

NEW BULGARIAN UNIVERSITY

National Endowment Fund “13 Centuries of Bulgaria”

HISTORY POPULATED WITH PEOPLE

Bulgarian Society in the Second Half of the 20th Century

Interviews

Sofia, 2005

HISTORY POPULATED WITH PEOPLE

Below I will give reasons for the title of this book, which might sound frivolous for a serious documentary work. All the more that it is the first publication from the ramified project “Bulgarian Society in the Second Half of the 20th Century”, which was intended as research but was also conceived as an educational endeavor. It was included in the History programmes at New Bulgarian University and funded by the National Endowment Fund “13 Centuries of Bulgaria” and more specifically by its research funds.

An important part of the work is the tracking down, collecting and digitalizing of the significant volume of documents on the above period not only in the Central State Archives, but also in local archives. Part of that documentation has already been made accessible on NBU’s website – a total of 2100 pages. Work on its completion is still under way, being carried out by young historians from the “History of Social Changes” Programme at the Department. In the fall, at a conference in Sozopol, 40 BA, MA and PhD students discussed and shared their experience, the results and the prospects of their indisputably necessary endeavor. And the completion of our task has as its objective to define research for the second half of the last century.

It is clear in advance that our project cannot bear fruit quickly, due to the relatively late appearance of young researchers of our most recent history. As we all know, until 1989 this period was under the competencies of the Institute for the History of the Bulgarian Communist Party, and only a handful of the researchers there continued to be involved with it after that date and only within the usual slant. Also, the access and the processing of materials was delayed. We have to note the reluctance, the alienation of colleague historians from the half century - after that events were dynamic, marked by sudden changes, and that is not a favorable environment for research. Notwithstanding, as another part of our project will testify – the bibliography of spontaneous messages, memories, personal testimonials, etc. about the said time are abundant, if not always unbiased and marked by other various forms of premeditation. It is precisely because of this that the bibliography creates a picture of the atmosphere of the turning point and the transition. It is to be published shortly.

The present book belongs to the third branch of our project: interviews. A genre that has gathered force during the period of democratic changes and has even occupied an independent place in our literature not only through the mass media, which is in essence short-lived. The reasons for that are more than clear: it is only in the past few years that historiography turned – or rather returned to the individual, until recently considered only part of the crowd. We remember well who made statements until then not on their behalf, but under their name, and not even in their own voice at that. Today, the citizen has the right to a personal opinion. And other citizens would like to hear it in order to agree with it or contest it. But in both instances they get to know a concrete individual, they enter into contact; they create a notion – warm or belligerent – with another contemporary.

Many books have appeared that are based on dialogues: assessments, disclosures, claims by Bulgarians here and abroad. This is knowledge acquired directly and allows us to ratiocinate: am I right or are the others right? In other words it is also self-cognition.

Interviewers today have different ideas regarding their task: do they turn to respondents, charged with nostalgia about the near past, motivated by memories of their unruly youth, the prestige and privileges, participation in power, high or low, but still Power? There are quite a few helpless people today who have lost their imaginary sense of security, the convenient belief that the State is taking care of them. A second type of interviewers prefer to talk to the ‘elite’ (that is what they call themselves, hence the quotation marks), who value the chaos in the still not fully erected structure of the civil society and the free market –

such pages are infused with optimism, but not sincerity as regards the manner in which things were achieved. A third group focuses on young people in Bulgaria and abroad; they are especially indicative for the forecasts of these two social groups, but also about their view to our society today and the foreign society. Extremely critical as a rule, young people rarely provide methods for achieving the future they desire.

The dialogues that are the most interesting are those with narrower focus – with a definite social or professional layer; they are a representative sample which is most suitable for researching topics on the social and economic life of our society with its problems and beliefs: for instance, people from a specific village or region, working in a certain branch, separate professional groups, etc.

Notwithstanding the disadvantages of our present day free market, one of its most liberated sectors is book publishing since it does not require serious capital investment. Therefore, based on interest towards some genres we can draw conclusions about the tastes of readers towards this type of writing. It is surprising that the readership today have a preference for collections of interviews – it testifies to the need for contact with unknown fellow citizens.

If we have to define the theme of our book, it is historical, and based on the last half century in Bulgaria. If we judge by fragmented, accidentally gathered thoughts, the outline and especially the content will be lost – human memory, especially Bulgarian, is short-lived. In order to fill in this large period of time with live human presence, to ‘populate history with people’ as the intention was, we decided that the respondents should not just belong to a class, gender, or profession in Vazov’s words; our aim was for everyone to talk from their inner self, about him/herself in some kind of an autobiographical discourse, in their own vision, taste and memory. We aspired to achieve a possible polyphony, where all authors in the volume kept the freedom and authenticity of their discourse. To present their ideas and not ideology. Without obtrusiveness – each life reflects in itself a whole view of life, as long as it is sincerely recounted.

