

Game Over, Perseverance, All I Want Is Everything

Among the Roma of Bulgaria

DIMITER KENAROV

Stoyan is the mayor of Hope. He is also its doctor, social worker, psychologist, marriage counselor, teacher, judge.

At ten o'clock on a sweltering June morning, I find myself in Stoyan's office, a tiny room in a one-story, derelict house with barred windows. The walls have been recently painted bright pink, like a nursery for a baby girl. But instead of a crib, there is a bulky wooden desk, bare but for a rotary phone left over from the bureaucracy of a former era. Two flags—the Bulgarian white-green-red and the European Union's snake of stars biting its own tail—flank an oil painting of a lonesome landscape dotted with birches. A fly ribbon speckled with dead insects hangs from a pendant light in the ceiling, twisting with every breath of wind like a perverse crib toy.

Sitting on a shabby couch, Stoyan is a human-size fly. His checkered cotton shirt and gray pants are neatly pressed; his shoes have been polished to



a maddening shine; a pair of sunglasses, like compound eyes, rests on his dark forehead. To the casual observer, Stoyan might appear as a minor public servant on summer holiday. He is, in fact, directly responsible for running the affairs of twenty thousand Roma in what is arguably the worst ghetto in twenty-first-century Europe: the Bulgarian town of Sliven's quarter known as Nadezhda—literally, “Hope.”

Being the mayor of Nadezhda is not exactly like being a mayor. Stoyan prefers “sheriff,” though he does not brandish a badge or carry a gun, and his position cannot be called official because official positions come with official responsibilities. He is more of a middleman, bridging his community and the municipal government of Sliven. Since he is allowed no annual budget but has intimate knowledge of the needs of the people, he puts together proposals on how to distribute public funds in Nadezhda. If a water pipe breaks, he tells

the authorities to fix it; if the ambulance refuses to respond to a call from the ghetto, he reports the incident. Today, people knock on the door of his office every few minutes: a man wants help with filing documents; a woman has had an argument with her husband and needs advice; another man demands to know when the sewage truck will arrive.

I ask Stoyan what is the biggest problem that Bulgarian Roma face. "You can't define just one single problem because everything is related to everything else," he says. His Bulgarian is flawless, without a whiff of the accent usually associated with Roma—rowdy vowels amid crowded consonants. "The problem of segregation begins at birth and ends only with death. Romani women deliver their babies in a segregated maternity ward. Romani children attend segregated schools. They live in a segregated neighborhood. The Bulgarian government simply has no need for well-educated, intelligent Roma." He speaks carefully, methodically. "Out of twenty thousand who live in Nadezhda less than one-tenth are literate. We have no more than twenty people with a high-school diploma. That's one in a thousand. Out of twenty thousand residents we only have four with a college degree. We live in the Stone Age here in Nadezhda. What is there to change?"

Tucked in the southern slope of the eastern Balkans—the scenic mountain range that literally bisects Bulgaria and gives the peninsula its name—Sliven presents to visitors a quaint mixture of rural and urban architecture, concrete Soviet-style housing projects towering over brick houses. In the mornings, the clank of horse-drawn buggies syncopates with the roar of automobiles and buses. Roosters have not been completely outmoded by alarm clocks. Tourists, probably en route to a glitzy resort on the Black Sea coast a hundred kilometers away, recite platitudes about the unpretentious beauty of the place, unaware of Sliven's hidden deformity.

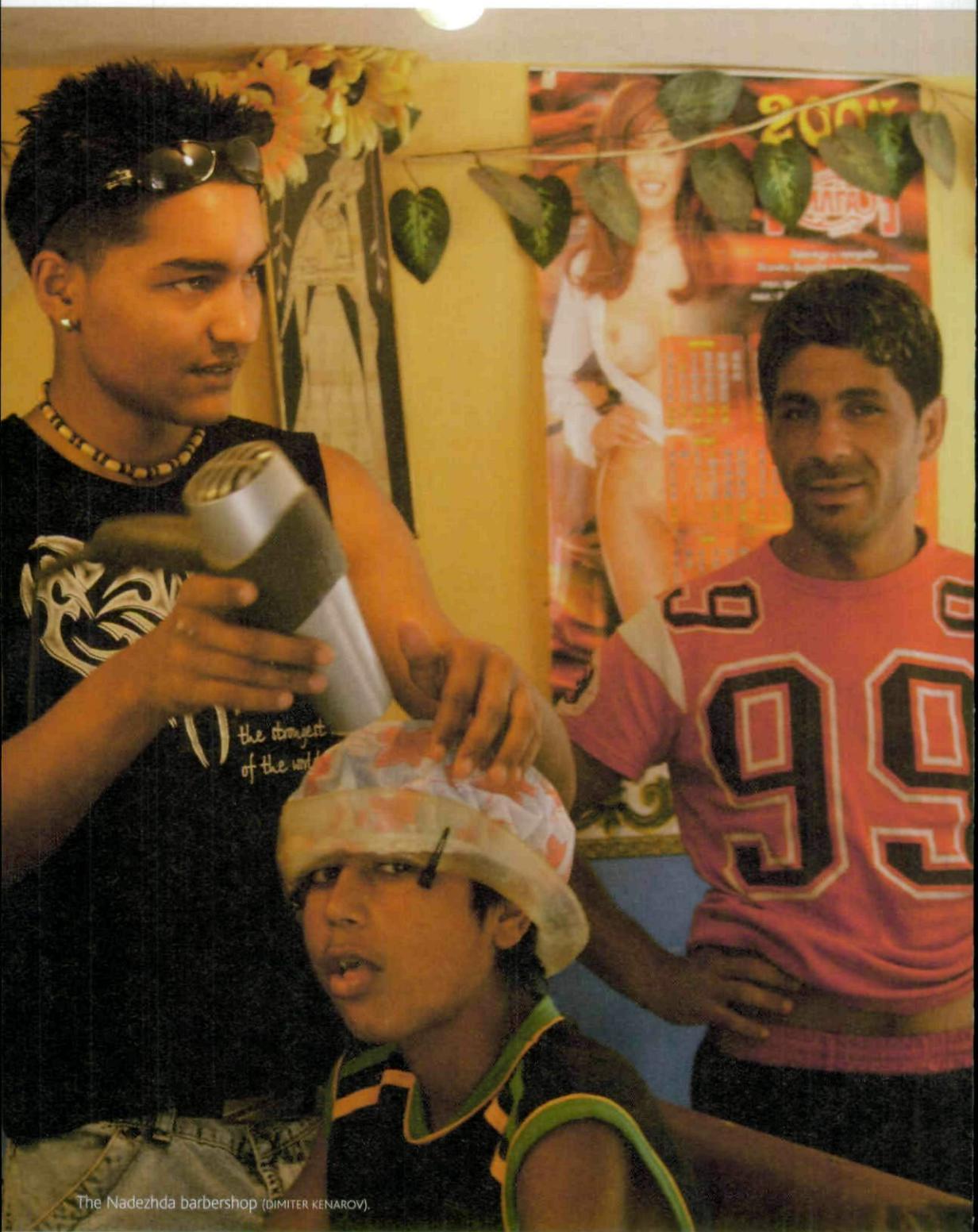
Stoyan leads me toward the first houses of Nadezhda. We pass by a field of grass strewn with discarded cash-register receipts. Two horses are grazing among the refuse. Soon we enter a narrow, paved road lined with squat brick houses with or without stucco, with or without windows, with or without doors. A few fancier buildings are painted in vivid orange or green, marble balustrades gracing the balconies, the double-hung windows framed in gleaming aluminum. Some of the facades are covered with bathroom tiles. Clotheslines criss-cross overhead. Satellite dishes spring out of almost every rooftop. Countless other neighborhoods in Bulgaria look exactly the same, except for one haunting detail: a three-meter iron wall, topped by rows of barbed wire, surrounds all of Nadezhda. Its resemblance to those other ghetto walls from another era is blood-chilling.



