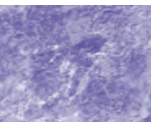


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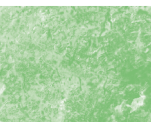


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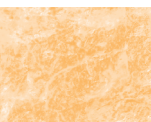
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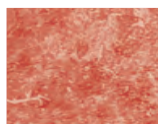
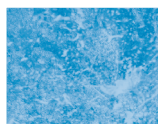
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## THE VILLAGE WAVES HELLO

I love Sofia in the same way we often greedily cling to our partners, still in love with them even though they keep sleeping with other people, but I guess that's more of an obsession than love. Been there. Done that. That's a topic for another book entirely.

I've never been a person of much means and have spent my entire life struggling, and surviving, often due to my lame indifference. I undertook this project while shopping for deals on rice and beans and taking whatever odd jobs I could find. Much of the time, I relied on the kindness of friends and family simply to get by and pay everyone involved whatever little I had. Was it the most brilliant life choice on my part? Nope.

In retrospect, maybe I should've waited until I had financial stability. If that were the case, however, the project would've never happened. An opportunity presented itself, and I was compelled to take it. I made an impulsive decision to go and live in some random village for a few weeks, to stay with a family there, and to try and understand what that kind of life is like.

I was hoping to catch a glimpse of the secrets that were actually never secrets at all, if any of us would just take a break from daydreaming about our social media posts reaching a hundred likes. If we'd only open our eyes and ears to the souls living beyond our cities and leave behind the 11th-grade lifestyles we've somehow sunk into.

After spending time in Negovanovtsi in northern Bulgaria, a village resting on the churning Danube, I knew I had to explore more. I had to talk to more of this lost generation while they were still around to talk to.

I understood the importance of someone sitting down and just chatting with you, listening to you, drinking a bit of backyard hooch, and letting you know you are appreciated. The wisdom and awareness they

have to impart are immense. It was a debilitating shame to think that these people were being forgotten, looked over, intimidated, laughed at. Occasionally, they're made into a sort of "status currency" for some overzealous, highly opinionated urban outsiders to use as a means to feel more alternative or cutting edge—the list can go on until my tattoos fade.

I felt connected to the idea of the village and the people inhabiting it. I felt in some way that they were the root of all that's good. Perhaps not in our lifetime, but the cities will fall and decay as all things do when they only devour and never create or produce.

Villages will once again be the lifeline of humanity.



There's no other point in this story that I could start with besides my first Bulgarian village experience.

Over the last decade or so, I have been shuffling around Bulgaria but only briefly passing through villages, never stopping to stay, never spending time with the people, drinking with them, conversing with them, eating with them, never laughing and falling victim to their memories.

In these forsaken villages, I discovered that sadness and happiness are often felt simultaneously and rely on each other to exist.

I remember my first village and getting off the bus that carried me there. The place where I figured out that the best way to get to know someone is by cooking with them and sitting down to a meal together. The place where I decided that this was exactly what I was going to do here in Bulgaria—the place that I had made my home but still knew so little about outside of the capital and its never-ending repairs of things that have already, supposedly, been repaired.

*RORY MILLER*





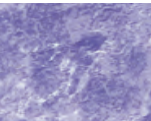




GREETINGS  
FROM BABA



OF  
NEGOVANOVTSI



## The First of Several Villages

I found myself in a village called Negovanovtsi. It's just a bit off the Danube, north of the town of Vidin, and it's been slightly luckier than some other even more remote villages.

I had no real voice in the choosing of the village nor the people I ended up staying with—it was all chosen and organized voluntarily for me. The organization consisted of several enthusiastic (sometimes exhaustingly so) and warm-hearted urbanites actively trying very hard to understand the village lifestyle.

I was in complete opposition, in terms of character, to the organization and the people populating it, as well as the university students participating in the actual residencies. Being in my late thirties at the time, I was in possession of zero ambitions for an academic career, nor did I have deep enough pockets to pretend to be of any importance—actually, I lacked pockets of any size at all.

It wasn't long before I realized I needed a photographer who would not only take pictures but also save me from misunderstandings if I got lost on the road or in translation. This was often the case.

The first lucky guy happened to be a close photographer friend of mine, known as "the Chinaman" in Bulgarian despite having no connection with China at all (personally, I could never bring myself to call him that without feeling absolutely ridiculous. I just used his real name—Ivo).

To this day, I still have no idea why they call him that, and neither does he. In Bulgaria, almost everyone has a nickname whose origin they can rarely explain. I found this annoying, but then I realized that I was just jealous because I didn't have one... yet.