When we started looking for respondents we discussed possible interviewees; members of the team gave suggestions: this is an interesting person, witness, functionary, victim of the times. Some suggestions were accepted, others were not. Our desire to gather 50 something interviews initially seemed impossible: who would agree to lay down their life strategy, achievements and losses – what for? We did not offer anything in return, apart from voicing their words in public.

But they agreed, can you imagine! In fewer than 5 or 6 instances we had to persuade or forget someone – we have avoided all kinds of pressure and bias. Out of our work, two main conclusions were reached. First, asked about their own life instead of current politics or social prospects, respondents seemed as if they had been waiting for this all along. Half a century they had talked about decisions taken at a congress or about an economic mechanism. Now they talked on their own behalf and with no script. Doesn’t that tell us that in Bulgaria today, alongside the orchestrated and paid media appearances there is freedom of speech? Doesn’t it mean that people know what it is and use it? Probably yes.

That is corroborated by the fact that we managed to record 53 interviews in a very short time. Some respondents, acquainted with the difference between spoken and recorded speech wanted to edit what they had said, others did not, being experienced in that genre. A third group did not even need our specific questions, but only a general framework for their exposé.

And an additional conclusion that came out of our work: people still have that small grain of insecurity that tomorrow may bring. It muffles the definitiveness of their conclusions. But the Fear is not there. If you remember it was still there in the 1990s, when everyone was

looking furtively behind their backs. It seems that notwithstanding the sighs: “Nothing has changed!”, “It’s all the same!” – many things have changed. And above all – we have changed. It would be a sin not to celebrate that.

It is precisely the awareness that we are different, or in other words capable of rationalizing our own life as part of a common past without “anger and bias” as the ancient philosophers said, that was the incentive to “populate history with people!” In the last half century the history we studied comprised of regularities, socio-economic formations, went from quantitative expansion to qualitative change, i.e. revolution, etc., – all big categories. The individual was banished for long and had no place – the individual, always different and in fact unique.

It was insulting that from a favorite subject for kids, from a dwelling of ‘great shadows’, a model for the adult in the making, our subject was studied on the eve of university exams with a marked resentment. A boring set of ready-made formulations and events here and there that were considered progressive. The names – usually the same ones, as a rule those of the good leaders and the heroes of socialist labour. The latter title was even bestowed on conductors and painters. Honestly speaking: how many contemporaries with their own identity who have contributed to the material and spiritual growth of the nation did we know? Did the progress of the country depend on them – who else otherwise? Here is how history became depopulated, the same thing that ails our mountainous and border regions now: lack of human offspring. Because people do not love their fathers’ land.

Let us get one thing straight: we are not suggesting for canonization individuals selected by us! The best part of every multitude is the polyphony. It is a good thing that notwithstanding the attempts to make uniform and format people it did not succeed – it seems to have been unnatural. We hope that our reader will be persuaded by our modest attempt and our lack of claims for a representative sample that each one of the interviewed Bulgarians lived, worked, fought. In their own manner but with a result; they took part.

In life and all the more in literature there burst forth unforgettable cries with tragic overtones. For instance: “Where is the drama, where am I, tell me!” How can you answer such a question? As we can feel the problem is in the “I”, the ego – which is normal. But it is not normal for this “I”, for this ego in his death-bed resignation to say: “what does an individual matter!” It does matter, it matters a lot, dear poet, since amidst the mad slaughterhouse of civil clashes in Bulgaria your name has stood out, although you considered yourself a nameless soldier. But please note – a writer!

I wish this could serve as an example: let those who consider themselves nameless speak, not necessarily on TV. No-one knows what cards history has up her sleeves – let us help her by populating her with people. It is impossible to know in advance who will turn into an emblematic figure of the near past or who will fall into oblivion notwithstanding the intense self promotion.

Incidentally, they should express themselves humbly in order to leave to the future testaments of “how they lived and how they went through life” as we read in anonymous copies of old manuscripts.

This book was made possible by the following team: professionally famous journalists with years-long extensive experience in the genre – GENKA MARKOVA, RUMYANA BRATOVANOVA, NIKOLINA DIMITROVA, GALINA RULEVA and STOIKO

STOYANOV (Kurdjali), well known with their contributions in the press and the electronic media.

Wherever the character of the issues discussed warranted it we engaged scholars as interviewers, namely Associate Professor ANTONINA ZHELYAZKOVA, PhD, expert on Balkan minorities; Senior Researcher Dr. EKATERINA NIKOVA, specialist in Balkan economic history; Associate Professor EVELINA KELBECHEVA, PhD, Associate Professor DANIELA KOLEVA, PhD, VANYA ELENKOVA – specialists on culture studies. Editing of interviews: VERA MUTAFCHIEVA, MARTA IVANOVA.

And finally, it is our honorable duty to express deep, sincere gratitude to our numerous respondents, who wholeheartedly accepted our invitation to talk or write down their answers, memories, interpretations of their professional and personal life, of their contribution to the common past. In this way they confirmed our hopes that no matter the differences in life style and background, it is possible for an objective history of the second half of the present century in Bulgaria to be built in the near future.

Once again we thank them for their selfless co-operation.

Vera Mutafchieva
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