Playing with cash register receipts near Nadezhda's ghetto wall (DIMITER KENAROV).

Farther down the road a few vendors are peddling cheap merchandise—shoes and vegetables, mostly—from cardboard boxes. Three children play cards with the utmost concentration, one of them taking furtive peeks at another's hand. In front of the barbershop, teenagers in trendy clothes wait their turns to have their hair highlighted or leopard-spotted (a popular style among Roma); the barber is no more than fifteen. The decoration in the barbershop consists of fake sunflowers, US dollar bills taped to the mirror, and a large poster of a naked woman. Nadezhda is not as hopeless as I thought.

"Are you ready to leave now?" Stoyan asks suddenly. He looks anxious, distracted, like a man who has just remembered he has left the stove on. He tells me it is not a good idea to walk around the poorer parts of Nadezhda because of a problem with the sewage system that has not been fixed. Many people are upset, he says, and might not be too fond of visitors. Last week they tried to break the camera of a crew from Germany's ZDF television channel. Stoyan's attempt to scare me off seems perplexing, considering his previous eagerness to show me around; is he really worried about me (the neighborhood seems quite safe) or uneasy about what I might discover? I ask that we go on. He finally acquiesces but requests that I refrain from shooting pictures. Deal.



The Nadezhda barbershop (DIMITER KENAROV).

The Nadezhda quarter of Sliven is like Dante's inferno. It has circles, even if at first glance it looks like one big square. It is not a simple slum, where everyone shares poverty on equal terms. Roma may be excluded from taking part in the workings of Bulgarian society, but that does not keep them from practicing exclusion among themselves. Hierarchies, whether religious (Christian versus Muslim), tribal, or familial, do exist, and they are rigorous and complex. Economic differences are the most obvious. Nadezhda boasts its own millionaires, proletariat, and beggars. The ghetto has its own ghetto.

The primitiveness of Stoyan's promised Stone Age is largely spatial. The portly houses are the first to disappear, then the street pavements, then clothing. The smell of animal and human excrement is terrible. No running water, no electricity. In this surreal place flies have superseded bees, pollinating the fields of trash. The rats are better known as *pis pis*—kitty-kitty—because they can reach the size of tomcats. Instead of playing games, children huddle in large groups, emaciated and naked, by their child-age mothers. Their derisive neighbors have dubbed them the *Goli tzigani*—naked Gypsies. But nobody in this part of Nadezhda can truly be called Gypsy. The hundreds of years of wandering, of survival, of traditions have been wiped out. The only memory left is the bodily memory of hunger, then sleep. For what sins are these people being punished?

I am not allowed to talk to anyone in the ninth circle of Nadezhda. Tugging at my sleeve, Stoyan, my Virgil, leads me back to the light. Protestations are futile. We cannot stay, he insists. Enough is enough. I have noticed, of course, the way hollow eyes follow me. I know what they see: an outsider, come to document their misfortunes. I understand I am not welcome. I have become a Gypsy.

