

## **I LIVED SOCIALISM**

### **Selected stories in English**

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## **A not all that bad socialism**

*Kristina Bratanova, 24, European funding programmes, Sofia*

One day I went to school without my blue necktie – I was sent all the way back home to get it – what a disgrace, did I want to defile the party – not by any means, of course not! My mother and father have to work, after all – I got back and gave explanations.

We went on holidays to the sea for a whole month, we went skiing, we made hiking tours along the 100 sites itinerary.

At school we were irradiated against something with a lamp, a radiation that could damage something else, however. Almost every time we stood around the lamp with our blouses rolled up and without any supervision!!!

We had a Zhiguli car.

My grandparents had a Moskvich.

My grandfather was some sort of party guy, but he traded with animals or something like that which, whatever it was, led me to think that we were not living in a planned economy.

Once we cut maize with a sickle, because no agricultural machines were allowed into the village centre where the maize grew.

During physical education we had to wear tight shorts, but when I turned up in a jersey - I was not allowed to, the excuse being that not everybody had one.

I was never worried, nor my parents, that we were playing until late somewhere in the neighbourhood.

We would buy a sesame ring and boza (millet-ale) for seven stotinki.

In third grade we had an Ukrainian woman teaching us Russian. She was the only one to come to school in a miniskirt. She tapped our heads with a pointer which CAME OUT OF A BIRO!!!

The free time of children was filled with all sorts of study circles like drawing, martial arts, aerobics, maths for geniuses, folk dances, etc. It was very merry and entertaining.

We had a Home of Pioneers and a Youth Home.

My grandmother used to bring me chocolate spread from Bulgarplod\*.

My grandfather fixed the car in Mototechnika\*\*.

All the women went to the hairdresser and beautician. For every festive occasion they would buy a new suit, something new to wear.

Milk chocolate had to be brought from the GDR.

My old cassette player was from Corecom (hard currency store).

The key to my home was hanging round my neck.

We were never poor during socialism.

During a football match, in which the Beroe team was playing, a helicopter sprinkled rose water.

At the age of four I read the heading Fatherland Front.

We always subscribed to Kolobok\*\*\*.

We knew when the produced agricultural output would be bought out.

And so on...

***Bulgarplod\**** - state owned shop for vegetables and fruits

***Mototechnika\*\****-state owned shop, the only place to buy cars and similar technique (in special waiting lists)

***Kolobok\*\*\**** - Russian magazine for children

## **“First blood”**

*Nadezhda Radulova, 28 years old, PhD student at Sofia University, Sofia*

Do you remember the first steps of the home video culture at the end of the 70-ties? Gatherings in the neighbourhood with the new rakia (brandy) in front of the “Veliko Tyrnovo” TVs and the palimpsest illegal videotapes. Even if one had very good sight would need 10 minutes to tell whether this is a spaghetti western, action movie or a porno one. Engineers and doctors working in Libya or truck-drivers imported those tapes. Those magical machines brought into our houses the moving, colourful West. One could call it “wild” in most of the cases. There was a problem with the interpretation too. It was simultaneous and poor. Those of us who knew a bit of English still remember the “evergreens” of the interpreter’s skills. A friend of mine long time ago gave the prize for originality to the following sentence: “Oh, Jesus Christ!” was interpreted as “Oh, Jessy got crazy”.

My first video memory has no sound. All of us were at the house of one neighbour - truck driver. He wanted to show us his brand new (in his opinion) video recorder. Despite of the boasting, it refused to produce any sound. They have tried from here and there, turned it upside down, begged it but it didn’t work. At the end we saw the soundless movie. Anyway, the images were too burdensome for my child mind. “Rambo: First blood”. Silvester Stalone falls down a precipice, stays alive and sews his own arm. Rambo is far braver than the “haiduks” and the children-heroes. At that moment I wanted to be like him...And I knew that the next day I would have to fight a lot so that can get the Rambo role in the street games.

As we were sitting quiet watching the great feat at the screen, the neighbour - truck driver couldn’t contain himself and shouted to his wife:” Turn the washing machine on!” “But why, how? she said. “Turn it on, turn it on, let it get loud so that the whole neighbourhood can hear it!” And the “Perla” started making noise. And everything got back to the normal. And we played the movie from the beginning.

## **The food...**

*Vasil Ivanov, 29 years old, lawyer, Sofia*

When I was a child, every day they brought us the food from the restaurant at “Rila” hotel. At around 12- 12.30 a small “Volkswagen” van stopped in front of our house (till I grew up I called this van “the Food”). I thought that “the Food” is something like Santa Claus that comes to feed everybody on the Earth. My friend Joro was very amazed when I asked him once:” Is the food also coming late to your place?” “What food?” he said, “The one with the van”. Joro brought me out of the dark saying that there is no food coming to their place and that they even go to the store to buy it. I thought that was quite unpractical.

## “Rebirth campaign” and carnations

*Vesselin Vachkov, 37, editor-in-chief “Lidove noviny”, Prague*

Shoumen was one of the centres of the so-called “revival process”(or “rebirth campaign” – “*vazroditelen process*”)\*. There were two Turkish girls in my class. One was called Aishe, the other Ferdie. As far as I remember, the main events took place during one weekend. On Monday we went to school. The first thing that startled us was the guard at the entrance to the school. We were immediately gathered by classes, but Aishe and Ferdie were missing. Our class teacher explained what had happened, naturally according to the instructions all the teachers had received.

The two girls reappeared after a week. Our class teacher gathered us again and said that they now had new names. If I’m not mistaken, Aishe had been renamed Ani, and Ferdie - Veneta. When she said her new name, Ferdie burst into tears. That’s where my memory goes blank.

I also have other fragmentary memories related to the regenerative process. I remember that there was plenty of ridicule. The Bulgarian kids ridiculed the Turkish children for their silly new names. During the name change they tried to retain the first letter or the semantics of their name. For them it was a tragedy, but to us it all seemed like a game. We started playing a game called “what’s your old name”. We pretended to be “reborn”. So that my friend Hristo was Hassan, and I, Vesselin, was Veisal.

