

The memory of socialism among the first generation of Bulgarian emigrants in Greece

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This paper seeks to analyze the memory and recollection of the period of socialism among a part of Bulgarian emigrants living in Greece. The aim is to trace how the recollection of socialism is constructed by emigrants between 45 and 60 years of age and how this recollection functions under the emigrants' daily-life conditions.

In the beginning of 2008, I started my research as a PhD student at the Balkan Ethnology Section of the Ethnographic Institute with Museum to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, on the theme "Modern migration groups in the Republic of Greece". My research interest is directed primarily towards Bulgarian immigrants in Greece and the dynamics of their identity, formed by the new socio-economic and political relations they have to live in. Today, at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Bulgarians are the second largest immigrant community in Greece after the immigrants from Albania (Angelidu 2008: 215, Ангелиду 2008: 321; Филевска 2008: 139). According to unofficial data, their number is around 250,000-300,000 people (Филевска 2008: 139-140). Three main waves can be differentiated in the large emigrant flow of Bulgarians to Greece: in the nineties of the 20th century (in particular, in the end of the nineties), after 2001 (when the Schengen Agreement was signed, allowing Bulgarians to travel without visas in the countries of the Schengen area) and after 2007 (when Bulgaria became part of the European Union). Most Bulgarian emigrants to Greece leave their country for economic reasons. The end of the socialist period in 1989 in Bulgaria gave rise to radical political and socio-economic changes. The transition to market

economy, along with high inflation, unemployment and political instability, brought forth intensive emigrant flows and high labour mobility. Bulgarian migration is mainly headed for the countries in the European Union and North America, and Greece – as the closest geographically (as well as historically and culturally) neighbouring country of Bulgaria, and a EU Member State, “naturally” turns into one of the most preferred destinations of Bulgarian migrants, in particular during the first migration “wave”. Bulgaria’s southern neighbour is suitable for short-term seasonal work as well as for settling down for a longer period of time.

For the purposes of my work, since the beginning of 2008 to date (December 2009) I have carried out several times field work with Bulgarian emigrants in Greece and during their short visits back home in Bulgaria, as well as with representatives of their families and relatives that have not emigrated. The main methods that I used in my field work were free and directed conversation, life history and observation. In order to gather highly relevant empiric material, I tried to meet as many people as possible – men and women from different generations with different professions and education. In their stories about how, when and under what circumstances their lives of emigrants began, my interlocutors at the age of below and above 40 always outlined a very distinct boundary in their lives – 10 November 1989. Very often this date was indicated as the beginning of major changes in their lives that subsequently lead to the decision to emigrate. The recollections of the respondents depicted entirely opposite pictures, which made me ask the question how and why the same events and social phenomena can be depicted and evaluated in so different ways.

Memory and recollection. Theoretical approaches

As memory is a polysemic concept (Лаванџ, 1998: 7), I would focus on that dimension of memory, which relates to the recollections and notions

of the past, whose holders are the separate individuals. Often, in scientific work memory is “opposed” to history as two different forms of attitude towards the past. According to Daniela Koleva, memory is usually related to the attitude of the individual towards their own past, which is intermediate and intimate, while history is considered as objective, abstract and impersonal (Колева, 1998: 102). I will refer to a number of research works, dedicated to defining the concept of “memory”, considering memory as the present of the past. For example, Marie-Claire Lavabre underlines that no memory can preserve the past, it does not reproduce it, but just allows us to see and understand “the present of the past” (Лавабр, 1998: 9), i.e. the recollection of the past is constructed according to the present of the individual who recollects. She points out that the definition of memory, understood as “the present of the past”, however, includes some inner contradiction, as this definition refers both to the *traces* of the past and the *evocation* of the past. Thinking about the *traces* of the past, we focus on the fact that the past is the source of the present and thus underlines its influence. Considering memory as *evocation* of the past refers to the reconstruction, choice and “invention” of the recollection. The knowledge and construction of facts from the past are always mediated by the present of the individual and that of the group. The idea that memory is rather an effect of the present than the past was formulated by Maurice Halbwachs, as he poses the question of the social functions of memory through maintenance and construction of collective identities. According to Marie-Claire Lavabre, Halbwachs’ approach is suitable when we are interested in what a present society is doing with its past, in how the past is being instrumentalized and how from the past only what serves the present is preserved. According to her, however, the definition of memory as evocation of the past encounters difficulties, when the analysis should include the question of the “memory holes”, which in this case represent a lack of evocation of the past (Лавабр, 1998: 11). As I did not register such “memory holes”, when recording the cases described below, for the purpose of this analysis I will focus mainly on the understanding of memory as evocation and reconstruction of the past. I will

try to show how the emigrant's present in Greece influences the construction of the recollections of socialism as well as if this is the only factor, which plays a role in the construction of this recollection.