Later we were joined by a second photographer named Stefan from Yambol. Working with two photographers allowed us to be more flexible with logistics, and they're both amazing at what they do. Even so, it was always a nightmare planning something between myself, the photographers, our families, the grandmothers we visited, the weather, our jobs, and whatever else conspired that day to stop us.

Without these photos, I would've never been able to finish this project, as half of the material and content that goes in through my eyes, in past my ears, or out of my mouth completely fades six seconds after it happens. You can see why these pictures along with my notes served a much greater purpose.

The only requirement I insisted on was that, wherever I went, the people there loved to cook. This narrowed it down to practically every person in every village, ever.

In any case, I couldn't have asked for a better setting or a more dynamic and beautiful set of hosts. I grabbed the few things I had brought along with me on that bus ride and made the dusty three-minute walk from the village square to the heavy, slightly open front gates of Baba Ana and Dyado Emil.



Negovanovtsi. Like all places outside the cities these days, it's dissipating, falling into disrepair. So are the local people. If these souls don't make their way to the cities for a shot at those blurry urban opportunities, whether social or professional, that are so exaggeratedly broadcast





over every TV, they often fall into depression, alcoholism, etc. Simplicity and honesty don't often win against the city's allure and dangling promises of progress.

This area (North West Bulgaria) is unique in its heritage and history. Being one of only a few remaining enclaves for the Vlach people, whose ancestors were ancient Romans and Dacians, there are hordes of cultural treasures and stories to reap. Unfortunately, their numbers have withered to a staggering low—now sitting at less than 4,000.

Negovanovtsi is a relatively large village boasting at least two operational family-owned shops where you can stock up on your essential supplies of alcohol, cat treats, and some not-so-appetizing people food. There appeared to be a sort of post office which had peculiar working hours, dependent on the mood of whoever was working there.

I was slightly disappointed that there was a gas station/mechanic in the village. I'd had a more ill-equipped location in mind. Later I was told that it was run by the son and son-in-law of Baba Ana. For any city-dweller, it would've been a source of superiority, but not for them.

Instead, it was an opportunity to help others in the community, as it's well known that anything made before 1990 doesn't really die. It just con-



stantly breaks down and needs new parts that aren't really new, just "re-furbished."

As with any small community, everyone knew what everyone had for breakfast and whether or not they'd found a hair in their coffee. The exploits of small-town politics occupied the minds of those sitting at most tables: common enemies like the village drunk, the stray or neglected dogs tearing up their gardens, and of course the lack of anything to do. A shortage of paid work is endemic to this region, which has the highest unemployment rate in the country.

Most of the inhabitants were over 50, yet this village functioned on the backs of their labor. A village almost wholly operated by retirees, it was filled with empty houses and livestock on the roads. One family often had more than a couple of houses in the village that were used for different reasons—keeping chickens, storage, etc.

A handful of younger people could be found here and there. Some were trying to sustain themselves in the village, and then there were others who came to visit their parents or grandparents on weekends, usually from the nearby town of Vidin. This led to odd get-togethers where copious cheap spirits were consumed as turbo electronic music was blasted through open car doors. At other times, fantastic home-distilled rakiya was passed around from hand to hand, lip to lip, by uncles using their accordions as makeshift tables—you could never predict what would develop.

Each day was taken as it was. It seemed like no one ever had a plan. In Bulgarian, they say "Na Oko." Literally translated, it means "By Eye"; figuratively, it refers to not measuring but rather feeling something out and making whatever it is your own.

This area is well known as a grape-growing region, and most families had vines in their yards or a few acres of them outside the village. This meant each family had their own potent homemade wine or brandy, called rakiya, but usually both were available.

It won't come as a surprise that plenty of holidays and traditions revolve around drinking and eating. Unfortunately, my short timeframe didn't allow me to experience too many of them (I hear it gets painfully wild there during the winemakers' holiday, Trifon Zarezan).

One old wedding tradition that I'm still amazed by has to do with a rooster. According to this custom, the bride's family must gift the groom





with a rooster. The living rooster symbolizes a masculine beginning and the strength of a man.

The rooster is prepared by the bride's family and, until recently, was almost always presented to the groom while still alive (the rooster, that is). They would often cover it with a towel or a sack, sometimes fastening it closed using a rope with several red peppers tied into it, or perhaps a wreath. A small pouch of grain is usually presented alongside the rooster. While this might seem a bit over the top, it's still fascinating.

This rooster is then given to the so-called "hostage," who's usually a relative of the groom. The transfer takes place through bargaining and, sometimes, ransom. The poor fellow chosen as hostage is responsible for the rooster throughout the wedding. His role includes dancing, joking, and whatever else needs doing without letting the rooster get away. Simply put, he needs to entertain the wedding guests.

