cities in the country, get married to Christian women and stay there, and for young girls from the village to fall in love with border security guards from the border outpost and also leave the village.

Nezife, a young neighbor of grandma Habibe, also had an interesting story. Her grandmother was from The Huts, a neighborhood above the village of Erma Reka, near Zlatograd. Nezife's grandmother had gone there to visit someone. There had already been rumours that "Redzhep [was] going to steal a girl from Kolibkite". One of his relatives had called her "for something under the awning". Redzhep came in with his mates and stole her. He knew that she liked him and that her mother wasn't letting her get married.

The three of us were laughing at the fact that I was asking about arranged marriages while they were telling me about brave young men and women who defended their will and choices in all sorts of ways. Then they thought of a different story - one "stolen" girl was taken to another neighborhood in the village. However, she did not agree to this, but since a woman's strength is less than that of a man, she used a trick to escape. She took off her underwear and pretended to go to the toilet, but instead ran away back to her parents in just her undershirt.

The following story is about the aunt of Shukri, Habibe's husband. This woman was quite sick. Her family got along with the neighbors, with whom they were close, and her father and their neighbor, who had a son, agreed to get their children together. They married them. Shukri's aunt became pregnant, and her husband was drafted in the army. They had a son. However, she died when the child was about one year old. The father got married a second time, but the marriage did not go smoothly, so the grandmothers raised the child... Habibe told me about this story to prove that arranged marriages do not bring luck.

The following are three questionnaires and the answers to them given by three women who preferred this format of the interview. We also had conversations, but, as they adamantly insisted, I can only publish the answers they gave to the open questions previously presented to them on the subject of mixed marriages between people of different religions.

**M. K. from Smolyan, who got married in another city**

1. When, where and how did you meet your husband?

- 14 years ago, in Nessebar.

2. When and how did you come to speak about the fact that you practice different religions? Did that hold any significance in the beginning of your relationship?

- After we already knew each other well. It didn't matter to our relationship.

3. Did you have an issue telling your parents, and what was their reaction to that matter?

- I didn't have an issue, and it's not an issue for my parents.

4. Do you have a civil marriage? I know that in some places it is not a problem to get a document from the Islamic legal administration for an Islamic marriage; do you have one?

- No.

5. Have you discussed religious conversion for one of you?

- No.

6. What importance do you attach to religion personally; how deeply are your beliefs, and how strictly do you perform mandatory rituals such as fasting, etc.?

- Not very big, and I don't perform mandatory rituals.

7. Do you celebrate both Christian and Muslim holidays together? Together with the parents and relatives of both?

- No.

8. Do you have children? How do you raise your children, and what place does faith have in this regard? Have you introduced them to both religions, or have you chosen one of the two religions for them?

- Yes. Son. We have not introduced him to both religions, but have chosen the Christian religion.

9. Do you have an interesting story to share about the two different faiths in your family?

- No, I don't have one.

#### **D. H. from a village adjacent to a small town in the Rhodopes**

1. When, where and how did you meet your husband?

- We met at work on the sea coast 20 years ago.

2. When and how did you come to speak about the fact that you practice different religions? Did that hold any significance in the beginning of your relationship?

- As soon as he told me where he was from, it became clear to me that he was a Muslim. It didn't matter to me, and it didn't matter to him.

3. Did you have an issue telling your parents, and what was their reaction to that matter?

- Yes, at first I was worried about how they would accept it, and if they would accept it at all. In general, in our family my parents have always had people of different religions as friends, and this has never been an issue for them. So when I introduced him to my parents, they accepted him as a friend.

4. Do you have a civil marriage? I know that in some places it is not a problem to get a document from the Islamic legal administration for an Islamic marriage; do you have one?

- No, we don't have a civil marriage. We have been through a lot of difficulties during those 20 years, and our priorities have been geared towards completely different things. However, we have discussed it, and hopefully one day it will happen.

5. Have you discussed religious conversion for one of you?

- No such thing has ever been discussed in any form.

6. What importance do you attach to religion personally; how deeply are your beliefs, and how strictly do you perform mandatory rituals such as fasting, etc.?

- We believe in God, but not we're not obsessed. Everyone is free to fulfill the obligations of their religion as much as they want.

7. Do you celebrate both Christian and Muslim holidays together? Together with the parents and relatives of both?

- Yes, we celebrate the holidays of both religions together, and my parents have also celebrated with us, but because of the fact that they live far away, it happens rarely.

8. Do you have children? How do you raise your children, and what place does faith have in this regard? Have you introduced them to both religions, or have you chosen one of the two religions for them?

- Unfortunately, we don't have children, but one day when we do, they will grow up with the traditions of both religions.

9. Do you have an interesting story to share about the two different faiths in your family?

- During these 20 years together we have had many good moments, but the hard and difficult ones have brought us even closer together and made us stronger.

### **Hristina H. from the neighborhood of Nاستان in the city of Devin**

1. When, where and how did you meet your husband?

- Stoimen and I met in Sofia, in the university we studied in in 2011.

2. When and how did you come to speak about the fact that you practice different religions? Did that hold any significance in the beginning of your relationship?

- Religion never mattered to us, even in the beginning. During the first year of our relationship I

had already mentioned to him that I was not baptized, but in my family there has never been any pressure to practice a certain faith. I have been taught that faith does not define people. My parents know that I want to get baptized. I also explained to my husband that we were not baptized because of my grandfather on my father's side.

3. Did you have an issue telling your parents, and what was their reaction to that matter?

- We haven't had a problem. Neither my parents, nor his hold extreme views on this topic, and none of them care who practices what.

4. Do you have a civil marriage? I know that in some places it is not a problem to get a document from the Islamic legal administration for an Islamic marriage; do you have one?

- We are not married, but we live de facto as a family.

5. Have you discussed religious conversion for one of you?

- I made this decision for myself years ago, alone. I have the support of my parents and Stoimen.

6. What importance do you attach to religion personally; how deeply are your beliefs, and how strictly do you perform mandatory rituals such as fasting, etc.?

- We are not deeply devoted to religion, but certain things matter to us. We celebrate all Christian holidays. Stoimen has also been present when my relatives have celebrated Muslim holidays. We do not fast, but we like the rituals, so we respect them and observe them.

7. Do you celebrate both Christian and Muslim holidays together? Together with the parents and relatives of both?

- Yes, we celebrate together. Not always, but in our 12 years together, we have managed to do so most of the time.

8. Do you have children? How do you raise your children, and what place does faith have in this regard? Have you introduced them to both religions, or have you chosen one of the two religions for them?

- We have a kid and her name is Diana. She is 1 year and 7 months old. She was baptized in an Orthodox church, which was important for her father and me, so that she could have a companion and a protector who would guide her during her growth journey. It is important

for her to respect and love her godmother as if she were a third parent on whom she can always count.

9. Do you have an interesting story to share about the two different faiths in your family?

- We have never had anything bother us, but I have often heard from outsiders that the Pomaks were 'nasty people'. On the contrary, he and I have always supported each other. My takeaway from all of this is that it doesn't matter what you believe in. What matters is who you are on the inside as a person.

### **Asya and Asen, the village of Trigrad**

Asya was born in 1948 and Asen was born in 1946. They had been married since 1968. Asya had been having health issues for some time, but she was now smiling and calm. I quickly understood the reason why: it was because of Asen's love and care for her. He showed me the drugs and explained them to me. He told me about the numerous sheets of paper that he had filled out with her indicators and the therapies that the doctors had prescribed for her, and told me about the current state of her health. They went through this together, as they had gone through all the difficulties in their lives right from the very start.

Smiling, Asya began telling me about the past when she used to meet up with several girls to construct their clothes, and do some weaving and knitting. The girls were left alone in the room, without the presence of an elderly woman. Asya thought that this was done on purpose, and that the mothers also knew about how the boys would enter through the windows or through the openings in the ceiling to see the girls. Not that anything really happened because morals were different back then. The youngsters played games, mostly a game with beans and four wooden sticks which resembled a bit what we now call "Ludo."

The group of people hung out until right after midnight, and then traditionally cooked polenta to feed each other. Asya and Asen "dated" for five years: they went to the movies, to parties etc. Asya remembered the bad big dog they had, and that used to lie outside the front door. Asya and Asen laughed and told me about an instance when her father got really angry: one afternoon, around five o'clock, her father saw the two talking, and when asked what they were doing, Asen courageously replied, "We are making love", but he had not even kissed

her.

I observed their interaction in this moment: their gestures, glances, how they finished each other's sentences, were all proof that the two had married for love. Asya only regretted that she had not continued her studies past the eighth grade, like all her peers at that time. However, Asen helped her in this instance as well. He had failed to convince her to enroll in the High School of Economics in Smolyan because they also had children, but he entrusted her with part of his accounting work while he was working for the local cooperative farm. She was an infallible and valuable assistant, and it also affected her self-esteem.

Flattered and smiling timidly, Asya changed the subject and started telling me about their family stories.

The first one was about her mother. She was from the village of Mugla. She got married in Trigrad, but her husband soon died. Her brothers came to take her back home to Mugla. Her husband's parents did not allow that and married her off to her husband's 16-year-old brother. She gave birth to five children, one of whom was Asya herself. Her mother often repeated a piece of advice: "He can be disabled, but please don't get married to a man in another village!"

One of her sisters was married at the age of sixteen. When the people sent by the groom came to persuade her, they brought gifts and a treat. She then found "magic" in the cheese: threads and a note with Arabic letters... and then her cousin had to "cast a bullet" to dispell the magic. The groom and the girl went to Plovdiv to get a civil marriage, and he raped her in the hotel. It didn't work out between the two of them. They broke up and he married someone else, while she "got herself a bachelor 'on eggs' ", which was another way to describe a groom who would come and live with the bride's parents in her house.

We changed the subject and spoke about religion. Both were unanimous, "God is one. What is important is to believe, but it is your business what faith you practice. To be a great human: that's the common word!" And, without me stirring the conversation in that direction, they started speaking about the komshuluk and about a man named Hamid who knew both the Quran and the Bible. They talked at length and with excitement about two of the neighboring families, Christians. They talked about how they helped each other, did favors for each other, exchanged festive dishes during the festive days for both religions. They confirmed what we all already know: your neighbor is closer to you than a relative because in case of need, you go to him first, and for better or for worse, he is the first one to respond.

I tried asking them about mixed marriages in the village. They briefly told me about two or three cases. Asya was a child when the most attractive girl from the village ran away to Plovdiv

with the forest inspector. He was a Christian, and his parents did not want to accept her into the family for a long time.

Asya had a classmate who had two daughters, one of whom had gotten married to a Christian in Burgas. But the little youngest sister hid the fact that she was a Muslim, and when her husband's parents, Christians from Plovdiv, found out about it, they kicked them out. The two returned to Trigrad, and then left and lived in Sofia.

The youngest son of some of Asya and Asen's relatives married a Christian woman from Varna who was older than him and had children. The two of them welcomed another child. They got a divorce after a while. He went abroad and got married in France to another Christian woman who had children, too.

Again, Asya and Asen summarized that religion was not the most important thing, and that no matter how angry the parents of the groom or the bride were, love and understanding are the things that keep people together...

### **R. G. from Smolyan**

R. D. was born in 1966. The story she told me started from the time when she was a Junior in the High School of Economics in the city of Smolyan. R. was originally from the village of Mihalkovo, so she lived with her aunt while studying in the city. She followed a strict regimen and her curfew was early, but she hung out with girlfriends after school. On one such day, her friend and she went to the "Sokolitsa" tavern which was a popular place at the time. After a while, they found themselves at a table with two young men. One left an impression on R. with his blue eyes. As she was describing them, she was looking around for a blue, a deep blue, with which to compare them, and her face started glowing in a specific way. She admitted that it was "love at first sight" for her. They had fun, and he told stories that portrayed him as a "bad boy" which made him even more charming to the girl. In 1983 there was no technology facilitating the communication between young people, so S. waited for her after class to hang out together. They also went to the student dances in the Youth Center, all the while respecting her curfew hour. He easily fit into her circle of friends. Her classmates liked him too. He also had a car. R. called him a "scammer"... In the meantime, her aunt "learned, researched and reported" to R.'s parents about her fling. When R. went to Mihalkovo during Spring break, her mother started a



serious conversation that turned into an argument. Her parents did not agree for their daughter to have a relationship with a man who was eight years older than her, on top of that a Muslim man from the village of Kutela, also divorced with one child.