The second defining element of the concept of memory is what Maurice Halbwachs calls the memory of affective community or *collective memory*. For him, the past is a construction of social groups related to specific spatial and temporal structures. These social groups construct the past lead by their present needs and through the meaning of collective memory. The formed collective recollections of the past reduce the variety of recollections of separate individuals and groups and construct the reality of the social groups as "structured communities" with common symbolic reality, which links them to history. According to Joan Ganau, referring to „La Memoire Collective" by Maurice Halbwachs, the concept of collective memory represents such a flexible conceptual instrument to interpret the present society as "the line that separates the present from the past has become increasingly difficult to distinguish" (Ganau, 2008: 797).

Often, Maurice Halbwachs is being criticized for neglecting to a great extent the *work on memory formation* and for putting the emphasis not on the group as a group, but on the individuals who materialize the collective memory. However, he includes the diversity and conflict of collective memories in society – something useful when we consider the individual as belonging to different social groups. The individual memory of the person is built on the basis of its involvement in communicative processes. It always has its "social frameworks" because it is a function of the commitment of the individual to different social groups – from the family to the religious and national community (Асман, 1997: 35). According to Jan Assmann, it is quite excessive to introduce the collective as a subject and talk about "group memory" or "national memory", as the subject of recollection is always the individual who recollects, however, depending on the frameworks, organizing their recollections.

So, on the basis of several individual recollections I will try to see how the recollection of the socialist past functions, formed through the sharedness of collective memory held by each individual and the needs of their present. These individuals can be considered as an abstract group, which least common denominator is the fact they are emigrants. For them the emigrant experience has the common scar from trauma. They lived and formed attitudes, values and dynamic stereotypes during socialism – a time of strict state controlled migrations. During that period the state set strict rules for the movement of citizens abroad as well within the country. Land collectivization in the fifties of the 20th century and the striving for industrialization in Bulgaria caused serious migration flows from country to town, but this movement of population was under the watchful control of the party and the state. In the relatively immobile world of the Bulgarian, the sad folk songs for labour migrants (“gurbetchii”), had formed the awareness of the risks of leaving home. Coercion (mostly economic), which today makes them leave their homes and join labour migration, is understood as drama, as trauma. The normal for this age mobility of population, of the “group” and its separate members is frightening, but is also a source of pride of the demonstrated “act of heroism” to cope with their personal problems by setting off for the unknown, where “the dragons live”. I will analyze the recollections of socialism of Bulgarian migrants in Greece through these lenses.

Methodology

To carry out this research, I have chosen the method of life history because it most clearly follows the path of recollecting and outlines the parameters of the recollection. I left the respondents to narrate through the

stream of consciousness, which naturally resulted in the evaluation of life and society, thus developing the story of life during socialism. Life history, as an ethnographic method, is a way of understanding the cultural construction, or more accurately, it is a window to personal configurations of history and culture (Blackman, 1991: 58). For this text, I chose to analyze interviews mainly with women as Bulgarian emigration in Greece, especially in the beginning of the transition, was extremely feminized. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that women are extremely sensitive to the survival of the family and the children. (As one of my interlocutors said – “*the man will never go to the unknown, to a black abyss, where he knows nothing, but the woman will!*”). On the other hand, in the early days it was much easier for women to find a job, because in the period before the first legalization of emigrants (1998), and afterwards as well, for illegal emigrants the most secure kind of jobs were “home jobs” or “inner jobs”, which are mainly for women. Last but not least, I should note that during the socialist period, Bulgarian women became highly emancipated and used to bear many responsibilities, which after 10 November 1989 and the beginning of the economic crisis in Bulgaria, transformed into massive female emigration. This text is developed around the personal histories of two emigrants – R.B. from Russe, 54, and S.A. from Svishtov, 46. They both had migrated to Athens. I chose them to be the centre for the analysis, because they take two extreme viewpoints to evaluate the period of socialism in Bulgaria. At the same time, I am also including material from 11 more interviews (of which 7 with women and 4 with men), also conducted in Athens. This has given me the basis for comparison and control over the empiric material.