Another fragment: We are at the Herson cinema and the newsreel is of course about the “rebirth campaign”. The strongest image I and my friends remember was the passports with the new names being handed out. The report was from a village, the mayor giving the villagers one carnation with each passport. Completely absurd. Later this turned into a password between my friends, something like a synonym of the process: “Aha, he’s got a carnation,” we would say derisively.

I am still struck by the cruelty with which we spoke of the Turks. They were second-rate people, simply “the others”. Probably this is why Ferdie–Veneta’s crying affected me so much. I was ashamed. And I locked this memory away in my mind.

- *“revival process”, “rebirth campaign” - In 1984 the Bulgarian government undertook the so called “rebirth campaign” during which the country’s ethnic Turks were forced to adopt new Bulgarian names. The process was implemented secretly and led to sabotage actions, demonstrations from the Turkish minority followed by fines, imprisonment, batteries, internment.*

## Bad lessons

### *Apostol Stamatov, 30, preacher, Chirpan*

I was happy to be living in Bulgaria and not in the West. We were told that the West was full of drug addicts, capitalists and all sorts of other horrors.

I was in third grade when we visited the village of Shipka and the church with the golden domes. One of my classmates lit a candle and was sneered at first by our teacher, and then by the entire class. I, too, despised him. Everybody found him despicable. “Jesus is fiction”, my teacher used to say.

The admission to the Comsomol (*Young Communist League*) was an absolute joke. Before we entered the room where the selection committee was waiting, we made fun, asking questions like “How many are the five from **RMS\***” or “What is Todor Zhivkov’s name\*\*?”

At that time there was a boy in our neighbourhood who went to a Protestant church. We followed him, waited for him to come out, to see how he would react. He would blush. Now I am a preacher and I teach people that which I was never taught either at school or at home. It’s a good thing not to remember the bad lessons.

**\*The five of RMS** – *a famous anti-fascist group of young people in the 40s*

**\*\*Todor Zhivkov**( 1911-1998) - *First secretary of the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party's Central Committee (1954-89) and president of Bulgaria (1971-89). His 35 years as Bulgaria's ruler made him the longest-serving leader in any of the Soviet-bloc nations of eastern Europe.*

*On 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1989 Zhivkov was overthrown at the meeting of the Politbureau and replaced by hitherto Prime Minister Peter Mladenov.( The 10<sup>th</sup> of November is considered the starting point of the democratic processes in Bulgaria.)*

*Zhivkov was subsequently expelled from the Bulgarian Communist Party in December and was placed under arrest in January 1990. Zhivkov was convicted of embezzlement in 1992 and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. He was allowed to serve his sentence under house arrest on account of his failing health, and in 1998 he was reinstated as a member of the Communist Party's successor organization, the Socialist Party.*

## **The locked Bible**

*Mariana Ekimova-Melnishka, 56, translator, journalist, lecturer at New Bulgarian University, Sofia*

My students do not believe me when I relate this telling story and with their innocent minds, unburdened by prohibitions, are unable to fathom its meaning...

In 1980 I was translating “The Thorn Birds”, a book which abounds in quotes from the Bible. Despite having been brought up with this Book, at home we only had a big children’s illustrated edition and the 1927 pocket version, but its current translation had already appeared and my professional ethics demanded that I refer to it. There was no way for me to own one of the only 1,000 copies distributed among the communist elite in the church and the state, so I was forced to work in the National Library, and for the purpose the Union of Translators or the Narodna Kultura publishing house ( I forget which) had furnished me with a special letter giving me the right to use the Book of Books (!).

The librarian on duty obligingly dug it out from somewhere, but instead of handing it to me, took me down the right long corridor to a small office into which she led me, showed me to a seat and wished me “pleasant work”, apologising for having to lock the door on the outside, because these were the rules. I asked: “Well, what if I need to go to the toilet?” and she reassured me that the minute I rang her or her colleague in the central salon on the phone, they would immediately unlock me. I was used to the censorship on literature, but I was so happy to be holding the Bible, that I do not remember how long I remained stunned by this madness. We performed the same “exercise” a few more times, until I had got all my passages, and that with the satisfaction that a small part of the eternal wisdom and the Word of God would reach the unsuspecting future (and numerous, as it turned out!) readers of the novel. Indeed, it was a minor miracle that such a book was being published in Bulgarian at that time, but how and why some good things happened despite communism (inadvertently or thanks to the education of somebody’s privileged daughters) is a the subject of a longer and more complicated conversation. This is one of the most harmless stories from the last years of communism, while those from the 1950s, 60s and 70s, which I could tell you, somehow do not fit into the quite merry tone of this collection of memories. Still, it is a good thing it exists and I wish it luck!

## The paternal home

*Ivan Todorov, 74, mechanical engineer by profession, retired, Montana-Krivodol-Sofia*

I want to go back to the past and remember what I have experienced. I will hardly be able to encompass everything. I have thought about this many times and it passes before my eyes like on film.

I was born in the town of Krivodol – the former village of Krivodol, Vratsa district – in an extremely poor peasant family. My parents were exceptionally hardworking people. A lot of hard work was needed to make ends meet. I remember that we were wanting in every respect – we lived mainly on corn bread and its variety – hominy. We only saw white bread on holidays. Woollen, hempen clothes, no underwear, woollen stockings and sandals. Every night the stockings would be put to dry on the stove. The clothes, too, were old, often handed down from parents and grandparents. I went to school with a notebook and pencil – mostly without a primer, or with an old one, borrowed from better off parents, no longer used. I went to school in the morning. In the afternoon I had to go and relieve my mother who was with the sheep or cows. So she could go and cook something for dinner. In the summer months my sister and I were taken to learn how to dig and reap. Being very young, lacking knowledge and experience, we cut ourselves – arms, legs, but after first aid from our mother, the wound dressed with a piece of cloth and ground tile powder, it was back to work.

That's how the years went by, the hardships growing. The reason was that our families lived together, the whole clan – my father, his sister, the sons-in-law, married to members of the household. They did not work. They were helped by my grandmother – my father's mother. My mother couldn't stand it. During a quarrel my father was thrown out of their home. He borrowed bricks from friends and in a few days, with their help, he built a room – four by four metres. They covered it temporarily with cornstalks and straw. Later we replaced it with roof-tiles which the owner of a mill gave us, Pesho Tsekov, on whose land we worked as sharecroppers.

