# Unconditional Love

## STORYTELLERS



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**STORYTELLERS**

The authors of the stories in this book are health specialists, health mediators, psychologists, professionals working in the field and with various vulnerable communities from Blagoevgrad, Kazanlak, Lovech, Montana, Pleven, Pernik, Plovdiv, Ruse, Sliven, Sofia and Sungurlare.

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The edition presents stories from various authors who participated in a three-day storytelling and narrative change training conducted by professors of narrative medicine at Columbia University:



the clinical psychologist Dr. Murray Nossel, Phd, founder and director of Narrative Inc., a company specializing in storytelling training with offices in New York and London

***'Listening shapes telling. We have to want to understand people and listen openly without prejudice and assumptions.'***



the psychiatrist Dr. Paul Browde, a storyteller and family therapist, who, in addition to medicine, also graduated in acting from Drama Studio London

***'It is through stories that people can relate to one another as fellow human beings.'***

Imagine the listening as a big bowl. And the speaking - like water that you pour into this bowl. Just as water pours out and takes the shape of a bowl, so listening shapes the speech.

The listening and the storytelling are interconnected. Often, and especially nowadays, the process of this interconnection is disrupted by various obstacles.

The using of mobile phones and new technologies are just some of the possible obstacles between people in their attempts to connect emotionally and personally with each other and understand each other. They are „external" because they happen outside of us – the noise from air conditioner or refrigerator, the cars on the street, the voices in corridor ... They can also interfere with listening, the so-called 'physiological obstacles' - this is everything that happens in our body - we overeat, we need coffee, we have to go to the toilet, we are thirsty, we are hot or cold... There are also internal obstacles that can make listening difficult – these are all things that happen in our mind – obsessive thoughts, emotions, feelings, prejudices ... – they create a kind of noise and prevent us from perceiving what is being told objectively. It is interesting that we often face psychological obstacles – these are all attempts to judge

ourselves or others, to try to categorize or explain things, to put our own meaning, even before we hear the story to the end. Last but not least, the relations between us, and especially those related to subordination and positions of power, are an obstacle in communication between us.

That is why it is important, trying to listen and understand others, to create a space in which to connect with each other without obstacles.

The way we listen gives shape to the story, and the story told changes the environment and the listener, who through our words feels with our senses – what we have seen, read, smelled, tasted, touched.

As we told aloud the stories of our grandparents, we had the feeling that they were with us in the hall. Imperceptibly, one by one, the images of Bulgarians, Roma, citizens, farmers, scientists, craftsmen, heads of families, mothers – colorful people appeared and filled the space. Each of these people carried with them from the past their feelings, difficulties, values, beliefs and hopes. What united us as a group and what each of us felt was a huge, boundless and unconditional love.

**From the editors**

# The Mascot

## The story of Ismail Edipov

**Antoaneta Eftimova,**
*(born in 1976), health mediator in Blagoevgrad Municipality; Chairwoman of the Board of National Network of Health Mediators*



My name is Ismail Edipov. I was born in the spring of 1922 in the village of Barakovo, which lies on the south-western slopes of the Rila Mountain. I was born in a poor craftsman's family. My father was a smith and my mother worked in the Balabanov's factory, a prestigious paper manufacturing facility in those years.

I have three brothers and one sister. The memory of our cosy home and the affectionate love and respect we shared within the family fills me with tenderness. We were not rich, but we felt how considerate our parents were and how much they wished to give us the best they could provide for. My mother was a great housewife and her cooking was superb. I'm not sure if I've ever tasted anything more delicious than the food she prepared at home! I loved her long black hair and the unruly curls which cascaded way down the entire length of her back. It never occurred to me that those wonderful curls might become the cause to lose her and become orphaned at the age of 7… !

A huge pain devastates my heart when I remember that fatal day, which had a tremendous imprint on my entire life. It dealt an irremediable blow on me! This is the direst of loss a child could suffer in his early years! On that day, I

was playing happily in the vicinity around our house, near the factory where my mother worked. I heard human shouts approaching and I saw a small bunch of people carrying something, clustering around it. I realised that it was a human body, someone had had an accident in the factory. What had happened? I heard someone say that a soaring press had grabbed the hair of a woman, whose protective bonnet had slipped off her head. In vain have the mechanics attempted to stop the press immediately. The woman had already been lifted to a height, the scalp had severed from her skull… Blood gushed. They had tried to save her life, but all their efforts failed. I could see the group coming nearer and as they passed me by, I saw the woman's hand, swaying on the side. I recognised mummy's bracelet! My entire body froze and I was benumbed in awe. A pain unfelt before stabbed my whole being. I would never see my mother again!

I was an inquisitive child, I was outspoken and read with clear articulation, and they chose me in the class to recite the Lord's Prayer. Unexpectedly, one day our teacher escaped overseas and then the entire school decided that I had to be appointed as a teacher and deliver classes, so that the tuition process would not be discontinued until they found a substitute teacher for us. This is how I came to be nicknamed 'Ismail, the Teacher'. Although I was an orphan, I managed to complete my secondary studies in the Cart-Making and Ironwork School in the town of Dupnitsa. Over the next years, I and my schoolmates worked in the towns of Lovech and Troyan, where we were building tunnels.

In the subsequent years, after discharging my military service, I moved to live in Blagoevgrad. Being one of all four welders in town, I made the beautiful banister on the central bridge over the Bistritsa river, which runs across the city of

Blagoevgrad.

I established as a valued and respected man and I was nominated to the City Council. I was the only Roma who joined the municipal governors at that time, I stood side by side with them on the high tribunes where we greeted the parades on festival days. I believed that every man could be successful if he or she really wished it and aspired towards his or her high aims, irrespective of ethnic background.

I am happy that I was able to advocate for the allotment of land plots, so that houses for the Roma could be constructed, and thus, the so called New Roma Neighbourhood emerged. In those years, there was a Mechanical Construction Plant in Blagoevgrad and hundreds of families earned their living there. There, I trained dozens of workers and they became qualified welders. Thus, I won their recognition and gratitude, and they often found ways to express it.

In Blagoevgrad I met the most beautiful woman in those times and I married her! She was so beautiful, that they called her 'Byala Yana'*. I fell head over heels in love with her. Her name was Rukiye.

She was the daughter of an imam and I was a Christian. She also had a life full of pain, she was the mother of three young children and had become widowed after her husband had died of consumption. We got married and I took care of the children as a true father. They grew up in love and they called me 'daddy', because this is what I was to them. Then, our son Lyuben was born. He inherited my inquisitive and industrious character, my kind-hearted attitude and sincerity.

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* *Byala Yana (in Bulgarian „бяла Яна") is a folk song female character named Yana, who has a delicate white skin (byala – white). All female characters qualified as 'byala' (white ones) possess breath-taking beauty.*



I was able to teach him the subtleties of my craft and all it took to make him an artisan welder and he got the seventh-rank certificate in the profession. I am so proud of his achievements! God had blessed me with grandchildren and great-grandchildren! Thank you, God! But I had a favorite grandchild and I called her 'my talisman'! her name was Antoaneta. I loved her so much! I saw her grow up before my eyes. She often noticed that I was crying and she came to me asking: 'What makes you cry, grandpa?' When she grew up I answered her question: 'You are my favorite granddaughter and I call you 'my talisman' because you are the true copy of a person so dear to me – my mother! You look so much like her! And this striking semblance drives me to tears every time I look at you!'

I knew that everyone was valuable and unique! I believed in God and I sought His guidance every day! I loved reading and I kept reading till the last day of my life. I hope that I have transferred these values to my posterity.

I died at the age of 74, in 1996, four years after my wife Rukiye had passed away.



# Hoard

## The Story of Grandmother Ruzha

**Valentina Nedelcheva,**
*(born in 1983), social worker in Day Center for People with Special Needs*

My name is Ruzha.

I was born in Greece, in some village. When I was about 16 years old, there was a war. I had to run from Greece and come to live in Bulgaria because life was getting too hard there. I had escaped together with my family, but before we left, I remember that we buried all our possessions in the ground, so that they wouldn't fall in the hands of those who had forced us to flee. When we came to Bulgaria, we went to the town of Harmanli.

We settled there and continued our life. Several years later, I met my future husband. His name was Vasil. He had also fled from Greece about the same time as I. Our fate was to meet in Bulgaria, years later, not in Greece.

We got married and, all by ourselves, we were able to build a house and set up a real family. Three children were born to us: two boys and one girl. Our life was not an easy one. We had to suffer privation and worked in the crop field to raise our three children. They grew up and had families of their own.

My husband and I never went back to Greece to look for our forsaken treasures.

We were both buried in Bulgaria, in the town of Harmanli.

# Lost Love

## The story of Grandmother Vera



**Dr. Veronika Krastanova,**
*(born in 1971), specialist obstetric-gynecologist in Vita Hospital, Sofia; member of many Bulgarian and European associations; Chairwoman of the Board of Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association*

My name is Vera Nikolova and I was born on 8 March 1918 in the city of Vratsa, to a middle class Bulgarian family. My mother was a good-natured woman and a tasseographer of coffee grounds, so the whole city visited our place to have their cups read. I can remember that certain people came to learn something about a sick person or about any of their beloved ones. My father was a merchant, but his trade was not going well and he succumbed to alcohol. I have no good memories of my father, but just the sorry sight of him stretched in the street, when people called us out to bring him home.

I was too young and even before completing my education I had to leave the city and start working in Sofia as a weaver. I shared a rented place with Elena Dzhurova, my best friend. I will never forget how we let her beloved lad Dobri hide in the attic because he was a member of the armed resistance forces. Those were turbulent times – we had bombings, people starved and goods were rationed. Thus, I met the love of my life – the factory owners' son. Regardless of how we were trying to hide from people's eyes and be together, his parents found



out about us and sent him abroad. I accepted this turn of my life and I worked restlessly. I married a young man, who had been running after me all the time. But we weren't happy. In addition to not taking his socks off in bed, he also drank and attempted to beat me now and then. We separated, after our two daughters, Lilyana and Maria were born and had grown up a little. In my senior years, I lived alone in my own home, I loved to visit my daughters, but I invariably went back to my house for the night. I've been telling my life story to my granddaughter Veronika, and, mostly, I spoke to her about my lost love. I died of gastric ulcer haemorrhage at the age of 92. I was alone in the hallways of a hospital where I was taken in the hope that I would survive after a surgery. Now I visit them in their dreams and I tell them about my new life.

# With Veselina We had a Very Special Relationship

## The story of Pavlina NIkolova



**Veselina Ivanova**
*(born in 1984), psychologist,*
*Board member of PULSE Foundation;*
*experience in working with victims*
*of violence*

My name is Pavlina Nikolaeva NIkolova.

I was born on 15 March, 1936 in the village of Kosacha, several kilometers away from the village of Kovachevtsi. I have a twin brother named Pavel. We were the youngest of a total of eight children.

I lost my father when I was four. It was not at all easy for us and mummy. Those were hard times. Regardless of all the difficulties we faced, it was also real fun, I was an impish child and I attended school with great enthusiasm.

However, when I played tricks on the other children at school, my brother Pavel usually suffered the consequences. I don't know how it happened, but sometimes other children would beat him, at other times teachers would punish him. Most times, it was for something I'd done.

I grew up in a large family, not the ideal family, but a very united one.

After I completed the eighth grade, I left my native place and went to Sofia, to my eldest brother Bogdan. Pavel and

I lived at his place. I worked and studied. I loved the life in Sofia and, irrespective of my busy schedule, I could go to the theatre and to the movies. Bogdan, my eldest brother, was always trying to introduce me to some intelligent and good men, so that I could get married, but I felt that something was missing. In fact, I had on my mind a young man, who lived in my home village. He was a real handsome man, blue-eyed with thick dark hair, such a dapper lad that my knees begin the shake as I think of him now.

In those years, my brother Pavel used to work in a factory near Sofia and played basketball on the factory team. One day, after yet another victory, he said to me: 'Dear sister, our team is going to play in Czechoslovakia. Can you imagine? I will travel and see another country. I'm so happy.'

I was also very happy about my brother! How paradoxical we looked: he was almost 2 meter tall and I was 1.60! We were very close, we kept together and I always felt calm and confident while he was around.

This trip was a turning point in my life as well. After it, my brother stayed in Prague, where he began to work. He fell in love with a very nice and beautiful lady there and they set up a family. They had two children, a son and a daughter. I was so happy for him, but deeply sad, also.

After some time I also married my beloved Vasil, about whom I already told you. We loved each other very much. Well, just like in any family, we had moments, which were not at all so happy or peaceful. We were able to build two houses: one in the city of Pernik, where we resided permanently, and a summer souse in the village of our childhood, where we also spent the years after retirement, amidst the purity of nature.

Vasil and I were working in the Struma factory, in Pernik.

