



## VASIL VALDEMAROV TSANOV

### OBITUARY

*Bulgarian mathematician Vasil Valdemarov Tsanov passed away on 31.7.2017 at his home in Sofia. The following are reminiscences by some of his friends.*

#### Ulf Persson: Prelude in Bucharest



The first time I met Vasil Tsanov was at a conference arranged by Lucian Badescu in Bucharest in the summer of 1983. This was at a time when Ceausescu still was in power, and at his worst megalomaniac to boot, the most innocent aspect of which was that his faded portraits hung in every lecture room. Vasil's appearance, on the other hand, was not faded. Rather short of stature, with a goatee and already balding at thirty-five made him look a bit like a classical revolutionary, but also older than he actually was. However, this was a fact which when conscripted worked to his advantage, he would later tell me. His fellow conscripts suspected that he had been to jail, which lent him a prestige he may have been reluctant to disavow. I took to

him immediately, on one hand touched by his warm and gentle manner, on the other hand fascinated by his sarcasm, which was anything but gentle. He was one of those who 'cut the crap' and had little patience for the usual 'cant' which tends to dominate the opinions of those anxious to please and not thinking for themselves. That he would be a man of strong principles and integrity with which he would not be willing to compromise I could not have known on such a brief acquaintance, but which I may have intuited. Admirable qualities but when pursued consistently, not

to say heroically, may lead to stubborn inflexibility, much to the detriment of those who possess them. What people in general may recall from that meeting was how Faltings, when challenging him in chess on a bus trip to some nearby mountains, had to see himself repeatedly beaten, even when allowed to remake moves. I on the other hand was touched by his modest admission, that he liked to hike in the mountains and do some amateur archaeology, and to his respectful deference to his wife, whom he called regularly. People in the Eastern block had at the time limited opportunities to travel beyond the iron curtain, and such exotic travel as was possible involved places such as Cuba and North Korea, the latter of which he was very scornful. He had, however, been allowed to visit Göttingen and he was genuinely puzzled, as well as amused, by an anti-capitalistic demonstration in which capitalists had been pictured with top hats. Such a stereotype!

### **Visit to Sofia**

A little bit more than a year later I went for the first time ever in my life to Bulgaria. It was, as was normal at the time, on an Academy exchange. I arrived on the fortieth anniversary of the expulsion of the fascists when everything was closed down and in particular there was no one to meet me at the airport. Consequently I had to fend for myself taking a cab to a hotel involving a black market currency exchange with the driver. The next day, however, I was located by a representative of my hosts and taken to my regular abode, as a lodger of an immensely fat woman, who spent her time squeezed in with her TV-set in a tiny room, and with whom it was only possible to communicate in halting French.

This was in the old days. Huge portraits of Marx and Engels as well as of Andropov and the rising star - Gorbachev - were to be seen in the streets. When you walked around chances were that you were stopped by the police to have your identity verified (an aspect of which no doubt played a role when it came to locating me the next morning). My host was Andrei Todorov, whom I had met many years before in the States, and who took good care of me, in particular inviting me to his home where I met his wife educated in America, due to a diplomatic mission of her father, speaking English with a perfect American accent and manners. Both were very well-connected to the establishment and allowed me access to which I would have had none in my home-country. I spent my time at the Academy, commuting on a rickety street car, giving the expected lectures to a diminishing audience. It was now I met Vasil for the second time.

It was also now I got to know him in earnest. He graciously invited me twice to his small apartment in the outskirts of Sofia for dinner. I met his wife Julia,

who in comparison with Vasil was very taciturn, and his young son Valdemar, still hardly much more than a toddler, and whose name I thought had been given out of fascination with the Norse, but in fact would much later be revealed to me as a family tradition of naming sons after their grandfathers, just as Vasil had himself been named after his maternal. Incidentally, it would turn out that his grandparents, especially his grandfathers, had played a very important part in his life, and he spoke much more about them than about his parents. It was one thing for Todorov to invite me home, quite another one for Vasil, who thereby took a great risk, which I at the time was not aware of, and which he naturally made not the slightest intimation of. Vasil came from a family of merchants and lawyers, who had belonged to the upper bourgeois before the war, and had had some political influence. One grandfather on the left another one on the right, as a result Vasil's attitude to Communism was one of ambivalence. On one hand it was connected to a regime that he deeply resented, and he proudly asserted that he had never been a member of the party, always excusing himself because of his age, initially being too young and now too old. But as an intellectual movement it held his fascination, I always thought that he looked a little bit like Lenin and he had the air of a turn-of-the century revolutionary. Many years later he would refer admiringly to Trotsky, who during the height of the Civil War, still had found time to publish articles of literary criticism. And when after the fall of the wall there was a witch-hunt on former Communists he took exception finding it hypocritical, but that admittedly reflected more his sense of fair-play than any political appreciation.