For middle-aged emigrants – between 45 and 60, the recollection of the socialist past is quite strong, but not identical. These are people who were born in the period of socialism, grown up and brought up in the spirit of its values. For example, my interlocutor from Russe, one of the first Bulgarian women in Athens, who came for the first time in 1992, depicted in this way the overall picture of the first emigrant wave to Greece: “*A lot of hardships in*

the lives of people came together with the changes in Bulgaria. We had families, we had kids – I’m speaking about the people of my generation – children at the age of 10 to 15, whose parents have lost their jobs... Many factories and plants were closed..., there was hyperinflation, banks were closed, the pyramid of Euro-whatever came about, money burnt out, and people were left out in the cold... And each of us used to have another life, we used to live differently – we had jobs, we knew that bread was 15 stotinkas that day, and the next day was 15 stotinkas, milk cost that, salt was 12 stotinkas. And it didn’t change. Everything was strictly regulated – you got 120 levas and with these 120 levas you could make the ends meet, you support your children... We knew our socialist – how to say it – not privileges but benefits – like free hospital, free childbirth, 3 years of childcare leave, no need to list them. Every year we planned holidays at the sea side, the children went to pioneer camps... Thus each of us... a four-member family had the right to one home, one car, we went on holidays... Well, we had some 2-3 thousand levas savings, for we didn’t know what was out there in the world...” The end of this arranged life and the new unregulated situation was one of the main factors that opened the floodgates of the first emigrant wave. The tough economic situation and the new “opportunities” for travel forced many Bulgarians to go abroad. My interlocutor summarized: *“and many people bit the road like that, with the neck into the noose, so as to save Bulgaria, to meet the needs of their families...”* ***This is the reason for the economic immigrant in Greece***. In the very beginning of our conversation, to my question “How did you decide to come to Greece?” she answered: ***“I won’t say anything about me. Generally, I will say that many Bulgarians, more entrepreneurial people earlier affected by the economic crisis in Bulgaria, came here ever since 1992, 1993...”***

The external viewpoint, chosen by my interlocutor regarding the events she spoke about, represents certain historization of recollection. Although it is about her own experience and background, she speaks as an external observer, thus trying to ensure the objectivity of the story. According to Daniela Koleva, such distant viewpoint is about “closing” the past related to the present, which results from the lack of smooth and easy flow of the past into the present (Колева, 1998: 108). The external viewpoint

allows the examination of the past, its understanding and finding its place in a complete sequence. The collapse of the socialist regime tore the calm course of time, and with it social order and hierarchy crashed. This current position of my interlocutor – estimated by her as quite “uncertain” and “tiring” is in strong contrast to her previous way of living, when everything was strictly regulated and permanence was its most important characteristic. Her attempt to make a neutral and objective evaluation of the facts is actually striving to strengthen her own, shaken social and moral values. By adopting this side perspective, she strengthens her faith in the values of socialism, which after the 20 years of “transition”, have started losing their well-defined outlines.

The principle of the opposition “before-now” turns out to be the method, on which basis is constructed the overall image of socialism, and the steady dividing line is 10 November 1989 (Дечева, 2003: 152). The socialist realities like “free hospital”, “free childbirth”, “three years of childcare leave”, my interlocutor contrasts the “anarchy”, which is, according to her, reigning in healthcare today, labour remuneration and pension insurance in Bulgaria. The social security “before” and the total lack of security “now” corresponds to the feeling of insecurity and threat in the literal, physical sense. According to my interlocutor, the “black money”, which some people had “acquired”, is the reason for the increased crime. She shared: *“That’s why now I see shootings in the centre of Russe, ordered killings... It’s terrifying. We didn’t know that during socialism. We didn’t use a key to lock the door... It’s not I was a comparty^j. It’s just such a big difference in the standard of life...”* The socialist period for this woman is like paradise lost. Then her life was complete, well-arranged and filled with meaning and bright future. She could plan each of her next steps as far as this was “destined” for the other members of society. All of a sudden, after 10 November 1989 everything changed and she found herself in a situation, where her predetermined knowledge did not help her to act according to the conditions. Taking the road of emigration is a drastic act, through which she coped with the difficult situation, developing new