They paid us decent money and we provided quite well for our daughters. Yes, we had two wonderful daughters, Elisaveta and Magdalena. My firstborn daughter gave me two granddaughters: Veselina and Radoslava. Our younger daughter was just not resolute enough to bond herself emotionally to anyone. Nobody seemed to be good enough for her, but she didn't mind enjoying and taking care of her nieces.

Both my granddaughters were very dear to me, but Veselina and I had something special between us. We loved each other very much and I probably treated her in a way much different than I had ever treated any of my daughters. Although she was named after her grandfather Vasil, her father (Georgi) said that she was named after the character of the famous rock ballad 'Veselina' of the Bulgarian rock band Shturtsite (The Crickets).

I left this world on 6 October, 2008. I was surrounded by all my beloved ones and I joined all who have already made their way to heaven before me.

I can definitely say that I had a happy life, with its difficult and wonderful moments.

# Guests in America

## The story of Stoyka Nenova

**Violeta Koleva**
*(born in 1981), speech therapist in Day Center for Children with Special Educational Needs in Sliven*



*With my granddaughter Stilijana*

My name is Stoyka, I am 78 years old and I still live.

I was born on 24 March, 1940 in Vulchin, a small village near the town of Karnobat. My mother was called Neda. She and my father Zheko were poor and kind-hearted people, they lived up to advanced old age and they saw grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I had a sister and a brother, they both died. I cried a lot when they left this world and I still happen to cry secretly on holidays. My sister was a benevolent and hard-working woman. For whole days she was digging the garden, washing the laundry, doing the house chores and taking care of the children. Her house always smelled of bread and hot cooking. I often repeat her words to my granddaughters: 'People work so much that they can't take a breath of air, and you sit here idling.' I do it because they are sometimes lazy and they feel aversion for the work rural people do. My brother was a large and strong man with huge rough hands. His worked on a big truck and his clothes were always smeary with oil. He worked enough for three, but his sons were not like him unfortunately. I had a happy childhood, I loved to graze the animals in the meadow, to feel the scent of the grass and to run after the sheep. I loved to put the horses into the cart and ride around the village, meet my girl-friends and sing songs, we loved to go to the village's square and dance horo.

I met my husband while my brother was serving in the

army. One evening he brought him to our place and we fell in love at first sight. He was a handsome and good young man and he lived in the neighboring village of Gorovo. I can remember how he used to came to see me on his bike and I mounted on the frame and took rides with him. We got married immediately after they discharged their military service. Together with his brother and his brother's wife, we moved to Sliven, the nearest big city, to start building our new life. I and my sister-in-law began working in the textile mill, while the two brothers drove trucks in state enterprises. We started building a house. We had to do the work ourselves and with my both hands I was carrying the heavy buckets of lime and cement and I handed bricks to the builders. We spent all our money on the house. I had only one dress and my husband didn't even have a jacket. I can't remember how many wedding invitations we had to refuse or otherwise we would have to buy something new to wear and we wouldn't make the house. But we made it. In this house, we raised our two children, a son and a daughter. We were happy.

In 1992, fate struck a heavy blow on me: my husband died only at 52. I suffered immensely. I cried for whole days, sometimes I fainted, I had nothing to live for without my Neno. My children were very concerned about me and my daughter's family even moved to stay with me for a while.

My daughter is married and she has two daughters. My son is younger and in 2008 he went to live in America with his wife and my youngest granddaughter, who is named after me. I miss them a lot although my son comes back every summer. When they lived with me, the house was full of children's laughter, now it's empty and I live alone. My granddaughters never leave me alone, they take care of me, they help in everything. When we are together they love to hear stories about my childhood, how I met their grandpa, how we came to the city, what sort of childhood their mother had. And how once, she threw away half

of the potatoes I had given her to peel, so as to finish faster and go out with her friends. I love to make them laugh with some old jokes and curses like: 'A male goat's testicles would sway, but not fall', 'Don't look at me like a kitten, whose mother had had a f**k on the roof tiles.'

I miss my youngest granddaughter a lot, I have raised her from a piece of flesh. Three years ago I visited them in the States. It was so nice, I felt calm, we often went to the stores with my son and my granddaughter took me to cafeteria with her friends. We frequently went to the neighboring city where there was a big hotel with a casino and we stayed for 2-3 days. My daughter-in-law and I played on the machines, I drank beer, we had a lot of fun and I even won small amounts now and then. They took me to a Chinese restaurant where you pay first and then you eat whatever you want and as much as you want. This was where I saw Mormons for the first time. I was raking the leaves in front of the house when they approached me and began to speak. I got scared and I told them to go away in Bulgarian, then I ran home. Afterwards I realized that they had wanted to help me. Now that I know I won't be afraid. After several days I am about to depart for the US again. I am a little afraid of the flight and I am concerned about the costs of any medical treatment, if I happen to fall ill there. It's very expensive there and I have a lot of health issues. Last time, I had bilious attack. Wow, what hospitals they have and how they cared about me... The doctors visited me in my room and I didn't have to go to them myself. Although my granddaughter was interpreting, they found an interpreter, to make sure that they were getting the true story. This time I will stay there for six months. They will take me to Las Vegas and to some saline lake. I am a happy woman. Only that I miss my husband a lot. I don't know why God still keeps me away from him, but until then, I will live for my wonderful children and grandchildren.

# Betrayal

## The story of Mariyka Georgieva

**Diana Georgieva**
*(born in 1985), art therapist in Day Center for People with Disabilities in Kazanlak*



My name is Mariyka Staykova Georgieva.

I was born in a poor family, in the small village of Karavelovo, Yambol region. I have one sister and two brothers. Zhelka, my sister, died 20 years ago, and my brother Ivan followed shortly after.

We lived peacefully, I worked the crop field with my mom and dad and we sustained ourselves on the yield. I enrolled for studies in the city of Yambol and I started work as a laboratory assistant – a job, which I kept until my retirement.

I met a wonderful young man, also from Yambol, and he was a sailor. We set up a family together and had two daughters, Stanka and Milanka. We had a wonderful life. I felt loved and appreciated.

We started our own business: a dairy farm. We had to bring up our children 'on the go'. My husband died 22 years ago. He was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, a rare disease which crippled him. He moved with difficulty and one day he fell and broke a leg. He was confined to his bed and I took care of him until he exhaled his last breath.

After he died, my life changed irreversibly. My daughter forced me to leave the home, which my husband and I had built

together. She banished me because she wanted me to transfer the property over to her. But I could see that she wouldn't bother to look after me. That's why I went to my younger daughter's home, in Kazanlak. She lived with her second husband and with their three children in a house of their own. From the very beginning, I knew that putting up with her wouldn't be an easy task, but I had no choice. Her father and I could not accept her divorce. Up until today, I cannot forgive my elder daughter for her betrayal. She repented and apologised to me, but my heart was chilled.

Today, I still live, and I am 86 years old. I have a lot of grandchildren and greatgrandchildren. I'm old and very tired already. My legs hurt, I have problems with my kidneys and my heart. I can still move, but I find it difficult. I feel I am a burden to my daughter. She takes good care of me, but I still feel that her second husband does not quite accept me. We can't get to terms with him. Sometimes, I am sad and very lonely. Often, I can't sleep at night and I cry. I wish I could wind back the hands of time and change the course of things, but I know that this is impossible. Still, I am happy to be alive and to have so many things to enjoy around.

# The Best Suit

## The story of Zahari Ivanov

**Zahari Atanasov**
*(born in 1976), health mediator in Chubra, Sungurlare Municipality, work with roma community and vulnerable groups*



*Karnobat, late 70s.*
*Together with my biggest and middle son and my daughter in law – the wife of my middle son*

My name is Zahari Atanasov Ivanov.

I was born at the beginning of the 20th century, around 1920, in the village of Yabalchevo, Burgas district. My parents separated when I was three, I could never find out why. My mother moved to a small village named Chubra and took me with her because I was the youngest child. Shortly afterwards, she met a widower with two children. Thus, we all began to live together. I can't say that my childhood was easy, but yet, I was happy.

Since my very early years, I had to start working and I worked hard. People in the village respected my for this. As a youth I met one of the most beautiful maids in the village. We lived poorly, but happily, she gave me six children: three girls and three boys. To my and the children's most grievous misfortune, at the age of forty my wife suddenly fell ill and left this world. I was left alone with the children. Thereafter, my daughters married quickly and, regardless of the difficulties, I

was able to provide for the education of my three sons.

Time passed. My sons also got married and set up their own homes. I had grandchildren and I loved them dearly. Although I was of Romani origin, I had authority and people in the village treated me with respect. After some time, however, rumour had it that my eldest son had a secret relationship with my middle son's wife. I felt horrified of these rumours and I was very ashamed. I refused to believe. However, after some time, to my bitter disappointment, I found out that it was true. All this was too much for me. I was ashamed of my son and I couldn't believe I had raised such a child! I couldn't live anymore and I thought that I had failed as a father. To me, this was a disgrace. Thus, in the summer of 1982, I decided to put an end to my life. I bathed, I put on my best suit and I hung myself.



# Naughtier than the Boys

## The story of Kanat Agusheva

**Katya Kirilova**
*(born in 1969), health mediator in Blagoevgrad Municipality; work with roma community and vulnerable groups*



My name is Kanat Rasimova Agusheva. I was born in 1911. We were two children in the family, I have a younger brother, Vasko. We had a 6-decare field, where we grew tobacco. My mother spent the whole day in the field, working. My father went to gather wood in the forest and sold it. People had nicknamed him 'Babadjan', which means 'a big and strong man'. This was a joke, because he was small and thin.

All people in the neighborhood knew that he helped the rebels in the forest and that he brought them bread and water.

When the Turks found out they went out in the forest to look for him. After searching for a while, they had met my father and asked him how they could capture Babadjan. He replied that this was what people called him. The Turks started laughing and poking fun at him.

My brother became an apprentice to a shoemaker, so that he could learn the art. Because I was a girl, I went working on the field with my mother.

When I turned 18, I married a boy, who had been found and raised by gipsies in the town of Petrich. He was a very kind and hard-working person. He was a shoemaker and we opened a store with 12 apprentices. I gave birth to three children; two boys and one girl. I can say that I loved my elder son most.

When the children got married, my husband started drinking. Of all my three children, I had 6 grandsons and only one granddaughter, Katya, who was unrulier than all the boys. This girl was born when my husband died. I drew distinctions between my grandchildren. I felt greater love for the children of my elder son Nail. Katya was the daughter of my youngest son, Doncho. This girl didn't like me at all, because she could see I treated my grandchildren differently, but her father insisted that she would come and visit me. He ordered her to do some shopping in case I needed anything, etc.

At the age of 60, from time to time, I began to forget all and everything. I died when I was 80.



# The First Bunch of Grapes

## The story of Velcho Velchev

**Dr. Kina Velcheva**
*(born in 1978), midwife, teacher in an obstetrics school in Ruse, coordinator of Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health in Ruse*



I am a tall, strong and powerful Bulgarian. I was named after my grandfather, Velcho, who was a voivode and has inherited his name from his grandfather. And today, my grandson bears that name with pride. In my passport, the name is the same as that of my grandson, Velcho Dosev Velchev. They have nicknamed me Velcho, the Kapan , and this is what I tell them, that I easily get angry and lose my patience…, well, I start speaking the Kapan way and this is why they call us 'chaprashik people' (quick-tempered).

My grandpa said that we originated from the unruly posterity of those boilas , who lived in the 9th century under the rule of Boris I of Bulgaria, who had sent our folks in exile (in 'kapan', which means 'a trap', 'entrapped') west of the capital Pliska, in the summer of 865, when he wanted to convert us to Christianity, but we wanted to follow our own customs. So, they had tried to harness our nature, but even now we wouldn't obey or follow anyone.

Later on, the fez-headed ones came and even today some, who are ashamed of their Bulgarian background, tend to bow to them. They saw that we wouldn't be easily driven to obedience and slavery, so they decided to capture the strong



men and the older folk, and together with the children and the babies, to put them in the casks, where we stored our wine. Then they sealed the tops of the casks in an intention to kill the entire folk. They kicked the casks down the hillslopes, so that the rocky stones would break the bones of any surviving soul. The people inside were entrapped. But ours was a strong tribe, we made it downhill and the casks protected us from the rocks, but burst to pieces down the ravine. My people went out, even stronger and more robust than before. Then the Turks said to themselves: 'Those people are the entrapped ones (kapanmış), nothing kills them, but it only gets them madder'. And they left us alone. So, this is where my nickname comes from: 'the Kapan'. We are known to be headstrong and stubborn because we are ready to die for what we believe in.