Going to school, I looked at every child, wanted to know where he or she lived and imagined in my child's mind who lived how. I realized that I and two guys from were the poorest in Krivodol. I've never told this to anyone, but my assessment was correct. That's when I first started thinking that I had to get out of this situation. I started washing lemonade bottles for the owner Balkanski during the vacation. At the end of the week, instead of giving me a lev or two to go and boast to my parents, he gave me a bag with ten lemonades. This bred a dreadful hatred in me, which I still feel. I began thinking of what was needed to build a house. Mainly bricks and stones. I started going and looking how bricks were made and decided to begin next year. I talked to my father and he agreed. So I started, it was 1942, I had just completed primary school, it was not easy, but as the days went by I got used to making bricks. My next wish was to make them like the old masters did – they made some 500-800 bricks a day. I started the first year with 100-300 a day and reached 1,000 the second year. Thus, in two years, I made 25,000 bricks. We baked them. The next year we started extracting stones from the quarry next to our vineyard. In one year – summer and winter – we got the stones together.

It remained to find a master to cut the stones for the facade of the house. We asked the husband of my mother's sister. He came and did the job. The co-operative farm promised

to send us two master stonemasons. We found another very good one from Galatin and started.

More than ten years passed before the house was built. Meanwhile, I graduated the secondary school for boys in Vratsa, later the Railway Institute in Sofia, and got a job as an engine-driver in Cherven Bryag. Then, in 1953, I got my first paycheque and the men started work on the house. Day after day, the house was built. We whitewashed it. It was really a nice house. People passing by – going to market – would stop and look. They said: “Dimiter’s boy has turned out very bright and hardworking, they were the poorest and look at them now – they’re among the first in Krivodol.”

## About the rope

**Ira Markova, 47, doctor, Sofia**

I was travelling with my then five-year-old daughter (it was 1986) on the tram and through the window she saw the monument to Vassil Levski and because it was February and because the anniversary of the hanging of the Apostle\* had recently been celebrated, she asked me in the crowded tram: “Mommy, is this where Todor Zhivkov\*\* was hanged?” in a really loud voice. I shushed her in embarrassment – the poor child, she had heard something on the news but had got the names all mixed up. Quiet giggling in the tram. Another question: “Mommy, mommy, tell me, is this where he was hanged...?” I hypocritically and nastily pinched the child and said that this is where Vassil Levski\* was hanged – the Apostle of Freedom, who...

The child cried out in pain and yelled: “Alright, but where was Todor Zhikov hanged, moooooommy?” The giggling turned into loud laughter and I dragged my daughter off the tram at the next stop – confused, madly angry and followed by the laughter of the passengers.

I remember so many funny and pitiful things of “that” time, which now make me a little sad and a little old, but one always idealises the past and so the funny things you tell your children and grandchildren today seem even funnier, and the pitiful – well, they just won’t understand. There’s no way they can understand me, the children of today, is there?

*\*Vassil Levski( called also the Apostle or the Apostle of Freedom) – a revolutionary, active in the Revival period in Bulgaria and fighter for independence, late 19<sup>th</sup> century*

*\*\*Todor Zhivkov – head of the Communist party till 10.11.1989*

## **Super TV set**

**Mladen, 23, student, Giumaraes, Portugal**

My father waited all night for a super TV set, the store being 50 metres away from us and there was a huge crowd of people there. I started waiting with him, but couldn't stand it and went home. I could see from the window the many people queuing for television sets and I found it madly interesting to wait for my first television, for it was a colour TV set and had eight programmes. And I did wait for it - my father came home around 7 o'clock in the morning with a big colour TV.

## The nightmarish kindergarten

**Dessislava Hourmouzova, 36, philologist, Sofia**

I was born in 1968 in Sofia and lived in the heyday of socialism, which included also the weekly kindergarten as a particularly suitable form for raising future Leninists.

First I attended a weekly crèche, and then kindergarten as well, in other words, I lived there four days a week. And if the crèche has not left me with any all that nightmarish memories, thanks to a good woman (I called her “Mama Tana”), the memories of the elitist kindergarten No. 100 still make me shudder. It was located on Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej street behind the Doctor’s Garden and right next to the building where Lyudmila Zhivkova\* used to live.

I still don’t know why these teachers and nurses were so hostile and cruel towards us and why not a single one of them showed even the slightest compassion for us (and we were an awful lot of children), entrusted completely and 24 hours a day to them.

My most vivid memory is not even linked with me. We had twin girls in the group. They were like glued together. Never letting go of each other. When we went to bed at night, they held hands across the path between the beds. Suddenly this started to dreadfully annoy the attendants and after yelling for a couple of nights to no avail, they finally parted them. They put one of the girls to sleep with the boys (which was not allowed) while the other stayed with us. God, how these twins howled all night! Nobody was able to sleep and, naturally, we all cried in the same voice night after night. They never put them back together.

The twins began wetting their beds at night, yet they had been among the few who had not done so before. This kind of misdemeanour entailed a set punishment – anyone who wetted his bed at night, was chased out wet into the yard, until his sheets were changed. I was one of those regularly punished. On the whole, this was a problem for most children. I now realise that this is how we reacted to the stress we were subjected to. I have no idea how many times I was dragged sleepy out of bed and sent out into the courtyard, but it must have been quite often, since I was not even afraid any longer in the end.

During my last year in kindergarten, one morning I planted myself before the attendant and said: “I’ll tell my mother.” Until then I had never let on about anything at home. Just like the twins and the other children. After this threat the night walks stopped and I instinctively sensed that the teachers, too, were afraid.

I had to reach second grade before I convinced myself that I was finally done with the kindergarten and only then told my parents. They did not believe me.

That’s how my generation was raised – in fear, with a feeling of guilt and alienation from your parents.

That’s why I’m happy when my son (who has never been to kindergarten) asks me: “Mommy, when was there socialism in Bulgaria – during the First or during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom?”