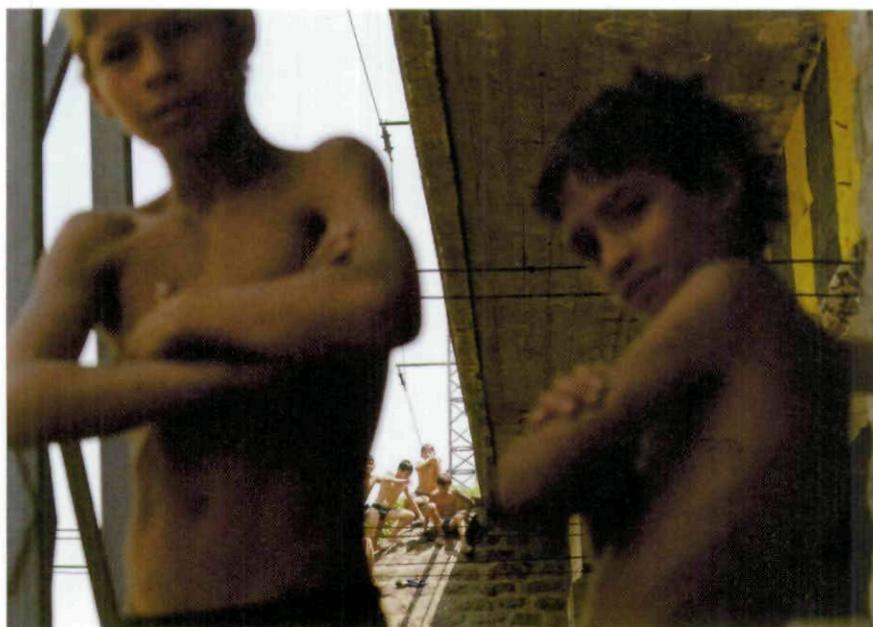
In truth, I am a *gadjo*—the term Roma apply to anyone who is not Roma. Jews are *gadje* to Roma, Roma are *goyim* to Jews. I am both a *gadjo* and a *goy*.

I was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, where I lived for nineteen years, before attending college in the United States. Between college and grad school, I squandered two more years trying to work as a freelance journalist at home. That makes twenty-one years in a country where Roma make up between 5 and 10 percent of the population—as many as eight hundred thousand out of eight million. But in those twenty-one years I got to know only one family of Roma—our next-door neighbors in another Nadezhda, the working-class section of Sofia. The paths of ethnic Bulgarians and Bulgarian Roma rarely cross.

But, of course, Roma can be seen everywhere, anytime: those in rags scavenging the dumpsters for leftover food or marketable salvage; those in front of Sofia's central train station sniffing glue from grimy plastic bags; those collecting scrap metal with horse-drawn carts; those with missing legs or horrendous

deformities—or feigning disability—begging in downtown Sofia; bedraggled children washing windshields on the main thoroughfares; low-end hookers by the Lion Bridge after 9 P.M.; musicians with chained dancing bears or monkeys. Not only are Roma not invisible in Bulgaria—they are the favorite glass-slide specimens for the media’s distorted microscope. They steal, kill, rape; they are dirty, lazy, uneducated, and exhibit no propensity for learning; they breed like rabbits and sell their babies or abandon them to orphanages; they drain social security funds; and they never pay their electricity bills. Rampant government corruption is not a very interesting story; crimes committed by Gypsies make the headlines.

Local prejudices are revealed in the language: a botched job is “Gypsy work”; a despicable person is “a dirty Gypsy”; a swindler is said to be “thieving like a Gypsy.” And so on. Under pressure from human-rights organizations, *Rom* (Roma) is now accepted as the politically correct name for *tsiganin* (Gypsy), but the connotation has remained the same: *lowlife*. When I was younger, my grandmother would gently but firmly warn me to eat all the food on my plate, “lest you marry a Gypsy.” My second cousin’s dating “one of them” was a shameful secret whispered only at family reunions. Behind the bureaucratic veneer of tolerance, many Bulgarians—many Europeans—consider Roma an inferior, homogeneous (“they all look alike”) people, better avoided, and every Roma knows it.



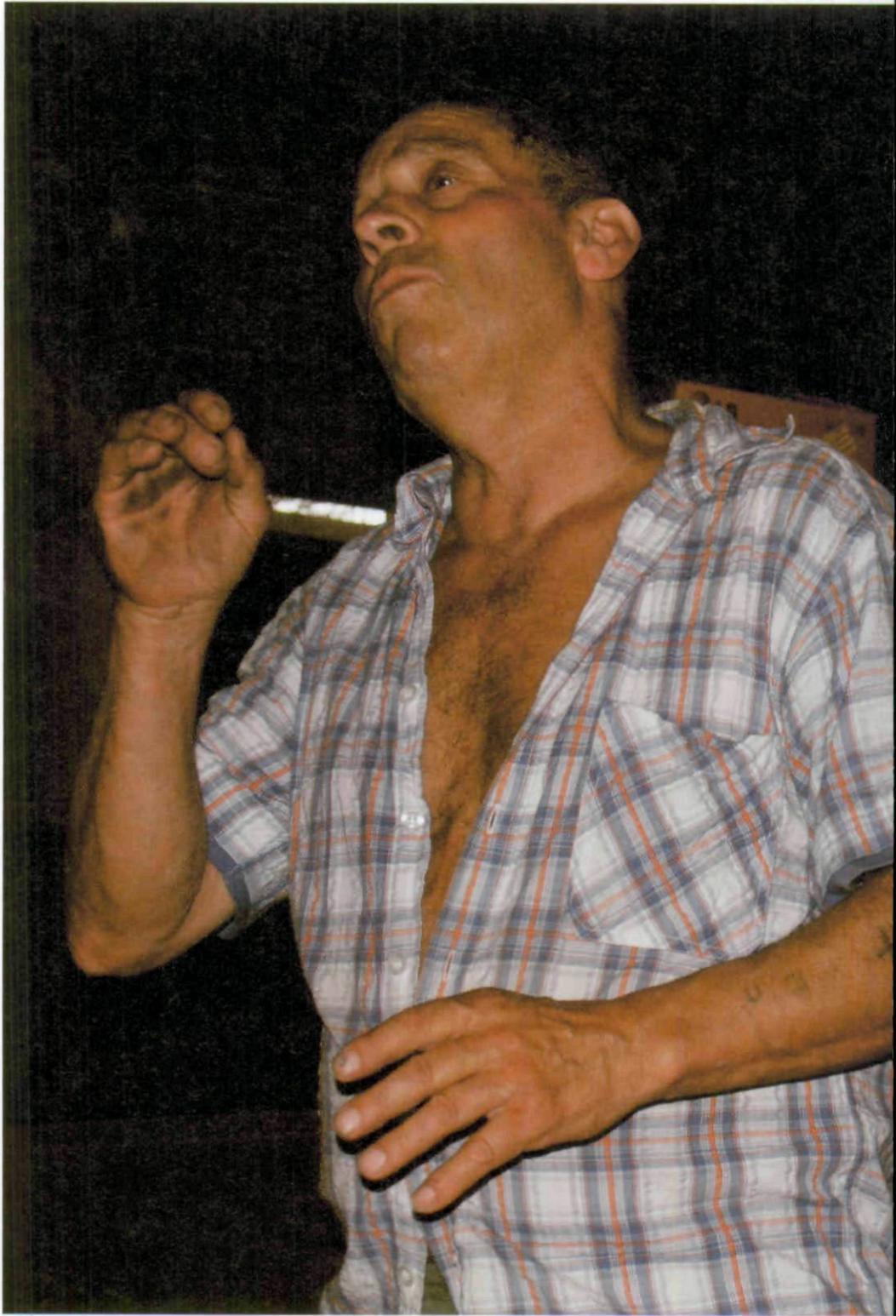
Roma children swimming under a bridge in Sliven (DIMITER CHAPRAZOV)