Well, sometime after, when I was about to get married, you can't believe what a refined lady I stole from the city, oh, you should have seen her! She never laid her hands on a hoe! So, our children had to name our granddaughter Kina after her (I could take no objections on this point), because we had no daughter and this girl had to be mine. And in autumn, the



first bunch of grapes, because I used to count the biggest ones, which were overhanging the doorstep, would always be for her (it doesn't matter that later she didn't marry one of our men, the Kapans, but a Hartsoyn , Ivlaylo). Nobody dared to touch the big berries of the grapes meant for her. So, when she came back from the big city, she would pick the grapes from the vine herself. Well…, a lot of grapes was left to dry on the old vine trellis in front of the house, but down the big cellar, which was about 5 metres high, there was always a bunch being dried for her… in the hope that she would come by springtime and taste it.

I changed jobs as a supplier, a barber, a winemaker, a butcher, but I also sold wine and rakiya. Well, I knew how to get the easy work and I was an expert.

I built my house myself, I made it small, so that it wouldn't be spotted from the road, but you should see the cellar! It was huge, two-storied, spacious, My little KIna would get lost in it, as a tiny bug. The sides were arched and low, so that you had to crouch, your head sweeping off the cobwebs. But in bad times you could hide there and wait until the turbulence was over. There was a stairway leading down, an endless descent which



landed you against the large mouths of the large wooden casks. Don't be stupid to doubt how low or how high they were positioned: two spans from the ground, so that the bucket could stand freely under the tap! Only the children were allowed to go down there and they knew that in hard times we could all go down there and hide behind the thick planks of the casks, framed within the strongest metal hoops, so that, if they had to be rolled down the hillside again, they would hold until we hit the lowest ground.

I didn't count of the casks only, I had two flintlock rifles, but nobody knew about them because they could get you in prison for this. And prisons were not a good place, I know. Well, I couldn't hold my tongue too much in those days and the party guys decided I was trouble, so, for some time they sent me to shave the prisoners. This is how I learned and mastered my profession.

I had taught all my kinsfolk the butchers' tricks, so that they wouldn't fear anything. When you grab the knife, you have to hold it tight and not regret a move. This is what I taught my little Kina, to stab the pig two fingers behind the

ear, stab once with great force, without fear. Then twist, not to forget to twist deep to the point of the blade, down the throat. The smaller the hole, the tastier karvavitsa sausage (black pudding) could be made later.

But most of all, I loved the autumn, when I could get my hands on that juicy bunch of black grapes, big and sticky, oozing its nectar in my fingers. I can still feel the sweet aroma, so strong and heady, sugary to a tinge of bitterness in the aftertaste, bound to make a real good wine. I was good at it, a true master... I was always aiming to get the best of the grapes yield, or otherwise the wood of the casks would dry, and we had to keep them. So, I often went down the cellar to see how it progressed. Oh, the wine! It was thick, red and foamy on the rim, boiling over and calming down, once it reached my dry throat. You must know it from me, there is nothing better than the grapes you can find in this land.

Well, have you seen my little Kina these days? She resembles me – she is long-legged and ready to carry the banner. Her father always wanted to break her, but I wouldn't let even one hair of her head perish and I would swipe around at them with my wooden walking cane. Then he quickly realized that he was wrong and I didn't have to even speak. So, he and my wife knew it all too well, that I couldn't walk too much, but I made it for 11 years with the walking cane, and I raised it to strike…, when they wouldn't listen, if I could get to them. This was a remnant of the left-sided stroke. They all said: 'He's going to die.' But as for us, the butchers, we can't be killed by such things. So, I lived for another ten-eleven glorious summers after I got this hell of a stroke.

I hear them say that I had passed away. It was on St. Peter's Day in 1995, after I had turned 73. Come on, I am a Kapan. I am still here, but you don't know it …

# Everyone was Welcome in my Home

## The story of Totka Poplazarova



**Maria Kaloyanova**
*(born in 1969), mathematics and informatics teacher in 1st Secondary School 'Pencho Slaveykov'; volunteer of Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association*

I lived to be 102 years old and I saw a lot; I had a world of my own where I dwelled, so as to avoid standing in other people's ways. I was born on 19 May 1910, at Orlovska Str., in the city of Gabrovo. This date applied after the calendar reform, it used to be different in the old days. Therefore, no zodiac signs apply for me. When we were kids, we used to play with rag-dolls, which we made ourselves, and boys used to kick rag balls. The boys in my street were crazy about football. At a certain point, they set up one of the first football teams by the name of Orlovets and they played games with the boys in the upper street. I was the eldest child of my father Gatyo's second wife. I was a student in the Aprilovska Secondary School. I proudly wore the beret with the school insignia and I had my long hair in braids rolled behind my ears. In those times, we had only one student of outstanding excellence in the school, his name was Razum Andreychin and he was in my class. He was sort of clumsy, but whatever they asked him in any subject, he knew everything. Thereafter, he became a scientist, a physicist, and he made discoveries, but some of those discoveries, which changed the world. I was

good at calculations and a factory owner offered me support to continue my studies in Sofia and then start work in his factory, but my father would not allow it. Someone had to take care of the younger children. My mother was weaving, knitting, doing embroidery and all kinds of fine needlework and I learned it from her while helping. Now I believe that since my very early years, I was getting prepared to be the mistress of the house. And, looking back in time, I think that life then might not have been that comfortable, but people were more kind-hearted. After my secondary studies, when I felt grown-up, I clipped my hair. I had to wait long for my prince and I rejected many a good boys. I married Lazar, my man, the best man ever. He was a driver. The first thing we bought when we got married, was a radio. All our belongings could fit in my husband's soldier's trunk. We moved to live in Sevlievo. We rented lodgings and used the trunk as a table. We had to move the radio, which stood on top of the trunk, to lay our meals. We bought an old Turkish house with a big yard and we built our own home – single-storeyed with two entrances, which had a cool, spacious, high-ceiling cellar and a big staircase, where I grew potted flowers. My husband was very handy and had a big heart, so he helped everyone. People loved him and sometimes we received presents. A colleague of his gave us a sour cherry tree. We planted it and it turned out to yield the most delicious cherries! You just cannot imagine how many jars of jam, compote, cherry syrup and sour cherry liqueur I had made! We reused the materials from the old house to construct two additional rooms and a wonderful summer kitchen, which had one side open to the yard. Later, it became the children's favorite place. The children! I had a miscarriage. For 5 years we couldn't have children. Finally, I got pregnant again. I can

remember the burning hot summer of 1941, when we had to live in the cellar to have some coolness. I gave birth to Stefancho in the maternity home. Who on earth could have ever thought that this small and helpless baby would grow up to be a 2-meter tall man! When he applied for a passport, he changed his name to Stefan. He also changed his family name, Poplazarov, because he didn't want to have anything in common with 'priests'. I think he didn't want to be in trouble with the political authorities back then. My daughter has always taken pride that she was the granddaughter of a priest. She was born at home, 5 years after her brother. Lazar was very happy. He went out in the yard to pick up some geranium for me and, upon entering the house, he thought to himself: 'We'll give her the name of Zdrava, so that she would be healthy! Well, what a great daughter I happened to have! She is so naturally skillful in everything! She could do any work! She was both intelligent and handy. She could paint and draw well since early childhood and instead of having to attend school brigades, she went to factories, where she painted. I wanted to teach her to do everything I knew, and I did. She even surpassed me: she learned to tailor and sew, she worked as an apprentice with a seamstress, she cooks better than me, with so much imagination. She wanted to become an architect, but she started playing basketball and she had no time to draw. But when she told me that she was admitted to study sports at the National Sports Academy I just couldn't take it! How could I tell the neighbors that my daughter would be earning her bread with the ball!! We had a mighty fight. In order to prove to me that she could handle the most challenging academic studies, she acquired degrees in both mathematics and physics. She moved out of the house at the age of 18. And for the better, though,

because we had to squeeze… The authorities took two rooms from us, because communist activists were arriving from the villages and had no place to live. We had been enjoying space 'unduly' (according to them). Some chief officer from the militia service came to live in two of our rooms. His mother was always nosy about our conversations, what I cooked, how often I fried meatballs… They could hardly bear the fact that I was not working. I never had any job. I did needlework at home. I was a master of crochet and knitting. At one point I was knitting babywear which they purchased to export abroad. I had a husband, who could take care of me and I was happy to meet him and see him off. He wouldn't hear a word about me getting a job and people found him hard to sway. Drivers in those times were often not coming back for the night. For instance, when he drove to Sofia, he would stop on the outskirts of the city, near the Eagle's Bridge, spend the night there, and come back on the next day. If the bus got broken, he would fix it by himself. Lazar used to help a lot to the guerrilla men, he loaded bags of food on the bus and brought the supplies to them. Not because they were the guerrillas, but because they were humans. And, only girls of easy virtue… would join them in the woods. But when they came to power, it became really frightful. They got rid of everyone against whom they held a grudge. I learned to speak quietly. I took care of the house, of my children, and even of my brother's children, as he also came to live in Sevlievo and his wife had to go to work, although she was far from being the most hardworking person I'd met. Well, at least we kept the rooms. We were forced to sell the stairway passage to one of their followers. They took away the beautiful staircase with the flowerpots, a section of the yard and I couldn't even use my attic because

he wouldn't let us get there. He was like a beast. He shouted, I couldn't figure out if he battered anyone. His son hit and killed a man with his car, while he was in the army, but they acquitted him. I am afraid of these people. Lazar was trying to be kind to them while settling issues, but it didn't work. They kept giving us promises on which they never delivered. They also made us sell half the yard, it was way too big for us, they said. They built a block of flats. Once we went on a family vacation to the seaside. I had to knit everyone's bathing suits. So, life went on, at least, they didn't take away my flowers. I overwintered them in the cellar, which I used instead as a fridge during the summer. I had a fridge also, one of the first refrigerators those days. It kept working for as long as I lived. And the radio was also fit, I can see that it's working even now.

My son got married and I had a granddaughter, but he couldn't find a decent wife. My daughter got married to a man, who was both a driver and a mechanic. He was such a kind-hearted man, but was also very, very lazy! So, it was her turn now to have twins, because they came every other generation, right? I had twin sisters, but one of them died as a small child: she had a low-height fall. I took great care of my brother and my other sister. She married a tailor from Gabrovo, an incredible jokester. The three of us were very close and so were our families. Zdravka got pregnant but something went wrong and the child died within her. They saved her life. Then she was pregnant again with twins, but only one child survived. It was a very rare case, they said. The doctors didn't give much chance. Thus, our granddaughter Maria was born. She insisted that the child would be called this way because this was the christening name given to her by priest Marko. She was brought to me



when she was a couple of months old and I looked after her until she turned five. Thereafter, she came for the school holidays. She had a lot of trouble with her tonsils and was allergic to mosquitoes. All summer I had to cut and I cleaned with spirits the herpetic sores caused by mosquito bites and I treated them with a purple medication liquid, which blotched all her clothes and covers. Until she turned five and had her tonsils removed (as were the rules in those years) Mimi was unable to swallow and vomited often. No one could imagine how many blankets and clothes I've washed! She often got sick. Sometimes, I had to carry her in my arms to the hospital at the end of town. Lazar continued to work after his retirement. He became a railroad watchman and he had to take night shifts. Sometimes, he would take somebody's car and drive her, although he was not actively driving. The little thing often had high fever. Her grandpa would heat a brick in the oven, wrap it in a cloth and put it under her feet. In the days back then, only two types of antibiotics were prescribed and we had to use some old, traditional cures, such as putting a cotton pad soaked with

rakiya on her chest, tea, honey, lemon. I had allergic asthma. It had dwindled away over the years, but then it gave me real trouble. When the linden-trees bloomed I had shortness of breath. It caused me great suffering, but wouldn't kill me, after all. However, I always had linden blossom for tea and I loved it. Lazar picked the flowers. Luckily, there were a lot of linden-trees around us. Mimi was such a fastidious child. So I made her drink milk every day at about 10 o'clock and at 4 p.m. I never left the house without some tempting homemade muffin cakes, cookies and buns as an afternoon refreshment. She would take a nibble now and then. Anyway, I could never teach her to eat meals at regular hours. For me, 12 is the lunch hour, no objections. I don't understand how they agree to it, what kind of job could make you take meals at any hour! When you get up, you have to take breakfast, then take a bite at 10 o'clock – a biscuit, a candy, some Turkish delight. When the hour stroke for lunch, I would stomp my foot on the kitchen floor, above Lazar's workshop and he would rush to wash his hands. Any other time I needed him, I would have to stomp my foot again, because he tended to be slow. Afterwards, the house would be prepared for guests. You never knew who could drop by, occasionally. Afternoon sleep. Then, leisure with friends. We would gather to do handwork, female friends and kin, often at home. We would sip coffee, and it goes well with sweets. Dinner was at 6:30 p.m. or 7:00 at the latest. Then we read, we played games. While Mimi was a small child, she always insisted that someone would read out loud to her. But you couldn't do this all the time, her grandpa and I were not always available, so she had to learn to read alone. She learned by herself. She knew a lot of stories and poems by heart. She started memorising how words were spelled. A very inquisitive