They threatened to stop her from going to school. And the end of the school year and prom were approaching. In spite of everything, after many promises, R. returned to school. Her aunt started controlling her more.

Preparations for prom began. One day R. and her mother went to Plovdiv to buy a dress. They returned to Mihalkovo by bus. "And who do you think was standing by the bridge near the house? He was." Her mother invited him to their house. She did so not so much because she wanted to invite him, but because she couldn't let people around them listen to their arguments and find out what was going on with her daughter. R. was not sure she remembered well what they spoke about or arranged and promised because she was too excited about whatever was happening, but she remembered that they agreed that she should finish high school and then think about other things. Until her graduation, things continued as per usual: she lived under the rules set out by her aunt, and her and S. saw each other after class and spent the evenings together until her curfew hour came.

The school year was over. R. applied to be a nurse in Plovdiv, but she was not accepted. She did not want to return to Mihalkovo, so she found a job in Smolyan. The parents of both youngsters tried to separate them. After an argument with her aunt, R. "took her shoes and slammed the door." This argument was more or less staged, because S. was waiting for her outside with the car and took her to his house. The aunt called R.'s parents, and they came in the morning with the Moskvich (a car brand) from Mihalkovo. "Mom came to pick me up, supposedly, but she was wearing a whole new set of clothes, with the tags on" R. laughed while remembering this. She actually didn't stay at S.'s house, but rented an apartment. Having calmed down, their parents insisted that the young adults get together and get a civil marriage. In October she left her apartment and moved to S.'s house. In November she got pregnant, and in April they got a a civil marriage.

During the first year of their marriage, the conflict between Christianity and Islam began. Their son was born prematurely, in the eighth month of pregnancy, and had to stay in the neonatology department of the hospital for two and a half months. After the baby was sent home, they had a big argument about which customs would be observed upon the welcoming of the newborn's guests. They argued whether they should have a traditional Muslim menu, with guests sitting on the floor and eating from homemade woven towels, or abide by

Christian traditions and eat at the table. There was another significant difference: according to the Christian tradition, a specific group of people is invited to the event, and they spend hours together, praying for the health of the baby and the parents; the Muhammadan tradition, on the other hand, requires that all relatives, neighbors and friends from the neighborhood and village of the baby's parents' pass through the tables, that they bless the baby and that they be fed. The two grandmothers got together and decided to divide the guests according to religion, with the two floors representing each, which meant that each side had to prepare and welcome its guests according to its traditions. That is exactly what they did. With a slightly sad sense of humor, R. spoke about how the two grandmothers grumbled and passed each other in the kitchen while the preparations were going on.

Almost four years later, when they had a daughter, all guests were welcomed together "at the table because [they] didn't want to embarrass [themselves]".

What had changed? For their first Christmas together in their new home, R. gathered his entire family: his parents and his sister's family. She decorated the house and the Christmas tree, cooked traditional dishes and prepared lucky charms and gifts. And so, for every single holiday, R. gathered everyone in her house, cleaned, served people and presented the Christian traditions, but also respected the Muslim holidays of the others.

A few years later, she herself decided and organized the baptism of her children. Her son was already 7 years old, and her daughter was about 3-4 years old. Only their grandmother, her mother, was present.

Her conflicts with her now ex-husband had nothing to do with the different religions practiced by the two or with the baptism of their children. Except for the first unfortunate reception of guests, R. did not believe that the two religions were at the root of any of the issues in her family. Her marriage lasted thirty years.

### **I.S. and V.I. , who have a joint business in the city of Devin**

I. S. was born in 1965. 38 years ago she got married to her husband O.S., with whom I also managed to talk albeit only for a little while. Her family was originally from the neighborhood of Mahmutitsa in the village of Shiroka Laka, but they moved to the town of Devin in 1917.

V.I.'s family was also from Shiroka Laka, and they moved to Devin before 1960.

The destinies of the two women had been interconnected since kindergarten. They studied together in middle school and then in high school. There, the two girl friends met two boy friends, O.S. and I.I. During the tenth and eleventh grades the two couples were "dating" and frequently went together to the city's pastry shop "for baklava and boza". I. shared that her mother was against O. at first, but she gradually got to know him and started liking him. His mother was also skeptical at first. The two loved each other and fought for their relationship.

That's probably why on November 28th, the day of their wedding, one could experience all the seasons: it was sunny in the morning, raining heavily in the evening, and snowing before midnight. After that there were big life changes: they built a house, had a baby... I. was an good housewife.

She knew, respected and celebrated all Christian holidays with the appropriate rituals and dishes. Her and her husband's families gathered together.

The two friends decided to name their children. Shortly before the baptism, V.'s mother-in-law interjected and said, "Why don't you also baptize I. when you baptize the children?" He wasn't quite sure, although he had mentioned it sometimes. One year they were on vacation in Veliko Tarnovo. They visited the Kilifarev monastery, a wonderful place. Impressed and probably provoked by something inside of himself, I. decided that he would like to accept Christianity in this monastery. They asked if it was possible, and asked when and what they should do and bring. His wife was ready to become his godmother as well, but it turned out that she herself was not baptized. She asked her mother, who justified this occurrence with the era in which she was born and grew up. The nun from the monastery, with whom they arranged the baptism, made two phone calls and secured two godparents, whom she called "nice, charismatic people", and that's exactly what they turned out to be. The man had graduated in theology, but did not practice as a clergyman. They performed the ritual, organized a treat in the courtyard of the monastery, and the two natives of the Rhodope region invited their godfathers to visit Devin because they really liked each other and quickly became friends.

O. had also promised that he would be baptized, but he was putting it off. One evening his wife and he had guests. They had a good time, and then the guests left. Suddenly O.'s hand got numb, so he got worried and called a friend. His friend told him that O. might have made a promise that he hadn't yet fulfilled. O. remembered his promise to get baptized. They quickly organized everything together with I.'s sister's family in Sofia. Her sister's husband became O.'s godfather. This had happened more than twenty years ago, a few years before the story of I.'s baptism in the Kilifarev monastery.

The godparents of I. and V. came from somewhere around Veliko Tarnovo to visit Devin. They met I. and O., and while they were discussing as friends various topics, including the godmothers, it occurred to I. and O. to get married in the church. In Athos. And they had to choose between two dates: November 28th, the day of their civil wedding, or March 25th, Annunciation Day. The priest in Athos rejected both dates because they coincided with the Christmas and Easter fasts, respectively. The wedding was being postponed for thirteen years. But the friendship with the godfathers from Tarnovsko continued. In 2021, the godfather who had a degree in theology called and said that on that year the fast was not strict from November 21st to November 28th and that the two could get married. R. was ready to perform the ritual if the priest in Devin refused. The same day, the priest from Devin father passed by the workplace of the two girl friends and confirmed that he would do it. They arranged the wedding. Quite naturally, I. and O. invited their closest friends, V. and I., as maid of honour and best man, respectively.

Here again things began to fall into place as if by miracle. On November 26th I., the husband of V., turned 60 years old, and on November 28th he had to be at work. Then I. said to her husband O., "I will pray and you will see that everything will be alright." In the meantime, V. and I. asked to be officially invited as maid of honour and best man, and the two families organized a "dinner and drinking party". At some point, V. and I. said that in fact a colleague of I. had asked for their shifts to be switched, so both V. and I. were free for the day of the wedding on November 28th. V. was convinced that her prayers were heard. She told me with overt excitement about yet another omen during the wedding: there was no electricity in the church that day, so many candles were lit. But the strangest thing happened right before the ritual: sunlight entered the church and illuminated the temple in a very mystical way. And before that, as she was entering the church, I. saw two birds on the cross on the tip of the church. For her this was a sign that her deceased parents were present and were blessing the spiritual union between her and O.

### **Gergana Georgieva from the town of Devin**

Gergana was born on May 6th, 1994. "I came with my name," she laughed.

Gergana's parents practiced different religions. Her father was from the village of Shiroka

Laka and was a Christian, whereas her mother was from the village of Beden and came from a family that practiced Islam.

Her mother did not change her religion, and her parents did not have a church wedding, but they baptized Gergana when she was two years old.

Gergana grew up learning about both religions. The family members celebrated both Christian and Muslim holidays with all of the necessary rituals, while respecting all traditions. Her grandmother on her mom's side even said the mandatory five prayers a day.

Her partner grew up in a family with a mixed religious background. His mother was a Christian. His father was from a Muslim family, but was baptized after their civil marriage, and a little later they had a church wedding. The young father knew the rituals of both religions which existed equally in the new family, for their respective families got together and celebrated all holidays together.

When their son Ognyan was born, they had a "sacrificial" feast with meat sanctified according to the Christian custom, and "prayers" said according to the Muslim custom. They boiled beans in large pots and distributed them to the whole neighborhood.

Gergana says that they planned for the baptism to be on the same day as the first birthday, which was already what most people did, but the priest from Devin scared her. Gergana wasn't happy with this type of pressure because according to her, spiritual leaders had to provide guidance and help with advice, and no religion should force its way into the hearts of people by means of coercion and fear. The same priest demanded from the young mother that both her and her child participate weekly in the rite of Communion. She accepted the Christian religion in her heart, but needed more freedom in this regard and, therefore, preferred to go pray in a small chapel near the village of Stoikite.

The little Ognyan was baptized on the forty-seventh day after his birth. His grandfather Ognyan became his godfather.

### **Emel Balakchi and Mehmed Alev, the village of Ustina**

Emel is the author and creator of Literature, Theater and Folklore. The first part, "The literature of Turks in Bulgaria", includes an article titled "The responsibility to national belonging and identity" by S. Alagoyoz, who wonderfully presented her:

"Who is Emel Balakchi?"

She was born in "the village of Stomanovo - Chelikli, which has been placed above the Vacha river for the past 134 years". Those childhood years, spent by the gas lamp during the long winter evenings when her sister read her novels, fairy tales and poetry and she was discovering a new world full of knowledge, could not be forgotten. The thing is that this knowledge later inspired her love for learning and for discovering truths about the world.

Emel learned about the truths of the world by getting familiar with three of the world's leading religions which shaped her as critically thinking, sincere and responsible person. She, however, sees these qualities of hers as flaws in her character.

"Three flames in the palm of a hand" is her first book of poems, which came out in 2005... The poet-mother sends messages and instructions to her three children. These are expressed through the allegories and messages urging them not to touch the beautiful flowers because they have thorns, to wash the dust away with drops of dew, and to look for the way to the truth in the people who had suffered in life.

... The monograph "The village above Vacha" was published in 2008. Emel Balakchi lures us in with her research in this book, which becomes important to us. Nikola Churalski, a local historian and journalist, member of the Association of Local Historians and of The Club of The Middle Ranges of The Rhodopes called "Bashtino Ognishte", called the book a valuable gift for the study of local history.

The writer and researcher Emel Balakchi introduces us to the Turkish minority in the middle ranges of the Rhodopes, a minority which was oppressed and silenced, and whose culture was intentionally sought to be wiped out during the totalitarian regime.

... She also talks about the richness of the speech in rural areas. The author includes the Turkish proverbs, idioms, phrases, tongue twisters, riddles, curses, nicknames, insults, etc. used in the village.

One of the topics in the book is children's games, including the games called Nal Konmak, Chelik, Pirke, Chorchuk, Taraniga, Tahta Tepmek, Kutu, Tikla, Urgan and Dyukkyan, and the relevant explanations about each of them. Thus the author passes on a cultural legacy from the past.

The author does not want for the days of the Revival Process to come back because they infringed on people's personal freedom and their right to choose the most intimate aspects of their lives: their name, their religion and their ethnicity. "The Revival Process" had a 130-year old history, she says, pointing out that it started during the Balkan War and still continues nowadays.