knowledge and new mechanisms of action in a new place. Her professional qualification did not help her at all in her life in Athens and became the reason for her to think of her present position as a social degradation. (This was also the reason for her reserved reaction in our first meeting to my interest and my suggestion to talk, avoiding the questions with the answer: *“what was before will never be again, so there’s no point. We also did research in the past and wrote things, but now it’s over... Now, we are here and that’s it!”*) Gradually, from the remoteness of the time, the present in Bulgaria starts to look increasingly distant, and the past – nearer for her. She said: *“do you know how hard it is for me to communicate with my children? I know the old names of the streets, the squares..., the monument of Lenin, of Georgi Dimitrov..., they don’t know them. The name of the street was before “9th September”, now it’s called “Tsar Osvoboditel”. I don’t even know the new names...”* In her mind, still lives the picture before “the change”, the things she knows and identifies as “close” and “own”. Currently, Athens is for her assimilated space, while her hometown is strange and unknown. The loss of “her own” space, left so many years ago, is a serious drama not only for her, but for many other emigrants, who share they feel like “foreigners” in Bulgaria. Many of these people have lost their social contacts in their birthplace or they have become formal. During their short “holidays” in Bulgaria, they do not have the possibility to intensify their contacts and adapt quickly enough to the environment. They come back to Bulgaria, but this is not that Bulgaria they have left and which they remember, because during their absence, it has changed just like they have. The new social and urban environment, where they live and have to interact every day, turns out to be closer and more “tamed” than the one they have left. Therefore, each of them keeps in their mind an idyllic picture of Bulgaria, to which they come back with nostalgia. This picture is connected with the individual’s closest and immediate environment – town, neighbourhood or even a house, in which they have spent the best part of their childhood, for instance. For the separate individual, the symbolic for the Bulgarian identity places give way to those, which are personally significant – street, neighbourhood etc. For instance, for one respondent from Sofia, an object of nostalgia is the area

around the Pirogov Hospital – the small streets “Dospat”, “Dukatska planina”, “Sandor Petofi”, where as a child he played marbles and ball with his friends. Then, as said by him, the streets in Sofia were safe and parents let their children play late outside without worry. He left Bulgaria 17 years ago, and the neighbourhood he left then looks completely different today – a lot of new buildings and parked cars on the pavements. For another respondent, born in Knezha, the object of his nostalgia are several cafés in the centre of the town, where he spent some of his days of “unemployed” before emigrating. The fact that these cafés no longer exist (to a great extent because of the lack of clients) makes him feel not at home when he is back. These examples assert that nostalgia is directed not to the place itself as such, rather to a definite picture and period in the past, when a person felt happiest.

For my first interlocutor from Russe, this was the time when she practiced her teacher’s profession, had her family and planned with it the family holidays, had some savings and felt she had future ahead. Without being “*comparty*” as she put it, she sincerely shared the ideals that were proclaimed years on end from the height of the party tribunes. The recollections from this period are vivid and often present as a discourse in the stream of her consciousness, because thus they compensate her present. For more than 15 years she has lived with strangers, far from her relatives and doing a job, which by no means satisfies her. For women in this situation, time acquires a different dimension and the recollection of the past turns into its corrective. (I would like to illustrate this with the words of another informant: “*For me 3 years are 3 months, as I go back to Bulgaria once a year for a month, thus these 3 years are in fact 3 months*”).

For my interlocutor S.A. from Svishtov, socialism is far from this wonderful past, to which she would turn back with nostalgia, nevertheless, it exists in her thoughts as a permanent model for explaining the situation of Bulgarian society. According to her “*Bulgarians are the dumbest nation in the world*” and the reason for that is “*communism, which deprived us of any culture*”. She

said: *“you can’t take my grandpa’s estates and give them to some Guncho from the middle of nowhere, who even can’t lace his tsarvul⁸. What can he do with them? Why should you take from the capable one and give to someone, who’s good for nothing? We should once and for all understand that we are not equal. People are born different and these differences can’t be erased.”* This woman has grown up with the traumatic family recollection of the loss of social status during socialism. In her recollections are opposed the professionalism of her grandfather, who had all important for the time being features of an entrepreneurial professional (cultural hero), against the unprofessional, uneducated and coming from unmodern villages, but loyal party members, brought to the fore by totalitarianism. For her, the re-establishment of market economy, the elimination of social regimentation and the opportunity for people to compete freely and measure their qualities on the labour market, is the restoration of justice and normal order that ensures the functioning of society. She does not, however, expect a quick change in Bulgarian society due to the domination of the communist minions and because of the distorted mind-set of the Bulgarian during the period of socialism. What my interlocutor R.B. from Russe defines as “socialist privileges” and recollects with nostalgia is considered by S.A. as a limited and primitive way of thinking. The low living standards requirements of Bulgarians are one of the reasons for the lack of development in Bulgaria, she thinks and expressed the following maxim: *“As long as Bulgarians think how to save 1€ and not how to earn 1€, we’ll never put our house in order!”* And what she thinks about the socialist holidays dreamt by other Bulgarians is: *“So, he went to the sea side every year, he says... And where did you go, ah? To sleep in some wooden bungalows and tents!... You went, yeah, so what? You call this holidays?”* And her husband adds – *“in these days, when setting off for the sea we lugged all those wash basins, night-pots, toys, the bike – you name it, so the boot of the “Moskvich” won’t close... This year we were with the missus for 5 days in a five-star hotel in Velingrad. A five-star hotell, with its breakfast, with everything. That’s what I call holidays – to say nothing about breakfast in the morning, you stuff yourself till you explode... Then, lying by the pool on the chaise-longue you just call the boy over there: “Bring me an ice-cold beer,*

to the bill of room this and that” and you got it right away... That’s it, not lugging all those bits and pieces, herding in some rented room or bungalow...”