child, she knew riddles and sayings, she always wanted to know who wrote which story, what he or she was. She wanted to become a writer. Or a ballerina. Eventually, a shop assistant. Once, during the celebrations on 24 May, when she was in her primary school years, I was visiting them in Kardzhali. There was a parade. I saw that they were all wearing shoulder-to-waist straps inscribed 'Excellent student'. 'Are all of you top achievers?', I asked. And she replied proudly: 'Yes!' Well, this must be falsified. There is no chance that so many people would excel in everything. I told her about Razum. It is enough, I said, that everyone does wholeheartedly what they are best at, you don't need to pretend you're more than yourself. Lazar got very sick in those years. He hadn't taken an aspirin pill in his life, but, well, tides turn. The doctors, out of good intention to help, shortened his days. His doctor said that they had given him wrong prescriptions because they didn't know that he had never taken any medications. He had been helping them as a friend in life, as well. He died at home. The whole town gathered at the funeral. It was 10 degrees below zero. All priests in town came of their own accord and read the funeral service. In those times, it was very important to account if a funeral was a civil or a religious one. Religious funerals might even lead to losing one's job. So, I was left alone. I didn't know how to manage my life. I didn't even go shopping regularly! Lazar took care that the house would be supplied with all we needed and that all house utilities worked properly. I didn't even have to remind him that we were going to be out of anything soon. I was growing children, flowers and chickens. I reared the chicks just as I grew the children. I took them from the hatching box when they were a day or two old and took care of them until they

grew up. We never bought eggs and chicken meat from the store. And now it turned out that almost a whole life was awaiting me and I was all alone, without my husband. I learned to sow parsley, tomatoes and cucumbers. I knew nothing about those things before. We have never had land, nor vines, nor plum-trees, we never even made wine or rakiya, probably because we never drank any. I had to survive and I had to help my children. And I helped them. My daughter moved to different cities and places but she always found time to come and help me to maintain the house. It had over 60 windows, painting them took forever. Washing them took just as long. And I kept giving the rooms a whitewash every summer and I swept the sidewalks every day. I kept receiving friends at home and we laughed together. It was such a blessing when your children came to visit and the house's walls filled with laughter and funny jokes. Zdravka was a lover of travels since she was a kid, so she bought a small Fiat and took Mimi and me to trips all around Bulgaria. I don't like travelling, I get sick. But there were so many interesting places to see. Tough years came again, there was a crisis, a change of power. People didn't change, however. And now the ones, who would fire someone from work for attending a church service, would line up in the first raw and hold the biggest candles, as if it was a competition. Stefan, my son, travelled around the country for a while and then he came home. Now I had someone to comment on football games with. Because my female friends and neighbours were not interested. Well, for as long as I had my friends and neighbours and we gathered home in the evenings to do handwork and chat, it was all well. But they passed away with the years. It feels so lonely to remain with no friends at all. Thank God, young people and children

come. I love children and I love to tease them. Mostly, as I go out for a walk. I walked every day, movement is important. Life seems to have changed a lot. And since they started flying in space, things started looking somewhat different. Technology developed too much and I can't say this it is for the better. Once, it must have been during the crisis under Videnov's government, I had to walk to a far-away store to buy oil. Five glass bottles, I remember. And as I was walking back, my feet started hurting so bad! I noticed that I was getting old. Mimi, who was not always the most tactful person, especially after she became a mother, laughed at me, and her mother said that she wouldn't carry 5 bottles of oil on a single shopping round, even if the store was just across the street. My daughter always complains that she has some problems with her bones, she works a lot and she does everything by herself. I used to have back pain in my 60s, but it fixed by itself later. They were joking with me about my age, even about the fact that ethnologists came to ask me questions about the customs in Gabrovo, in Sevlievo, and also about the traditional dishes and handwork.

My son died. It seemed like life was over for me. I no longer had the same vigour and zest. The rooms were empty, the house was quiet, it all became so sad. I couldn't recover from this blow. Although my daughter came often and I went to visit her, something had broken within me. I couldn't get to terms with this daughter of mine. Even when she would buy me clothes as presents, they were designed for grandmothers! She had to wear them herself, afterwards. I told them not to dress in black when I die, I don't like it at all. Since I remember myself, every night I have been praying to God and whispering that 'Prayer' poem by Ivan Vasov, which we learned as first-graders:

*Oh, my Father God, forgive me,*
*From all my soul I do entreat.*
*Power of reasoning thou give me,*
*So that no sin can I commit.*
*Please, keep my heart away and shielded*
*Off wrong and evil thoughts and deeds.*
*Thou, who beholds entire heavens,*
*Do not send evil at my door.*
*Give to my mummy and my daddy*
*Good health, and strength, and life,*
*Give peace and love to all my brothers*
*And grace with kindness all our folk.*

Since I felt that my time was near, I prayed to Him to spare me from any long illness, but let me die in my sleep. He almost granted my wish. First, I had a bad fall. I had had quite a number of falls actually, and I often had accidents, but Zdravka was taking good care of me and had doctors see me, while Mimi bandaged me. Once, I poured boiling water on my hands. Afterwards, I needed help in everything and I felt guilty, when they spoon-fed me because I hadn't worked, so I had no right to eat . On another occasion, I hit my head in the open lid of a big waste container. At that time, I had cataract on one eye and my vision was dim. I had a surgery and I could see again. With age, my other eye also developed a cataract, but nobody wanted to give me a surgery. I couldn't understand the reasons. I assume it had something to do with my old age, but they didn't explain. I was very worried that I might go blind. How would I live if it happened! With time my wounds healed slowly. The children were managing my condition somehow. I was 97 when many people thought I was a goner. I fell on the

street and I cracked my pelvis. Well, but there was still time ahead of me! The doctors had X-rayed me and said: 'Zdravka must come and take her mother home." So, she came and took me home. I don't remember it, I was unconscious and I seemed dead. Her son-in law and a neighbour had taken me upstairs, to the apartment. Zdravka was taking great care of me, she did everything about my food and exercise. And I was also a fighter and I wouldn't stop moving. Two months later, I was back on my feet. In the third month, I could walk. When I began to walk, she bought me a walker, afterwards – a walking cane. When that neighbour saw me, the one who had carried me upstairs, when he saw me climbing up and down, he knew me and he couldn't believe. Zdravka wouldn't allow me to walk around the neighbourhood because I was a stranger and she doubted that people would help me if I fell. And she always demanded that I had to prop on the cane, or I might fall again if I got dizzy. But, while I was still in bed, I got high blood pressure. She was mindful and called the doctor. I was given an ECG test! I asked the doctor detailed questions about the wiring, the graph lines and what sense he made of them. Wow, how much medicine has progressed! He prescribed me some pills, but they were only a reason for further quarrels with my kin, especially after I went back home to Sevlievo. I didn't take them, when I felt well. And Zdravka was upset about it because they had to be taken regularly. Mimi reminded me not to get her angry because she was putting so much effort to keep me well and safe. But would I have lived so many years if I heeded what doctors said! The little one advised me to discard some of them and make it look as if I was regular. I had thought of it, but I forgot to do so. Afterwards, life got harder to manage all on one's own (or at least, Zdravka said so) and urged me to

go to her place. Damn, life in a flat is no life at all! You get to know these walls too well, too soon. You're imprisoned. Or is it because you're not in your own house? Or you don't belong to this new century, especially this one... I couldn't live in a different place, I'm not like her. Now, people can travel fast and far. My granddaughter showed me what her friends were doing in America, while she talked to them online. The shop doors open in front of you by themselves. It all seems like the devil's work, but let's wait and see. I began to change, I said untypical things although in my kind of way; I sometimes failed to recognise the people around me. Very old age is a difficult thing, especially those near you. I was probably messing up things, because from a certain point onwards I couldn't find any knives, scissors or even an ordinary matchbox. I spent my last year in a home for the elderly, and I recognised my folks less and less. Probably the last face, which faded from my memory, was that of Bogdan, Mimi's son and my great-grandson. He was a very kind-hearted child, smart and inquisitive as his mother. She had a daughter. The age gap between us was 90 years and I can't remember her so well. It's hard to get by when you're so old. A lot of memories from different periods intersect in your mind, but they mingle and you find them hard to trace. Then they go. Same with words. You want to speak, words cross your thoughts, but veer away before you catch them. I remember my 101st birthday, but on my 102nd birthday I already felt week and I mostly slept. God granted my prayers. I died on a splendid day – 24 May, 2012.

I had a home where everyone was well received and welcome. I had a home where my family gathered and we didn't miss anything. And my life was not an easy one, no. I just never gave up.

# The Dug Church

## The story of Tsonyo Chavrov

**Milen Chavrov**
*(born in 1968), consultant and educator on topics, connected with HIV/AIDS and sexual transmitted infections; work with people, living with HIV*

My name is Tsonyo Chavrov and I was born in 1900.

I spent my entire life in the village of Krasen, near the city of Ruse.

Ours is an ancient village, and a rich one. It is located 16 km away from the city, in the picturesque canyon of the Rusenski Lom river, very near the famous Ivanovski Rock Monasteries.

We built the houses in the village by ourselves, using the famous Ruse limestone, which was extracted from the river rocks and widely used for veneering works in the country.

Even the mausoleum for the communist leader Georgi Dimitrov was built with our stone and probably this is why they had such troubles demolishing it later.

Caves opened where the stone had been extracted and they started mushroom cultivation inside. The village became the biggest mushroom producer in Bulgaria. They even built a processing factory and the produce was exported in many countries.

There was a saying about our village that no Turk could spend the night there. We were not bad people and there was no problem to work with the Turks if they came, but ours was not a mixed village and there were no Turkish houses, probably because we were fervent Christians, which is confirmed by the fact that our rock church was one of the oldest in the North-East of Bulgaria.

The history of the church was lost over the centuries, just as the history of my family name – Chavrov. All we know was that it didn't exist anywhere else in Bulgaria, except for the strange fact that there are two families in the village with the same surname, but with no blood relationship.

My wife Gina and I met when we were young, as was usual for those years, and we had three children, which, following strictly the Christian tradition, we named Pavel, Yordanka (we called her Dana) and Mihail. Pavel and Dana stayed near us. He lived in Ruse and she stayed in the village, but Mihail gradually moved away from us.

I will speak about him most because he had a most interesting life, although he had set up his family away from his birthplace, but when I was infirm, he came back and took care of me until my last day.

Mihail was a quick learner and he first attended the ship-building school in Ruse, and thereafter, they sent him to discharge his military service in Varna, away from the city.

It so happened that he got involved in the recovery of the Bulgarian submarine fleet after World War II. They sent him for qualification training in the city of Odessa, within the former Soviet Union, and then he had to serve on the first post-war M-35 submarines, the so-called 'Malyutka'.

After his mandatory military service elapsed, Mihail became a professional army officer and remained in service on the submarine fleet, while in the meantime he got married and graced me with two grandchildren, Galina and Milen.

My son served on the next (and last for Bulgaria) generation of submarine vessels, up until his retirement.

Although his life story was the most interesting one and I am telling it now, we didn't always get along well. It is for a reason that he and my other children were named after

biblical characters, because I was the bellman of our ancient church. But Mihail never really recognized the Christian faith as a most cherished credo, probably because in those times, if you wanted to serve in the fleet you only had to be faithful to the party in power.

When he left the fleet, for some time, he worked on commercial vessels and at other places, but he always found the way to come back in the village and see me, and finally, he stayed to the end.

I left this world in 1989, when my grandson Milen was in his second year in the navy, on a ship in the Varna fleet.

He and I had no big chances to get to know each other, because he only came for the holidays and he was still small, while I was already too old. There was never enough time and I wasn't able to tell him who was the man in the rebel uniform standing next to the battle banner in the faded picture above my bed.

Irrespective of this, he was able to come and bid his final farewell with me in that same ancient rock church, where I had served.



# I will Always Love You No Matter What Happens

## The story of Dobrinka Boteva

**Dr. Miroslav Angelov**
*(born in 1985), doctor, specialist in cardiology; work with roma community and vulnerable groups*



My name is Dobrinka Boteva and I was born in 1939, in the village of Borika, near the town of Ihtiman.