She says that neither the Turks, nor the Pomaks or the Gypsies could become Bulgarians, so it is better to think about how these ethnic groups could become good citizens of the country.

... The change of names in 1972, as the author notes, first started in her native village, and this fact has also been reflected by the historian Prof. Dr. Evgenia Ivanova.

After the change of names, the destruction of the mosque, of tombstones and of other ethnic identifiers of the Turkish population began in the village.

Emel Balakchi gives examples with the stories of those who had to suffer these consequences in her village. She also sheds light on the destructive role of politics on the symbiotic and wholesome relationship between ethnic minorities, which had existed for centuries. ... Together with her husband, Mehmed Alev, they have been collecting, researching and popularizing Turkish culture for years. They have been writing about Turkish literature, folklore, customs, legends, historical events, ancient holidays, mausoleums and mosques in their magazine on culture called "ALEV". What brings joy to both artists is their tirelessness and complementarity." Actually, Emel published a collection of poems before she met Mehmed. He noticed and encouraged her talent. To date, Emel Balakchi has published three books of short stories, a novel in three volumes which she co-authored with her mother Fatma Odzhak-Balakchi, four historical monographs about different local settlements and five books with research materials on folklore, literature, theater and local languages. Three of these books are co-authored with her husband, Mehmed. Together they published the last forty-five issues of the magazine "ALEV" ("fire" in Turkish) which is bilingual: in Bulgarian and Turkish.

Mehmed himself has thirteen published books, only two of which were published in Turkey. He was a teacher for fifteen years, and was in the meantime publishing the magazine "Turkish Culture in the Balkans", a forum of Balgloch, a society of expatriates. An incredible storyteller and essayist, he graduated with a degree in Oriental Studies and Bulgarian Language from The University of Sofia "Kliment Ohridski".

He has been writing since he was fourteen. He was a correspondent for numerous Bulgarian newspapers and magazines, and he worked as a translator before he left for Turkey as part of the emigration wave in 1989.

In the third part of their collective book, which is entitled "Folklore: Research, customs, legends", one can also find Emel's article "The Balkans: the colourfullness of ethnicities", which relates to the present study.

"The Balkans, like a wheat field which has had its grains scattered, is a peninsula dotted mostly with villages. This essential aspect is perhaps one of its characteristic features. Some

settlements are made up 4-5 houses which form a neighborhood, while settlements are downright villages with 50-60 family clans. Next to them you can find, also characteristic of the Balkan peninsula, small plowed pieces of land which feed the locals.

If you walk around these villages, you will come across various dialects and languages, folklores and other identifiers.

You can encounter Turks, Bulgarians, Greeks, Gypsies, Serbs, Bosniaks, Pomaks, Albanians, Macedonians, Romanians and many more communities which see themselves as distinct from others.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the Balkans are these differences. The Lord seems to have "sprinkled" these lands with the most colorful bouquet of people. This can draw the attention not only of local, but also of world scientists.

... I was born in the Rhodopes. I am the granddaughter of a Pomak and Turk. I grew up between two languages, two cultural identities, and my life to this day "takes advantage" of this reality which enriches its essences. Sometimes the rituals and customs were identical, sometimes they were combined, and sometimes they were different, but they all marked my growth and formation as an individual with a personality. In this reality, the presence of Bulgarians, Gypsies, Russians, Greeks, etc. contributed to the enrichment of my cultural identity." In this article, Emel Balakchi describes the costumes of the Turkish woman Fatme and of the Pomak woman Fatma. She compares the customs associated with the rituals and celebrations surrounding the birth of a baby. She talks with fascination about the dishes and the meals around the table

And she presents the similar tales about Yedzhuch/Dzicho, and Medzuch/Medzhicho.

The article ends like this:

"Any outside intervention in the life of ethnic groups leads to the loss of identity and cultural heritage accumulated over centuries. The greatest loss for humanity is the destruction of the spirituality of small ethnic groups. Each nation assimilates these ethnic groups into the country they live in. The sole mission of our modern culture should be to preserve the cultures of minorities by providing opportunities for their authentic preservation without the interference and appropriation of others."

I met with Emel and Mehmed in their home in the village of Ustina, between Krichim and Perushtitsa. They had bought a house with a yard there. They had chosen to settle down there after juggling between different options, among which Kardzhali and Smolyan, and changing their mind several times. They had the opportunity to live in Istanbul, but they chose Bulgaria.



They justified their choice to me with simple arguments: they wanted to have a house with a yard and enough space to welcome their children and grandchildren, which had to be close to the Rhodopes, but also close to a big city, in this case to Plovdiv, in order to have the desired peace of mind to work on the things which they loved to do.

We talked for a long time about things from the lives of Bulgarians, about religion and about books. She showed me some old photos. She told me that her blood was mixed with the blood of Turks, Yuruks, Pomaks, Tatars and Arabs. She spoke fondly of her parents who, she said, were intelligent and progressive people. Emel herself graduated from the Teacher's Institute in Stara Zagora with a major in Preschool Education. As a teacher she used to put up theater performances with the young children. She participated in the Children's Dance Ensemble in Smolyan and in the teachers' choir in the community center in the neighborhood of Raykovo. She had inherited her musical talent from her parents. Her father played the mandolin, and her mother and he were part of the choir and orchestra of the village of Stomanovo. Emel's interest in folklore was also inherited from them, but she was more interested in its theoretical and scientific aspects.

While talking, Emel had opened her chest filled with her books and shared with me her most intimate thoughts: the thoughts that haunted her and which she wanted to share with people, because all three of us realized the power of writing.

I didn't want for this meeting to end. Emel and Mehmed sent me off with a bag of walnuts from their garden and three books: Emel's poetry, Mehmed's diary as an emigrant, and their book of research articles on literature, theater and folklore.

### **Vera Hadzhiyska - a Bulgarian photographer and multidisciplinary artist based in England.**

My last "meeting" was not in person. In the State Archives of Smolyan, I was shown an album of Vera Hadzhiyska, a young artist whom they had assisted in her research for her art project "Named After Flowers". I tried to contact her via the Internet, but I did not succeed, and I am now taking the liberty of publishing two texts. One of them was published by her on the web, and the other is an excerpt from her essay in the aforementioned album released as part of the project.

"Hello! My name is Vera Hadzhiyska and I am a Bulgarian photographer and

multidisciplinary artist based in England.

“Named After Flowers” is a long-term project that investigates the oppression and forced name-changing of Muslims in Bulgaria. Through my work, I seek to understand how these historical events have influenced the cultural, religious and national identity of people and of their descendants.

My motivation to work on this topic comes from a very diverse place.

My relatives are Pomaks from the Rhodope Mountains. They come from Chamla, Mugla and Trigrad, but at the moment they are scattered all over Bulgaria and the world. Some of my relatives emigrated to Turkey in the 1960's. Another part of my family was forcibly evicted and displaced from the region near Veliko Tarnovo in northern Bulgaria. My grandfather's father was sent to the concentration camp in Belene where he died. That's how colorful and filled with heavy memories my family's history is.

However, I learned about all of this for the first time a few years ago. In 2017, while interviewing my grandparents about our family history, they casually mentioned their “old names”. This is how I first learned about these forced name changes. That's how my interest in the topic was born.

Between 2017 and 2019, I created the first part of the project “Named After Flowers”, which is a combination of self-portraits, video and audio installations, archival documents and other elements inspired by stories and memories of relatives. In this part of the project I used myself as a model. The project itself is also an attempt to make sense of my personal identity and inherited trauma, which was hid from me for many years.

As I listened to my family's stories, I wondered what other Muslim families had experienced. These events and policies affected a large part of the Bulgarian population, but each person perceived and reacted to their trauma in a different way.

I am interested in how the process of forced name-changing Muslims had to go through has affected the identity of people (both people who experienced the name changes personally, and their descendants). Through this project, I want to learn about how these events have influenced the passing down of religious customs and traditions, as well as memories from the older to the younger generations, and how this has affected people's religious affiliation and self-awareness.

In September 2021 (after a 2-year break due to the pandemic) I had the opportunity to return to Bulgaria to travel and meet people from the Muslim community. This post (at the end of the webpage) presents photos from my trip in September, created with the help of Svetlana

Bahchevanova during a mentoring program organized by the VID Photography Foundation. Meeting and getting to know new people from the Muslim community, as well as their stories motivate me to continue working on this project. They inspire me to continue collecting, preserving and sharing the lived stories of generations of Muslims in Bulgaria.

In November of 2021 I received funding from The Arts Council of England for 'The Development of Creative Practice' for a project which aimed to develop a socially engaged creative practice with a focus on the Muslim population. This funding will help me travel around Bulgaria in 2022 and meet more people from the Muslim community affected by the forced name changes and oppression of the so-called "Revival Process".

Here is the excerpt from the essay in the album released as part of the project:

"When I decided to focus my project on the name changes of Muslim Bulgarians, my grandmother expressed concern for my safety. I noticed the same fear in other relatives which often resulted in a reluctance to talk about their past experiences and their name changes. Some agreed to share their stories only after I had assured them that they would remain anonymous. The fear from the government, which was caused by the way they were mistreated and oppressed in the past, remains even though thirty years have passed since the fall of the regime responsible for it. This demonstrates that the memories of the past, which have been tucked away for a long time, still cause anxiety and worry in Muslim Bulgarians.

This fear is covered by silence. It creates cracks in the family history. It is a barrier that prevents the passing down of information and memories between generations. Over time, this can lead to the loss of parts of family history and of the collective memory. I believe it is important for young people to ask questions about their past and heritage. If we don't ask these questions now, soon the only people who know the answers will be gone, and with them we will lose a valuable piece of history."

### **Anastas Staykov - painter**

I will end with the story of another artist and a painting. There is really a little bit of everything in this story: it includes the two religions, the political interference, the words of an ordinary but wise woman about the love between young people...

I am talking about Anastas Staykov, who was born on May 21st, 1905 in Smolyan. In

1929, he graduated from the National Academy of Arts in Sofia, and was taught by Prof. Stefan Badzhov. Staykov was often referred to as the first Rhodope painter with an academic education. Later, Anastas specialized in the "Academy Julien" in Paris, France. Staykov lived and worked in Plovdiv his whole life. There he was a member of The Society of South-Bulgarian Artists. In 1937 he organized his first exhibition in Sofia. He had over 20 solo exhibitions and participated in numerous national and regional expositions. He was a member of The Association of Bulgarian Artists. He became an honorary citizen of his hometown Smolyan. His works are now owned by many galleries and private collectors in the country and abroad.

He was the recipient of a number of awards, including the "Order of St. St. Cyril and Methodius" (1985).

In 1958, his painting called "A Maiden Says Farewell to Her Family" literally caused a political scandal, which was clumsily disguised as a creative disagreement. Currently this painting is stored in the City Art Gallery of the city of Smolyan, but over the years it passed through the hands of the district's People's Council, the local museum and the Teachers' Institute, after which it was rolled up and left in various warehouses, which is why it ended up in a horrible condition. During his lifetime the author, who gave birth to three subsequent generations of artists, took it away with him. His daughter Maria Staykova donated it to the gallery. It was restored thanks to a project sponsored by the Fund "13 Centuries of Bulgaria", was exhibited in one of the halls on the Night of the Museums in 2018.

In the State Archive of Smolyan I came across Staykov's memories on this matter. They were described in Fund No. 1528 with N<sup>o</sup>. 1, arch. unit 61. I publish it by summarizing.

"1958. We had a regional exhibition. It was organized in the exhibition hall on the main Street Vasil Kolarov. The jury allowed the painting to be exhibited. "A Maiden Says Farewell to Her Family", size 2.60 by 4.00 (but much larger with the special wide frame), was placed on the opposite wall."

"The book of impressions (which someone stole) was only filled with reviews of "A Maiden Says Farewell to Her Family", and they were all showing praise and delight."

"The evaluation began. Two buses with artists, including the board of trustees of the Association, came from Sofia... And inside there' s a tense atmosphere... The evaluation was interrupted... The discussion continued in the press."