These respondents understand their participation in the labour market in Greece as an opportunity to reveal their qualities (inherited and cultivated in the family). They both share that they have a clear aim – make sure their children break out the closed circle in which they, their parents and the parents of their parents have lived in, i.e. not to work hard physical labour, but “work with their heads”, but this can be achieved only outside Bulgaria. S.A. has been working for 5 years now in a garbage recycling plant, but says she is not ashamed of working amidst “junk”, as there is no shameful job. As said by her, everyone who works to provide for his family, deserves respect and she does not understand why so many Bulgarians living in Bulgaria, are complaining all the time they have no jobs. According to her, in fact, they do not want to work, because ever since the period of socialism, Bulgarians are used not to work and in return they want to receive money, which is not normal. She considers that all Bulgarians must go and work abroad to understand how people work and earn money. In this regard, as a summary, I can say that most of my respondents shared, that they “understood” what it meant to work only after they left Bulgaria. Almost all migrants consider that people in Bulgaria do not work hard and the proverbial Bulgarian industriousness is just a myth. Very often, during our conversations I heard that a true proverb for Bulgaria was “They lie to us they pay us, we lie to them we work”, also a product of socialism and its planned economy.

While comparing the above mentioned recollections of socialism, we can also make a distinctive difference between the viewpoints of the two main interlocutors. Their opinions are representative for two major groups of Bulgarian citizens. The first ones, who recollect with nostalgia about their arranged life “before 10 November” and the others, who identify this period with the restrictions, censorship and sometimes the absurd decisions of the

system and the artificial “equality” of individuals in socialist society. To a great extent, these views have been formed on the basis of the family environment, where the female respondents have grown up. The different symbolic and real capital, which they are bearers of, is decisive for the formation of their views on life and the evaluation of the social system, in which they lived or live in. For R.B. from Russe, the socialist regime allowed many people to educate themselves, to be homeowners and enjoy a peaceful life. People like my second interlocutor feel affected by the former regime and think it deprived them of the opportunity to develop by placing them in a non-competitive environment and fictitious equality. Very excitedly, she described the moment when she crossed the Bulgarian border. She said that when stepping on “nobody’s land” beyond the border of Bulgaria, she felt such an ease as she had never felt before. Though she emigrated in 2001, i.e. 12 years after the changes, she still “felt” all the limitations of thinking and life, inherited by the former regime. As an example, she pointed out the fact that she had been laid off just because she did not want to participate with her bonds booklet in the mass privatization of the enterprise where she had been working.

In order to understand the way in which these two informants construct their recollections of the period of socialism, we must have in mind, on the one hand, the symbolic capital they bear and, on the other, their present positions. In the past, the first of them worked “in her specialty” as a teacher in Bulgarian language and literature and Russian language. The second interlocutor said that she had never worked what she had studied – she finished a technical school in chemistry, and then worked in a silk fibres plant in her hometown. The first interlocutor is divorced and looks after her two children on her own; while the second emigrated with her husband and shortly after that they took their two sons with them. This family has already sold their house in Bulgaria and bought one in Athens. They assert that there is nothing for them back in Bulgaria, and look forward in the future, while the first interlocutor does not see any future ahead of her. She said: *“if we have*

to work –we’ll work, fine, but for how long? How much more? We are already exhausted of this hard physical labour. We already have illnesses. Who will take care of us?” (she has in mind the thousands women providing for their families and children in Bulgaria). The lack of prospects before her makes the recollection of her arranged and secure life during socialism extremely vivid.

Gazing at the past suggests some deficit in the present. It can be overcome through the recollection of the beautiful past, when her life was fulfilled. The scarce resources in the present deprive the future of meaningful prospects. It becomes a kind of endless repetition of the present situation, a spiral, where moving ahead does not suggest moving upwards. We can also say, that in this case, the past has expanded so much that it covers the present and the future and the timeline loses its tripartition. For people like my interlocutor, the recollection of the time of socialism, when everyone had access to the “socialist goods – benefits”, is the one that supports them in the present. Many of them are entirely devoted to the idea that they should continue taking care and providing for their already grown up children. Very often, these women need to feel they are needed to be able to continue doing their everyday obligations.