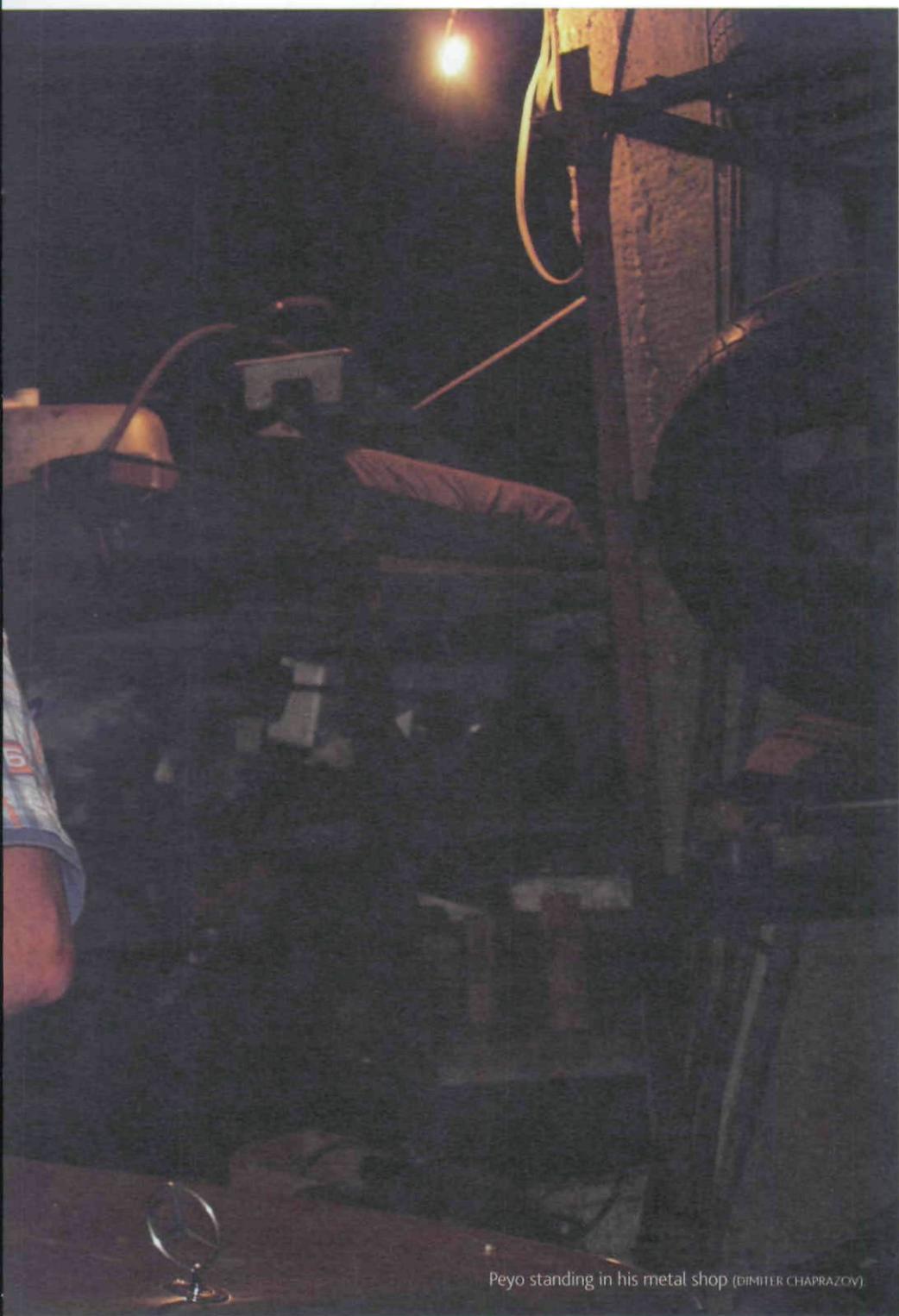
I am lucky to find Vassil Chaprazov. Vassil is a famous poet in the local Romani community, as well as the publisher of the monthly newspaper *Drom Dromendar* (A Road to Roads, roughly) and the magazine *O Roma*. Balding, somewhat overweight, with a well-trimmed, grizzled goatee, he could be any sixty-two-year-old literatus. While we drink beer at a café in downtown Sofia, he quizzes me on Roma trivia. Did I know that Charlie Chaplin had Gypsy blood? What about Elvis Presley? Vassil's attitude toward his own tribe seems to oscillate between pride in accomplished individuals and distaste for the illiterate masses. Self-esteem mingled with self-loathing. In his view, Roma's public image suffers because many talented people refuse to acknowledge their origins. The color divide is insignificant, at times nonexistent, thus successful Roma—artists, scientists, musicians, sports stars—can pass for Bulgarians, while Bulgarians are only too eager to claim celebrities as their own. As a result, only the most underprivileged, the most stigmatized—the dregs—remain “Roma.”