"Foreigners wanted to buy the painting, but they didn't allow the painting to leave the country. They said it was of value to the nation. And I was puzzled. I could not fathom how its artistic value could have been denied, but at the same time it was said to be a

national treasure. The district's People's Council in Smolyan bought it. They exhibited it in the Ethnographic Museum (now called the Museum of History). During one rearrangement of the exposition, the painting was moved to the Teachers' Institute in Smolyan. Due to the lack of an appropriate placement, they hung it in the corridor. Finally, it was rolled up, tucked away in the cellar, and it died."

"This constant denial and admiration of my art was beyond what I could endure. My creative, artistic and public life went silent."

"Many painful years have gone by. But the Rhodopes continue to live in me. They urged me again to paint them. And I am painting them."

"There are Muhammadan Bulgarians and Christian Bulgarians in the Rhodopes. They are all Bulgarians, but something was missing, something was failing. In the many years after the Liberation people were looking for a cure, a solution. I wanted to contribute to the unification of the two groups, too. After all, I was also from the Rhodopes. In 1950, the idea in my head ripened... The composition of the painting also became clear: the newlyweds would be coming out of the old house, happy, having outlived the prejudices... I researched, collected materials, bought costumes and drew studies, many studies. My indispensable role models were my wife Ralitsa, my son Petar and my daughter Maria. Choristers from Raikovski's self-made choir clothed in Rhodope wedding costumes [...] reenacted the presentation of the bride. It was in a mixed Christian and Muhammadan house above the Kaigal house, a little to the right.

And the interesting part is that the oldest woman in the family did not object to the “wedding”. She told Ralitsa,

*“They got me married when I was fourteen years old. I didn't love him. I gave birth to kids, and I worked; I gave birth to kids, and I worked. But he was still foreign to my heart. Whenever I was sad, I would go to the attic, open the hole/the skylight, and shout in the direction of the sky, shout until I felt better. Therefore, if they love each other, they should get married. Faith should not be a hindrance to them.”*





„A Maiden Says Farewell to Her Family“/ “Rhodope wedding“ (1958)  
painter: Atanas Staykov

## CONCLUSION

The work on this project started for me as a challenge. I graduated university with a major in social sciences and humanities, but I am not an expert on ethnography, folklore, dialectology... The other reason I felt enticed to conduct this research was because I was not born and raised in the Rhodopes, and the topic was not part of my family's collective memory, but it excited me because of my circle of friends and relatives. In the beginning I started by researching the methods I would use and clarifying the concepts I would be dealing with. I also came across the State Archives of Smolyan, where I quickly realized that my work would not simply be limited to collecting and systematizing information because I came head to head with an interest that surpassed mere professionalism.

And so my excitement grew because I realized that the most important part of my job would be to communicate with different people. This is what actually happened: many people welcomed me to their homes and shared their intimate stories and thoughts. We laid the foundations of some interesting relationships.

Although I don't have the courage to generalize, I would like to present some conclusions that I drew as a result of the research. After having specified the used methods, I would like to explicitly say and quote the experts that such a study, limited in terms of the amount of time spent on the research, the region covered and the number of interviewees, cannot lead to objective and well-defined lessons and conclusions.

The two topics of the study quite naturally intertwined and inevitably tackled some sensitive topics for some of my interviewees about the change of religion and even about the change of names. These phenomena are a function of the level of education and the distance of the given person from their birthplace and roots. The influence of state or non-governmental entities was not mentioned. The personal stories, nonetheless, were about the Christian rituals and the Christian holidays, which were more entertaining. Some stories also mentioned the presence of certain omens which tipped the scale in favor of choosing one religion over the other. I heard a story about a Muslim artist who was supposed to paint a Christian temple, but was still "not allowed to."

I realized that everyone quite expectedly and logically perceived the issue and my questions through their own worldview and through their own feelings.

I spoke with a woman who had personally participated as an educator in the courses organized during the so-called "Cultural Revolution". She remembered fondly the atmosphere



of trust between the students and the teachers. Both her husband and she were activists in the Youth Communist Movement, but were the type of idealists who genuinely worked for a better future for all. The husband's family was Muslim, but as they later discovered, his mother had also prepared an icon for her own funeral... This woman, surprisingly to me, refused to participate in my research with the argument that these topics were no longer interesting and that these occasions were not exceptions. She said that it was not even a matter of a lack of interest or neglect, but that people had been living together for a long, long time and weren't paying attention to the faith, name, ethnicity, skin color or other intangible characteristics of others. She said the quality of communication and the joint tackling of the challenges in their lives were more important.

I also detected her reluctance to relive the politicization of human choice, the manipulation of free choice and the division created based purely on external to our human nature factors.

I also got to learn about some emotional and painful personal stories that my interviewees refused to have published, but shared with me in informal conversations.

I want to respond to their trust by sharing a very personal reason for undertaking this study. There was a brief period of time when some very extreme nationalist statements appeared and circulated on the Internet. A close acquaintance of mine from a Muslim family shared that she was worried about whether her Christian grandchildren and she would end up on two opposing sides... I reassured her. And at home I had a serious conversation with my teenage son who had shared one of these posts. I reminded him of his one-week long stay at a friend's house in a village near Smolyan. They had visited the beautiful places in the area, cooked homemade liutenitsa and played together. My son had met a lot of his relatives and friends there. His friend's family practiced Islam, and my son had told me that they also said the five daily prayers. Therefore, I simply asked him whether he would point a gun at his friend in the event of a conflict, and whether he realized that sometimes a serious crisis in society could start from such a trivial at first glance post share of far-right nationalist content. He understood, cried and removed the post. In the conversation that followed he realized how many more of his friends he would lose if he blindly and recklessly repeated other people's words.

Therefore, instead of a final message, I would like to repeat again the words that I heard many times during the conversations with the people I met in this part of the Rhodopes: "unrelated sister/girl friend", "unrelated brother/guy friend", "komshuluk", and "God is one but has different names. What's important is what kind of person each of us is!





## THE ROMA IN BULGARIA

researcher: Alexandra Tsankova



## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

This research aims to gather data about and analyze marriage, arranged marriages and nuclear families in the Balkan context among the Roma communities in Bulgaria. It focuses on the gender roles and norms from the past until today and how they affect Roma youth in the country. The study gives information about the traditions surrounding Roma weddings in Bulgaria, their cultural values, and how they influence present-day early marriages between representatives of this ethnic group in the country.

The collected information presents customs from the past, some of which have survived to this day and play an important role in shaping the attitudes of a large part of the Roma communities in Bulgaria. For the traditional Roma family, marriage continues to be the most important step in recognizing the individual as part of the community.

The questions that the current research aims to answer are the following:

- What are the cultural traditions and customs related to the wedding ritual among the Roma communities in Bulgaria?
- What is the significance of the wedding union in the life of the community?
- What is the reason for early marriage?
- What does it mean to be bound for life to someone you almost don't know?
- What is the role of parents in this choice?
- What is the community's role in this choice?
- Where are women placed in this context?

For the purpose of the research, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of the Roma communities and experts working in the field for decades. The participants in the study are people living in the following Bulgarian regions: Sofia (Shopski region), Stara Zagora, Yambol, Dryanovo, and Pazardzhik.

The research reliably conveys the expressed opinions of the interviewees, aiming to preserve the authenticity of their statements, emotions and attitudes, uniting their different points of view on the questions asked.

Firstly, the history of the Roma in Bulgaria is briefly presented - from the first recorded settlers on the country's territory onwards. It draws attention to the various groups and subgroups into which the Roma community in Bulgaria is divided. This is of key importance for the objectivity of the researched topic, since different representatives of the Roma group in the country follow different patterns of behavior and respect different customs and traditions.

Differences in religion, traditionally practiced crafts, and the territory they inhabit play a significant role in shaping their lives and cultural development.

The mass settlement of Roma in Bulgaria began in the 13th and 14th centuries, when they arrived in this region under the names "chingene" and "kibti". After the second half of the 14th century, the accounts of the Roma population settling in different parts of Europe increase in number.

Some of the Roma settled permanently on the Balkans and in particular in Bulgaria, while others remained leading a more nomadic life. This is where the even greater variety of customs and cultural specifics of this ethnic group originate.

The first Roma neighborhoods (mahali) appeared in Bulgaria during the 18th century (the so-called Bulgarian Renaissance period). At the moment, all inhabited areas in Bulgaria have representatives of the Roma ethnic group, and today all Roma lead a sedentary lifestyle. Those who were still leading a nomadic way of life had to permanently settle as a result of a 1956 law, which obliged the citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria to have a residence registration at a certain address.

Depending on their religion, the Roma living in the country are divided into Dasikane Roma (Christian Roma), and Xoraxane Roma (Muslim Roma). The main metagroup communities in the country, as classified by the local researchers, are three - Yerlii, Kaldarashi and Rudari.

In 1956, the Roma numbered 194,000; in 1959—214,167; in 1976 —373,200; in 1989 the authorities counted 576,927 Roma, but noted that more than half preferred to declare belonging to the Turkish ethnicity. In the 2001 census of the Bulgarian population 370,908 citizens identified themselves as Roma, and according to data from the last census conducted in 2021, their

number decreased to 266,720 people.

## **TYPES OF ROMA**

The Roma should not be treated as a homogenous entity, because they are not. Roma groups are different in religion - Orthodox Christians, neo-Christians - Protestants, Muslims. The language of the various Roma groups is also different. For example, the Roma from North-West Bulgaria - the so-called cucumani (tsutsumani) speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue. Christian Roma often speak Romani, and Millet Roma speak Turkish. Some speak an old Wallachian dialect.

Their traditional crafts are also very varied. The Roma, despite the names by which they are called, use their own names to show their group affiliation. Groups should not be confused with clans or families, because they can number anywhere from a few thousand to over a million people.

The three main groups found in Bulgaria are:

- Kaldarashi - the most numerous group, traditional blacksmiths, from the Balkans, many of them migrated to central Europe and North America;
- Rudari - descendants of the groups that migrated from Wallachia, Moldova and Transylvania throughout Europe in the second half of the 19th century. In Bulgaria they are also called "Wallachian gypsies";
- Yerlii - a settled Roma population in southeastern Europe and Turkey.

According to the crafts they are masters of or the territory they inhabit, each of these groups is divided into subgroups. For example: Machvaya, Lovari, Churari, Sinti, Rudari/Ludari, Beashi (Bayashi), Luri, Xoraxane (Horahane), Bashaldé and Romungro.

There is also another theory according to which there are two main groups of Roma in Bulgaria, distinguished by the dialects they speak:

- Balkan Roma - with a significantly large Turkish vocabulary;
- Wallachian Roma - migrated from present-day Romania and have a strong influence of Romanian language in their dialects.

These two major groups include the following:

- Balkan Roma: Arlii, Yerlii, Yerlides, Sepetchii, Burgudjii, Kalaydzhii (tinkers), Drundari.
- Wallachian Roma: Servi (Servitka), Vlachuria, Patrinarya, tinkers, Vlachs, Dzambazi, Lahorya, Gurbeti, Chergari, Aurari (goldsmiths), Machvaya, Lovari, Dirzara, Mashara, Kalderashi, Rudari, Beyashi, Ursari (bear leaders), Lingurari and Gurvari.

## **THE ROMA FAMILY**

Looking at the cultural traditions and values, we can say that the first and most basic level of social organization of the Roma community is the family. It can be very large and include several generations.

For hundreds of years, family has been the center of Roma life, where the loyalty of its members is concentrated.

As far as the patriarchal family is concerned, the parents have the say regarding the future marriage of their children. Usually, the adults meet and come to an agreement among each other when they have decided it's time to marry their kids. The image and status of the boy's family is very important. Among the Roma, the boy's mother, or in other words the mother-in-law, mainly helps to raise her grandchildren. Respect for parents is of the highest importance.

Among the patriarchal Roma, family is the most essential element of social organization and everything revolves around it. Usually it includes at least three generations that live in the same home according to rules accepted by the clan and the community.

In this type of patriarchal structure, children are brought up selectively on the principle of gender; they accept the inherited ethno-cultural information, assimilate and maintain the ethnic specificity. The roles of men and women in the family are different and complement each other.