The reflections about the period of socialism of my interlocutor from Russe occur spontaneously and repeatedly. For her the socialist past is an important and inseparable part of Bulgarian national identity. The denial of socialism and its values, ideals and monuments is considered as national betrayal and loss of identity. Being one of the first Bulgarian women in Athens who came ever since the beginning of the nineties, she defines the relationships in the Bulgarian emigrants’ community then as “*human in a socialist way*”. As said by her, “*everybody cared about everybody*” and people helped each other without expecting any material gains in exchange for the services they made to each other. She excitedly described how, on her arrival in Athens to look for a permanent job (she had already come as a peddler), the woman in the so called “grafio”, i.e. a private job office, introduced her to

her employers as her sister in order to guarantee for her as well as to ensure the necessary respect and good attitude towards her. It is also amazing, that in the beginning she sent to her family “luggage” and money by absolutely strange people, and neither worried that the delivery would not arrive, nor paid for the service. She said: “*nothing was ever touched in my luggage. You meet this man – hey, are you from Russe? Take this luggage to this and that address. You buy him a coke or a coffee, and he says – “no need of that, we are still people!”* Now, to send even a small packet by the so called “carriers”, costs at least 10 euros. According to this interlocutor, the reason for the immigrants to help each other in the beginning of the nineties was in the still preserved socialist values. Over time, the relationships between people began to express mainly in terms of money. She ignores the fact, that on this initial stage of Bulgarian immigration in Greece, the community was quite small, which allowed keeping the community spirit and intensive contacts among the immigrants. Then, meeting any fellow countrymen and hearing Bulgarian speech brought tears in the eyes of quite a few of my interlocutors. While today, many of them share that when they meet unfamiliar Bulgarians, for instance in the city transport, they prefer to move away and show by no means they are Bulgarians. Currently, the Bulgarian colony in Athens is quite numerous, according to some of the informants it reaches 90,000 people. Even if the figure is exaggerated, we cannot deny that for the whole 20-year period of transition, the Bulgarian community in Athens (and Greece as a whole) constantly increases, which makes it impossible to preserve the type of relations from the beginning of the nineties of the 20th century.

I should note that today we are facing a very important trend – after twenty years the socialist past is distinctly being recognized as an inseparable part of Bulgarian cultural and historical heritage. This view is shared also by other interlocutors with a similar social position to that of R.B., but without manifesting the discourse on socialism to such extent. In a discussion, raised by my first interlocutor on the hometown of another female interlocutor – Dimitrovgrad and the house museum of Penyo Penev, the participating

people backed the opinion that removing the monuments of Georgi Dimitrov, Lenin and other prominent communist figures was something wrong, even on the verge of sacrilege. R.B. was convinced that the house museum of Penyo Penev did not exist anymore since he was “rejected” for being a socialist poet. According to all my respondents, taking part in this conversation, the monuments of the former period had to remain as signs of the past and part of our history. They summarized: “*A nation, that demolishes its monuments of culture is not a nation!*” and “*A nation that does not respect its past has no future!*” At this point, I would again go back to the starting theoretical position that “reading” the past depends to a great extent on the present of the individual, who recollects and constructs their recollections according to their current position in society. My respondents – having left Bulgaria at different points in time, mainly for economic reasons, idealize their past, as they felt important then. For them the period of socialism was a time, when they took actively part in the process of “building the motherland” contributing either their physical or mental labour. The fact they currently are emigrants in a foreign country, drifts them away from what is happening in Bulgaria and deprives them of the opportunity to participate directly in the life of Bulgarian society. Though they all have “set off to save the sinking ship”, reality does not allow them to be really committed to what is going on in their homeland – to the real economic and political life in the country. Most emigrants send money back to their families, which represent a considerable part of income to Bulgaria. Nevertheless, they do not have any control over the way, in which this money is used. The physical distance is understood as “deprivation” of social rights. Therefore, the return to the homeland makes them feel “alien, used”. In the changed environment they do not see their own labour and efforts. My interlocutors need the monuments from the past to remind them of the time when they were equal citizens of Bulgaria. The monuments, buildings and plants, built during socialism, have their meaning even for the mere fact that they have been part of Bulgarian history. For these emigrants, the question of evaluation of these monuments does not exist, they are neither interested in the connotations

which they have, nor in the objective historical facts behind them. In this respect, the house museum of Penyo Penev and the monument of Georgi Dimitrov in the centre of Dimitrovgrad belong to the same plane – they are historical evidence and as such should continue to exist in the urban space to remind people. For them, the literary value of the poetry of the first and the character of the political decisions of the second are things without any relevance. The important thing is that they are considered as “monuments of culture” and being such – as some of the markers building part of the identity of these Bulgarian emigrants in Athens. Thus, one of the female respondents concluded: *“Destroying monuments of culture??! Why?! Because the government has changed. It doesn’t matter. Well, it may come back tomorrow again.”*