*\*Ljudmila Zhivkova – a daughter of Todor Zhivkov, the Communist party leader; minister of culture in the 60s*



## **The sunsets over Guanabara**

**Emil Kovachev, 57, foreign trade specialist, Sofia**

Until 1957, when I first heard Elvis on the radio, I considered myself 100% percent loyal to socialism. This was traditional for my milieu. But when in 1961 we flew to Brazil where my father was to work in the Bulgarian Legation, this issue became disturbingly acute to me. How could I betray socialism?! How could I stop seeing what was in front of me? With what names should I call it? Luxury, glitter, mirage? We stopped over in Vienna, and in Paris for three days. In Paris in September, at the age of 15! My meeting with the West proved to be a shock – pleasant, captivating and confusing. Night-time boulevards, streams of cars, jet-liners in the sky high above the Atlantic – and, finally, the incredible Copacabana. The carnival, the sunsets over Guanabara, the palms and stars at night above the city... The French-Brazilian college, the uniform with the Gaelic rooster, the Marseillaise every morning – but was I not a person from red Bulgaria? An abundance of coveted goods, records, films and exotic scenery, which makes you forget everything. You realise one thing – that you are a citizen of the world, that the dimensions here, in my native Bulgaria, are small, archaic, and that people in other places too are good, and that the world is wonderful, despite its many problems.

In 1966 a new adventure – the meeting with an unknown country ignored by many people – Switzerland. Incredible beauty, gigantic mountains, cleanness and order, which make you a different person. Even your thoughts became beautiful and new to yourself. Small towns straight out of a fairytale, ultra-modern stores, intimacy, the taste of expensive cigars and chocolate. Whenever I returned to Bulgaria I saw its slow, but sure lagging behind, its self-infatuation and the countless meaningless stories. True, people were not starving, they did build villas and bought Moskviches, there were no beggars, murders or outright misery, but the country was lacking what it lacks now too – the vivacity, the optimism and scale of the West. Here, in the streets of Sofia, I did not feel the huge size of the world, the dynamism, the melting of peoples into one nation, here there was no glitter and neon, zeal and speed, expensive manias and human weaknesses, absent here was the expanse of spaces without borders and the exhilarating chance to travel, to race in your fast car to the horizon and beyond it. Absent here was the western pedantry of those who maintained the order, the neat uniforms and grand stride of the policemen, the dishevelled gaudiness of the young, rushing in all directions in the summer mornings, absent was the feeling that you are part of a huge, powerful community of people, united by one thought – to live better, richer, cosier and securely. This is why, when things changed after 1989, I believed that we were there where I had been – with the traditionally rich and civilised habits we so much wanted to copy. Alas, it did not happen. And it will not happen soon...

I envy the coming generations - they will probably experience what I had the chance to experience THERE and which here is corrupt, twisted and loathsome...

## Story with a VEF

### Simeon Hristov, 43, constructor, Dresden, Germany

I am by nature taciturn and not at all good at telling stories. So when I opened [spomeniteni.org](http://spomeniteni.org), all I intended was to just read, to be a kind of voyeur so to speak. Then, as so often happens with firm intentions, I thought twice about it and decided to write. The story of Mr. Petrov "My Father and the Sea" called forth such a strong memory that I cannot refrain from sharing it.

Sometime towards the end of the 1960s my family acquired a VEF transistor radio. After that my mother listened regularly to the broadcast of Radio Free Europe at 6.30 p.m. I even suspect that this was the actual reason for the purchase. She would withdraw to the kitchen, because that's where the reception was best, poured herself a cup of coffee and switched on the radio. Occasionally I happened to be around, so she found it necessary to explain to me (and then to repeat it many times) that what happens at home is not told out on the street. I understood to the extent that an 8-9-year-old boy is able to and promised to keep quiet.

My father was a teacher at an evening school and was not at home at this time of day. He listened to the late broadcast at 10.30 p.m. instead. After some time my father learned that I too was present during the radio listening sessions and voiced sharp disagreement. He said I was too young, did not know what I was saying, etc. In one word, he still did not trust me. This my mother countered with the words that, on the contrary, I was big enough to know how things were. Naturally, this made me proud and inside myself I was completely, absolutely sure that I was deserving of trust. My father's face remained doubtful. About a year passed. During that time, my "accidental" presence at that hour of the day around the VEF was spaced out and the matter was no longer discussed. At least not in my presence. Vacation time came around and we headed to the sea in our *Trabant* and, of course, with the VEF. We must have started fairly late from Sofia, because we stopped for the night in a campsite near Turgovishte. A campsite with bungalows and places for tents. We took a bungalow, my mother poured coffee from the thermos, placed the VEF near at hand and she and dad sat down on the steps outside the door. I stuck around because it was past 6.30 p.m., but when I heard that the Horizont programme was on, I went off somewhere. I decided that due to the absence of brick walls, there would be no listening to Free Europe, even if I were not present.

And as I was traipsing around the campsite, I suddenly heard loud and clear the characteristic peeping and squeaking of the jamming stations. The sound came from a tent and clearly the people inside did not worry about the absence of brick walls. At first I was so surprised that OTHER people also listened to Free Europe that I did not immediately react. Then I turned around and ran straight back to our own bungalow. I even knocked over the small table in my agitation and announced in an excited voice: "Mom, dad, they are listening to Free Europe there in one a tent!!!" Which was meant to mean neither more nor less than: "You see! They're not hiding! They are not scared!" Only that I did not realise this at the time. For as soon as I had blurted this out, I realised that I had blown it. That I had given away my mother and my father, that I had not justified their trust! That I had become a traitor, although at that time, in the mind of a 10-

year-old boy, the strong word of traitor was at worst linked with telling on a friend who had done something naughty.

My father looked at my mother and asked me: “And how do you know that it was Free Europe?” I wished the ground would open up and swallow me for shame. I knew that exactly this question could also be asked by somebody else... I clearly must have looked very crushed, when I murmured: “I know...”, because my mother slapped me lightly on the back of the neck, smiled and send me off to play. After that nobody ever opposed my presence during the time of the broadcasts. They knew that I had learned my lesson. Thank God, in the easiest and least painful way.

Quite a sad story, but typical of Bulgaria, because the protest both of mine and of many other families was confined mainly to listening to a western radio station and conversations at table. Something for which four generations paid, are paying and will continue to pay...