After we finish our beers, Vassil takes me to the editorial office of *Drom Dromendar* to introduce me to his son. My namesake, Dimiter is also about my age, my height and weight; he could be my brother, my doppelgänger. A deep scar over his left eyebrow is perhaps the only significant difference between us. Dimiter is preparing the layout for the next issue of the newspaper. He flips through the copy of VQR that I hand him. “Nobody in Bulgaria would bother to read such a thick magazine,” he says with a note of disparagement, but his careful attention to the pages betrays approval. He agrees to act as my personal guide around the Romani neighborhoods in the country. Yes, he'll be able to help me; he'll escort me to areas where tensions are too high for an outsider to travel alone. He'll be my inside man.

Because I'm a friend of Dimiter's, Peyo Peev Dimitrov welcomes me in. It is the end of the workday, but he turns on the lights in the warehouse, sets the machines roaring: mighty pneumatic hammers that unleash two hundred tons of anger on innocent anvils; giant steel cutters like guillotines. The shaking earthen floor is strewn with metal parts and razor-sharp shavings; the air has a sour, galvanized smell, a heady mixture of hot machine oil and sulfur. The few incandescent bulbs seem to absorb light rather than give it off, so that the whole warehouse remains shrouded in perpetual gloom.

In reality, this small industrial unit, near Sliven, produces plowshares. Peyo is the owner. In the early nineties, when indiscriminate privatization was in full swing, he bought all the machines from a state cooperative (known as an agrarian-industrial complex) and set up his workshop. His friends ridiculed him for his temerity, but he persevered. Now, he supplies Bulgarian tractor factories with spare parts; he even signed an export contract with an Albanian company.





Peyo standing in his metal shop (DIMITER CHAPRAZOV)

Peyo's success is palpable. Next to a heap of plowshares gleams a silver Mercedes S350. To Peyo, however, the car is nothing compared to plain iron. He lifts two plowshares in his coarse hands. "This one," he says, extending the blade in his left hand, "is made by the competition. And this one," he announces, offering up the other, "is my own production." In this posture his body resembles a pair of scales weighing man's conduct in life. His good deeds, Peyo believes, outweigh someone else's bad ones. "Whatever you do," Peyo tells me with pride, "you have to put your heart into it. Nothing else matters."

His heart metaphor is more than figurative. His unbuttoned shirt reveals a long, hideous scar on his chest: four bypasses. But surgery has not dulled his passion for metalwork. With a pair of hefty pliers he picks up an iron sheet and places it under the pneumatic hammer. *Bang*. My pulse begins to race. "And this is the steel cutter." *Slash*. A festive pandemonium.

According to Bulgarian legend, Gypsies were the first blacksmiths. They worked in the armories of kings, outfitting their armies, building fortifications for their cities. After Khan Krum defeated the Byzantine Nikephoros I in the ninth century, Gypsy smiths lined the vanquished emperor's skull with silver, so the Khan could drink from it. I do not doubt that Peyo, given adequate time, could forge the shield of Achilles.

Among Bulgarians another myth persists: when no one else would do the job, it was a Gypsy who pounded out the nails to crucify Jesus.

Romanticized or demonized as fortune-tellers, charming vagabonds, or thieving nomads, Gypsies populate literature and film—from Cervantes's *The Little Gypsy* and Defoe's *Moll Flanders* to Emir Kusturica's *Time of the Gypsies* and Brad Pitt's impersonation of a pikey boxer in *Snatch*. To the west of Budapest the word Gypsy conjures fanciful caravans and hot-blooded guitars; to the east, it is a swearword. Everywhere else, Gypsies are still Egyptians.

Roma were always named by outsiders, and never correctly. When ancestors of Roma arrived from India and settled in the Balkans around the eleventh century, the Byzantines called them *atsinganoi*, a name that might or might not owe its etymology to *athinganoi*, a heretical ninth-century sect that did or did not practice magic. The Bulgarian *tsigani*, the Hungarian *cigány*, the German *Zigeuner* are all derivative of that term. Whatever the case, when the gadjo failed to secure facts about the *tsigani*, he made things up. Few good books have been written on their history, and most of those have been relegated to the ghetto of scholarship.

Romani culture is so diverse that it may be more accurate to speak of *cultures*. The common Indian origin has collapsed into Babylonian exile. A Serbian Rom has little to say to his Finnish kinsman; someone from northern

Bulgaria performs different rituals from his southern counterpart. There are more than sixty dialects of Romany in Europe, at least eighteen in Bulgaria alone—the only universal language being perhaps the language of exclusion. Theories arise in the library only to wither in the first village. None of the stereotypes are untrue, and all of them are completely false.

In the Bulgarian unconscious, Gypsies are sometimes seen as Turks in disguise. The conflation is neither new nor limited to Bulgaria. Because the arrival of the Gypsies in western Europe between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries coincided with the most vigorous expansion of the Ottoman Empire, Roma were oftentimes taken for Turkish spies. Mass persecution resulted from, or coincided with, the mass hysteria generated by the Turkish threat. In consequence, many countries in Europe created legislation that dealt harshly with anyone suspected of being Gypsy—or even pretending to be Gypsy. Accusations of espionage were commonly evoked as justification for penal sanctions and became the basis for three edicts—among so many others—of the Imperial Diet (in 1497, 1498, and 1500), which advocated the expulsion of Gypsies from the territories of the Holy Roman Empire. Some other customary charges included theft, nomadism, witchcraft, even cannibalism.