This was the time when World War I was about to outbreak. I was the fifth and youngest child in the family. I have two brothers and two sisters. My mother's name was Paunka and my father was called Zahari. He was of Romani origin, but for my mother his background was not a concern when they married. Before that, he had been married to another woman, who, by some odd misunderstanding, had been killed by his own brother. My mother had not been married previously because she was deaf. Now I wonder how she had managed to raise us and show her affection for us if she was never able to hear our voices. We communicated with her only by facial expression and gestures. She could understand what we said and she could read our lips if we spoke slowly. She was a beautiful maid when my father married her. She was not of Romani origin, but she loved our father very much. She gave birth to seven children. The first two children died in their infancy, people say it was some evil charm. My eldest sister, Zdravka , comes to be the third child. She was born in 1925 and was given her name in order to remain healthy and survive after the death of the first two children. During the war, everyone's life was difficult

and we never enjoyed any affluence in those years. We were a poor family and we sustained ourselves with agriculture. My father and my brothers raised the buffalos of the village, while my sisters worked as house servants in Sofia. My mother took care of the household. We were so poor that I had to bring two eggs in the store and get a wafer in return. Otherwise, I was looking at the other children as they nibbled all sorts of strange stuff, which I'd never seen before. I went to school, unlike my brothers and sisters. I completed the eighth grade, but I found it difficult, because I also went with my father and my brothers to graze the buffalos of the village. At the age of 16, I met my first husband, Trendafil, who was 19 and came from the neighbouring village. I eloped and married him. We felt happy, I loved him and for a while we lived in his home, in the village of Zhivkkovo, together with his parents. My mother-in-law was ill-tempered and didn't love us. Obviously, she felt no affection for our children afterwards as well. Our father-in-law loved us with all his heart, however. We lived with them until our daughter Petranka was born in the summer of 1956. We went back to Borika to live with my parents. We stayed there until 1958. My husband was a lumberman in the forest. We suffered a chronic shortage of money. We decided to move to the village of Gabra, where there was a mine and they paid good money. We went there and my husband began to work in the mine. In 1959, three years after my daughter's bith, my son Anton was born. We resided in rented lodgings. When Anton was one-year old we enrolled him in the village kindergarten. My daughter also started attending. I began work as a cook in the canteen of the mine. The children grew up a little, and from a certain point onwards they could take care of themselves and stay locked at home, while we worked. Sometime later, they went to school. My daughter was a brilliant student, a top achiever up until the

12th grade. Meanwhile, my husband had certain health issues, he probably suffered grievous pneumonia relapses without being confined to his bed. He regained his fitness and kept going to work. When our daughter was in the 8th grade we decided to move to Sofia and allow our children to get better education. We wanted to make a home for them. We gathered all our savings and in 1971 we moved to a rented place in the city. We enrolled the children in school, my daughter maintained her pattern of excellence. After many difficulties, we were able to buy land and build a house for ourselves and the children. Meanwhile, Trendafil was working in Kremikovtsi as a welder and I worked as a cleaner in the locomotive depot. However, he started falling ill and was hospitalized ever more often. In his infirm health, he still helped to complete the construction of our house in the Hristo Botev Roma neighborhood. Our daughter graduated from school in 1975 with flying colors, but her father's health deteriorated abruptly and he died in the hospital in November, the same year. He was 39, he died young and didn't live to see his grandchildren. I was widowed at the age of 36. We faced a life full of hardships. My son was in the 9th grade. My daughter found a job because she wanted to help me. We were planning to build a two-storey house – one story for each of our children, but we had only managed to complete the first level. Those were difficult years. In 1977, my daughter married her, most likely, one and only love. His name was Angel and he came from the city of Yambol. My first grandson was born in 1978. They named him Trendafil, after my husband. In the neighborhood I met my second husband, Mitko. He was also a young widower, aged 44, with two sons. Thus, he became a support for me and I, for him. He became the father and the grandfather of my children and my grandchildren and I became the mother and grandmother of his. We took care of

them without distinguishing between 'mine' and 'yours' and this is why today they get along well and stick together in good or bad times. Mitko and I managed to build the second storey of the house. Meanwhile, my daughter gave birth to my second grandson, Martin. He died as a baby, when he was 40 days old, in 1981. In 1985 she gave birth to Miroslav. Slowly, but surely, we regained solid ground under our feet. My son got married and he gave me two grandsons: Rumen and Mitko, who was named after my second husband. Thus, with the grandchildren around, life acquired a new meaning for me. The children were growing up and we were growing older. In 1997, when my son-in-law died abruptly, my daughter was befallen by my own fate: at 38, she was a widow with two children. My second husband got sick and died in blindness in 1999, after one of his sons died young in 1998, at 43. He couldn't take it. Eight years after my son-in-law passed away, my daughter died suddenly, at the age of 48. It was on 12 April 2005, a fatal date for me, obviously. Both, my mother and my father had died on this date, in 1962 and 1965, respectively. Thus, after so many hardships, I came to be the mother and the father of my grandsons, who are my support and source of living energy today.

I am 80 now*, in shaky health, but I'm not yet out of my mind if I'm telling all this to you. I live with my two grandchildren, the firstborn Trendafil, who is the father of two of my grandsons, and with Miroslav, who is a young doctor today and he takes care of me and tends my health. He probably tends other people wo are like me. I am very proud of what my grandchildren have achieved in life. I hope that I was able to give them a good upbringing, so that they would be looked up to as models for their families and for other people around...

* *Grandmother Dobrinka passed away in 2020. The title of this book contains her last words she uttered*

# The Unforgettable

## The story of Stefana Popova

**Ognyan Kamenov**
*(born in 1960), philologist, founder of Health Problems of Minorities Foundation; secretary of National Network of Health Mediators*



My name is Stefana Popova.

I was born far back in 1898, in a remote neighbourhood of the village of Belitsa, near the town of Ihtiman. I was named Stoilka, after my grandmother on my father's line. God rest her soul, she died at the age of 93, when she was bitten by a viper while dancing horo in the village square. So, this was my given name in the birth certificate. Later, when I was 20, before I married my first husband, I changed my name to Stefana, because Stoilka was a name typical for the peasant folk.

I was 7 years old when my father got murdered. He and two other men had found a pot of goldpieces and the other two hit him with an axe on the head and killed him because they didn't want to split the treasure. Nobody proved anything and nobody was convicted. We were seven children in the family: four girls and three boys. I was our father's favourite. He had a very long rebel-style moustache which I used to play with and curled it behind his ears. While he kept saying that I was the smartest of all and he would have me qualify as a seamstress or a as a teacher. In those years, these were the most prestigious professions in a village.

Hardly a year elapsed, when my mother married another man and sent me to Sofia to be a house servant of the rich. I never set foot in a school, I remained illiterate, but in the rich Jewish homes in Sofia, where I served, I learned refined, urban and worldly manners, I dressed fashionably and became fluent in djudeo-espanyol, the language spoken by most of the Jews in Sofia. I also learned Turkish quite well. At the age of sixteen I became a cleaner in a sewing factory where all workers were young Turkish girls. The first month I could understand everything they said. In the second month I could speak the language.

During World War One I had an affection for a Turk. Since there was a curfew, we used to sit together at the table for whole nights and speak. He never even touched my hand. He wanted to marry me, but I would have to go with him to some village in the Deliorman region. Well, I was established in Sofia, I had got accustomed to a city lifestyle, I didn't want to go in this godforsaken place and we had to separate.

I married my first husband, when he was twenty-one and I was twenty-four. We had a son. My husband died of intestinal volvulus when the baby was only six months old. My son was barely a year old, when he died too. They couldn't name the cause. I was devastated with grief.

At the age of thirty-three I married again a 26-year old man. I was a widow and he was a bachelor. In those years, it was scandalous. He was like a small child, he looked me in the eyes and did what I said. I gave birth to two daughters, so I had to raise three children in total. He was also unlucky. He suffered continuous lung infections. He was a railway brakeman and worked constantly in the draught. He died abruptly and I was a widow again, with two young children. During the bombings of Sofia, my house in Nadezhda

residential area was destroyed. I remained homeless and I had to raise my two daughters in rented lodgings, but I they grew up to be decent people.

I retired and I stayed with my younger daughter. I raised and I brought up my youngest grandson, Ognyan. I was also his godmother, I christened him secretly because his father was a fanatic communist and wouldn't allow anyone to utter a word about christening.

I felt so sad when I knew I was about to die (I didn't take too long, just two or three days), because he, my favourite grandson, was a soldier in the army and I couldn't bid farewell with him. I died in January 1981, it was a very cold winter...



# A woman in Bulgaria between the two wars and two political regimes

## The story of Mariyka Dabova

**Pavlina Filipova**
*(born in 1964), engineer, consultant; manager advocacy and resource mobilization in Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association*



My name is Mariyka Mincheva Dabova and I was born on 20 September 1910 in the town of Lyaskovets.

Those were years of hardships and poverty and my family pertained to the middle class. My father Micho had vineyards and he used to be one of the well-known wine producers in the region. He had completed his studies in Russia and was very skilled in the hybridisation of different grape varieties. As most women then, my mother Dora was a housewife. We lived in a beautiful, frieze-decorated house and the living room was laid out fashionably, with parquet flooring and a white heating stove. The basement of the house was a wine cellar and was full of casks of white and red wine, while the wooden beams on the ceiling were overhung with bunches of grapes which were left to dry up until Christmas. On holidays, my mother kneaded loafs of bread and baked them in the stone oven in the yard. The entire house surroundings were filled with the aroma and all neighbours knew that Mincho was going to

give it out for the good health of all. My father would put on his brand new attire, sit under the vine trellis, call the gipsy musicians to play and give out food and wine to everyone.

The patriarchal sprit of the times required that every woman had to marry well and raise numerous children. Irrespective of the predominant views about where women belonged in those years, modernity and the novel ways of thinking in Europe penetrated the local grounds through the more affluent families. Most of them aspired to send their children to study in prestigious universities in Europe. They would sell their property and land to provide for their children's education. Although women usually completed only their primary education, my father sent me to study pharmacy in Czechia.


NOS DECANUS ET FACULTAS MEDICA
UNIVERSITATE CAROLINA
Mariam Mináva Dabova
ARTIS PHARMACEUTICAE MAGISTRAM

*1933, Prague, the Charles University Graduation Certificate of Mariyka Dabova in the major of Pharmacy*



*1932, Prague, the students of the Pharmacy Faculty of the Charles University*

The Charles University of Prague was one of the most attractive places for the intellectuals and high-spirited people all over Europe. Celebrities like Albert Einstein, Franz Kafka, Karel Capek, etc. were members of the teaching and student community in the period between the wars.

After I returned to Bulgaria in 1933, I was sent to work in the pharmacy of the District hospital of the city of Stara Zagora. There I met my husband, Konstantin Bratov, who had a degree in chemistry from the Braunschweig University in Germany and was now managing the municipal food-testing laboratory.

I married him on 2 August 1937. Our wedding was a fashionable and unconventional one for those years. Instead of engaging in endless festivities with countless relatives and pagan rites around tables heavily laden with food, we celebrated in the presence of only two friends of ours, who were also our witnesses, in the town of Kotel. We have never travelled to the place before and we thought the occasion presented us with a suitable opportunity to visit this beautiful location.



*2 August 1937. Kotel, wedding with the best man and bridesmaid of honour – the doctors Ivan and Elena Bratoevi*

In 1938, a daughter was born to us and we gave her the name of Veselina. I worked as a pharmacist in Stara Zagora, while my husband was involved in the establishment of the first Institute of Infectious Diseases in Bulgaria. We didn't seem to notice the hardships of those years. We were happy and well respected in the city. And, all of a sudden… during a wonderful picnic with friends near the river, Konstantin had an acute appendicitis attack. They couldn't save him and I was widowed with a child aged one year and three months.

My education allowed me to handle the difficulties by myself. I worked days and nights in the pharmacy, I prepared medications and ointments by proven prescriptions, so that I could help the people who had no means to afford treatment. During the war in 1939-1944, the pharmacy was the main place where the German, and later, Russian trucks of soldiers in transit stopped to procure supplies of medicines. The German soldiers looked orderly, clean and disciplined, the Russians – dirty, drunken and shabby. I helped everyone, but, being a lone woman, I was afraid at night, when I heard the drunken voices of the Russians at the windows of the house.

After the war, there came the nationalisation: they appropriated all our properties, but this was not our biggest concern. My father died of grief because the 'people's power' took away his vineyards and destroyed the grape varieties he had been hybridising and growing for many years. I worked and provided for my daughter, but the new communist rule decided to destroy the intellectual elite (i.e. the enemies of the people) and they wouldn't let my daughter enrol for academic studies although she graduated with excellence from the secondary school. I had to fight it over and win this battle for her because I knew that a woman vitally needed education and a good profession if she wanted to handle what



*1942, with our colleagues in the pharmacy in Stara Zagora*

life had in store for her.

Years later, my granddaughter, who also had high scholastic achievements, was taking part in an international conference about women in Central and Eastern Europe and their participation in the labour market. Educated women from Greece, Spain and Italy could hardly believe that her grandmother in Bulgaria had acquired an academic degree. So, I wanted to say that Bulgarian women have always kept abreast of their times in breaking the patriarchal models, as compared to Western Europe. Undoubtedly, I can be quoted as an example in this respect.

