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CHAPTER 7 COMRADES, 2000

Ani was tall and thin, with straight, golden-brown hair that fell to her shoulders. Her skin was tan, and her eyes were hazel. She would have been a very pretty girl save for the prominent nose that seemed too big for the otherwise delicate features of her face. She also bit her nails incessantly; they were chewed down to the raw flesh of her fingertips. Despite her nervous habit, she was friendly and open, smiling often and compulsively refilling my teacup whenever I emptied it. Her clothes were loose and modest, a wide pair of brown palazzo pants with a white linen, long-sleeve, button-down shirt. At a time of year when most Bulgarian young women Ani's age would be wearing halter tops and mini-skirts, her clothes made her look older and more conservative. At first I assumed that this was her professional look for the office, but she soon informed me that she was a part of the ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria, a Muslim minority that was a remnant of the Ottoman imperial presence in the Balkans before Bulgaria's independence in 1878. Ani then quickly assured me that she was allowed to dress however she wanted but that she did not want to make her uncle feel uncomfortable. Ani kept her head uncovered but thought it best not to expose too much skin. Her uncle was responsible for her during the summer.

Ani was about to turn twenty when I met her in 2000. She had just finished her first year of university, and she was working for

PROOF

her uncle as a reservations manager in a hotel in the Bulgarian ski resort of Borovetz. It was July, and most of the tourists staying at the hotel were Bulgarians fleeing the intense summer heat in Sofia. There were few foreigners around, and Ani wanted to take every opportunity to practice her English. The interview I had with her lasted twice as long as those I conducted with most other employees in the resort; she was eager to share all of her thoughts with me as long as I agreed to correct her grammar and pronunciation along the way.

Our interview was about labor in the tourism industry. I asked her a series of questions about working conditions, job satisfaction, and hopes for the future. Toward the end of every interview I usually turned to questions about the transition from communism to capitalism and what people remembered about it. Most of my interviewees were older. They had very clear recollections of the chaos and hardship that had characterized the last decades of their lives (with the notable exception of Damiana who saved all of her ire for the Bulgarian Communists). Many of my interviewees spoke of food shortages and ration coupons of the early 1990s, about not being able to find milk for their children. Others lamented the savings they lost when the banks collapsed, agonizing over the irony that those with the most debt were the true winners of the hyperinflation. Then there were the many men and women who feared unemployment, worrying about the lack of jobs once the old socialist factories started closing down. One woman talked at length about the crime and violence; her son had been shot and paralyzed from the waist down during a mafia shootout in a Sofia nightclub. He had been a professional soccer player. The general zeitgeist of the transition of 1989 was one of despair tempered by hope that things would soon start to get better.

In my interviews my favorite questions to ask were: "what was your first memory of the end of communism?" and "when was the first moment you realized that it was really over?" Given that Ani was so young in 1989, I imagined that she might not recall the exact moment when she became aware of the transition. I only decided to ask her the question because she was a Turk. In December 1984 the government of Bulgaria began something called the "rebirth" process, a program that forced the Turks of Bulgaria to give up their Turkish names and accept Slavic-sounding ones along with a series of other heavy-handed measures aimed at erasing the Turkish ethnicity from Bulgaria. Tensions between the Turkish minority

PROOF

and the Bulgarian government rose steadily throughout the late 1980s. Beginning in May 1989 the Bulgarian government began issuing exit visas to the ethnic Turks who refused to be assimilated, a signal that the Turkish minority was expected to leave Bulgaria at once. Many Turks were given only twenty-four hours to flee the country. By November 1989, when the Zhivkov regime finally fell after thirty-three years in power, over three hundred thousand Turks had fled, leaving behind their homes and possessions.

This expulsion was ironically called the Great Excursion, because the Bulgarian Communist Party tried to make it sound as if the Turks had left of their own free will. Although there were undoubtedly those who did, there were far more who left because they expected that the state would kick them out by force anyway. Because Turkey was a NATO-allied country, the Bulgarians feared Turkish aggression and irredentism. The government believed that expelling the Turks would prevent future Turkish intervention in Bulgaria's affairs. I guessed that Ani would remember those events even if she was only nine years old at the time.

Furthermore, the Bulgarian Turks were Muslims. Like Communists in other Eastern Bloc countries, the Bulgarian leaders believed that religion kept people from accepting modern life and the values associated with it, especially the equality of men and women in society. In Bulgaria headscarves and specific Islamic garments had been banned as well as the most intimate Islamic rituals: circumcision, Islamic burial practices, and the ability of Muslims to give their children Muslim names. I guessed from Ani's conservative attire that her family might be a devout one that suffered from religious persecution before 1989. I therefore assumed that she would have a far more critical view of the communist period than some of my other informants who had already begun to look back at it with considerable nostalgia.

Her answer surprised me. Our conversation captured the essence of what so many different Bulgarians had tried to articulate in different ways. Perhaps because Ani saw the Changes through the eyes of a child, she was able to distill into one small anecdote an entire universe of conflicting emotions and frustrations about the continued failures and social upheavals of the 1990s. She was able to put her finger on the one thing she felt had been lost in the transition.