Perhaps the most exhaustive list of hatred—an evil mirror of the time—was compiled by Aventius (Johann Thurmaier) in his *Bavarian Chronicle*, written about 1522:

At this time [1439], that thievish race of men, the dregs and bilge-water of various peoples, who live on the borders of the Turkish empire and of Hungary (we call them *Zigeni*), began to wander through our provinces under their king Zindelo, and by dint of theft, robbery, and fortune-telling they seek their sustenance with impunity. They relate falsely that they are from Egypt and are constrained by the gods to exile, and they shamelessly feign to be expiating, by a seven-year banishment, the sins of their forefathers who turned away the Blessed Virgin with the child Jesus. I have learned by experience that they use the Wendish language and are traitors and spies.

During the subsequent ages, prejudice did not loosen its hold on the European imagination. At the pinnacle of Western rationalist thought, Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie* records: "[Gypsies are] vagabonds who profess to tell fortunes by examining hands. Their talent is to sing, dance, and steal."

Far from being the savages of legend, the conquering Turks exhibited measured tolerance toward the conquered minorities, including Bulgarians and Roma. Those who wished to pay lower taxes could abandon their Christianity and convert to Islam. Some availed themselves; the majority did not. In the nineteenth century the dying Ottoman Empire committed a number

of desperate atrocities on Bulgarian territory, but normally its policy favored noninterference in the religious and social affairs of its subjects. Gypsies were ostracized, to be sure, yet they were never forced to undergo the systematic punishment that was the norm in western Europe. Except for the kingdoms of Wallachia and Moldavia (present-day Romania and Moldova), where Gypsies were brutally enslaved up until 1864, the Balkan Peninsula was not such a bad place to be different. If India was the first home of the Gypsies, the Balkans became their second.

After the liberation of Bulgaria in 1878 from five centuries of Ottoman rule, the status of Gypsies did not improve significantly—they were still the conquered ones, though the government had changed hands. The situation was analogous in other Balkan countries with large Gypsy populations, including Romania, the former Yugoslavia, and Greece. Before any talk of discrimination, however, it should be noted that Bulgaria was the only country in Europe (along with Denmark) to save its Jewish and Romani populations during the Second World War by refusing their deportation. In response, Hitler's ambassador to Sofia, Adolph-Heinz Beckerle, filed the following report: "The mentality of the Bulgarian people lacks the ideological enlightenment which our people enjoy. Having spent their entire lives with Armenians, Greeks, and Gypsies, the Bulgarians see no harm in the Jew to justify special measures against him." Sometimes backwardness could be the most enlightened attitude.

It was neither the Turks nor the Germans that did the greatest damage but the pseudo-communist regime foisted on Bulgaria by the Soviet Union in 1944. Even though the first several years were marked by promise, with Gypsies allowed their own cultural institutions, soon the party began to tighten its grip until it refused to acknowledge even the existence of minorities. Officially, there were no Gypsies in Bulgaria. Policies swung back and forth between assimilation and segregation, with no clear results. The tendency of functionaries to adopt grand-scale, arbitrary strategies without respect for cultural sensitivities doomed everything to failure. The special housing projects lay abandoned or vandalized; unemployment was crudely concealed behind the reality that many Gypsies were forced to work as either janitors or street-sweepers. When the regime was toppled in 1989 and Bulgaria entered a painful period of democratization and market liberalization, Gypsies were the first to fall through the cracks of freedom. What used to be segregated neighborhoods now turned into ghettos.

Bulgaria's 2007 accession into the European Union was beneficial to the Roma. European Union laws require the implementation of provisions that guarantee the rights of minorities and the fair distribution of public funds. Numerous government and NGO programs have been created in order to speed up the



A squatter community in the town of Stara Zagora (DIMITER KENAROV).

process of desegregation and integration. Most significantly, several countries, including Bulgaria, have initiated the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015, a comprehensive project intended to improve the socioeconomic status of Roma minorities in the central and southeastern European countries with sizable Roma populations (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia). Housing, health, education, and employment are the main fields of action. Offices throughout the continent simmer with volunteers. Enthusiasm is nearing a boil.

Stella Kostova is a major enthusiast. A member of the municipal council in Sliven, she practically exudes revolution. Authoritative and amiable by turns, solemn and bantering, she is one of the chief agents of the Roma civil rights movement. Like many young, well-educated Roma activists, she seems as familiar with Budapest and New York as she is with her own town. Having seen other worlds, she knows what she wants for her own.

We meet in a restaurant in downtown Sliven; she has just been to her gym. Before we start talking, she opens her cell phone to call her English-language teacher and explain why she won't be at class today. Then she starts a Marlboro Light, her lipstick reddening the filter.

"The policies of the Bulgarian administration toward the Roma have been absolutely outrageous," she says before I ask a question. "Somebody writes documents, votes on legislation, but there hasn't been any change. Nothing. Everything is one big theater performance, a complete sham. Of course, the Communists made the mess in the first place, but things have only been getting worse since."

Stella concedes that EU funds and NGO sponsors have done a lot to ameliorate the urgent problems facing Roma, yet most of the money, she claims, is wasted on administrative costs. "What goes down to the people is just a trickle. More funds should be spent on monitoring, so that we can make certain that those in need can be given real help."

As the head of Sliven's desegregation program, Stella is responsible for ensuring that Romani children are given a fair chance at education. Currently, there are Roma-only schools in almost every Romani neighborhood, which are nothing more than institutions for perpetuating social inequality. Most teachers are underqualified and indifferent toward their students. Sometimes the fifth grade has classes with the fourth and third grades. The condition of the facilities is also dreadful—windows are missing glass, during the winter the heating does not work. Attendance is very low: out of approximately 1,500 Romani students in the Nadezhda schools, perhaps only two hundred go to classes with any regularity. The net result is that oftentimes even the ones who receive primary education end up illiterate.