## **Thirty tonnes more**

**Dimiter Kazakov, 37, lecturer at the Computers Department, York, Great Britain**

I was a pupil in primary school when our teacher told us to make up a mathematical problem with words, containing the phrase “thirty tonnes more”. It must have been the end of term, June, because I started thinking of stories about truck drivers spilling grain onto the road. My grandfather, a retired primary school teacher, had taught me to read from a very early age. Every year the papers kept repeating the same thing: the crop is good, but because of somebody’s negligence we are unable to gather and guard it. The papers would not say how big the losses were, but left the impression that there were many. Without thinking twice about it, I decided that this would be my subject. Juggling the figures so that there would not be too big a difference between the two years (i.e. in order to make it look truthful!) I came up the following problem: “A truck driver spilled 270 tonnes of grain one year and the next – 30 tonnes more. How much grain did the driver spill in the second year?”

The year was either 1974 or 1975. Bad luck would have it that exactly I was picked to read out my problem before the whole class. For a minute my teacher did not know what to say, then she told me to sit down.

## **“The good times”**

**Despina Popova, 38, librarian at the National Library, Sofia**

Every Saturday morning my father would take my sister and me to the grocery store, where the queue was already huge. I would line up in the one behind the pay-desk, and my sister and father respectively in the queues before the meat counter and the dairy counter. We always waited at least for an hour and a half and throughout all this time I was scared to death that my turn would come before my father had arrived with the purchases and the money and then the other people waiting in line would shout at me and I would lose my turn. I remember other things as well, how we took frankfurters or sausages to my grandmother in the village, because such things were received rarely there and the shopkeeper Gena would distribute them as she herself saw fit. How women skirted work and went hunting in the stores to see what had been “released” on the market. Or how, after years of living in various quarters, our turn finally came and we got a newly built departmental flat where all the walls were crooked and which, incidentally, was not at all easy to pay off, despite the fact that my father was a mining engineer and my mother a lawyer. So that what I remember most from socialism are the constant and humiliating discomforts of everyday life and the permanent lack of basic things. As my lecturer at the Library Institute, Mrs. Lenkova said when she discovered nets of onions at the greengrocers: “When there are no onions, there are none. When there are onions, there’s nothing else.” That’s what it was like and I cannot understand how some forgot so quickly and how otherwise intelligent people have started calling this the “good times”.

## **Second-hand store**

### **Mitre Mitrev, 59, engineer, has not been living in Bulgaria since 1968**

I was in my first year at the technical college (aged 13, in 1958) and I would buy batteries for my transistor radio from a second-hand store for 2-3 leva, but they did not always have them.

A classmate of mine told me that in Dimitrovgrad (Pernik) they were selling them for 50 stotinki, so I got on the train, bought a few and ... sold part of them to a second-hand store at five times their price minus the 15% commission for the store.

Later I found out that in the small towns there were batteries to spare, while in Sofia there was a shortage and... I became a tradesman, not only of batteries, but also of small tape recorders, stockings, small size bras, etc. I travelled by train or bus to all small towns 4-5 hours away from Sofia, and kept a diary – expenses, commissions, income gross and net... the way it should be.

When my parents asked me where I had got all this money from and I told them, they went mad and called me a profiteer, an enemy of the people and I don't know what else, and forbade me to keep on doing this.

When I asked them – well, why doesn't the Ministry of Foreign Trade know how to properly distribute the goods, they told me not to act smart.

## Dollars and ice-cream

### Alexander Kodjabashev, 46, lawyer, Sofia

In 1986-1989 I was a young lawyer with the Pleven bar. In the Nikopol regional court the law was administered by an elderly judge, a real oddball, about whom various funny stories were told. His name was Peter Yakov.

One day he had to enter a session of a colleague of his, a Pleven judge, so that I was accidentally able to be present during the hearing of the case of which I am about to tell you.

The case was for an administrative offence – the illegal buying of hard currency. I must explain that in these confused pre-perestroika times, the buying of goods with hard currency from the Corecom\* stores was not a punishable offence, but the buying of currency was an act that was punished with fines.

The poor guy who was to be fined had admitted to buying the currency from an unknown person in the street.

Judge Yakov decided to examine the intention of the offender – i.e. to check whether he had been aware of the illegal nature of his offence. And he asked the following question: “Did you know that it is forbidden to buy currency?” The answer was: “No, I did not know.” A second question followed: “Well, if it were permitted, the dollars would be sold in the streets just like ice-cream, wouldn’t they?” “Well, that’s exactly how they *are* sold,” came the immediate, sincere answer of the man.

The hall burst out laughing – after all, we were in the late 1980s.

*\*Corecom – a special store for western goods (sold in dollars only) for the privileged class (and only for people who have lived abroad and received salaries in dollars)*

## Twenty kilograms of bananas

**Julia Damyanova, 28, journalist, Vienna**

The smell of bananas makes me puke. I never buy bananas and in the supermarkets I even carefully avoid the place where they are piled up. Otherwise I like fruit very much, but my choice usually falls on the less exotic varieties from our own geographical latitudes. Depending on season.

It has not always been this way. I still remember the time when bananas were a synonym of all that was exotic, and having the cherished kilo – a minor holiday. I absolutely loved bananas, not only for the fruit itself, but also because of the fact that somehow for me they were an inseparable part of the New Year holidays. For in the past you could only get bananas in the shops at the end of December.

This is perhaps the place to say that I have no negative memories from the time of socialism. In 1989 I turned 13 and all the clamour around the change of the government and the political system was not very clear to me. Nor did it particularly interest me. I had my own childish interests and worries. Things like bananas, chocolate and rope skipping were among my main priorities.

This is exactly why I never will forget that winter evening when my father came home with a whole box of bananas. Twenty kilos! Something unheard of! When they appeared at the greengrocers, you could only buy one or two, three kilos tops. There was a limit to how much you could buy so that there would be enough for everybody.

In those days we lived in the Lyulin housing estate, in a bedsitter on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor. Our next door neighbour, the gypsy Aunt Fanny, an extremely colourful and very warm person, worked at the greengrocers. So during that memorable winter, when the bananas arrived she remembered us and immediately set aside a box – 20 kilos – so that there would be plenty to go around.