But if he took a risk in inviting me home, that was nothing compared to what he took when he invited me to visit his family Dacha, which they had been allowed to keep, situated in the mountains outside Plovdiv. This involved in addition a lot of inconvenience to him. He had undertaken to give a course for teachers, and such an excursion necessitated extensive rescheduling and concentration of his lectures. I like to think that it was not entirely prompted out of politeness, but that my presence provided an excuse to make yet another visit, because it was clear that this retreat provided him with a sanctuary he deeply savored. Just a day or so before the planned trip, I had found out from my girl-friend that she was pregnant, which after the initial reaction of spontaneous joy, had resulted in anguish. Vasil had with his customary directness commiserated with me and referred to it as a mess. I then learned that he had had the same experiences in his youth and had a daughter with his first wife. I was hence in a state of shock and may have been even more of a taciturn companion than usual, but Vasil, who was a great talker, was never bothered with such shortcomings, he provided the entertainment, all he required was a sympathetic ear paying attention.

Many things stand out in my memory from this my very first penetration into the Bulgarian countryside. Above all, meeting in the early morning with Vasil full of energy and expectation, carrying on his back a huge old-fashioned rucksack packed to the point of bursting at its seams, while Julia arranged for tickets (did I ever bother to reimburse them, preoccupied as I was?). In the train, the window is open and the wind ruffles the curtains, and Vasil stands in the aisle, his cigarette glowing red emitting a light blue smoke, the sun slowly crawling up out of the night. The station at Plovdiv has recently been blown-up, officially Turkish terrorists are blamed, but unofficial rumors point at the KGB having masterminded it. Vasil is very proud of the city with its remains from classical antiquity, such as the giant amphitheater rivaling in horizontal scale Colosseum in Rome, and dreams of having the entire 19th century city razed down to reveal the ancient remnants lying dormant below. The bus is old and rusty and coughs a profusion of smoke as it struggles up the hills passing through small villages. The last stretch we hike, the green hills in the distance beckon, already dotted with the yellow and red of autumnal foliage decay. Among them we can spot a house located in splendid isolation, Vasil informs me that it belongs to some party boss, and is heavily guarded, otherwise somebody like him would blow it up he adds smilingly. He holds forth at great length on Bulgarian politics before the war. It was liberal, with leftist leanings, just as in the West. His grandmother always voted for some Communist, not because of the politics, she could not care less, but because she found him the most honest of them all. The Dacha has to be woken up, the shutters opened, the water connected, and a fire set going. Vasil is aghast when he notices that the beeches below have been chopped down turned into fire wood. It must be his mother's doing he laments exasperated, she could have gotten the same amount from the forester for just a bottle of whiskey.

After lunch we embark on a long hike. This is literally his home turf, it is here he spent his childhood with his maternal grandparents. Lightening a cigarette he deplores the fence which prevents him to hike down to Greece and the Aegean Sea, which otherwise he easily could have done. 'You know the East Germans financed the fence' he informs me 'because it is only the Germans who want to flee'. He is somewhat disgusted by my suggestion that the Bulgarians would like to escape as well, dismissing it as a Western misconception, but admits that if the borders were open the last pretense of the regime would crumble down.

We find ourselves in a small village. 'It is literally unchanged since the last century' he explains to me truly fascinated. 'Only old people live here now, their children may visit them on an occasional weekend, driving on narrow dirt roads' and adds that here the people are really free, because to where can such people be exiled? They sit here in a long row on a bench, they do not talk but look at us not without

some curiosity. Vasil points out that the fact that we come from Sofia is exotic enough, and that after Stockholm and Sofia have been destroyed this is what will be left. We glimpse inside a store along the cobbled street catching sight of an old woman decked in the white hood of a Muslim.