The goal of the program is to enroll Romani children in integrated schools and provide them with coordinators to supervise their progress and attendance. If there is a discrimination complaint, the coordinator has to take action and file a report; when a student needs additional help with schoolwork, the coordinator must arrange for it. The objective is to slowly, gradually, close down all the segregated schools and have Romani kids attend classes with ethnic Bulgarians.

Angel, one of the program coordinators in Sliven, brings along for our interview a dog-eared notebook he has titled "The Bulgarian Engineer of the Nadezhda Quarter and the Country." On each page he has diligently outlined problem issues. How can we decrease crime rates in the Romani community? How can we stop early marriage and pregnancy? There is also a picture-diagram colored with crayons. A boy and a girl are holding hands; "pupas" says the caption underneath. An arrow leads to a houselike structure identified as "school." Another arrow leads out of "school" to the already grown-up man and woman. "Butterflies."

At the office of the organization, where Stella takes me afterward, I sit through a meeting with the coordinators. The Romani flag—a red wheel rolling over an equally divided blue (sky) and green (earth) background—hangs

on the wall. Computers buzz everywhere. In one corner there is a guitar missing four strings. When the meeting begins, Stella asks every coordinator for a thorough report. She is in a solemn mood; no bantering allowed. Smoking is prohibited. To those who have not done their duty, Stella raises her voice. Everybody cowers. There are five Romani kids enrolled in one of the integrated schools; six enrolled in another. Numbers in the reports never rise above single digits. Stella knows well that whatever the benefits of her efforts, the Romani hungry will go to bed hungry.

"God ordained that they go to bed hungry," says Bobby, a Roma from the Kosharnik quarter of Montana, a town in northwestern Bulgaria. "God ordained their fate. They need to go to bed hungry once or twice to learn the value of work, and stop begging. Give them ten loaves, a hundred—it'll never be enough if they don't earn what they eat. They have to start helping themselves."

"They" are Bobby's less-fortunate neighbors in Kosharnik. Dimiter and I have been sitting in Bobby's house for an hour, waiting for the afternoon heat to cease its crazy hammering. Bobby is shirtless, his potbelly a bit smaller than the fancy potbelly stove in the corner. While he is talking, he flips through TV channels: music, movies, advertisements offering work abroad. He finally settles on a sitcom.

Like so many other Roma, Bobby supplements the income of his family by traveling. He buys cheap used cars in Austria and sells them in Bulgaria; he trades in diesel fuel, sometimes illegally. Business is good: his house is spacious and clean, furnished with expensive-looking couches; there are flowerpots on the windowsills. The yard is littered with his children's bright toys. Bobby's mother, who is at a spa-resort at the moment, runs her own little café adjacent to the house. At 6 A.M. it bustles with customers drinking coffee before work; by 6 P.M. the same customers are back, daily earnings in hand, ready for a couple of beers.

Once the scorched earth cools down, we head out into the neighborhood. The café is almost full. A few men, none of them older than thirty, chatter at a table by the sidewalk, smoking cigarettes and drinking. Their hands are covered with dirt; they have just returned from work. Digging the fields. Picking strawberries at a nearby farm. Looking for scrap. Anything. Day labor is the main occupation in Kosharnik. Most Roma have no secondary education or professional training. Because state companies are more prejudiced hirers, private employment is preferable, though Roma are paid less than anyone else. Wages are around ten leva (approximately US\$7) per day.

"Life was better under Todor Zhivkov," says an older man whom I meet in the street; many share his nostalgia for the former Communist dictator. "We

didn't have rights back then, but we had work. Now we have rights, but you can't feed your family on freedom."

You can't feed your family on religion, either, but it's the principal diet here. Almost everyone I meet in Kosharnik is a Protestant Christian. Daily conversation is freighted with Biblical quotations or stock phrases—"our brother stands firm in the faith"—translated literally from missionary English. Children are taught the Bible orally before they learn to read. The Turkish proverb about there being seventy-seven-and-a-half religions in the world—the extra half being whatever the Gypsies believe—is not without a grain of truth. Whether Christian or Muslim, Roma prefer a syncretic approach to the divine. Families are known to celebrate both Christmas and Ramadan. Protestantism has hardly changed that; rather, it is the Roma who have changed Protestantism to suit their tastes. "The family over there are Adventists, but I am a Baptist," a plump woman in her fifties brags to me. "Adventists don't allow pork, but Baptists are fine with it. And I love pork."

By reputation, Bulgarians are not very fond of God, even though Orthodox Christianity is the official religion, and Muslims (Bulgarian Turks) make up about 10 percent of the population. It was the lifting of the Iron Curtain

A day laborer in front of Bobby's café in Kosharnik (DIMITER KENAROV).



that opened the stage for the religious drama. Hundreds of American missionaries, eager to regain souls from the communists, embarked on a transatlantic crusade. (I still have, somewhere in my library, a copy of the Bulgarian translation of the Book of Mormon.) And, naturally, it was among the most downtrodden, the Roma, that American evangelicals reaped their greatest rewards. Promises of a happier afterlife, and a few packages of salt and sugar, were enough to lure many Roma away from the penniless gods of the past. In addition, Protestant churches offered a new sort of congregation untainted by local bigotry. Religion seemed like the ready and easy way to integrate into Bulgarian society. There was a catch, however: Bulgarian Protestants were themselves a tiny minority, frequently objects of ridicule and spite. The Roma who turned to Protestantism exchanged one marginal community for another.



A girl in Kosharnik (DIMITER KENAROV).

