

BULGARIA: MAGICAL MOMENTS by Anne-Louise Schaffer

Like many folk-dancers interested in Balkan culture, I made the pilgrimage to Bulgaria this past summer to attend the famous Koprivshtitsa folk festival. It takes place every five years in a string of meadows in the mountains above the town. Not speaking Bulgarian, I decided to sign up for Jim Gold's two-week tour of Bulgaria that included the festival. Three other current and former Texas folk-dance couples came on the tour as well, making it particularly congenial for me.

During several conversations I had with Jim ahead of time, and during the trip proper, he often used the word "magical" and occasionally the term "magical moments." I wasn't sure what he meant until I arrived in Sofia with the rest of the group. By the end of that first day I understood: I was already in love with the country!

As the trip progressed, we stopped at famous places and obscure ones; some were on our itinerary, some were total surprises. Along the way I did indeed experience many "magical moments," none of which could have happened on a normal commercial tour. Here are some of them. Ranging from the light-hearted to the intensely emotional, they are the ones that remain most vivid in my memory two months after my return.

The Koprivshtitsa Festival. The festival took place on seven stages in as many meadows, each of which was devoted to a particular region of Bulgaria. I spent all of Saturday, the second day of the event, going from one stage to another, sampling the different cultural areas. I began with Stage 6, which featured the groups from the Pirin and Rhodope Mountains, my favorite musical, dance, and costume regions. During the two hours I sat there in the baking sun, I determined that there were categories of entrants: dance groups, ritual presenters, and women's singing groups. When the latter came on, I was stunned to hear them sing two-part dissonant songs similar to those I had learned in Ethel Raim's Balkan singing classes in New York City in the late 1960s. The verses were sung alternately by two groups, each of which consisted of a few droners and one or more melody singers. I had taught similar songs to my own beginning Balkan students in the 1970s in Washington, D.C., but had not thought about them since. Hearing these singers brought back wonderful memories.

Needing both food and shade, I moved on to Stage 7, which was dramatically situated on the edge of a cliff overlooking part of the town of Koprivshtitsa. I bought some Bulgarian fast food from a stall on the trail and settled down in the shade beneath the pine trees on the slope of the hill to one side of the stage. Women's singing groups from Gabrovo were performing at the time. Then came a surprise: a children's category! One by one, several little girls got up on the stage and belted out a solo full of difficult ornamentation, sounding exactly like the adult singers on so many of my recordings back home. They were amazing! They seemed to range from 4 to 7 in age. It made me wonder: what was I doing at that age? Answer: dancing around my home pretending to be a ballerina.

On Sunday I returned to the meadows to watch the closing ceremonies at Stage 2. I arrived early to get a spot on the grass in the shade with a good view. As I waited, two groups of Bulgarian women sat down next to me, one on each side. Some were in colorful traditional clothing, some not; it was obvious, though, that they were not from the same region. Over time,

other family or village members arrived to join them. All were in a festive mood. I felt very uneasy, being alone and so obviously out of place. I noticed that some individuals with cameras walking past us would stop to take a photo and walk on. I wondered if they noticed me in the midst of the sea of color; they certainly would once they saw their finished photographs. I tried to will myself into invisibility. Would they curse the interloper and discard or delete the photos? I hoped not. After all, I too was wearing traditional (American) clothing: well-washed blue denim pants, a matching sleeveless over-blouse, tennis shoes, and a large white sunhat. I suddenly felt a lot better.

Chalin's Farm. One evening while our group was staying in Bansko, a resort in the Pirin Mountains, we were treated to a picnic dinner in a meadow half way up a mountain. The meadow belonged to a farmer named Chalin and was a popular spot for hikers and climbers during the summer months. Our bus could only take us part way, though, as it was too large to go beyond the fork in the road. Horses with large carts were waiting there to take us the rest of the distance.

At one end of the meadow was a covered eating area with tables and benches. As we stuffed ourselves with the delicious kebabs roasting on open pits, washing them down with kegs of beer, we were serenaded by a group of four gypsy musicians and three female singers. The former played many *čoček*s—one of my favorite Balkan dances—but everyone was too intent on feasting to get up and dance. I was frustrated. However, once we finished eating, as the sun was setting, we started dancing to the music of Ventsi, the wonderful *gaida* player who traveled with us on our tour. The dancing continued till long after darkness had settled in.