It is the woman who ensures order in the home and organizes the daily activities by taking care of the children and the elderly. She is brought up conservatively and passes down this tradition in her own household. Her specific concern is the education of the female offspring until the young girls are ready to enter into marriage.

The only way for a Roma woman from a patriarchal family to assert herself and prove herself is to do so through excelling in her marriage responsibilities. She should be a good wife and a good mother – preferably a mother of a boy. If the young couple cannot leave heirs, then the



woman is considered an unfulfilled member of the family, and she could be replaced.

Generally in our society (not just in the Roma community), an important fact is overlooked - namely that 1/3 of the causes of sterility are due to male infertility (even though the finger is always pointed at the woman). It is not widely known that having a boy or a girl depends entirely on the man's chromosomes (X, Y), and it is falsely believed that the woman is to blame if she cannot produce a boy (regardless of the fact that her chromosomes are X, X).

This pattern is not characteristic only for the Roma, but it continues to play a huge role in their communities to this day. Scientific information related to conception and the possible future gender of the baby is widely unknown to the public, regardless of their ethnicity.

"When I was a young bride, I was offered to drink herbs to get pregnant, they would take me to local healers and give me medicines from abroad in order to make it happen faster."

The man in the conservative Roma home, on the other hand, is considered the head of the family, the one who provides sustenance and is the protector of family's prestige in the community. This gives him the right to be the undisputed authority and make the most important decisions for the family. By birth, he also has more freedom and opportunities to develop personally and professionally.

"When I saw my girl, I liked her, we started writing to each other and then meeting in person. Her family did not allow our relationship at first, her mother even started beating her. Then her parents realized that we really love each other and agreed to meet me. Since then, they have accepted me, I can go to their home now. I asked for their daughter's hand, but her mother said she had to finish school first. So I'm waiting now.

My parents allow me to go to her because I'm a man and they don't forbid me anything," a Roma boy from the region of Stara Zagora.

The other important element of social organization is social control, which is applied comprehensively and further reinforces the supremacy of community structures over the individual. It is associated with a number of rules and prohibitions regarding what is good and evil, clean and unclean, right and wrong, permitted and forbidden.

Within the family, social control is by right exercised by the husband's father and mother. Bearers of this function outside the family, and especially in regards to breaking the rules during interaction with representatives of other family-lineage communities in the Kaldarashi community,

is the so-called “meshere”. The meshere is a kind of court, comprised of key members of the community who are seen to have authority. It weighs on matters related only to the internal life of the Kaldarashi, and it has no power outside of their community.

The role of Roma men and women in a traditional patriarchal family seems very conservative; usually the woman takes care of the household and the children, and the man is responsible for the protection of the family and for any work that involves physical strength. Usually both of them take care of the sustenance and provide for the family in some way.

Elders, and especially grandparents, are highly revered. They have more experience and young people turn to them for advice. The concept of the patriarchal Roma family includes the closest members living under the same roof, and ties with other relatives complete the extended family.

## **FAMILY WITHIN THE NOMADIC ROMA COMMUNITIES**

The nomadic Roma peoples often had additional structures within the group. The Wallachian Roma used to travel by horse and cart, which created a high degree of social organization.

The social organization of the Kaldarashi Roma provides a good example that is valid for other groups as well. In every country of the world, the Kaldarashi are divided by nations: Serbian, Moldovan, Hungarian, Greek, Russian and others.

The Kaldarashi who travel and work together form a group of several families, not necessarily belonging to the same clan. The name of the group is always derived from the name of the leader - the one who represents them to the local authorities.

Travelling nowadays should be seen more like a potential for mobility rather than a nomadic practice. Travel is important to nomads for several reasons: it creates social organization, allows for adaptability and flexibility, and enables the pursuit of various occupations. Moving from place to place allows different groups to coexist, to come together, and even for certain members of the groups to oppose and challenge each other or to intermarry.

Along with the social aspect, traveling also has an economic purpose. This is evident for various professions: street vendors who follow festivals and fairs, horse breeders at animal markets, agricultural workers during the active season for picking fruits, vegetables, etc.

## **CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS AMONG THE ROMA**

Traditions play an important role in preserving the Roma identity over the centuries and are essential in shaping their way of life.

Traditions called “Roma laws” are passed down from generation to generation from parents to children. These Roma traditions create the Roma identity. The place where these traditions operate in full force is inside the Roma family and family life. For Roma, the basic social units are family and clan. Traditions cover every aspect of life - birth, death, union or conflict, family life, and so on.

Family traditions still form the core of Roma culture among more conservative and those living in more marginalized communities. Even if the Roma no longer live according to the “traditional” values and way of life, these traditions still influence their day-to-day experience in some way.

Marriage unions are a foundational element in the social organization and their rules vary among different Roma groups. For the Kaldarashi and the Lovari, for example, marriage is the result of long negotiations between the families. For others, marriage often begins with a brief elopement of the young, who return and beg their parents for forgiveness and approval of their choice in a spouse. For others still, the bride sometimes runs away or is stolen just before marriage, even though there has been an agreement between hers and another boy’s family.

Marriage between members of different Roma groups is possible, but this can be regarded as either a positive or a negative event by their communities depending on the circumstances.

## **WEDDING TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS**

### **ENGAGEMENT**

According to the tradition, the boy’s parents come to ask for the girl at her home. In some cases, today’s boys decide they like a certain girl and run away with her. After they return, they must marry in order to preserve the girl’s honor. But even in these cases her family needs to consider whether she has connected to the right people. In general, “good” and “right” would mean that the boy’s family is agreeable, kind, and not rude or arrogant.

“When the young people decide to marry, the boy's parents go to the girl's parents to ask for her hand. And they ask her as well:

- Do you love my boy?
- I love him.
- Do you want him?
- I want him.

And then they set a date for the engagement," a Roma man from Strelcha, Pazardzhik region.

One of the traditional forms of marriage among the Roma includes engagement before the actual wedding. In this case, there is payment but it is more symbolic (similar to filling the bride's shoe with money before she leaves her home - a modern-day wedding ritual of all ethnic groups in Bulgaria). However, an important "sign" is the gift for the girl from the boy's family (a ring, bracelet and earrings). In this type of marriage, the parents still agree on the terms beforehand - when the young people would get married, where they would live, what would the dowry amount to. Like other traditional types of marriage, this one also carries the risk of being forced – especially for the girl - and it has a negative impact on the early age of first marriage.

The engagement always includes a feast with food and beverages and entertainment for the whole family, which can last for several days. The parents agree on who covers the expenses.

## **HENNA**

Another custom that precedes the wedding day is that of painting the bride with henna. It is best preserved among the Muslim Romani and it is done in a narrow circle of relatives in the bride's home. The ritual begins precisely at midnight. The bride's fingers, palms, and toes are dyed with henna - traditionally by a virgin girl (it is usually done by children).

The rite is accompanied by leaving money on a white cloth, with which the hands and feet of the bride-to-be are wrapped. The white cloth is fastened with a red thread and together they symbolize the chastity of the young girl. The custom is performed under the guidance of an old and influential woman of the clan who has only one marriage and has never cheated on her husband. She and all the older relatives bless the couple, and the younger and lively women and

children in the family assist the bride the whole time.

Some Roma put a coin on the bride's palm, which is printed with the henna, and after the dyeing is finished, the girl puts a red flower in her hair. Some give one such flower to all the women present at the celebration.

The ritual among Romani Muslims is performed with a special musical accompaniment of a zurna (traditional woodwind instrument) and a drum. The atmosphere is joyful, jokes and good wishes are being shared, there are tears of happiness from the parents and the most faithful friends of the young bride.

Among Muslims, after the wedding, the girl covers her head with a veil. She is forbidden to show her hair to anyone but her husband. This tradition is still practiced in many Roma communities, but in the big cities it is gradually dying out.

## **WEDDING**

The wedding is one of the most important events in the life of every Roma. As soon as the girl is born, the mother begins to prepare her dowry. The boy's parents are responsible for providing a suitable living space for the future husband and his wife. The wedding itself is preceded by customs and rites of different importance. Thus, in the past, the engagement was the mandatory test through which future spouses had to pass. During the period of engagement, the young people have the opportunity to get to know each other better. This gives them more certainty with which they can step in their marriage. The engagement celebration was almost as big as the actual wedding, and it was accompanied by music, merriment and joking around.

A traditional Roma wedding involves a big celebration and a lot of gifts for the bride and groom.

"When we decide to get married, she is going to ask for a lot of things - 4-5 prom dresses, live music, a camera, etc. And you need money for this – without money, nothing happens. We invite relatives, friends - whoever loves us comes to the wedding. At the wedding there is food, drinks, and later we get together with the men and party all night. The women are waiting for us at home, they don't have anything to do with us there," a young Roma boy from Stara Zagora region.

"Before, weddings were held for 2-3 days. The guests slept in tents. They would come

by and gift money or electrical appliances. Everything was announced on the microphone and recorded. After a while, when the guests get married themselves, the couple who is already married tries to respond to the gifts they received either with the same or even with a bigger gift", a Roma man from Strelcha, Pazardzhik region.

When the family chooses a husband for the girl, they expect his family to be good, to have houses, to have money. Everyone finds their way.

"Here, in Strelcha, we marry according to who the parents are. If I am moderately rich, we marry my daughter to a boy from a family with the same financial status," Roma man from Strelcha, Pazardzhik region.

It is a tradition for the girl's family to start collecting dowry for her from a young age and have it ready for her wedding day. It consists of various household items, which the young family would need in order to furnish their home. The dowry varies according to the financial status of the girl's family. In some cases, it could even contain very large furniture pieces and appliances - a washing machine, a refrigerator, a sofa, a stove, etc. Sometimes, the dowry is brought in by a whole truck to the bride and groom's new home.

Among some Roma, the wedding takes place twice - once at the boy's home and once at the girl's home. The celebrations take place within a week from each other. Typical for these celebrations is the Kurban soup, which is eaten the morning after the wedding and it's cooked in front of all the guests.

On the day after the wedding, the bride comes out in front of everybody first in a peignoir (light dressing gown), then puts on a colorful dress. Throughout the day, it is possible that she would change several dresses, always in different colors, until the end of the festivities. The colors are not exactly defined, but are according to the girl's preferences - green, pink, blue, yellow, etc.

Many young bridesmaids are also included in the wedding - both relatives of the newlyweds, as well as children of family friends, acquaintances and guests of the celebration. Some time ago, the wedding took place in katuns (roma tent settlement outside of towns), now it is organized mostly in restaurants.

An obligatory element of the wedding celebration is the orchestra. It is considered disrespectful if the newlyweds do not give money to the musicians who accompany them throughout the day and create a joyful atmosphere among the guests.

## **\_VIRGINITY**

"It's a matter of honor that the girl gets married before having sex. We want her to be honest."

Virginity is a great value among the Roma, and parents worry that the young would do something that would devalue the girl in the eyes of the community. There are quite a few cases when parents stop a girl from going to school because she has "bleeded", i.e. she has had her first period. For many Roma, this is a sign that the girl is already a woman. According to statistics in Bulgaria, women's first menstruation starts at the age of 12 (6th grade).

Now that she is a woman, the young Roma girl could start thinking about love and someone of the opposite sex. If anything happens before she gets married, she could dishonor the family because she would no longer be a virgin. This is mainly an issue in the most conservative Roma communities, where there are almost no social prospects.

Virginity is the most important thing and the main reason for early marriages. There are rarely young girls who are not preserved (honest). The more conservative families, who still hold on to this tradition, have concerns about the opinions of others - neighbors, relatives, friends, what would they say if their child loses her virginity before marriage. For them, it is not normal for a couple who are together and in love to have intimate relations before the wedding. This is difficult for them to accept.

"I have given an honest daughter" - this is very important to them. It is a value. After that, her mother, as well as her father, can walk proudly on the streets."