Even more symbolic in this aspect is the Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov in the capital city. When they started speaking about the removal of the “old” monuments, my interlocutors immediately pictured the Mausoleum and its demolition. Though, there were two-way answers to the question “for” or “against” leaving the mummy of Georgi Dimitrov in the Mausoleum, they all agreed that the building should not have been demolished. According to one of the interlocutors, it had to be transformed into some youth or children’s education and play centre and thus to be used for some practical purpose. Another female interlocutor pointed out: *“well, it’s O.K. they removed the mummy, but they had to think out something about the building”*, while my first informant insisted that the mummy of Georgi Dimitrov had to be preserved, too, as *“this is history”*. She backed up her opinion by pointing out that the Russians preserved the mummy of Lenin. The word “mummy” that was used several times, has different connotations, which can be interpreted differently. On the one hand, it speaks of something that is no longer living and which is a part of a past age, not the one we are living in. On the other hand, however, this term also includes the notion of history – the mummies of the pharaohs of Ancient Egypt are evidence of the greatness of this ancient civilization. Thus, an association can be made that the mummies of the “leaders of socialism” Lenin and Dimitrov

are significant, as they are evidence of a certain part of our history, which is still too near to our present to find its real evaluation. I think that the expressed support to the Mausoleum revealed some pragmatic features of the Bulgarian character as well. All participants in the conversation supported the idea that something, which had already been created and in which had been invested money and efforts, should be preserved and used, instead of being demolished.

This idea also reverberated in many other conversations, in particular, those about the created during the socialism factories and plants – all those places, which for so many years sustained the livelihood of Bulgarian families. The end of socialism and the transition to market economy caused many plants closures and mass layoff, which triggered the enormous emigrant wave. Painful for them is the fact that many of these plants were sold off at a knock-out price during the mass privatization and then their equipment was sold off for scrap. In this regard, the evaluation of the former regime made by one of my interlocutors from Knezha, was quite interesting. While he was telling me about his various attempts to start up a private business in Bulgaria – all of which had failed and thus reaffirmed his decision to emigrate, he concluded: *“In Bulgaria it won’t work, because of our system... It’s because of these robbers, the communists that ruled us, that gave away the money to some gypsies and thick necks, who bought up and then sold off the factories... **So, communism as an idea is something good, though I have always been a UDF^m...**, I think – **communism probably exists in America** – giving equal labour rights and freedom of expression... And in Bulgaria, they should have taken the good things from the past and the good ones from the present and make up something good... Well, on the other hand, the UDF was also created by dummies...”* This person is not extreme in his evaluation of the past. He critically estimates the pros and cons of the communist regime. For more than 10 years he tried to participate in the process of building a democratic civil society in Bulgaria. He shared that he had tried to start up different types of small businesses in Knezha, he was a municipal councillor in the city council, elected on the

UDF ticket, but all his efforts failed. According to him, the reason for this is the “negligence” and the “abdication” of the state, which allows “people’s labour to be robbed”. I would note that this opinion is shared not only by most emigrants, but also by the Bulgarians living in Bulgaria – people, who in the time of socialism were part of the working class and who, after the changes, found themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy because they lost their jobs or kept them receiving insignificant pay. The difference between them and my interlocutor is only in the strategy and choice they have made to cope with the situation. Those who remained in Bulgaria have accepted the circumstances and live with the secret hope that “things will get better someday”, while my respondent thinks that this will not happen soon and thus he chose emigration. He is definite that if it was possible to live in Bulgaria from one’s labour in the way he lives in Greece, he would immediately come back home. (Just to add to his image, I will say that he lives in Athens together with his wife and son. Interestingly, this family does not fit in the frameworks of the “typical” chain family migration, in which the woman has the leading role. In this case, the son was the first family member that arrived in Athens, and several years later his parents followed him.) This interlocutor deeply believes in the ideas of liberalism, on which Western capitalist societies are grounded. He believes that without private property, free market and entrepreneurship there cannot be any economic development. He proudly shares that thanks to his own qualities he managed to make his name as a worker and won the trust of his employer, for which he gets the relevant payment. According to him, in this respect socialism has inflicted serious “damages” to Bulgarian society, where personal development and career based on kinship and friendship. For this respondent, however, socialism is not a permanent discourse, not an explanatory model for the current condition of Bulgarian society. For him, the near future is related to Greece, but in the long run he intends to come back to Bulgaria, where is still a part of his family (daughter, grandchildren).