Further on, we leave the path bushwhacking up a steep slope under the canopies of colorful foliage until we reach a rocky overhang under which there is an inscription discovered by his grandfather and published in some historical journal in the 30's. Most likely it is pre-Roman, too short to be deciphered, but it used to be longer, and he shows how the rock has been defaced and pieces broken off. Here we have the amateur archaeologist in action, frustrated by the tantalizing indication of invaluable added script lost. We also stop at a small chapel. Somebody has put a modern sink inside, and Vasil is aghast at the sight. On the other hand he admits that this reveals a piety that trumps the breach of aesthetic sensitivity.

We return in darkness the air pervaded with the smell of potato fields and the distant roars of drunken soldiers. High above us tower the dark peaks of spruces against a vault of brilliant stars. It is all very quiet, and quiet we are too. They are both exhausted and Vasil has to admit to me that the pace I have been provoking was just a little bit too fast for his usual comfort.

Close to their house there is a monastery, and not far from it a restaurant. The restaurant is closed, but Vasil is nevertheless able to secure a bottle of wine. Julia prepares dinner. It is sumptuous, we are all very hungry. I sleep blissfully and the next day I wake up singularly refreshed.

And we return to Civilization. It is a beautiful day and a long downhill stretch. Vasil has connected with an old acquaintance who has turned up unexpectedly both of them engaging in a lively conversation. I and Julia trail behind. She is not as voluble as her husband and talks but reluctantly and consequently what she says is imbued with a sense of significance and felt as precious. 'Tsanov' she reveals 'really had a hard time deciding to get married for a second time'.

## **An Interrim**

After this I corresponded regularly with Vasil but admittedly not with the relentless frequency that the advent of e-mail later would make possible. I recommended him strongly as someone to invite for a semester at Mittag-Leffler in the fall of 1986, but unfortunately with two small children my wife and I had few opportunities to be social and in particular repay the hospitality I had enjoyed two years before. Then it must have petered out and at the end of the 80's I lost contact with him. The reason for that was of course obvious, in the fall of 89 the old regimes of

Eastern Europe did indeed come tumbling down, as Vasil had predicted, once the borders were opened. It must have been a momentous time for him, and naturally he had many things on his mind, not only because of the excitement of the political turmoil, but he and Julia were again parents, their second son Kristan having been born in 1989.

In the fall of 1991 a young Bulgarian mathematician by name of Iliev came by Gothenburg. I naturally asked about Vasil and was told that he had indeed been excited and had played a very active role 'on the barricades'. I have later learned that he had tried to get politically involved, but of that came predictably nothing. Vasil did not have the temperament of a politician nor the instincts, no doubt being too honest and unable to suffer fools. And one may suspect too inflexible to compromise against his principles. Still I suspect that it was a disappointment to him, after all he was passionately interested in politics, and he was committed to the idea that eventually Bulgaria would become a normal country, after all there was no (mathematical) axiom to the effect that it would not. But the road to normalcy, even returning to the fragile and imperfect but yet functioning democracy of the prewar times, would be long and tortuous, and from then on a growing disappointment with how things were turning out would take hold of him. But one thing at least he could take with him. During the exciting time of the overthrow of the regime, something for which he had always wished, he established himself as a national expert on elections (among others things pointing out the mathematical fallacies inherent in many election schemes), which would eventually lead to international assignments providing the most exciting adventures of his life. But more of that later.

### **Reconnecting**

In the late summer of 1993 I got a letter from him and I was overjoyed. He announced that he was coming to Sweden on yet another Academy Exchange and that it was two people here he wanted to meet. Me and Dan Laksov. And so after almost seven years we met again. He gave a very nice talk, unfortunately only attended by my students, and we had him over for a day walking out in the nearby woods looking for mushrooms. He had thoughtfully brought along presents. And when out in the woods he produced chocolate for the children. At home he helped with chopping wood, his veins bulging, his face blushing, pearls of perspiration forming on his head with the effort. The wood I had supplied for him to chop was not dry enough and when burning it filled the whole house with smoke and all doors and windows had to be opened. We concluded the day with dinner, admittedly a pale return for what I had enjoyed almost ten years earlier. In spite of his

brief appearance at our home he made an impression on our children which they retained to the day that is. 'Oh yes, Vasil', my son remarked when I reminded him while recollecting the visit.