The culmination of the wedding celebration follows the wedding ceremony - the newlyweds and some of the closest relatives go to the boy's home. The bride is usually welcomed by her mother-in-law, the table is full of food, and the result of the first sexual contact is awaited - whether the bride is a virgin. The family's joy from the positive outcome is made public in different ways for the different subgroups. However, if the bride does not turn out to be a virgin, the wedding is usually broken off and she is returned to her parents. In Roma groups where the bride has been bought, the money has to be returned.

According to one tradition, the girl, who has not kept her virginity until the wedding, has to put dry peppers on her head and return home like that.

## **SWEET BRANDY**

On the first night after the wedding, the parents and guests wait for the bedsheet of the newlyweds to be removed and to see if there is blood on it. This custom is called "sweet brandy". The blood itself is doused with brandy to see if the stain "spreads like a rose" (this only happens with blood that indicates the loss of virginity, not with any other kind of blood from a person's body). If the girl is not "honest" (if there are no traces of blood on the sheet), the bride is returned to her mother and father and another bride is sought. The qualities that are wanted in girls are to be beautiful and smart.

\*Sweet brandy customs used to be common among Bulgarians as well up to a few decades ago.

"For the Roma It is obligatory that the girl is a virgin. On the morning after the first wedding night, brandy is poured over the drop of blood on the sheet. And then the parents of both families get together, drink sweet brandy and celebrate the virginity of the girl", a Roma man from Strelcha, Pazardzhik region.

There are also cases when the young do not know each other before the wedding. The boy's parents hear of a certain girl, who is grown up, already mature. They call her parents to say they want her. If there is an agreement, the two young adults start dating for a while to get to know each other. There are quite a few cases where the parents of the young people do not know each other personally, but know of each other from other acquaintances.

"We protect our children. We warn them not to have sex, because chances are they won't marry after that and the whole thing will turn ugly. Just don't do that, still you can respect each other, but don't have sex. If it happens, in some cases the two are forced to marry, but other times the marriage does not take place because the boy denies that he slept with the girl", a Roma woman from Stara Zagora.

However, from an anatomical standpoint, there are cases when there is no blood during the first sexual intercourse. This continues to be a problem in the Roma communities and it is not understood by many people who still hold onto this custom.

"When I got married, there was no blood, but I was a virgin. My mother-in-law took me to the doctor to prove that it was my first sexual intercourse. I was very worried then, I cried. I was very scared. My husband trusted me, but his family had doubts", a Roma woman from Filipovtsi,



Sofia.

In case a girl lost her virginity and did not marry the boy, her chance of starting a family is often with a man, who already has a failed marriage, not with a bachelor her age.

“My mom and dad wouldn't let me be with the boy I first fell in love with and lost my virginity to. He stole me and took me to Kazanlak, but my parents brought me back home. I never saw this boy again. Then I met another one, who had been married before. I have been living with him since the 1980, I have 4 children, I have grandchildren, I also have great-grandchildren. We also married our boys to girls we heard about. We went to their families and asked for them and they live together to this day. They are near me, in separate houses, but they are a few meters away”, a Roma woman from Stara Zagora.

However, after such an arranged marriage, sometimes there comes a moment when the young people realize they are not for each other, problems arise between them, and the girl returns home to her family. She could be 18-20 years old, already with one or two children. Children can stay with either the father or the mother - it depends on who is more influential. Rarely, there are cases when the mother rebelled against her husband's parents and managed to take the children with her. The children themselves are very often registered under the mother's name among the Roma.

“They came to ask for my little daughter (12 years old), I didn't give her and she ran away. Then they brought me a gift - the sheet from the first intercourse. They lived together for a while and separated; their three children went abroad. She married another man, 20 years older than her. My other daughter has 9 children - 8 boys and 1 girl. She is 30 years old now. She already has a grandchild.”, a Roma woman from Starozagorsko.

Another custom, which is still observed in some places, is that the mother of the bride buys the clothes for the groom - from underwear to the coat. It is a curious fact that after the wedding, some Roma do the following: the girl goes to her mother-in-law, who washes her hair, and the boy goes to his mother-in-law, who prepares him fried eggs with sugar.

The father usually teaches his daughter how to behave in her new house. For example, a woman may be taught to call her mother-in-law “mother.”

“Making a family and having offspring is the most important thing for the Roma. This is before work and other things in life. Having children is mandatory for the family to grow. If a woman does not have a child, she is often casted away, returned to her parents. She may be hardworking, she may be good, she may be anything, but if she cannot give birth to a child, she

is replaced. We want to have a child, to continue the family. What's the point of looking after her at home", a Roma man from Strelcha, Pazardzhik region.

According to another common belief among some groups, at the age of 13 or 14 a girl is already an "old maid", that is why her family is in a hurry to arrange an engagement and marriage.

The bride traditionally lives with her husband's family, but her parents keep an eye on the lives of the young. For some Roma, a couple is considered to be whole, unified, when they have their first child. Then they are considered to enter the period of maturation. If the marriage does not work out, divorce is allowed among the Roma. This can happen either by mutual agreement or after a decision of the community court. Once divorced, the two are free to commit to other people.

Among Roma, the wedding itself has undergone many changes from the past to the present day, but it has always been as lavish as possible, richly decorated, and associated with a lot of joy and positive emotions. For Roma parents, it is the most important event in their children's lives, and they are ready to give their best in following the Roma traditions, regardless of their financial status.

Bride buying, bride stealing/running away, and betrothal followed by community union are forms of marriage among Roma that are not legally recognized by the macro-society without a civil act. During the years of the socialist regime, unregistered cohabitation was constantly criticized. However, after 1980, many of the Roma in Bulgaria entered into a civil marriage, not because of external pressure, but because of the significantly high "wedding allowance" granted by the state, which gave them the opportunity to start on their own by buying a house, furniture, and a car.

## **BIRTH**

Another important event in Roma life is birth. In many Romani groups, there are a number of prohibitions for pregnant women that apply before and after childbirth. A wide range of customs are still in force, helping to protect the life and health of the young mother and the newborn.

In Bulgaria, after birth, the baby is ritually bathed in salted water (so that it does not smell and is healthier). Some coins are also placed in the water (believed to bring health) together with spring flowers, if the birth is in spring. In some instances, relatives and friends gather at a table with ritual breads, kneaded especially for the occasion, together with honey, halva and cheese. No alcohol is served at these occasions. The baby and the young parents are given money, clothes and sent good wishes.

When the toddler starts walking, the tradition is to organize another special event. Homemade or specially ordered loaves of bread are tied with a messal (a special cloth) on the child's shoulders like a backpack. Assisted by an older member of the family, the kid goes around the homes of relatives and gives away the bread loaves, thus demonstrating that he/she has already started walking and the attitude towards him/her should become more serious.

A boy's first hair cut is also an occasion for a family celebration. It is done in the courtyard by a professional barber, accompanied by music, jokes, good wishes, and a festive meal.

## **EARLY MARRIAGES**

In general, early Romani marriages are decreasing in number in Bulgaria, but the percentage of children who marry at the age of 14 remains high. This is because at this age they are already sexually mature. At this point, it is logical that the purely human urges have been awakened. However, the consequences of these completely natural sexual desires are different for different ethnic groups in our country.

Roma teenagers in the "Faculteta" district in Sofia, for example, generally marry at the age of 14-15 either because they get pregnant or because they have already had their first sexual contact. Having sex and not being married causes shame since it is not according to the Roma traditions and they fear being rejected by the community. This in turn leads to early marriage.

After shame, the other main reason for early marriage among Roma is the tradition. The tradition of marrying the person with whom you first had sexual relations is still alive.

As for getting pregnant at an early age, abortion is a sin for the Roma, and the fear of God exists and influences many of them with great power. Especially in the closed neighborhoods, the Roma see the Church as an authority symbol of their community. The

reprimand they would receive for their mistakes is not so much a reprimand from God, but rather from their family, the clan and the people with whom they live in the same territory.

In general, there is a movement towards lowering the number of early marriages among the Roma in Bulgaria, but in the ghetto itself the rules are dictated mainly by the grandparents who play the main role in the families. They are quite young themselves.

For example, the grandmother is 45 years old, the parents are 30, and the children who are getting married are 15. It is important that the children are given via an arranged marriage. "We give this girl to that family - they will look after her there, they have money. She will thrive there."

There is a difference between teenagers now and those who were the same age in the 1980's.

The following trend is observed: those who grew up in the 1980's have a certain mindset, those in the 90's - a different one, and those born after the year 2000 have a completely different way of looking at life. The 1980's generation left it entirely up to their parents to choose their life partner. Those who grew up in the 1990's had a relationship with someone of their own choice and in cases of sexual contact, their parents married them to preserve their honor.

In general, today's young people stand up to their parents a little more. They state that they do not want to get married, although many of them have relationships openly (it is not about intimate relationships, but rather going out and dating).

Despite the overall decline in the number of early marriages among the Roma, we cannot ignore the fact that there is a certain raise in the percentage in the past 2-3 years.

The reason for this is the Covid-19 pandemic, which left many students at home and this seriously affected the early marriage factor. Due to the pandemic, quite a few well-educated girls from families who care about their education, did not manage to finish highschool (12th grade). This is a reason for marrying early - because the school environment and the commitment to the lessons are not there any more.

What we see after a year is that a large number of these girls realize early marriage did not work for them and they are currently separated from their partners.

Years ago, early marriages were a higher percentage, and they don't happen in the same numbers today. The family environment (plus the community) and the school support are the two main factors that influence the "early marriage" rate.

Due to economic reasons, high inflation, war and the Covid-19 pandemic, many Roma

adults left Bulgaria in search for work. Thus, the care of their young girls and boys remained in the hands of the older generation - the grandparents. The parents themselves have lost control over their children and what exactly happens to them being left in Bulgaria. Many Roma families, taking up seasonal work abroad, take their children with them and thus they interrupt school. At a later stage, returning home, they drop out of school because of the missed material. And what they see as an alternative in their community is marriage. The prospect of going back to school is very difficult, and they choose to get married.

Early marriage among the Roma is not an official marriage. The law is different for them. That's where the moral law comes into play. When a boy and a girl get married, they do not do it according to the laws of the Republic of Bulgaria, but according to the laws of their community. The given word means there is a "Yes." Usually the parents of the young couple have come to an agreement, they have "shaken hands", and the newlyweds start living together. This is what marriage at such an early age looks like in the Roma society.

For some Roma, the girl's younger age also means an easier adaptation to her new family.

It is accepted that the parents of the newlyweds take on an active role in raising their grandchildren and providing help in the household.

It is customary after the adults "shake hands" to play some music and perform a traditional dance, which for the Roma neighborhood is a sign that the young couple are going to get married.

We should note that despite the fact that early marriages today are done mostly within the Roma community in Bulgaria, they are not a "Roma specialty".

Early marriages, early school dropouts, children having children themselves and arranged marriages have been commonplace all over the world decades and centuries ago. In various places they continue to happen today on a regular basis - for example, in certain communities in the Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa, India, etc. It has happened in Bulgaria as well, a few generations back within different ethnic groups.

Early parenthood and having many children used to be typical in the region a century or more ago, when infant mortality was much more frequent, and the offspring was also part of the labor force for harvesting the crops. Before the advancement of medicine, kids' chances of survival up to the age of 18 were slim, so many families, regardless of ethnicity and culture, had

5-6 children or more, just to have 2 or 3 of them survive.

In Roma communities, infant mortality is high even today. This is due to lack of education and information among their members.

For example, there are two large Roma neighborhoods in the city of Sliven. One is "Nadezhda", where people live in terrible conditions, and the other is "Nikola Kochev", which is the birthplace of quite a few Roma intellectuals in Bulgaria. The Nikola Kochev neighborhood was set up in the 19th century by workers in the factory of Dobri Zhelyazkov, the Tinsmith. Working there, this Roma community acquired a different social status and a different attitude towards life in general. They value education, and they want their children to have it.

Arranged marriages take place in the more closed Roma communities - the Kaldarashi and the Kalaydzhii. Here, early marriages must be seen in the larger context of these Roma people's degree of integration into the modern world. These two groups are some of the most closed off to outside influence, and observe their traditions very strictly.