# Honest and Dignified in Life

## The story of Tsvetan Stoyanov

**Petar Tsvetanov**
*(born in 1975), health mediator in Montana Municipality; deputy-chairman of the Board of National Network of Health Mediators*



My name is Tsvetan Vasilev Stoyanov.

I was born in 1928 in the village of Zlatiya, in North-Western Bulgaria. Fate had it for me to be the part of a large Roma family of settled craftsmen – cartwrights and ironworkers. I was the second child born to my parents, I had four sisters. I never had a brother and, for my whole life, I felt that this was what I most missed.

Our village folk were land farmers as we lived in Bulgaria's most fertile area. My parents' craftwork could not make us rich, but it earned the bread of the family. I can remember from my grandfather Stoyan, that his family came from the Kyustendil region , and he came and settled here after being released from captivity during one of the wars at the beginning of the century. During his captivity he was kept as a servant to a Greek craftsman, also a cartwright and ironworker. When his master told him that he could go back to his homeland, he allowed him to take with himself one instrument from the workshop. My grandfather took a universal thread-cutting tool. For the time, this was an invaluable innovation because iron had already become a part of wooden carts. My

grandfather Stoyan arrived near the Danube river where he met my grandmother and they got married.

My father Vassil inherited his craft from my grandfather and my childhood memories abound with his working moments and toilsome labour. The Second World War broke out when I was in my youth years. Nazi attitudes and affiliations spread out across the land. I filled with horror when I saw Nazi youth formations because they used to treat us, the Roma, in a very bad way. The school where I went could not guarantee our security and I had to stop attending.

A socialist regime was established after the war. Initially, I couldn't account for it, but with time, I began to feel free and protected. My ethnic belonging no longer doomed me to trouble. I married my wife, Petra. She was from a neighbouring village. Our first child died while I was in the military, but three more were born to us: two boys and a girl. We lived with my mother and father for 15 years, but from a certain point on I was not able to get to terms with my mother and my sisters. When I was 35 we left our village and moved to my wife's native village, Septemvriytsi. We had nothing on us. All we clutched in our hands were our children's hands and a bag of basic possessions. We came to an empty field. We were given a land allotment and we started building from scratch. Nothing was a concern to us because life was poor, but there was work for everyone and we were content. Time passed and we gradually began to settle. We build a home of our own. My children continued school. My eldest son Rumen completed the construction vocational school, my younger one graduated from the agricultural school and qualified as a tractor driver and combine-operator, while my daughter didn't acquire any professional qualification but completed her primary school . Only my eldest son continued to live with

me afterwards. My younger son remained in the village, but he moved to another house when he got married. My daughter set up her family in another village.

I became a grandfather at the age of 46. My first grandson was born to my eldest son. Afterwards, I had many more grandchildren, a total of 8 to all my three children. Four of them, the children of my eldest son, grew up under my roof. Those were the happiest years of my life. I so much enjoyed seeing them getting up every morning and going to school, happy and peaceful. They were completely equal to the other, non-Roma children. They even surpassed them in many instances. I took great pride in Peter, my second grandson. He was so vigil since his very early years and everyone praised him.

The family's evenings were always friendly and warm. I loved to tell them my moralising stories, which often evolved into fairy tales, but my grandchildren listened to me, agasp. I taught them many important things, such as to love and have respect for their kin and family, to be honest and have dignity in life. I told them about my childhood, when there was a huge division gap in social relations. I could see it in their eyes, that they were not able to grasp how people could be exploited by other people. I was trying to tell them that capitalism was the worst evil in the history of mankind. Later, my fears began to materialise, because in my life, again, I saw the return of the system most oppressive to the weak and the poor.

After I retired, I began practising the family craft. I made a small workshop in my village and I equipped it with the necessary tools. To a great extent, this emotionally reunited me with my ancestral tradition. I was able to sparkle my grandsons' interest to this work and I felt great excitement seeing them absorbed in the art. I am happy I could pass it

over to them.

The other happy moment of my life was to see all of my grandchildren graduate, one by one, from school. They all completed their secondary education. Then they started getting married. I attended all their weddings and I couldn't realise how time had elapsed and how all of them, those small kids, had become grown-up people. They all had their own families to take care of.

At the age of 72 I had a blood stroke and my life turned towards its end. One day, while I was still strong enough to talk, I requested that my grandson Peter would take a tape recorder and come to me. I wanted him to record the story of our kin, I wanted to tell it to him for the last time. I wanted them to cherish and remember it. He couldn't accept that my days were numbered and didn't come to grant my wish. However, I know, that he would always keep a memory in his heart, and, probably, one day, eyes dimmed with tears, he will share it with other people!



# Pie and Chickpeas

## The story of Slavka Zaharieva



**Peter Tsintsarski**
*(born in 1974), teacher, journalist, educator; long year experience in NGO and with vulnerable communities in health prevention; youth activities expert in Bulgarian Red Cross*

I was born to a poor family in the winter of 1924, in a small village within the region of Sofia, located in the skirts of the Vitinya pass in the Balkan Mountains. My name is Slavka Ivanova Zaharieva.

My parents had had other children before me, but they had died of pulmonary consumption in their early infancy. In those years, only the rich people in the big cities had access to doctors and medication. And my family was not amongst the rich. So, diseases took many human lives back then. Thus, I was the eldest surviving child of the family and, after me, 6 more brothers and sisters were born. My father died so young that I barely have any memories of him and my mother and I were left in charge of family survival, raising the kids and the care of the household. I attended the village school and completed the 4$^{th}$ grade sharing a desk with peers from the village, most of whom were from the Roma community. I had only turned 14, when I went to Sofia and I had to work days of 12-14 hours in a textile mill to earn for the bread of my rural family. Five or six years passed, I fell in love with a young hard-working man and we got married. We moved to a house in the suburbs of Sofia (now a city area). He worked hard and was employed in the metalworking plant, the industrial symbol

of socialist pride. Two children were born to us, both were girls. We were so eager to send them to school because we ourselves have been deprived of good education, out of sheer poverty. But our dream didn't come true. One of our daughters completed the 11th grade and fell in love too young. She set up a family with a lad from the country and gave birth to two boys, our grandsons. The other one took so long to find the love of her life that she ended up a spinster. Thus, our dream to have educated girls in the family didn't come true.

With two of my brothers we built a summer house where once our old house in the village had stood. It was a nice place for our grandsons to spend their summer holidays. Let me just say that for so many years, our village home had never been broken into or robbed by our Roma neighbors. Those old good feelings from the classroom were still in the air and we had a custom with the older grandmas of various ethnicities in the village – to meet under the old linden-tree in front of our house and enjoy some homemade muffin cake, banitsa or hot 'lebllebia'. I was known as the master of home-rolled banitsa, the yummy pancakes with jam and soft cheese bread. The grandmothers were telling their children and grandchildren that a classmate of theirs used to live in this house and those young people had it as a guideline, to have respect for and keep intact other people's property. My husband and I also taught our grandchildren to tolerate differences.

Years passed, children grew up and so did our grandchildren. One of our grandsons was named Peter, after his grandfather. I loved to hear his voice on the national radio when he spoke about issues in the healthcare and social sectors. The other one also embarked on some lengthy studies at the university, he became a lawyer and managed to establish himself well in the career. I lost my husband in

1987. His strength declined gradually and slowly and he passed away after a grievous disease in September. I had a great-grandson in 2000, but I rarely saw him throughout the years, although I wanted to enjoy more time together. All this time I only wished for the good of all my beloved ones. Time flew, life galloped on its course. I worked long and with perseverance, I was employed for longer than 40 years. I witnessed the first obituaries of my brothers and sisters. One by one, I accompanied them all to their last resting places. I was the eldest of all and I remained all by myself. Often, I thought how much effort it took me and mummy to raise them all and provide for them in life. Thereafter, life gave us many good and bad moments, but I expected more gratitude and acknowledgement for the pains and the hard work, which I didn't get in response. The worse thing was that I also bid last farewell to some of my nephews and nieces, my siblings' sons and daughters, which makes me so sad, because there had to be some order of departure from this world, but there's obviously none.

I left this world exactly six months ago, on 20 April 2018. I remain with the hope that our children would have a much better future and opportunities in life.



# Game with Walnuts

The story of Radka Kanakova

**Petya Dimitrova**
*(born in 1979), programme manager 'International Programmes and Projects, International Activity, Analyses and Child Participation' in Social Activities and Practices Institute*

My name is Radka Kandzhakova.

I was born in 1934 in the city of Botevgrad.

I could not recall my mother – she died when I was at the age of 2. Pneumonia. Afterwards my father married again, I had never said a word against my stepmother but later, in the long winter evenings I told stories to my granddaughters how evil the stepmothers were and how they gave more work to their stepdaughters. I cooked for the whole family and took care for my smaller sister from my father's second marriage.

I was a small child when the WWII started. We ate mainly bread – not always we even had some bread. We lived close to the military quarters in our city and the whole neighborhood was afraid that we would be bombed. During the nights we ran away from homes or hid in the basements and we were hearing the booming of the planes, the explosions in Vratsa. Usually we ran in the forest – far from the militaries we though it's safer. In fact, only once our city was bombed – the war was already over and the planes just threw away the bombs – in the forest where we usually were hiding.

After the end of the war, we slowly restored our live. I was a good student. I succeeded to graduate high school – most of my peers didn't manage. I was also very good with the grammar and I learnt type-writing. I even won a completion for the fastest and most literate type-writing. Thus, I was

invited to work in the police. There I met my future husband. Obviously, one morning I was explaining to my colleague "I woke up early to cook before work" and he heard this statement and was impressed by me.

So, we got married. He was from Etropole – a city nearby and we moved there. Although young, he had his own house. He was very famous in the city – a non-formal leader, he organized a lot of concerts, events, holidays… And he sang fantastically. We had two children I organized our family traditions. I liked when I had the whole family around the table, especially for Christmas Eve. Then I prepared the 11 lenten dishes, I prayed, I burned with incense; then we ate and laughed and played lio-takmo – a walnut game, and sang songs. The smell of the open fire and incense evaporated everywhere.

My husband died young and I was again with no support but with two grown-up daughters. The older one was already a medicine student in Sofia and the second one – soon to be a student. At the time I worked at the City Council, a Mayor's secretary. My salary was not high but I managed to educate my daughters. They became women and married. The first one divorced in several years and the second remained alone although not divorced. But we continued to gather every holiday, every Christmas Eve.

I died in 2009, at home, at my old sofa near to the kitchen table.



# Unconditional Love

The story of grandmother Tsvetanka

**Dr. Radosveta Stamenkova**
*(born in 1965), doctor, counselor and educator on topics, connected with communications, sexual and reproductive health, social health and prevention; Executive Director of Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association*



My name is Tzvetanka Krastanova Tomova.

I was born on Christmas day, 1919 near Sofia. My father was a blacksmith, tall and slim like the willow trees on our street. When he was not working, he was always wearing a white shirt. Never a scarf, even during the coldest winters. When he was an apprentice, he fought for the liberation of Macedonia. During that period he became friends with the esteemed poet Yavorov. The artist frequented his master's blacksmith shop for a cup of coffee. When I asked my father "What kind of a man was Yavorov, he said to me "Well, a haramia (bandit □)". My mother Rayna was 2 years older than dad. She took all possible precautions to hide that – for instance, big blue ink dots on her date of birth at official documents. I was good in school and very good with embroideries and cooking. My hair was so thick that breaking combs happened quite often. I was very beautiful and many young men asked for my hand. I wanted to be a teacher and after high school I pursued my dream.

At this time my parents arranged a date with the parents of my future husband Dimitar. He was ten years

older than me, a graduee of the Theological Faculty of Sofia University and as per the tradition had to choose a wife before becoming an Orthodox priest. Mitko was so handsome that when I saw him all my blood rushed to my face, my hands were clammy and my ears deaf. At my wedding day the hairdresser cut a big clump of my hair in order to put a tiara on my head. I had a beautiful princess wedding gown. We had two kids - a girl and a boy that were born during the war.



*Mom and Dad, Sofia, 1912*

I was very fond of my younger boy and more severe with my elder daughter – she was daddy's girl and in general girls have to be more responsible! When my husband advised me to do something I ALWAYS said "Yes, OK, Mitko" and afterwards I did what I thought was the right thing. Just like



*My wedding day, Sofia, 1938*

the water drop pierces the stone, I was persistent…

…Many women were attracted to my extraordinary husband – his charismatic outlook, his charming voice of a professional singer, his witty stories and attractive smile. I often felt beneath him and was trying to compensate with my care, love and cooking – vanilla and cinnamon aroma were our home trademark. We had lots of guests, one could hear laughter, debating voices and music at our place almost every evening. Than my husband fell in love with a woman that according to him was more his equal and completed him more. It was an impossible love, he was a priest, but it was a long lasting and unhappy period for the three of us and for my kids. One day when the other woman was again in my home talking with him about art and literature in one of the foreign languages they both were so good at, I took her handbag, ran out and threw it in the canal near our house. I wanted to jump in the water myself, but I had small kids to care about.