From then on our correspondence became more regular, eased by the convenience of e-mail. In fact we exchanged several hundred letters in the years to come, mostly on history, politics and with a sprinkling of philosophy. In the summer of 1994 we met at a conference up in Tromsø in Northern Norway with a never setting sun. In 1997 I made a stop in Berlin on my way to Göttingen, to meet him where he was spending some time. He was intrigued by West Berlin while we walked around most of the time in East Berlin, the separate identities of the two divisions still noticeable, although the dividing border had long since been removed. Then the circle would close, not that we would once again meet in Romania, but I was invited in the fall of 2001 to a conference to take place in Bucharest and then the following spring for a longer stay for the month of May, both giving opportunities to visit him in nearby Bulgaria, opportunities I would not neglect to seize. Those would be the two last times we would meet in person, and of course we had no inkling of that, as you seldom have.

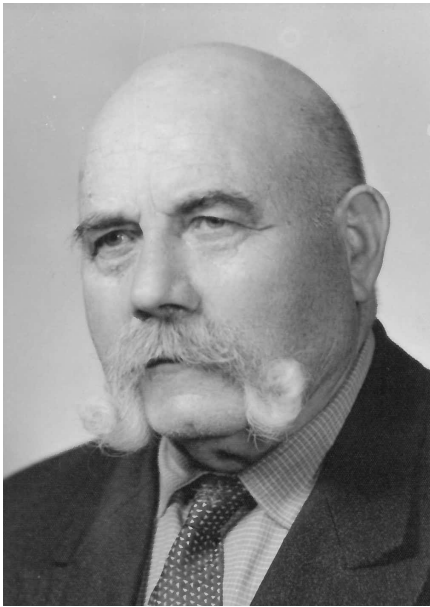
### **Pleven - His Paternal Home**

It is in the middle of the night. The train out of Bucharest is several hours late. We have stopped at the border town of Ruse. A young big man is trying to foist a bottle of whiskey on me for twenty German marks. As I show no interest he becomes threatening, and I am saved only by the train starting anew and he having to jump off. Vasil had suggested that we meet a few hours later at Pleven, the home of his father's part of the family, where we were going to spend the night at the apartment of his widowed aunt who recently had lost her only child due to the incompetence of the present health system in the country. Something especially bitter as she herself as a head dentist had devoted much of her life to uphold high standards. Even a century or two ago her son would have been in better care, as they would at least have let him of some blood, which fortuitously would have eased the pressure on his brain.

I get off in the middle of the night, only reassured by the Cyrillic lettering of the station name that it is indeed the right place. To my great relief Vasil shows up on the other side of the tracks, he is tired and we take a cab to his aunt's place. He scoffs at my apologies for having kept him waiting in the dark, he had called the station and only had to wait for a short time. Later he will admit that it was long

enough to have been pestered by propositioning prostitutes whose aggressiveness he had to fend off. The night is very warm.

At his aunt's apartment we tip-toe to the kitchen as not to disturb her. He produces some left-overs out of the refrigerator and apologizes that he as an Oriental man is not used to do woman's work, such as putting out food, let alone preparing it. He then holds forth in a hushed voice on the corruption of the new regime, how valuable capital investments are being squandered, not to say looted by the men in power and their cronies. After a few hours sleep I find Vasil already out on the balcony smoking out of the apartment in deference to his aunt. He has just bought bread for breakfast which we share with her. We spend the morning walking around Pleven and he takes me to the top of the hill, which was the scene of a decisive battle in 1878, when the Russians liberated the Bulgarians from the Turks. Three times the hill was seized, lost and retaken, he informs me as we inspect some cannons from the times, looking strikingly modern except for the wooden wheels. The Russian army was swelled with Finnish and Estonian conscripts who hence unwittingly became heroes of Bulgarian history, he informs me in passing. We discuss a lot of issues, the novels by Disraeli, Ice-ages, the Greeks favoring Milosevic.



He tells me that the Bulgarians are actually a Turkish people, so in fact he probably has a lot of Turkish blood in him. The region is fractured along religious and cultural lines, yet people have nevertheless always intermingled and are racially very close. Balkan history and politics, with all its intricacies opaque to an outsider, never cease to fascinate him, and as already noted, he never tires of recalling aspects of it, apologizing lest he would bore, always taking care not to repeat himself, drawing from an inexhaustible fount.