Arranged marriages among Roma in Bulgaria are not usually characterized by a big age gap between the bride and the groom, as is the case in India, for example, where the girl is 15 years old and the man could be 50. In Bulgaria, a 15-year-old Roma girl would marry a 17-year-old young man because they fell in love, or because their families agreed so.

Early arranged marriages happen because their culture is that way, and that's how it's accepted in the closed environment they live in. Parents very often find other families for their children to connect to. The main reason for this is to preserve virginity. That's why they marry their kids earlier, to avoid problems later on (around 13-14 years old).

The parents make an agreement having in mind each other's economic status and preferably choose a family who lives closer in the same area.

Sometimes the young marry very early because they fall in love, don't think much and get together. But once a girl is taken, it is not good for her to return home, because her and her family's honor will be at stake.

Another reason why marriages happen early is when there is no parental control. When the mother and father are away, the children do as they wish, which is not always the same as what is right. Parents often have to look for work abroad and leave their children with their grandparents. In these cases, either control over the kids is lost, or the model of early marriage is imposed by the grandparents.

"My father died early, my mother married another man and was home to look after

me. She decided to marry me to a boy I didn't know and she did. I didn't want to, I wanted to continue studying, but we didn't have the financial means to support my education. I had nowhere to go because I had no other relatives. I got married at 17. I felt disappointed. I did not agree", a Roma woman from Strelcha, Yambol region.

## **THE BRIDE MARKET**

Studies of Roma culture and way of life distinguish several types of traditional marriages among the Roma in Bulgaria. Although they are not legally recognized today, they have their historical analogies in different cultures throughout time, including the Roman empire, as well as in the Bulgarian traditional culture until the middle of the 20th century. The custom of "buying a bride" is most characteristic of several Roma groups like the Kaldarashi and Kalaydzhi from the Thracian valley. Despite the negative connotation of "bride buying" and "bride market", from a scientific point of view, this custom does not imply literal buying of people.

A study among the Roma community shows that it is more about buying her "honor" - the right of the boy to take her virginity and the right of the boy's family to continue their lineage.

According to the theoretical construct in sociology and social anthropology, the "bride ransom" is a payment given as a compensation to the girl's family for its loss when she leaves home to get married. Since among ethnic groups with a patriarchal social organization the woman belongs to her father's clan, compensation must be paid to that clan.

One of the main functions of the payment in marriage is to determine the exact social status of the children born after the marriage. The payment guarantees the security of the paternal line - it places the children within the father's family in all social matters. This can be easily seen in Roma groups, where the custom is strongly preserved: for example, after a divorce among the Kaldarashi, the child is usually left with the father's relatives, not the mother's.

The results of a number of ethnographic and sociological studies among the Roma in Bulgaria show that bride buying has a negative effect on marriage age and early/forced marriages in general. In some local communities, after the onset of the first period, the girl is suspended from school so as not to be "tricked" into losing her virginity.

The fear that a girl might meet a boy and have sex before her marriage leads parents to marry off their daughters at a relatively young age. Since girls at this age are still children and

do not know “what is good for them”, parents choose a marriage partner - usually among boys whose parents have also decided it is time to marry them.

Among the Kaldarashi community, we can still observe the custom of “buying a bride”, as it has been preserved and functions in certain regions of Bulgaria. It is related to payment of ransom to the girl's parents by the groom. Nowadays, there are stories about the commercialization of this tradition showcasing the skills and beauty of the bride.

A similar custom was also practiced in the settled Muslim Roma communities and was called babahak (father's right). However, in our time it is almost forgotten and it seems that it will soon be lost forever.

The bride market usually takes place on Todorovden (the celebrations of St. Theodore's Day in the spring), following a centuries-long tradition. Since most families used to be nomads, it was agreed that they must see each other at some point in the year so that the young boys and girls can meet and marry. Some time ago, the Kaldarashi organized the market on a certain day of the year and at a certain location where everyone knew they would be able to see each other.

Bride markets have been a tradition for centuries. To get a daughter-in-law, the boy's father sends two delegates to the girl's father. This is done so that the daughter can be publicly given as a bride. If the girl's father agrees, a small feast is arranged and bargaining begins. The girl is asked if she has any dowry (dishes, etc.). If she is a hard worker, the price goes up. The highest price is always paid for a virgin girl, and this is mostly what is sought after even today. If she is taken as a virgin and turns out not to be, she is returned to her family.

In this tradition, very often the young people do not know each other and meet for the first time at the engagement. The parents themselves meet and arrange the marriage without the prior consent of the newlyweds.

In broader terms, the tradition for other groups was similar, except that the gatherings took place on the fields around the village. The bride market custom originated from the fact that the Kaldarashi groups led a nomadic lifestyle and these gatherings were a way to meet once a year with friends and relatives. A very important element of these meetings was the opportunity to arrange the marriages of young people, because this type of Roma like to keep themselves “pure as a community” and they don't mix with other Roma groups and different ethnicities.



Despite the settlement law of 1956, the tradition to preserve the Kaldarashi community pure-blooded has persisted to this day and they continue to organize bride markets.

"I have given both of my girls for money, following the custom. They were 15 years old then. But both marriages did not work out and my girls are now with other men. The second time they chose them, they married out of love. I accept their choices, because I have also learned a lot," a Kalaydzhi man from Dryanovo.

Nowadays, some see this event as an opportunity to meet old acquaintances and find new ones. Others say that even today money is exchanged for the bride that the boy's family has arranged with her parents.

An important fact to which we draw attention is the preparation for this bride market and a harmful practice adopted by the women who attend it. For young girls anticipating the event, this means buying a lot of new clothes and extensive preparations. In their desire to look more beautiful and "white", many young girls use the so-called Yambol cream which whitens the skin.

Many Roma women believe that "the whiter you are, the prettier you are", which is why they apply this product to their faces at such group gatherings. The "Yambol cream", however, is harmful because it contains lead compounds and can cause serious intoxication.

Today's Kalaydzhi gather from all over Bulgaria to meet and introduce their children, to communicate with relatives and friends and to find out "who is available to marry, who is getting a divorce". Since they are scattered all over the country, they are usually seen on Todorovden (St. Theodore's Day), and sometimes on the Sunday before Easter.

"I have three boys, one is married. I take the other two to the market to meet their relatives and friends. At some point, we will choose a girl from a family from the same clan - this is how we have preserved the tradition for so many years, so that we do not die out and survive as a community", a Kalaydzhi man from Stara Zagora region.

"We only want to be among 'our people', our minority group. In this way, we preserve ourselves and continue the tradition from generation to generation", a Kalaydzhi man from Stara Zagora region.

When two young people marry, their fathers (the matchmakers) negotiate. If the bride turns out to be "honest", the tradition says that the boy's family has to give the couple a golden coin. If they don't not have gold, they would give money.

This money is for their future home, as a start for their life together.

At the market the money is paid on the spot, and there is no chance for fraud, because everything is done in front of witnesses. Before, the young people did not know each other in advance and got to know each other at the market. These Roma groups live mainly in the regions of Stara Zagora and Kazanlak, but there are also a small number scattered around different parts of Bulgaria.

For young Kalaydzhii who follow the tradition, the annual bride market is their only chance to find a mate. Their Orthodox Christian faith and traditional code of conduct forbid them from dating, flirting or having other premarital relationships.

Kalaydzhii marry only within the group. Finding a mate from outside the community - and in particular a non-Roma Bulgarian woman - was not possible until a few decades ago, and love was not a priority. What is important is the dowry.

Despite this strictly observed tradition, today a growing number of young Roma are rebelling against the annual bride market. They want to make their own decisions and marry a person of their choice. This is especially true for girls – some are as young as 15 when they marry and this is the end of their self-defined life, because from then on they must first and foremost be housewives and mothers.

If the bride has not kept her chastity, it must be known in advance and the boy's family must decide whether to accept her as she is. But then there is no honesty ritual and no money is given. In most cases, however, the girl is expected to be a virgin. This is the main thing the Kalaydzhii hold on to to this day - in the whole minority group.

"As life changes, we feel a little bit like we're losing the right moment. More and more children, young people, want to integrate into society. They begin to see different things. However, we want to preserve this tradition, no matter how difficult it may be for us", a Kalaydzhii man from Stara Zagora region.

If we analyze the situation outside the group of Kalaydzhii, a similar trend is observed in the smaller towns. Usually, if there are Roma from different groups in a city, they do not intermarry. An example is the town of Varbitsa - a small settlement inhabited by four groups of Roma who, to this day, form families only between representatives of their own group.

## STEALING BRIDES

The custom of “elopement” or “bride-stealing” is generally characteristic of those Roma groups, among whom the tradition of buying brides is dying out or has already been forgotten. In the custom of elopement, the social legitimacy of marriage is achieved only through sexual intercourse, and the proof of this is the blood from the loss of virginity.

The boy would abduct the girl or the young couple would run away from home in case their parents do not agree to marry them. After a few days the young would return, and then the preparations for the wedding begin. In some Roma groups, symbolic abduction still takes place, although this tradition is dying out.

In the Yambol region, stealing of brides used to happen often years ago. A girl would be stolen against her wishes and then married off so as not to stain her family's honor.

There has been no bride stealing in Sofia for a long time. Today, much more often, early marriages take place because teenagers become sexually active earlier. Thus, the bride stealing tradition is dying out in this region, according to reports it used to be a more active practice some 30-40 years ago. To a greater extent, the stealing of brides among the Roma happened because of love and powerful attraction that the boy felt for the girl.

In the case of bride theft, tradition dictates that the boy's family should visit the girl's, declaring that they wish to take the girl as a bride. There are reports that the girl would have some saying in the matter and decide whether she wants to enter into marriage after discussions between the two families.

“Bride buying” is a ritual followed for generations. Nowadays, in the Sofia region, in many cases this is done when young people already know each other and feel attraction to one another. The money that is given as a dowry from the young man's side, in this part of Bulgaria, is used as initial capital for the young family to start their life together.

Nowadays, very often people who hold on to traditions are people who want to lead a moral way of life. They believe that if a girl does not marry the first man she has sex with, she would become a “rag”, she would be an “easy girl”. A family with this mindset wants to preserve their honor. They need to prove that they can marry their daughter as a virgin, that she could give birth to beautiful children and carry on the family name, thus ensuring the

people's continued respect for her. Many Roma, regardless of the group they belong to, feel this obligation to continue the family line and live with strong respect for the family in general.

These days, when money is involved - whether it's buying a bride or making an arrangement between families - it is the financial status of the families that matters. They want their wealth to be preserved in the family and shared with people who are on the same economic level. This is important when choosing a bride and, accordingly, a family with which to merge their own. Money is also a guarantee that the girl will live well. This aspiration is particularly expressed among the Kaldarashi. „You can stay here and live here. Look what a beautiful house this boy has.“.

Speaking of Sofia, we must pay attention to the large Roma neighborhoods, where the situation differs from that in the smaller Bulgarian towns. Very often, people who are born in a closed Roma neighborhood stay there their whole lives. The main reason for this is the fear of leaving it - how will they be accepted by the people outside? This is the reason why they follow strictly the community laws and the parents' model passed down from generation to generation, both in terms of marriage and family, as well as in terms of education and their professional growth.

In Roma neighborhoods a few generations live in the same house. People are afraid to continue their lives outside of the comfort zone of the Roma neighborhood, even though it may seem unsafe to outsiders and it could lack opportunities for their own development. This is their home, and the fear of not being accepted outside of it keeps them stuck there.

The safest environment for many of the residents, outside of their native neighborhood, is another Roma neighborhood on the city's territory. Because of this, very often Roma from different neighborhoods in Sofia marry each other, and the wedding, as an event, is an opportunity for the guests to get to know other people, outside of their closed community. This adds additional value to the wedding as an event that enriches the social life of the Roma in the city.

Here, however, it is important to note that the isolation in the Roma neighborhoods leads to a number of problems that slow down the development of the residents and limit their worldview. A clear example of this is that there are no nurseries in the "Faculteta" district in Sofia. There are no kindergartens either. As a logical extension of the lack of perspective and alternative in closed and segregated neighborhoods, Roma children directly become mothers

and fathers, missing other valuable stages of their personal development.