Sadly, we eventually had to leave. Jim had corralled a small bus from another tour group to take most of our group back down to the fork in the road where our own bus was waiting. Some of us volunteered to walk down. I was in a group of 8 to 10 that departed last. Descending the mountain proved to be quite an adventure, both creepy and mysterious. It was pitch black; even the sliver of the crescent moon was not visible, due to the tall trees on each side of the narrow road. The road itself was full of potholes, but no one had a flashlight to spot them. At first there was total silence. Then gradually our little ragtag band started chatting, joking, laughing, and then singing. At one point I sang out: "We're off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz." It seemed appropriate at the time. For me it really WAS a magical moment! ... Then it was ruined. We came to the fork in the road and continued downhill. Suddenly our giant bus came up behind us with lights glaring and picked us up. Drat! We were clearly back in Kansas.

Banichan. One of Jim's surprise stops on the tour was at the small village of Banichan, located on the main road south of Bansko in the Pirin Mountains. Our bus stopped in front of a house on the edge of the village, where a woman greeted us and ushered us into the garden behind it. We gathered in and around the L-shaped porch to take part in a mock wedding dowry negotiation, with two of our tour members standing in for the engaged couple. Assisting the woman were a few teenage girls and boys and a gaggle of little children, all dressed in traditional clothing.

The humorous ritual was punctuated by singing from both the older and the younger children. As it was concluding, the woman in charge asked US to sing something. There was a pregnant pause. Having prepared a few songs—American and Bulgarian—back home on the possibility that something like this might happen during the trip, I decided to sing one verse of "Kalimanko." It is a very difficult Macedonian song that I heard on a record back in the 1970s, fell in love with,

and painstakingly learned. Over the ensuing decades I had never had the opportunity to sing it for anyone, but this seemed to be the right moment: it was a love song and I was still inspired by all the fantastic women's singing I had heard at the Koprivshitsa Festival. So I closed my eyes and began. When I finished there was another pregnant pause. Then finally applause and compliments. I was so relieved! I hadn't made any mistakes either.

Kovachevtsi. Another special place we visited was Kovachevtsi, located way off the beaten track northwest of Samokov in the Rila Mountains. It used to be a thriving town, but now many of the people have left for the cities to find jobs, leaving behind mostly old people and some gypsy families. The current mayor, a tiny frail woman who nearly died a few years ago, has dedicated the rest of her life to reviving her dying town. The money Jim's tours have brought in has been used to renovate the church and community center. The town is also the home of Kremena Stancheva, one of the original trio of singers whose recording "Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares" catapulted Bulgarian women's singing onto the world stage in the 1980s. She runs a singing school there during the summer months and takes on special students during the rest of the year. She is particularly interested in teaching traditional Bulgarian singing to the local gypsy children.

As our bus drove into the paved town square, we were greeted by many of the local people. A young man from Samokov TV videotaped our arrival, as well as the subsequent greeting ceremony and some of our dancing. The mayor began by giving a speech, which unfortunately was not translated for us. It was followed by a short vocal concert by two trios of women in traditional clothing. They performed the same two-part dissonant songs, alternating back and forth, that I had heard at Stage 6 at the Koprivshitsa Festival. As before, I was ecstatic; I even got goose bumps.

When an accordion player somewhere on the square started playing a pravo tune, we all moved towards him to form a long curving line. I was still standing behind it deciding where to cut in when, out of nowhere, one of the singers grabbed my left hand like a vise and led me into it. She was tiny and elderly, but definitely NOT frail. Her steps were large and forceful. I tried my best to match them, but it was in vain. I kept running into the woman to my right, who was dancing the way we in the U.S. usually do: with a firm-but-gentle handhold and taking easygoing medium-size steps. The music eventually sped up and then switched to a different dance. When the music and dancing ended, the elderly woman turned to me and gave me a sustained hug that nearly crushed my ribs. I tried to return the same, but I was pitifully weak by comparison. Eventually she released me and I found that both of us had tears in our eyes. I wanted to speak with her, but we had no language in common.

She accompanied me on the short walk to Kremena's house, where we were treated to a huge homemade feast prepared by some of the women in the town. One by one we filed into her tiny kitchen to choose among the bewildering number of dishes set out for us. While we gorged ourselves in her tree-shaded yard, we were serenaded by a group of her young gypsy students, by a visiting friend of hers from Thrace, and by one of her former "Voix Bulgares" mates.

When it was time to leave, we returned to the square for a farewell set sung for us by the two trios in the same two-part style with drone. Afterwards, my adoptive baba (grandmother) reappeared suddenly, and we hugged a tearful good-bye. It was only when I got home and went through my trip photos that I was able to identify her as the solo melody singer in the left-hand trio. (See photo)

My encounter with her in this town was the most emotional event of the trip for me. It left me with the strongest memories—memories that I can't get out of my head. They continue to haunt me to this day. I will always wonder: why did she choose me? She wasn't standing next to me on the plaza originally. Did she see me smiling from ear-to-ear while she was singing? If so, did she feel a connection across the space? Were others in our group "adopted" like I was? Who was she? And most important: WHAT IS HER NAME????