*Sveta Nedelia, Mitko's church, Sofia, 1940*

...Time passed and this affair went to an end, but the bitter taste stayed much longer. Our kids grew up and graduated university. Life was not easy - the communists considered priests as "the nation's enemy" and in university both my son and daughter faced many difficulties. My daughter graduated as a valedictorian in her class of French literature, married a doctor and gave birth to my beloved granddaughter. She grew up with me and we loved each other unconditionally. I was taking care of both my parents and my husband till the end of their lives. My son, the engineer, my brilliant boy married when he was 50, had a daughter and died of cancer 3 years later. I took care of him and his loss broke my heart and my eyes lost part of their brightness, but I had to live to help my younger granddaughter grow.

I lived long enough to see my great-grandson - the child of my older granddaughter – graduate from University. My daughter and her daughter took good care of me. I died in



*Pregnant with my son, Sofia 1942*




*My 95th anniversary with my daughter, 2014*

2016 at the age of 96, with a clear mind, reading magazines for the royal family, trying to be dressed with good taste and giving unconditional love – the thing I excelled at. At my last years I finally understood why all generations of my family love cats - one big ginger cat made my life better till the very end, staying as a furry ball by me all day long, purring constantly.

# Pieces of Illusion

## The story of Radka Ilieva



**Radostina Antonova**
*(born in 1974), PhD of sociology, psychologist, family therapist, educator, work with vulnerable communities; programme coordinator in Know How Center of Alternative Care in New Bulgarian University*

My maiden name was Radka Ivanova Ilieva, (Tsanova after the marriage).

I was born during the wheat harvest in 1924, somewhere in our family crop fields in the vicinity of the village of Dolni Dabnik. They registered me when my mother came back to the village with me. The priest, who made the registration, was drunk and didn't want to bother about my exact birth date. He had picked an arbitrary day of the same week and that's how I came to be officially born on 24 August.

My grandmother Rada and grandpa Iliya were the richest people in the village. I can remember grandma Rada, who was shiny and smiling from morning to dark. She had a long tress wrapped around her head and used to cover herself with a white or colourful headscarf. She managed the family's drinking house where we had the only radio in the village. People came and called her if anyone was sick or if a women was giving birth. She was regarded as the local healer. Grandpa Iliya was a big and heavily built Bulgarian man with large and strong hands. He taught us that riches had to be earned with work and multiplied by



work. Grandpa Iliya and grandma Rada could not have children of their own and adopted an orphaned field labourer. Grandpa Iliya liked him because he was very hard working. This was my father Ivan. Daddy was a large man with light-coloured hair and eyes. He was very kind and benevolent to people and animals. My mother Ivanka was a quiet and industrious woman. They taught us to never raise our voices, regardless of whether we spoke to the human or animal kind.

We were two sisters, I was the eldest, Venka was younger and our brother Iliycho was the youngest. Venka was the beauty of the family since childhood, with her thick black hair and large beautiful eyes, just like the actresses in the black-and-white photographs. Iliycho was always ailing, he had a delicate constitution and sought to be around us when we went out in the village. From my earliest years, I can remember the never-ending work. In the summer, daddy used to wake us up before dawn and we went to the crop field. In winter, there was always something to do – cleaning, cooking, doing chores in the drinking house. Grandpa Iliya wanted all his grandchildren to go to school. Thus, Venka and I completed the 7th grade. Thereafter, the family were willing to pay only for Iliycho's studies and support him too become a pilot.

The war began. They quartered Germans in our house. My grandpa and daddy were very protective of us and always sent us on errands – to help other people in the village, acquire some new skill or something else. In those years, I was in love with a boy from the village. He was a military officer. I can remember his shining black eyes, the deep-toned voice, and how the uniform seemed to be perfectly cast for his shapely body. Then he died in the war. Also, my best friend Vetka died of consumption during the war. Her brother Tsono was sentenced to death for disruptive communist activities in the army. Then everyone in

the village spoke how Maria, his mother, lest she would lose her second child, had sold both their oxen and given all her money to the judge. He substituted Tsono's death sentence for life imprisonment. My sister Venka and I often visited Maria's place and helped her anyway we could.

After that, the first abrupt changes came both for Bulgaria, and for me as well. In the summer of 1944, the Germans started looting food supplies from the houses in which they were billeted. One day, they took our hens and departed, they took as much as they could carry. They entered the village in a military formation, but they left running, dressed in the last-minute rush. In the end of the summer the power in Sofia changed hands, the king was expelled. Many people started moving to the big cities. My sister and I decided that we wanted to study and take our chances in the big city. Thus, on an autumn night in 1944, with a bundle of clothes and some food, we quietly sneaked out of the house and took the night train to Sofia. In post-war Sofia, poor and gloomy after the bombings, we quickly rented a place and enrolled to study. The new government and my escape from home cast a heavy blow on our family. Grandpa never spoke to me again...

Venka and I undertook studies in financial accounting. We worked a bit here and there. Work, cold and hunger were not scary, for as long as we were together.

Later on, Tsono, Vetka's brother, found us in Sofia. He told us that after 9 September he was released from prison and had returned to Dolni Dabnik. He joined the new power. He told us how daddy came to him one day and, tears in his eyes, and begged him to come and nationalise the land properties and the animal stock of the family. Fearsome stories were being spread around the whole of Bulgaria about the atrocities and the killings during the nationalisation. And Tsono did it all in a peaceful and civilised manner. He even allowed our grandfather to sell two oxen. Daddy



had asked him, since he would be coming in Sofia to study, to find us and take care of us.

Thus, a year later, Tsono and I got married. With the money from the two oxen last sold by grandpa, we bought a house in Sofia. Meanwhile, our two daughters Veneta and Mariana were born. Tsono gained rocketing promotions in his work. One day he said they offered him some diplomatic job in East Germany. So, we departed.

In Germany our daughters uttered their first words and they started school. In Germany we saw that a human life didn't mean a thing.

After Germany we were sent to Iraq. Again, on a diplomatic mission. In Iraq we saw how money could change governments overnight.

Thereafter, in the mid-60s we came back to Bulgaria. Veneta enrolled with the first-year students of the Sofia German Language School, while Mariana joined the first-year class of the French Language School. Both of them could already speak several languages and played at least one musical instrument. They had numerous friends and our flat was always full of young people. Veneta became a translator and Mariana became and engineer. I lived my life for my children. My husband was dedicated both to the family and to his work. We believed that our efforts to build a strong and independent Bulgaria would yield results. Soon.

Both my daughters were not lucky in their marriages. Both

of them married heirs of Czech immigrants whose families had moved to Bulgaria at the end of the past century. A year after her marriage, Veneta was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and was confined to her bed. We took her back home together with her child Radostina. Irrespective that Tsono and I visited all sorts of doctors and did anything we could, she died in 1985. We brought up Radostina as our own child. For Many years Mariana travelled and worked with her husband and her child Anna in the Arabic countries. In 1985, he 'escaped' to the United States and Mariana and Ana came back home to Bulgaria.

Four years later, Bulgaria was swept by another round of political changes. The communist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed one after the other. Bulgaria followed pat. We didn't know what to do, we were afraid for our own lives and for the lives of our children. But we had lots of friends and we made it somehow through the first years of deprivation. We were able to ensure the education and raise our granddaughters.

Then our lands were restored to us. For those of us, who were born before 1944, they only meant bonding labour. The ones born after 1944 perceived only the money value of land. The family broke apart and fought between themselves, each holding on to their illusory share of money and security.

Old age and uncertainty befell us all at the same time. We brought up our daughters as princesses. But there was nothing we could do for our granddaughters. They had to fight their own ways through life, right after secondary school. I feel upset and I'm scared for them, taking account of the time in which they live. It rends my heart and I feel ever more desperate to see how cheap Bulgaria is being sold out – the country that we were building and fighting for.

I died of cancer in 2000. The children were all around me to my last minute. Tsono died 4 years after me.

# You have to share a living space with other people

## The story of Georgi Doychev



**Ralitsa Zgalevska**
*(born in 1974), philologist, work with young people and vulnerable groups on communications and health prevention; projects coordinator in Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association*

Our grandchildren, while still small, used to dash in the kitchen teased by the irresistible smell of freshly baked banitsa or bread, and they begged to have a piece, but she would never give it to them straight away. She would wrap the pan in a thick white towel and ban them from touching it for at least a quarter of an hour. She would tell them that all bread and bakery had to go out and run around to check their crop field first. I think this was her way of teaching them to be patient and disciplined. Gergina, my wife. We joined our paths back in 1945 and, initially, we rented a place near the Lion's Bridge. Until then, she lived with her family in Busmantsi. When she came to the city, she cropped her beautiful braid, so as to gain a more 'urban' look. I tried to dissuade her, but in vain. After that, we were both regretting the loss of the long black curls, but she never admitted to it. Several years later, with the help of her father, Stefan, we built a house near the Iskar Railway Station, at a comparatively short distance from her parents' place and her other two sisters' homes. Gergina was always serious, and often restless, but she was so skilled in managing the house and the garden. She had completed the fourth grade in their local school, but she dropped her studies because continuing further meant commuting to the

neighbouring village and she turned out to be the only girl there, so she gave it up. She was in the habit of cluttering the corners of the house with various items that you couldn't necessarily call 'useful', with the idea that they might be in demand some day. She always smiled and acted kind to neighbours and strangers. What people said was definitely important to her.



I was of a different kind. What I felt was most important to me and I didn't like pretended courtesy at all. Of course, I had to be mindful not to upset anyone or not to make enemies. You have to share a living space with other people!

My name is Georgi Evtimov Doychev and I was born on 8 April far back in 1919, in the village of Skurt, the district of the city of Petrich, near the Greek border. I had two brothers, Boris was the younger one and Yordan was my elder. Two of my mother's other children died in their early infancy. As a child, I loved to play outdoors and I couldn't be confined to one place for long. I loved to walk around the area and explore with friends. When we were still kids, in the village, we used to compete who could throw a stone furthest in the river... My

mother Dimka was always shouting at me and pointed at my brothers as the paragons of good behaviour and obedience... My brother Dancho acquired a degree in history and he worked as a teacher around the country. At a certain point he was diagnosed with glaucoma and he gradually lost his sight. In his last years he could only tell light from darkness. Until his last day he lived with us, in the house, he had no one else. In those years, being a teacher was taken as a lifetime mission and anyone in the profession committed their whole vigour to the job. This is why he never really set up a family. I had had less communication with Boris, my other brother. He was a military officer. His wife Zlatka was always in poor health. In the view of our friends and kin, who had known us, I was the shrewdest of the three.

I was still small, when my parents brought us to Sofia. I studied till the 4th grade and when I turned 15 I found a job to help my family: I was a paperboy and an errand boy in a tinsmith's workshop. I did whatever could earn me some money. Later, I worked as a senior printer for the Todor Dimitrov Printing House, at Veslets street, I loaded the printing quires and I monitored the fluency of the printing process. We were printing advertisements, historical chronicles, novels, selected literary classics and, years after, the editions of the communist propaganda. For a short period I worked as a typesetter. However, this was a slow and fine job for a jeweller's hand. I wasn't made for it. I browsed through all the editions pending release and, whatever I liked, I carried home with me as bedtime reading. I had no other free time as there was always something to do. Sometimes I borrowed books from the city library, too. For me, the books opened whole new worlds! Most of all, I was engulfed by detective stories and military history novels. I had a vivid imagination for the



*With my wife and daughter, 1948*

battle scenes. And when the author was also the master of letters, I lived through the pain, the love and the aspirations of the characters. I even cried now and then... I don't know whether it came with the books or by other unfathomable ways, but, with the years, I began to hold politics as a dirty business and believed that one should never run for politics if one wanted to maintain one's integrity and self-respect and, in general, be able to live with oneself.

My father, Evtim Doychev, a daring man with a loving heart, always supported us within the family. I think he understood me better than my mother, and, later, better than any beloved living soul in the world. He was inventive. I can remember, in the 30s, he had a grocery store at a street corner near the Lion's Bridge. We had rented lodgings in the adjacent area back in those times. In the interwar years, poverty was so widespread that people were buying on tick. He went bankrupt after World War II, during the 'Third National Catastrophe' . Over time, he had lived amongst Greeks, Jews, gypsies and Turks, so he had picked up something of all their languages. He also worked with the Customs House at the Central Railway Station. He used to tell us that, for a while, he

used to hold the mayor's office of the village where I was born, but someone had found him politically inconvenient and he had to quit and run to Sofia. He also told us that when he was a rebel in the Macedonian volunteer corps (1912-1913) he had met Yavorov , who was in command of a revolutionary detachment. They sang rebel songs together. I learned several songs from him and, at meetings with friends, I sang them, together with the popular songs of the time:

*I spend my  days − onto secret roads*
*I spend my nights – onto roads unknown;*
*Neither my father, nor my mother around me –*
*Father's curses I hear not*
*Mother's sobs I miss a lot…*
*Oh, my Pirin Mountain!*
*My Black Sea,*
*My Constantinople wine…*
*My enemies I fight – measure for measure,*
*I grace the kind ones – for the shared faith;*
*Neither my brother, nor my sister around me –*
*For my brother would praise my deeds,*
*And my sister would grieve over me…*
*Oh, my sabre,*
*awe-inspiring fright!*
*Oh, hot and heady*
*Edirne rakiya. God rules in Heavens – well, I don't mind,*
*A king rules on earth – will he last a century?*
*I have no sweetheart, nor my first love –*
*to hope for my return*
*to mourn over my remains…*
*Oh, my fire bursting gun!*
*Oh, thou, slender Thessaloniki girl.*

My father had a military decoration and had a bonus on his pension for participation in the struggle for national liberation.