We, who had never before had such a lot of bananas, did not know how quickly this fruit goes bad. Naturally, we were unable to eat all of the 20 kilos, despite our monstrous efforts and greediness, my own and that of my sister. We also gave away bananas to our neighbours. Even so, the bananas went bad – they turned soft, black and shrivelled. Putting them in our spare fridge did not help either - an old Bulgarian Mraz model, where my mother kept extra products for long-term use – pork chops, sausage, biscuits. Even flour, for there were plenty of cockroaches in Lyulin.

In the end, we threw away the bananas.

“Well, at least you had your fill this year,” my father reassured himself.

I will never forget that winter, during which, even after we threw away most of the rotten 20 kilograms of bananas, the refrigerator continued to smell of them. The food in the old

Mraz also carried the flavour of bananas – the biscuits, the flour. Even the pork chops which my mother made for the New Year smelled of bananas.

## **The forgotten half**

### **Valentina Bevaqua, 30, private teacher and translator, Italy**

I live and work far away from Bulgaria. Here it is now a typical Italian evening, news, spaghetti for dinner, football ... and Antonio, my husband, who is fussing around the table with the wine glasses.

Whereas I discovered this site and am reading story after story, I simply can't take my eyes off the computer screen. Despite my husband's prompting for dinner and a drink. I can hear him from the kitchen, loudly and sincerely puzzled in a typically Italian way why I am not coming and why I am so spellbound by what I am reading. While I, reading, exclaim. Bananas? Yes, that's how it was! Toilet paper - yes! The queues? Yes! I want to tell you what I remember and what I did not take with me in my luggage when I departed from Bulgaria. A part of me, which I forgot on purpose and did not put into my suitcase, and which I never want to take with me. Unfortunately, it did not go away, the way "that time" went away. A humiliated and insulted little girl, deprived of the right to be an individual. At a time when the individual was of absolutely no importance, especially a child, and when a good hiding was a popular measure of education.

I lived with my parents in Sofia. Both of them were in the army, barracks at work, barracks at home. My brother and I were brought up strictly. We were also given a hiding occasionally and it was considered beneficial.

I cannot forget comrade Zhivkova, a Russian, the kindergarten teacher, who punished us by making us kneel for hours on end with our hands up high, holding a chair. It hurts and tears are streaming down my face. I cannot wipe them off because I am holding the chair. And the feeling of utter helplessness, because although little, I already knew that I could not rely on protection even by my parents. The adult was always right! The teacher, the adult could not be wrong. He had to be respected on any account.

Comrade Delinikolova in first grade, for whom we were "imbeciles", "idiots" and "morons". Once she beat black and blue Mitko, the boy sitting next to me on the desk, because he would not sit still. She would yell: "I'll teach you lot to respect me!" We children, obviously did not make any difference between respect and fear, so we "respected" her very much.

I had one good friend, she was called Maya. My most vivid memory is that we used to queue up together with many other women outside the neighbourhood pharmacy, waiting for sanitary napkins to arrive, of which there was only one kind, thick, uncomfortable, in packets of ten. I think they were the Belana brand. There were never enough for all the women. Every woman was allowed to buy only one packet (surprisingly, I never saw a man in the queue). The problem was that one packet was not enough, you needed at least one and a half for your monthly period. So, after getting our "packet", we went back home, changed our clothes, let down our hair and went back to stand in line. During that time they sometimes ran out...

At school, for physical education the girls had to wear black "shorts", white T-shirts and white or blue sneakers. I was a little on the chubby side and was terribly embarrassed, not to speak of puberty. But the outfit was a must!! I remember a classmate of mine,

Angelina, who had very big breasts and was wearing a bra, and when we had to run with the said white T-shirts, all the boys in the class would ridicule her, while she was dying of shame. Later she got herself a letter, which excused her from physical education. I remember that there was absolutely no choice of clothes or shoes in the stores. And whenever some new shoe model nevertheless appeared, they never had my number, because I wear a size 37, i.e. the standard Bulgarian female foot. I remember the shoe stores, the shop assistants, like queens, whom the clients asked, as politely as could be, to let them try on a pair. If you wanted to try on several pairs, after still more pleading, the “queen” would burst out into something like “Excuse me – if you’re going to buy, buy, stop asking, there are other clients too!”

I remember how I never managed to get into the Hush Puppies shoe shop on Dondukov Blvd., outside which morning till night there was a queue of at least 100 metres, and no more than 3-4 persons were allowed inside at a time.

And a whole lot of other such humiliating stories, which ruined the everyday life of people who wanted to be “individuals”.

Now, so many years later, I am most concerned about social work. The rights of children. No need to ask myself why. They need respect. Above all and more than anyone.

## **Aunt Selemima**

**Margarita Georgieva, 23, student, Nice, France**

I have many childhood memories. Sometimes I think it very odd, because I remember things from a very early age. I have a particularly vivid memory which I would like to share with you.

I must have been four or five years old. I was living with my grandparents in South Bulgaria – in the Rhodope Mountains, in a hamlet called Ribino. I remember the colourful names of the surrounding hamlets and small villages – Golyama Chinka, Malka Chinka. Chinka was some kind of bird.

A big stream ran through Ribino. All the houses were on the one bank, and the school was on the opposite bank. The only way to get across in the beginning was a makeshift bridge. They had hung ropes and everybody moved along them and the whole contraption shook dangerously every time a wind came up. I remember running across it like mad, my grandmother shouting after me: “Margarita, get back here immediately!” Later they covered the bridge with boards, but it continued to sway and my granny was horrified to look into the abyss and the river below it every time she had to cross it. And she had to do so at least twice a day.

My grandparents were both teachers in Ribino, and their pupils were Turks. There were Turkish families in every household. Most made a livelihood from stockbreeding and agriculture – to the extent that this was possible high up in the mountains. I think that only blueberries got the better of the climate there. We lived in a big hostel, together with the pupils. They were merry kids, like all children. We constantly played together, we studied together, recited communist slogans and various poems, which we did not understand. But it didn't matter what they meant, because when we met to recite them the important thing was that we were together and that we were friends.