"That is a difficult question because I was so young. Maybe in the third or fourth grade," she said, curling her hand and lifting it up to her mouth as she

PROOF



A third-grade class photo from 1976.

searched for some remnant of a fingernail. She gnawed at a small sliver of nail on her left ring finger for several moments, gazing up at the ceiling as she rustled around in her mind for the memory, a memory that seemed to be eluding her. Ani finally tore off a thin white sliver exposing a raw, pink nail bed that looked like it was about to start bleeding.

"But I remember," she said at last. "One day our teacher came to class. And she told us that we should no longer call her Drugarkata Stefanova. Do you know the word *drugar*?"

"It means *comrade*, right?"

"Yes, *comrade*, but also *companion* or *friend*. And it could also mean *workmate* or *classmate*. Like a *colleague*," Ani said in careful English.

"That's what the Communists preferred to call each other: *comrades*?"

"Yes, but we all used that word. We were all *drugari* to each other," Ani explained, using the plural of the word in Bulgarian. She put her hand back up to her mouth once more, but before she could begin nibbling she paused and said, "Yes. I remember that one day our teacher, Drugarkata Stefanova . . . you know at that time we called all of our teachers *drugar*. And you know that *drugarka* is a woman *drugar*?"

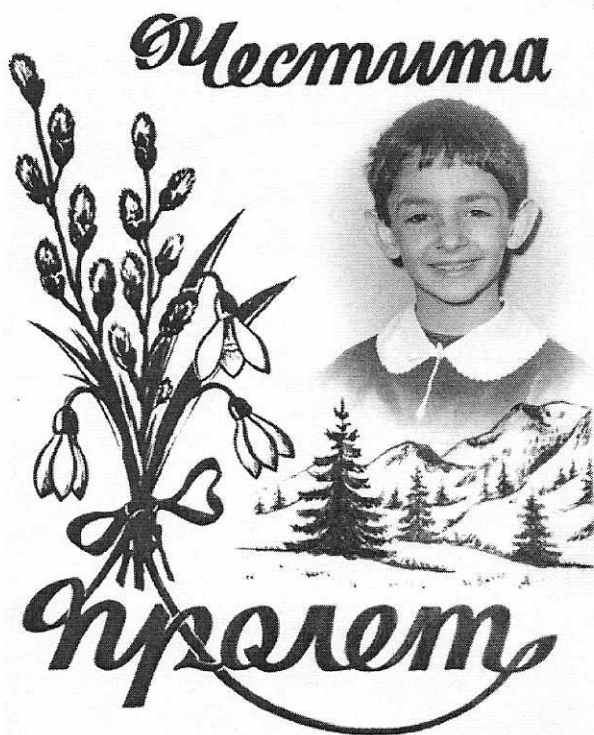
"Yes," I said, "The feminine version of the noun?"

"Yes, but you don't have many gendered nouns in English."

"No, we don't. I make mistakes in Bulgarian all the time."

"We don't have gender nouns in Turkish either. It is curious how languages can be so different."

PROOF



A Bulgarian "Happy Spring" card from the early 1970s. These were school photos that were sent to family and friends.

"Very curious," I said, trying to bring her back onto the topic. "You were telling me about Comrade Stefanova."

"Oh yes. Well, one day our teacher comes to class and tells us that we are no longer allowed to call her Drugarkata Stefanova. From now on we are supposed to call her Gospozha Stefanova, you know, like Lady Stefanova."

"Like Mrs. Stefanova?"

"That's right. Mrs. Stefanova. And we all thought it was very funny, because it made her sound so old, and she was really just in her twenties maybe. We kept calling her drugarka, or Mrs. Drugarka. She kept correcting us. Eventually she got very angry and told us that she was no longer our comrade but our teacher, and out of respect for her position we should call her missus."

"And why did that make such an impression on you?" I said.

"Well, it's because I don't remember much about communism. Because I was so young. But I do remember that we all called each other drugar. You

PROOF

see, because we students were drugari to each other, and we were drugari to our teachers and to other adults. And people in all sorts of different professions and living in different places, well, they were all drugari to each other, too. Everyone was a drugar.”

She paused, sucking on a fingertip now that the last of her nails was gone. “When Drugarkata Stefanova told us to call her Gospozha, I realized for the first time how much everything was going to change. I had heard the rumors. I knew that my father was no longer afraid to listen to the American and British radio stations, and that there would be elections, and that Todor Zhivkov had gone away. But none of that meant anything to me. It did not affect me. Having to call my teacher missus, you know, which sounds so formal and like she is someone really important, that was the first thing to change in my life. So that’s why I remember it.”

“I see.”

“And you know. It is because I very much liked the word *drugar*. There was something good about having one word for everybody. I don’t remember too much about communism, but I do remember the word *drugar*. It is a good word: *drugar*,” she said, heaving a deep sigh.

I nodded, scribbling down her words as fast as I could in my notebook.

“*Comrade* was a good word,” she repeated, rolling the English-language version of it around on her tongue, emphasizing the *r* just slightly. “*Comrade*. Colleague. Friend. Maybe it was not really true, but I like to think that there was once a time when all Bulgarians, even Turks, were drugari to each other. I don’t know. Maybe we lost something really important when we lost the word *drugar*.”