In our marriage with Gergina, we had a daughter, Stefanka (Stefka). She was born in 1946. Upon my request, we christened her after my father-in-law, Stefan. Grandpa Stefan was a strong man, a hard-working and caring master, a land farmer and a landlord. He cultivated about 100 daa of land and having to part with it, when the national land cooperatives were formed in 1957, cast a heavy blow on him. Six years later, he died of cancer. Stefka was good as a child, but she was often impatient and pretty wayward. I loved her dearly. We had a workshop in the yard where Stefka and I were often making various items: a wooden sabre, a cardboard wardrobe... and then I used to tell her various stories. With her mother, she made ragdolls and they both tailored and knitted clothes for them. Sometimes, she would hold to her ways so obstinately and never retreat out of sheer pride, even after realising that she was wrong. Once we fought over a trifle and, for a very long time afterwards, she wouldn't speak to me. She was married, and my grandchildren (I adored both of them), were already born and beyond their toddling ages. I tried over and over to resolve the situation, I couldn't even remember what we had quarrelled about, but she wouldn't give in. I took it to heart and I really suffered about this stubbornness of hers, but I had no way of changing it. At such times, my lovely Chernyo would come to my rescue. He was a big, black, sleek tomcat with long white moustaches, light green eyes and benevolent of nature. Oh, and was he a skilled hunter! I often took him in my lap and he purred with delight, eyes half closed. Even as I was dying, in the autumn of 1978, before I had turned 60, Chernyo was keeping me comfort. I was

having a heart attack. Some years before they had operated on my carotid artery. I couldn't say whether it had anything to do with it. The animal seemed to feel that something was going wrong with me, suddenly it jumped to its feet, stared around helplessly and dashed outside with piercing mews, as if crying for help... The last human being I saw before my eyes blurred, was my granddaughter, four-year old Ralitsa. She ran to me and wanted me to tell her a fairy tale. But this time I couldn't... The ambulance hooter was the last thing I heard before I passed away.



# Moneylenders

## The story of Petar Hristov

**Sabina Hristova**
*(born in 1978), psychologist in Regional Center for support and inclusive education in Lovech*



My name is Peter Petrov Hristov and I was born way back in 1932 in the village of Slavshtitsa, municipality of Ugarchin, Lovech district. I was born in a middle-class family and I was the only child of my parents. My father was a retail vendor and he was almost never at home. My mother was a housewife and took care of me and the household. I was a very inquisitive child and I studied in the primary school in our village. Then I had to commute to Ugarchin where I completed my secondary studies. At this point exactly, my father fell ill and lost his eyesight! I was willing to continue my education but I had to support the family, so I was both studying to become a teacher and working at the same time, up until the day when some usurers came home. My father had borrowed money from them for his trade and it became clear that my mother and I would have to repay this debt as well! We tried to cultivate more land, but it was so hard that we couldn't manage! However, I was able to complete my studies and I became a primary teacher in the school of

the neighbouring village. My salary was hardly sufficient to repay the debt, I had to carry food from home for the day…, well, life was tough then. But all of a sudden, inflation was on the rise. My mother and I took the opportunity to sell some of the land and we were able to repay dad's entre debt!

I married a girl from our village. She had no education, but she was so hard-working. She worked in the Zlatna Panega Cement Plant. We had two children, a boy and a girl. The boy was lazy and didn't want to study. I felt so ashamed that the next year I didn't let him go to school, but I assigned him to graze the cattle. Well, you should see what diligence he demonstrated afterwards: he became an engineer. I have two grandsons and one granddaughter, and I am so proud of her! I keep telling my children and grandchildren not to borrow money from the banks because even if they get the loan now, circumstances might change and someone else might have to repay it aaaand… you have to think in advance!

I died on 18 January, 2014.

# God's Gift

## The story of Totka Angelova

**Teodora Borislavova**
*(born in 1985), school's psychologist, experience with young people in conflict with the law*



*With my husband in Sofia, 1951*

My name is Totka Draganova Angelova (after the marriage).

I was born on 6 June 1927 in the village of Barkach, Pleven District. I was the only daughter of a rich family of land farmers. I have emerald green eyes and auburn hair. Well, to tell you the truth, I am a real beauty. People couldn't take their eyes off me, not only in our village, but in Sofia also.

I studied up until the 4th grade, then the war broke out an everything changed …

At the age of 20 I married Ivan, a handsome young engineer from near the town of Ihtiman. Many men offered to marry me, but this one had real class. We moved to live in Sofia. Vanyo (Ivan) loved me so much and I gave him all my respect. He was honest and intelligent. He worked a lot and his service was more and more in demand. On 10 July, 1949 I gave birth to my first son. I think this was my

happiest day. Then, probably for the first time, I felt what it meant to love for real, unconditionally. We named him Borislav. Bobby was my greatest joy. He was quiet, modest, kind-hearted and smart. Five years later, I gave birth to my second son, Dragomir. Drago and Bobby seemed to be standing a universe apart. He was shrewish, sharp-tongued, ever dissatisfied and fastidious. I had no way to understand this child..., but he and his brother loved each other so dearly. Both became engineers, like their father. Vanyo was travelling a lot, mostly to Libya. They were constructing a lot of sites there. In 1963 I joined him on one of his trips to Syria. I'll remember it for the rest of my life. I bought so many things intended as a dowry, in case I ever gave birth to a daughter or if I had a granddaughter.

I had no daughter, but in 1985 Bobby blessed me with a granddaughter. So, I was wrong, this was my happiest day. I always wanted to have a girl! And this one came as a miracle. We named her Teodora, which means 'a gift from God', but she was actually named after me. Her mother's sister was also Teodora, but this was just an arbitrary coincidence. She was named after me. We celebrated together the day of St. Todor.

Two years later, my life took a different course. Vanyo died. Children had their own problems to handle. Bobby and his family moved out to a new flat. I remained alone at home, with Drago only. I felt empty. Then Drago got married. My children's lives seemed to be moving and mine had stopped. Lovely Dora, my granddaughter, who resembles me and Bobby, is the light of my life. I would give my all for her. I had two more grandsons, but I they were not as close to my heart. Some people thought I had no heart at all, but this wasn't true. I had a heart but it could only accommodate few people.

I have obviously committed certain wrongdoings, because life became too harsh for me. Bobby died. All of a sudden. He had a heart attack. Oh, my God, my soul was burnt to ashes! But misfortune didn't come alone. My grandson died. He was sick and they didn't give him much chance, it was clear. Probably this was why I couldn't feel so much affection for him from the start… Then I said to myself: 'This must be it, no more tragedies', but no… A year later, my second son died. Drago. I didn't think I had room for even more grief in my heart, but you see, here goes my Drago, my obstinate child, who ran against everything and everyone… No, after him, the sap drained out of my life. Following his death, I just lied on my bed and never stood on my feet again. I waited. One day, my lovely Dora came. I could see her like she was moving through a fog. We looked at old photographs. She reminded me of good moments. I felt calm. After two days, on 13 December, 2007, exactly 3 months after Drago's death, I left this world. In peace.



# Dignity

The story of Toncho Konov

**Toni Toncheva**
*(born in 1965), clinical psychologist, EMDR therapist, experience with vulnerable groups and families, Board member of Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association*

My name is Toncho Konov.

I was born in the autumn, in a beautiful village in the north of Bulgaria. I'm not sure anyone really remembers the date, there was nobody to make note of it. I was orphaned in my early infancy, my mother died when I was 3 years old, and my father had passed away even earlier. I was brought up by my poorest aunt, and most of my kinsfolk claimed that I had no semblance to their line. This was probably because they didn't want to divide their land property with me.

I am literate, I went to school and unless I was busy grazing my aunt's cattle, I tried to be as regular as possible until I turned sixteen, when I decided to leave school and start a life of my own. I was very good at playing cards. I played daringly, I risked and I won! I began to travel to neighbouring cities and countries and bet. I played, I won and I went through a lot of fighting back in those years! The men who lost their money wanted to get it back from me, but they could never get anything more than small change. Since those times, I grew an affection for vineyards, grapes and wine and I used molehills in the vineyards in Bulgaria, Romania and Austria to hide the money I had won in card games.

I saved some decent earnings, I came back to Bulgaria and I decided to get married. I took a beautiful tall woman with lavish black hair and grey eyes. She was named Radka.



*Egg size standard. There was a time I worked two jobs, one of them was collecting eggs from small producers and pass them on to the state organizations*

She didn't come from a rich background. Her brother was a communist, he spoke against the government. I loved her and she didn't seem to share my feelings, but I was not handsome, anyway. Together with her we built our first home with our own hands. We made the bricks from adobe clay, we built two walls and used the stone fence materials for the other two sides. We had two sons when I was mobilised in the army and had to fight the war against fascism, leaving my wife alone for almost two years. They've seen times of sheer starvation and my younger son's growth was stumped, but both my sons were beautiful boys: they resembled their mother. She must have found it hard to raise the boys on her own, though the junior one, Vassil, kept around, he picked up many working skills just by looking, he could build, cook, mow. He was good in everything. I think that while I was in the military she had probably prayed hard to have a granddaughter, so as not to be alone. And because my Radka was such a good woman, God didn't just give her one, but three granddaughters and two great-granddaughters.

That's what this life is made like – when you want something with all your heart, it always comes gracefully and in bulks. This is how it happened with my stoves. I can't

explain it, I might have felt too cold as a child, but I always felt cold and I was buying all kinds of stoves: electric, gas, combined. I had more than ten under the working shed. Wine barriques were another passion of mine. I could be gone for weeks and travel around Bulgaria in search of the best barrique, so that I could make good wine.

I was an honourable man, I could not tolerate unfair deeds and I had my own values, so when they began forcibly to alienate the poor folks' cornfields, I stood up in the middle of the village square and I tore apart my membership card for the communist party. They were rubbish and this is how I broke off my relationships with the new government, although in the previous years I thought them to be good and I believed in them. Many years later I found out that by doing this I had made myself enemies, but I had also saved my children from fallacy.

I was a proud man and I didn't want to compromise my authority before my sons and my granddaughters, so they never saw me in negligent dress, tipsy or heard me using coarse language. It was for Radka's sake that I gave up on this last bit. When I was young, I had a habit to curse when angry. So, one day, with my wife and my granddaughters who lived in Sofia (the daughters of Vasil, my younger son) we were going to the melon field and the donkey lied down on the ground and refused to go. Oh, did I burst in curses, when I could hear little Tony, who was named after me, asking her grandma: 'Granny, why does grandpa call Moncho, the donkey, a woman. He is a male donkey, isn't he?' I felt so ashamed, while Radka didn't miss a chance to hit me back: 'You old man, obscene words don't go well with little children!' And I stopped!

My pride drove me on my road. One had to had dignity

and keep one's name in honour. This is what I passed on to my ancestry. Property you may have and lose, but you must be aware where you write your honest name, because this is the only thing you truly have.

I died when I was 82, out of pride. I refused to eat, because I found it hard to accept what life had in store for me, due to the brain attacks. So, I couldn't take it easy when they wanted to disgrace my name and I couldn't forgive. But his is a sad story of greed, betrayal and lust for power.



Edition of the Bulgarian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association

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Project ‘Changing the Narrative: The Storytellers’

BULGARIAN FAMILY PLANNING AND SEXUAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

narativ

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS



*The authors: health specialists and health mediators, psychologists, professionals working in the field and with various vulnerable communities from Blagoevgrad, Kazanlak, Lovech, Montana, Pleven, Pernik, Plovdiv, Ruse, Sliven, Sofia and Sungurlare.*

The texts in this book present in first person the stories of the grandparents of the authors. Writing the stories down is a part of the process of realizing personal storytelling as an ability to send messages, manifestation of courage for change and breaking of prejudice.

The stories are a result of the participation of the authors in a three-day training with two inspiring professors from Columbia University in storytelling, techniques and influencing in order to send messages and change the narrative.