The different perspective on the future determines the different types of attitude to the past. As mentioned in the beginning, the recollection and memory of the past legitimate the present and its future development. As a key element of identity – individual and collective, memory creates a sense of stability in people. It organizes, rationalizes, legitimates and justifies the present or some present behaviour. In this way can be interpreted the behaviour of my second interlocutor, who demonstrates extremely negative attitude towards Bulgaria. She estimates her willingness to leave Bulgaria as the only right decision and thinks it is the only way to cope with the situation that should be done by all Bulgarians. Besides, she states that she does not identify herself with Bulgaria at all and does not want to return. Her strong denial is necessary for her in order to accept more easily the fact she has to live in another country. During our meetings, the topic about Bulgaria and Bulgarians was accepted reluctantly and provoked her negative comments. She underlined several times she felt no nostalgia, and the only reason for her and her family to travel to Bulgaria was to buy books. The negative image she creates of Bulgaria and the notion that socialism was the reason for all their failures in the past, were the mechanism that allowed her to perceive her strategy for the future, clearly linked to Greece, as the best option. She lives a real and fulfilled life in Athens with her real family. She has permanent control over the big and small decisions, communicates with her children and builds their system of values directly, but has to accept that they will never come back to their birthplace, nor will she. The price of her new life is to cut off the link with the past. Therefore, the more traumatic it seems, the easier the new identity will be developed. The more substantial are the occurring changes for the individuals and the communities at the times of crisis, the more radical are these changes in the individual and collective memory in the process of re-writing of history. The constant reconstruction of memory and historiography are the result of the constant changes today and the course to the future.

Conclusion

Memory and recollection of the past are important components that participate in the building of our identity. As identity is not a finished construct, but rather a process (Barth, 1969), therefore, memory and recollection are not frozen in time, but change and develop depending on the present of the person recollecting. Even though their subject is the separate individual, they are acquired in the process of socialization and thus are always socially determined. The social groups, in which the individual enters, and his interconnections with the other members of the group, determine the model of reconstruction of the past. The mode of memory constructing and its functioning are determined to a great extent by the social capital and the experience, gathered during the “past” period. An important role in this regard plays the present position of the subject in society, as well as their future prospects. The presented empiric material shows how the difference in the positions of different respondents creates different forms of recollecting the period of socialism. One and the same phenomenon from the socialist past is estimated in entirely opposite ways by the two main interlocutors. While for the first one, the period of socialism is a time of realized personal potential, for the other one, it is a period of stagnation and person’s deprivation of opportunities for development. The social regimentation during socialism means for the first equal opportunities for everyone’s welfare, while for the other it is a decline in quality and a prerequisite for the lack of development. The different social capital, which both interlocutors have accumulated during the period of socialism, as well as the different social positions, which they have as emigrants, creates differences in the memory of the past. The future prospects of S.A., definitely connected to Greece and Greek society, necessitate the building of a new identity by making a distinction and drifting far from the past. For R.B. it is the past, which is the factor that upholds her in the present with its danger of disintegration of personality, caused by the feeling of social degradation and lack of future. On the axis of these two extreme opinions lies the whole spectrum of personal recollections of the other respondents.

The life of emigrants reinforces their national identity. The socialist period as part of Bulgarian past is considered an inseparable part of the cultural and historical heritage and that, according to the respondents, creates the necessity for its preservation. Life in emigration is considered to some extent as “deprivation” of the right to participation in the contemporary processes in Bulgarian society, while the feeling of belonging to the “building of socialism” creates, in general, certain nostalgia to the past. Memory and recollections of the past are those elements of our identity that create the feeling of stability over time and reaffirm our feeling of belonging to a certain group. Each of the presented interlocutors needs their notions and recollections of the past, so as to be able to “reconcile” their present and the prospects to/lack of future through them.

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ⁱ Translator's note: Comparty, i.e. member of the communist party.

ⁱⁱ Translator's note: Tsarvuls are traditional shoes sewn from pigs or veal leather, characteristic for the national costume of all Balkan nations. In modern language, it is pejorative word for a stupid and uneducated person, coming from a village/underdeveloped environment.

ⁱⁱⁱ Translator's note: UDF – Union of Democratic Forces, is a political party in Bulgaria, founded on 7 December 1989, as a union of eleven political organizations in opposition to the Communist government.