I remember aunt Selime who treated me to airyan (cold yoghurt drink) and baklava (very sweet pastry). She wore shalwars (Turkish trousers) which hung down to the ground and when we went to gather firewood, she always kept something in them and took it out when needed. Her shalwars were a bottomless magic bag. Her husband played the accordion. Sometimes we went to visit them in the evening. He played and my grandparents sang. They always managed to make me cry with their sad songs. On one occasion the conversation revolved around the weasel. It had sneaked into the village and was killing the birds. I still did not know what a weasel was. I imagined something huge with big yellow eyes.

The idyll ended when some strangers arrived one day. They carried weapons and lined up everybody in military formation in the school. I did not understand exactly what happened. My grandmother cried a lot, my grandfather with his soothing voice and bushy eyebrows only said: “Don't, don't, why are you doing this Margarita?” And he was right – it was not she who needed soothing, but all the other people in the village.

The next day many people and many children, many friends left. They piled up their belongings on carts and trudged down the path to Ivailovgrad. I still remember the long line of donkeys and carts, the wrapped up women, in their colourful shalwars, sitting in the carts admonishing the children, and their husbands leading the donkeys down the stony paths. Only very few remained in Ribino. So few that there was no longer any need for a school on the opposite bank. They closed it down and my grandfather went to look for work elsewhere, for himself and for my grandmother.

Granny and I went to see aunt Selime for the last time. When I said: “Hello, aunt Selime,” she turned to me with eyes full of tears and said that her new name was aunt Mima. I did not understand any of this. How could she have been called Selime ever since I knew her, and then suddenly decide to be called aunt Mima? I didn’t much like my own name either, I couldn’t pronounce it, and the only thing that came out of my mouth was “Mikka”... I thought and thought and in the end, before we left, I told aunt Selime: “Your name from now on will be aunt Selemima, since you do not like Selime.”

## Socialist Haiku

**Ivanka Neikova, 23 , Sofia**

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We had very nice toys  
- whipping-tops and Matryoshkas.

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My mother had a Russian pen pal.  
She sent my sister and me very beautiful dolls, who said Mama.  
Mom sent her valves for a gas stove – she couldn't get any there.

\*\*\*

In second grade I was on a school brigade for potatoes.  
The furrows – long – you couldn't see the end of them.  
At the end of the day the team leader ordered the whole class to slap me in the face,  
because I had not done my best.

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I was very scared –  
I did not understand why we had to stock up with water, why the cellar was being filled  
with preserves, why the windows were made air-tight, we were all measured for gas  
masks, and gauze was prepared at home.

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When my sister and I went to school in jeans for the first time, the teacher called my  
mother.

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New Year was oranges and mandarins – if there were no oranges or mandarins, there was  
no New Year and Father Frost (Santa Claus).

\*\*\*

Our neighbours bought a colour TV set.  
Their son went from house to house all day long to treat everyone to chocolates.

\*\*\*

When mom returned from her first visit abroad, she had got varicose veins.

## Fear and “Queen Margot”

### Elka Gerginova, 34, public servant, Sofia

We had some relatives across the border, in Yugoslavia, but somehow this was not something you talked about much. Only mom told me how they went to “meetings” at the border and how the militiamen on both sides had kept the people apart and sometimes they never got to actually meet. They just looked at each other from a distance of five-six metres, shouting to tell each other who was alive, who had got married, who had done what. And cried ... They cried the whole day long.

Every year, my mom’s aunt carried on her back the dowry of her married daughter Ana in Skopje, but the militia would not allow her to give it to Ana. Mama is from the Trun region. There are villages there where the border furrow runs right down the middle of the village square. How they decided which house would be on the one side and which on the other, I could never understand with my child’s mind. I remember that in one village where we went with my uncle, the grocery store was right on the border furrow and beyond it Serbia started. My uncles’ hounds would regularly get lost “on the other side”, because an animal could not possibly understand these things. Later the men would return them, the next time they went hunting.

Another thing I remember was the deceptive abundance before the New Year (Christmas was hardly ever talked about). We would buy salami and smoked meat. I remember the anticipation. The first and only oranges or bananas for the year. How dad would go to the shed to dig out of a grain tank the watermelons hidden there already in autumn. They tasted a bit odd, but they were watermelons nonetheless.

But my strongest memory from that time is fear. The fear of the teacher scolding me, the fear of annoying the neighbours, of being called by the militia. One year I did not attend the rehearsals for some field-day and I my mark for conduct was lowered. It must have been at the peak of puberty, otherwise I never had the courage to oppose anything. I still carry fear in my heart, I cannot even say of what any more. It was very important not to be different and to fulfil all the various assignments, resolutions, rules, etc.

Another thing I remember is how in winter we would sit with my mother and sister in the dark. There was no electricity, there was light only from the coal burning in the stove. How somebody quietly knocked on our ground floor window in the middle of the night and mom would open the door. It was dad who was being called up as a reserve officer by the army every year for one or two, and one year even for three months. I don’t remember the international situation at the time, but clearly it must have been something tense. He appeared clandestinely for some ten minutes or so, only to see us and to get some clean underwear.

Another, particularly painful, memory is linked with books. I have been a bookworm every since childhood. But then the good books were not sold just like that. There was a list in the bookshops - the first secretary of the party, the chairman of the Fatherland Front, the militia chief, the trade union boss, various other local bigwigs and if any books remained after this whole string of names, copies would be sold to the ordinary people. And that’s when fighting would ensue. Fighting outside the bookshop for “Queen

Margot”, for example. I never managed to get “The Thorn Birds”. I never knew when it got to the shelves, only five copies for the whole town of 7,000! Eventually, seeing my obsession, the shop assistant started selling books to me under the counter, saying that those who took them never read them, so she was not depriving them of anything much.