In today's world, it's frowned upon to bring a live rooster into an establishment, so the custom has evolved. Now, it's customary for the rooster to be cooked first, meaning that this hostage character no longer has to endure the whole extraordinary, grotesque spectacle with a wriggling live animal. It's straight into the oven with it nowadays, and then dancing

with its corpse afterward—still in its typical garb of peppers, corn, and other adornments.

It may sound like I'm joking, but this tradition is real and totally mesmerizing. The rooster itself is highly respected in Bulgarian folklore. Its crowing measures time and divides the day into light (good) and dark (evil). Moreover, it separates the civilized world, where crowing is heard, from the wild, where the rooster doesn't crow.

As a final note, I'd like to leave you with a quick recipe for such a wedding rooster given to me by a Bulgarian baba down the road.

"A well-cleaned rooster is simmered over medium heat for two or three hours. The legs should be tied so that they don't fall apart during cooking. The water needs to be salted and have some onions, carrots, and a handful of chopped tomatoes in it.

"After boiling, remove the rooster from the pot and let it cool in the cold air. Then it should be decorated. For its glamorous transformation, you'll need:

- an egg or potato that can be stuck onto the neck and used as a head—or the actual head of the rooster can even be reused.
- a string of small red peppers for a necklace or sash. You can also use a string of beans, popcorn, or raw corn for a fashionable accessory.



“A long time ago, people started to put things on this hip rooster such as trousers, a shirt, or earrings. Of course, they might even fix a Bulgarian flag to its back with a clothespin or nail of some sort. Various vegetables, dried peppers, and fruits can also be added to the metamorphosis.

“Lastly, for the rooster to sit upright, it’s stuck on a bottle (you can use your imagination for that one). For even greater stability, it’s surrounded by loaves of bread with flowers and geraniums.”

I was married once, many years ago, and this tradition would’ve made that painful experience so much more amusing and enjoyable. Maybe next time? Probably better not.



Eventually, I came to the large, hodgepodge home of my gracious hosts, the enormously kind Baba [Granny] Ana and Dyado [Grandpa] Emil—or, as the locals call him, “Dyado Bulgaria.” They allowed me a glimpse into their lives for a short time and revealed to me a bit about themselves, their lives together, their family, and, of course, their village.

Their house was mostly obscured by lush ash trees in summer bloom and a vine-covered veranda providing shade for a quirky dining table beneath that often inspired emotional conversation. The enormous building was randomly punctuated with concrete-slab balconies whose edges had softened over the years.

The dining table was covered in patterned nylon cloth and laid for guests. Uneven tiles covered the area around the house and would move slightly as you stepped on them. A side garden exploded with scents that successfully hid the aromas floating around the shabby outhouse. The little garden was the pride of Baba Ana, who relentlessly protected its treasures from stray dogs.

I spotted a few cats of different ages creeping out from corners and dark holes to greet me, hoping I had a chicken bone for them.

Baba Ana stood there with her arm outstretched over her head and Dyado behind her in an awkward knock-off designer t-shirt, his arms hanging down after setting his drink on the table. She waved me into their yard, which I’d soon learn was more like a living room during the summer when the family spent most of their time there. In the winter,

those lively gatherings would move into the kitchen, where the air becomes permeated with a bouquet of cigarette smoke and the aroma of cooking.

I gently turned the loose door handle on the gate and walked in for introductions. They both came up to me at once, pressing their hands into mine, their faces emblazoned with genuine smiles and infectious curiosity. I instantly felt at home. Before I could respond with any word other than thank you, I had a glass of rakiya [brandy] and another one with cold neon-colored soda thrust into my palms.

Baba Ana is spry and up before dawn each day. She radiates confidence and is as necessary to the home's stability as one of its concrete pillars. She's never without an apron, its sagging front pouch a haven for knick-knacks and wise hands.

Her face glows with experience and humility. The mere sight of her bustling in and out of the house, over the garden, to the shop, and back instantly disarms you and makes you feel at ease. She's the epitome of a good grandmother, and her deep sense of duty accompanied by her love of the human condition struck me every time she greeted me. I always felt cared for while around her, although I'd only known her for a short time.

Stout and always upright, she had just entered what most of us would consider the dawn of her baba days. In the village, however, age is measured at a different pace than in cities. Despite being only in her early 60s, she already had three grandchildren—one of them had just recently escaped their awkward teenage years.

Baba Ana was born in the small village of Gomotartsi in the Vidin region. She was born to village laborers and had an older sister. When she was still young, she started working at a bakery in Negovanovtsi while simultaneously holding down a second job as a cook for the local grade school.

Cooking has always been her passion, and she nurtures it whenever she's not preoccupied in her garden, chasing off stray dogs, tending to vegetables, battling droughts or other, more vocal nuisances like a hungry husband or barefoot grandchildren.