Like Sliven's Nadezhda quarter, Montana's Kosharnik has squares and circles, surfaces and depths. Set on a hill at the edge of town, the neighborhood has a social geometry all its own. Bobby's house is in the more affluent section—streets here have a fresh coat of asphalt, sidewalks are swept clean. Some of the other houses are equally sturdy, trellises with creeping vines throwing cool shade in the yards. Well-dressed children play tag or ride new bicycles. This is the presentable section of Kosharnik, where everyone works from Monday through Saturday and attends church on Sunday. These are Bulgaria's isolated Roma bourgeoisie, but it is hard to determine what keeps people of economic means living in the ghetto. Is the color of one's face more important than the color of money? Or is it that the outside world has been refused entry?

The bad part of Kosharnik—"the jungle," as the locals refer to it—is not, as one would expect, at the bottom, but at the very top of the arid, treeless hill. It's a million-dollar view: the gargantuan apartment buildings of Montana on one horizon; on the other, the plains of northern Bulgaria, carpeted with sunflowers, sprawling toward the invisible Danube River. Scattered across the field, like a chance gathering of misanthropes, most houses—hovels, really—are rickety and unkempt, hastily put together from corrugated iron, plywood and cardboard; some mud-and-brick edifices look as if they might melt under the force of the next rain. Unauthorized power cables run from one building

to the next. Water bottles, canisters, buckets, washtubs, and drum barrels lie empty amid mounds of refuse; there is no running water here. Everything has a vague frontier aura, dislocated only by the odd satellite dish.

The transformation of the landscape is so sudden that it takes me a while to recognize that I have crossed the threshold to another world. I realize it finally when I see a man with three English non sequiturs written across his T-shirt: *GAME OVER, PERSEVERANCE, ALL I WANT IS EVERYTHING*. Bobby, my guide around Kosharnik, wants us to turn back. Like Stoyan earlier, he seems hesitant to show me the less-respectable part of the community. It's clear Bobby doesn't like the people here, even if they are fellow Roma; he would never have come up here on his own. But this time, I don't budge. I want to speak with them.

Forty-seven Kamchia Street: this is the only postal address of the squatter families in Kosharnik. My reception is warm, certainly because Bobby and Dimiter stand by my side. People discuss their problems, take me around their homes. "I live here with my six children," a middle-aged woman tells me, gesturing toward one of the makeshift hovels. It is a pitiful structure with cardboard walls and tattered blankets for windows. But inside there is no trace of filth. The iron beds are covered, a quilt has been spread out on the floor, framed photographs decorate the walls. When I raise my camera, she asks that I wait until she clothes her children. There is such tenderness in her motions, such maternal care, belying all that I have heard about Romani disregard for their children. The woman lifts her cherubic baby, a girl, in her hands and poses for the camera. Renaissance artists would have found them a fitting subject.

Children are the essence of Romani culture, the alpha and the omega. Childhood might be very short—ending at ten or eleven—but it is not solitary, nasty, or brutish. Boys and girls are loved equally. Wherever I go in Kosharnik, people ask me to photograph their young ones first, lining them up in front of their dilapidated homes. The swaddled baby raised high over the parent's head is a kind of triumph of life over adversity. Everything else might be a source of shame, but not the children.

Soon, I am surrounded. "Boy, can you help us?" The question comes from all sides, sometimes desperate, sometimes peremptory. Twenty, perhaps thirty, men and women, three times as many children. The juggernaut of their complaints gathers force. Will I go to see the mayor of Montana and ask him to provide garbage collection? What documents does one need to apply for legal housing? "If we're not part of the city plan, does it mean we are dogs?" a woman asks me. Why isn't there clean water? Water, water, water, water. The water is yellow, useless. It carries dysentery. Babies die every day. "Can you

help us?" the question comes up again. Here, I am not a journalist; I am only a gadjo, and the gadje run the country, the town, the village. Aren't the gadje one big family, like the Gypsies? Surely I know, or know somebody who knows, the president.

Keeping his distance from me, a tall, broad-shouldered, shirtless man stands in the shade of a stablelike structure. When his children gather for a photograph, he gives me a stare that conveys something between condescension and disgust. After a couple of minutes, he finally approaches. "You are from the university, right? Don't say no, I can tell by your looks. You come here asking questions, so that you can write your dissertation after that. Right? You ask for percentages, numbers, you take pictures. You just want to watch and then go home. You want to make money out of us. You want to rob us."

He is sick of people coming to his home, recording the story of his life for others to read. Narratives don't cure tuberculosis. By the time the painter completes the portrait, the model has died. The letter killeth. "Are we monkeys or bears," he asks me, "that you should come here to watch us dance, so that others can laugh at us? This is sinful, you know."

Because I have nowhere to go for the night, a Romani man, Tano, invites me to stay at his apartment in downtown Montana. In the evening he asks over several friends, piles food and drinks on the kitchen table, and the party begins. We are getting drunk—seven Roma and two ethnic Bulgarians—the talk swinging from sexual exploits to travel. Tano dated a Bulgarian woman, but she wanted to break up because her parents didn't approve of "a Gypsy in the house." Dian tells the story of his time in western Mexico as an extra in the movie *Troy*. He is a Judo champion with a master's degree from the National Sports Academy. He even taught martial arts at Sofia's police academy, but when he applied for a job as an officer, he was turned down. "Look at all my credentials!" he says, handing me his wallet full of ID cards. "I just wanted to become a cop, not a very high position, you know, and they didn't accept me. Why? Because I am a Gypsy."

"To prove their worth," Tano joins in, "Roma need to be ten times better than the average Bulgarian. It's a lot of pressure, if you know what I mean." Tano used to be a representative with the European Commission in Brussels. Two years ago, he delivered a talk on the issue of Romani identity before the United States Congress.

The conversation rambles on through the night. Tano's laptop blasts traditional Romani music, Bulgarian hip-hop, drum and bass, pop. Some of us go out on the apartment's balcony to smoke up. The joint goes from hand to hand, slowly. It's our peace pipe. ■

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