## The first

### Peter Slabakov, 81, actor, Berievo village

This happened at Theatre Sofia. Todor Zhivkov was to watch the play “The First”, but the actor Luchezar Stoyanov fell ill and therefore the director Vili Tsankov asked me to fill in. On April 15 the deputy director, Virginia Blagoeva, called me to her room to inform me that Todor Zhivkov was to watch the play on April 17?! I refused to act without rehearsal. I have never used a prompter either. I understood Vili – socialist power had never favoured him much. But I cannot, I simply could not help him! He at least knows! We’ve been together in Bourgas, he knows me well enough! Then Virginia said that the theatre director Kolyo Georgiev was adamant – I had to act! I don’t take such orders! I am not ashamed to admit that I cannot act without rehearsals! I handed in my resignation, but explicitly demanded that the notice would say that I had been forced to act without rehearsals. My leaving was accepted “by mutual consent”. I did not consent, but nobody was asking me! And to beg to stay on was beneath my dignity!

Thank God, Luchezar returned and performed the part, despite being ill. While I was sacked. Later rumours started that I had been told to take the play and read the part. The story was blown out of all proportion. It became incredible! And got to the Politburo of the BCP. Rumour had it that I had said: “Why on earth should I act for That One!” Yet I had never said any such thing.

At that time Kina Dasheva and I were living with the director Yulia Ognyanova. Yulia’s neighbour, Vessa Marinova, had two children. Our own Andrei was six. We decided to take them up to Mt. Vitoshka. We stopped at a restaurant for *kebapcheta*, the children started playing and we stayed inside. We got back to Sofia and, passing the house of Todor Zhivkov on Oborishte street, I sat down outside it and started singing: “Come look and see what you did to me. Take a good look at me and gloat... And then you ask if can I ever forget you and can I ever forgive...”

The militiaman on guard was completely flabbergasted. My notice of dismissal had already been signed. I kept thinking that Todor Zhivkov was to blame for it all. Later it turned out that the one to blame was **Venelin Kotsev**.

The reason was a meeting in 1965 of Todor Zhivkov with the film makers. Meanwhile the film “King and General” had been released. I was sitting on the one side of Zhivkov, on his other were Naoum Shopov, Valeri Petrov, Lyubomir Sharaliev, Vulo Radev, etc. We raised a toast with brandy. Valeri said quietly: “It would be good when writing screenplays to allow the authors more freedom to interpret various problems.” Zhivkov took offence: “What, don’t you have any freedom?” His tone caused Valeri to shut up. Zhivkov was trying to revive the conversation. “Ho-ho-ho, Valeri what do you think?” And Venelin Kotsev writes it all down, even the “ho-ho ho”. And Zhivkov again: “Valeri, what do you think?” Valeri only said: “Comrade Zhivkov, if you have nothing to play with on your plate, please don’t play with me.”

Confusion ensued, the press never wrote about it. That’s when I started talking against privileges...

(Recorded by Roumyana Emanuilidu)

## From the Forum

**“Hi!My name is Plamena.** I am surprised, but also pleased, that our generation (of the 1960s) has at long last spoken up so frankly. Dear me, I do not have such courage. I am confused because I am an odd hybrid of a child well brought up in the spirit of socialism and a non-understanding adult trusting in the change.

This split creates problems when I communicate with my colleagues (teachers – compulsory non-partisan now), when I had to attend modules on civil education (the lessons resembled seances of a group of alcoholics), when I have to listen to the liturgy on the holiday of the leaders of the Bulgarian National Revival, accompanied by the chatter and smiles of those present. It is most difficult when I face the children, for I have to be honest. We talk about new morals, about free contact between people ... There is no such thing. Our memories haunt us...

**Sincerely: Plamena”**

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I am in the United States in one of the classes on the political systems of the Western European states; the first day our lecturer handed out cards with questions – one of them was: what is your first memory of expressing a political position or participation in politics?

I thought for a long time and did not write down anything, because perhaps I would have had to fill at least 200 pages with long explanations - what a manifestation is and how at home your family starts worrying a little about your future when they refuse to admit you to the Comsomol for the second time. And how the worry has gone because November 10 has arrived.

**Milena, Missouri, USA**

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**I belong to that generation** for which the last experienced classical socialist moment was the tying of the pioneer necktie. A little later democracy came and we shouted and jumped and began to busily blot out and hide our superfluous and monstrous memories... I remember being the assistant of the standard-bearer and marching before the whole school, I remember how I was forced to stop writing with my left hand (because everybody was writing with their right), but somehow quite naturally I began drawing with it, I remember how I had my ear pulled because of a crookedly written “M”, I remember how my father suddenly forbade me to drink water from the tap, bought all the Hissarya mineral water from the shop, then uprooted and threw out all the lettuce he was growing in the yard (later I realised what exactly had happened then and that this was 1986) ... my father listened to Free Europe on the VEF (that’s how he learned about Chernobyl) – I clearly remember the “jamming” noise and the shudders caused by all the whispering or sudden switching off of the radio...

**Svetlana**

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**Whenever socialism is mentioned**, my first most vivid memory is the water gushing from the fountain in our yard. This is a very long time ago (the 1960s). Until then we carried water in buckets from the well 500 metres away from our home. We would take turns – including me and my sister, regardless of the fact that we were small, together with our granny we also knew when we had to bring water, which I regarded as a precious wealth. My mother still keeps the yoke on which she put the two buckets, to make it easier when going uphill. And then suddenly the water was right there at home. It probably sounds very primitive, but this was a huge joy to me as a child – now I could wash, without saving any water, I could let it flow just like that without worrying – a genuine source of happiness. And after the water in our most remote street in the village, street lighting was installed on the hill...

My other vivid memory from socialism dates from my work as a teacher. It is indelibly imprinted on my mind. I am standing punished in the directorate, being told how unacceptable my behaviour is because I am wearing trousers to school. It sounded almost absurd. Only a few years ago during a visit in my literature classes I had been given a high mark by an expert, I delivered an open lesson, my colleagues liked it... This did not matter in the least. The party bureau had judged my conduct to be inappropriate. I had to wear a skirt, regardless of the fact that it was the time of the mini, which was much more scandalous than trousers. That's how I got my first lessons in uniformity. There was, however, another, much more terrible experiment. I quite consciously use the word "terrible". The idea was to humiliate teachers, to show them that they rank lower than the so-called working class. Nor can I forget the contemptuous looks of the shop assistants in the Valentina fashion stores.

"Ah, a teacher! Leave her be."

We were an empty space.

*Dafinka Marinova, 50, teacher, Montana*