A serious reason for entering into marriage for girls is the preservation of their honor and that of the family. These are teenage girls and boys for whom it is quite normal to think about sex. However, they don't think about the consequences. And it goes like this: a girl spends one night with a boy. She has to keep her honor and that of her parents, so they get married.

Sometimes the girl, having already chosen her partner, runs away with him and loses her virginity, if her parents do not agree to marry them first. In this way, she forces her family to be given as a wife to the boy in question. And so the two become an official couple in the eyes of the community.

Early marriage stunts the development of the girls who enter into it, because they hardly manage to do anything other than look after their children. Education is what will change things and turn the tables. Very often parents want their children to continue studying, but they end up not doing so because the attitudes in their social environment are different. Even if the parents want change, it is the environment that condemns something as "disgraceful", "wrong" or "impure", and their opinions and prejudice are fundamental for acceptance and survival the community when you live in a closed environment.

"Come on, the boys are almost over, they'll take someone younger"; "How come she hasn't given birth at 20, is she barren?"

Strength to oppose the community is needed to understand that there is an economic benefit to leaving your daughter in school. There should be a general acceptance that education is a value, that it changes your status as well as your children's prospects for a better life.

On the other hand, since we are part of the EU, many Bulgarian women, including Roma, emigrate and see what other countries are like. This brings, to some extent, positive changes in their perceptions of life. They see that the countries laws must be followed, or that without education one cannot achieve almost anything.

For the most part, the Roma community in Bulgaria is gradually beginning to change its understanding of family and to turn its attention to the modern way of entering into marriage and developing a love relationship.

"We are still dating - for 2 years and 10 months. My cousin introduced us, and he started writing to me on the Internet. We are from the same neighborhood otherwise. I was 14 and he

was 15. We want to get married when we turn 18. Now we live separately and visit each other. Our parents know each other from before.

I want to study first, pass 12th grade and then get married. Now we have promised each other that we will get married", a Roma couple (the girl is 16 years old, the boy is 17 years old) from the Stara Zagora region.

Adultery is not typical for Roma women. Most cases of adultery are instigated by men. Depending on the economic situation of the family, the woman may also be forced to endure such behavior if she has no one else to rely on or nowhere else to live.

To this day, there is an attitude that it is forgivable for a man to cheat and have a parallel relationship, because he also provides for the family and the woman is dependent on his salary. If the woman does it, she is dishonoring her husband and the whole family.

In some families, the man forbids his wife to work, preferring that she spends her time at home, looking after the children and taking care of the household. This is typical of the patriarchal family, it is more common in the marginalized communities (closed Roma neighborhoods with a poorer population and fewer prospects for development). Of course, this pattern may also be dictated by feelings of jealousy.

Among members of more closed communities, there are recorded cases of the so-called "Roma diseases", most often muscular dystrophies.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION**

There are teachers and school principals who are very involved in the topic of early marriages among the Roma, trying to help prevent them. In other places, it is the exact opposite - total lack of interest as to what is happening with the children and why they miss school.

The problems are more serious in schools where children are segregated. There, the traditional beliefs are the norm, and whenever there is an issue it is covered up.

Poverty and the patterns the young see from their parents. There are settlements and neighborhoods where the children have seen nothing outside of what surrounds them. There, households sometimes live without running water, without electricity, without a bathroom and toilet inside, and they still consider their living conditions "good". Their criteria for what a "good

life" is and what path to follow themselves are determined by what they saw from their parents and grandparents. They also get married early and the young keep reliving the same pattern.

There are parents who encourage early marriage, and there are those who do not want it for their children because their own experience was not good. Despite that, they cannot prevent it, because the children know only this model of behaviour. In these cases, the parents do not find willingness for change in their children or do not have the means to help them try another way of life.

All my children studied until 5-6th grade. And when they got married, where would they continue? Who will let them study?

The traditions of early marriages may not be entirely Romani, but they are the members of our society who continue it today. If young people become parents early, they are largely deprived of the opportunity for education and professional development.

"A woman comes to me and cries. I ask her why, and she says, "I can't read the sign on the door." Why didn't you learn to read, what was the problem? Well, I got married and my father-in-law and mother-in-law said I couldn't study, because I needed to look after my children and take care of my husband.

I have a case of a girl with arranged marriage and they claimed she would have no problem continuing her studies. At the moment, she is pregnant and locked up at home. They did not allow her to go back to school", a Roma woman - a mediator in the Roma community in Straldzha, Yambol region.

Roma usually have many children in one family and they live in small homes. Early marriages are also an opportunity for girls to leave the father's house and to ease the parents' financial situation. This is characteristic of many closed marginal communities.

Nowadays, it is more common than before to count feelings of love between two young people as a reason to get married. This is the case for more integrated into the larger society Roma who use the Internet and have a broader worldview.

There are also parents born in the 1980's who say they don't want their children to follow in their footsteps. "What have I seen of life? I want my child to see more." Before, they could not freely express what they thought and felt. In this regard, there is a change in the younger generation.

In marginalised communities (closed neighborhoods) there are rarely attempts to break away from the status quo, but these places always need support from people outside the community. Most often, these are people viewed as authority by the locals.

“We don't get along because we don't know each other.”

There is no sensitivity and consideration for this problem in society. There are ways to prevent these issues - with a lot of individual and delicate work and with a lot of understanding. Another tool for prevention is raising awareness about the consequences of early marriage. In Bulgaria, there is still very little information on this topic. It's hard when the model is passed on: the grandmother says “Well, I gave birth at 15 and you can also give birth at 15, it's okay.” It is a different story if a specialist comes and explains what the risks of early pregnancy are.

On a state level, no in-depth work is actually done. Constant and serious work with relevant specialists is necessary.

“As a society, we have to decide whether it is a problem for us that 3,000 children are born annually in the Roma community. If it's a problem for us, we need to work on the issue of reducing that number with persistence, understanding, respect and delicacy.”

Reasons for early marriages today in marginalized communities and closed Roma neighborhoods: passing down the same model of behaviour from generation to generation, lack of education, lack of opportunities for development, lack of information and lack of access to it. Roma communities are highly encapsulated, they do not leave the ghetto except to receive some social or health service. They replicate the model they have seen and learned from their mothers and grandmothers.

There are also positive examples. In recent years, in the Yerlii communities the “problem” with virginity is somehow starting to blur. With them, it is more and more calmly accepted that young people, who like each other, would see each other, go out on dates and even study in other settlements, far from the family.

This is largely related to the level of education and inclusion in society. The more marginalized communities still strictly follow the traditions of their ancestors and the place where they live.



Girls who have become university students are extremely independent. With them, the “mother-in-law”, “father-in-law”, “household care” factors has no such power. They have already won their freedom at the very moment when they chose their own partnership and made plans for their future cohabitation. The roles in these cases are a clear and the girl could have a career and develop professionally, she would not only be a housewife, but also a working woman.

“Children are more modern now. They grow up in a different environment, they study. We have a lot of university graduates. My daughter studied, got a certificate, and I can no longer tell her: you are going to get married. She now has a different mindset and outlook on life. She is 21 years old and not married.”

Younger girls, who have not yet completed their secondary education, are still trained to do the house work in order to be good housewives. Emancipation comes after starting university and eventually graduating from it.

“It’s rare that they get married and continue to go to school. After the wedding they usually leave. The community model and its principles influence the decision to marry among the young. If her mother got married at the age of 12-13, the girl often follows in her footsteps”, a Roma man from Strelcha, Pazardzhik region.

In recent years, the tendency for Roma (both boys and girls) to enroll and complete their higher education has been increasing. Most of the students are actually girls.

In case of arguments between the young couple during their life together, a lot of support from the family is needed if they want to separate and especially if the girl wants to end the cohabitation. If she receives understanding from her parents, then the situation can resolve in the most favorable way for her. However, if her family pushes her to return to her husband, this could be disastrous for her and her future.

It is much more difficult for such a girl to get together with another man, because it is assumed that she is no longer pure. Usually, a prospective partner who would pay attention to such a girl has had a similar fate - he would have separated from his first wife. It is rare for bachelor boys to marry girls who have already been married - regardless of whether they have a child or not.

## **THE NORTHWESTERN BULGARIA PHENOMENON**

In the North-West part of Bulgaria, one of the poorest regions of the EU, the Roma are more educated and more integrated. This phenomenon is due to the fact that their mother tongue is Bulgarian and when they start school they “don’t catch up” with the other kids, there is no language barrier between them and the lessons learned in class. Because of this, there are villages such as Dolni Tziber, for example, where almost all Roma have university degrees.

The biggest language barrier is for the Millet Roma subgroup who speak Turkish as a mother tongue. In their neighborhood they only speak Turkish, and when they go to school it is much more difficult for them to learn Bulgarian. This is not the case with the Romani speaking communities, because almost 20% of their vocabulary is borrowed from the Bulgarian language. This makes it a little easier for them.

Among the Roma, there is also migration from smaller settlements to larger cities. Often, those who moved to Sofia are not very well received by the local Roma, and in this way a “ghetto within the ghetto” is formed - usually such areas are segregated at the end of the neighborhood and people there live in very poor conditions. In Sofia, the situation is the worst in the Orlandovtsi and Malashevtsi neighborhoods.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main reasons for early and arranged marriages among the Roma community are two: the model passed down from generations and the lack of alternatives for young people who grow up in closed environments with limited opportunities for development. The traditions of the past are still respected and valued by representatives of the patriarchal Roma communities, for whom the honor of the family and the opinion of the community in which they live are of utmost importance.

The trend shows that young people who have access to education and sufficient motivation to take advantage of it are more likely to choose their own partner in life - out of love, not according to what the tradition dictates.

The research results that are published in this book are part of our work on the project “**ECHO III: for memory’s sake**”. Some of the stories are also video-documented.

It is an arts and cultural heritage project that aims to bring together artists working in theatre, music, visual arts and literature to explore tradition and culture through the themes of marriage, arranged marriages and nuclear families in the Balkan context. More specifically, the aim is to explore gender roles and norms throughout history and as it relates to young people and artists living in Europe. “ECHO III” is a sequel to **ECHO I & II**,

Within the framework of the project, parallel studies are being conducted in Greece, Bulgaria, Albania and Romania. Their results will be the basis for the next stage of the project: artistic production:

- in Greece, artists and directors are invited to recreate a theater play;
- in Bulgaria - you will work as musicians;
- in Albania - poets;
- in Romania - artists working in the field of visual arts.

What next? Artists from the 4 partner countries will work together in art residencies in Greece, Bulgaria, Albania and Romania. In September 2023, all together will participate in a tour in several Balkan cities. We will continue to talk about marriage, about roles, about relations in the Balkan community, which are rooted through our culture.

More about the project, you can add news on our page:

**<https://openspacebg.com/for-memorys-sake-bg/>**

## The researchers:



### **Zaharinka Kutseva:**

writer, author, activist. In addition, she is also a favorite teacher of one of the most challenging souls - the artists. She has lived in the Rhodopes for more than 25 years. She loves the mountains and the people there, with all their challenges.



### **Alexandra Tsankova:**

finder and teller of true stories. One of the authors at [truestory.bg](http://truestory.bg). To inspire and infect is her personal mission. They say about her: "it gets under your skin and directly penetrates your heart".

**for memory's sake**



Producer:



With a support of European program “Creative Europe” and Sofia Municipal - Program Culture



Co-funded by  
the European Union



With a support of  
Sofia Municipality  
Program “Culture”

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

1-st edition, 2023

OPEN SPACE foundation (Bulgaria)


[www.openspacebg.com](http://www.openspacebg.com)

Partners:



**BoWB.**





“They got me married when I was fourteen years old. I didn’t love him. I gave birth to kids, and I worked; I gave birth to kids, and I worked. But he was still foreign to my heart. Whenever I was sad, I would go to the attic, open the hole/the skylight, and shout in the direction of the sky, shout until I felt better. Therefore, if they love each other, they should get married. Faith should not be a hindrance to them.”

**OPEN SPACE foundation**  
[www.openspacebg.com](http://www.openspacebg.com)