Back for lunch prepared by his aunt I get an opportunity to look at a picture of Vasil's paternal grandfather Ivan Tsanov Nachev (1893-1978). A man with a big mustache, making you think

of Nietzsche. He was a soldier and a teacher who had fought in all the Bulgarian wars he was old enough to participate in. He was a founding member of the communist party in Bulgaria, and as the result his son Valdemar, the father of Vasil,



was not baptized until he was seven and needed to go to school. Ivan played a very important role in Pleven, organizing historical museums and monuments, in fact in the 40's and 50's he was the head of the historical museum in Pleven. His son Valdemar (1920-95) did very well, got a stipend and studied analysis under Kiril Popov (1880-1966) who had been a student of Poincaré, and was also a veteran of the Balkan Wars as was Ivan. Valdemars studies were interrupted by the Second World War during which the Bulgarians were allied to Germany. As a result he took a very active part in the so called anarcho-communist revolution. Among other things he built a bomb, blew up a train loaded with German army supplies, getting seriously wounded in the process, yet managed to escape capture. He sought shelter with a woman he had met as a student and her father, who in spite of being the head of the Conservative party in the Thracian region, consented to help this leftist anarchist youngster (no doubt seen as a terrorist in many circles), getting him a doctor, and allowing him to recuperate. Soon thereafter Valdemar was caught again, this time smuggling printing equipment. He was beaten up and sent to a work camp, from which he was able to break out late in the summer of 1944. On September 9, the Soviets occupied the country and the Communists naturally took power. However, Valdemar disgusted with the mass-killings that followed in the fall, refused to follow a party career, which would have been open to him, and instead went back and finished his studies. He used his expertise to take an active part in planning the state economy and did serve for some time as the director of the Institute of Statistics. It is remarkable that Vasil never once in my presence alluded to the heroic exploits of his father. Could it be that he was ashamed of the Communist ties of his father's family? The closest he ever came to it was to refer to his aunt as a leftist sentimentalist, as he ignored her advice to take me to the monument on the top of the hill.

Out on the balcony again, taking a smoke, he relates to me his most recent adventure and from a certain point of view, his most satisfying. How he had been asked to help getting a fair count of the upcoming election in Serbia in the fall of 2000. Knowing that he had acquired some notoriety in the Balkan area, he asked to have his flight detoured via Vienna, in order to make his arrival less obvious. I am sure he really savored the fuss, so different from the world of an ordinary mathematician. His real achievement though was to organize a team back in Sofia with their computers to make a proper documentation. When after the election a press conference was called, his team was the only one which could supply proper figures. Because of that a second election was prevented and he liked to think that he had been instrumental in bringing down Milosevic. As to make a difference in the world at large, this was, as noted above, his most satisfying experience.

We leave Pleven for Sofia, both of us carrying as presents small bottles of delightful home made grappas from his aunt. As we are about to board the train, he suggests that we should change to first class, getting more comfort for a modest outlay. And indeed we get it, and in addition I am regaled with more Balkan stories, one of them concerning an Agrarian leader between the wars, who was assassinated and literally cut to pieces, and how the Communists after the war picked out a presumed culprit, had him tortured to confess, in order to bolster the legitimacy of their regime. I must admit that I find it all a bit confusing. As we enter Sofia he points out the tall mountain Vitocha, which he in his youth was able to hike up in four hours, while now he may possibly be able to do it in six.

### **A Brief Revisit to Sofia**

It is seventeen years since I was in Sofia last time. Nothing I glimpse through the cab window rings a bell. His apartment on Chechov street is not the same one I visited back then out in the suburbs. And the young son Kristan did not even exist at the time. And Valdemar is away playing at some club for the night, and when he will eventually appear the next morning, the contrast to the toddler I once met could hardly have been greater. A towering presence well over two meters it looks to me.

The next day we run around the town in order to get a Sofia T-shirt for my daughter Sofia. Still nothing rings a bell from my first visit. How could a city change so much, or did it simply not make an impression on me the first time? As we pass the American Embassy Vasil is disgusted by the entire street being cordoned off. What other country could make such demands? Vasil is a bit disappointed, he would rather have taken an excursion than to show me the sights of the city, most of which I have to confess I missed the first time around such as Sophia Basilica. Vasil gives me an impromptu lecture on the early Church and how they eventually settled on a common creed. After a delightful lunch in town with his wife, Vasil and I take off for his office. We pass by a night club and Vasil remarks it has a very bad reputation, but then realizes that for a night club, a bad reputation must actually be a good reputation. A door with a frosted window with his name lettered on it opens up to his office. There you find two computers, a map of Albania, and a lot of books. The window is protected by iron bars, yet some has been wrenched aside testifying to a burglary many years ago. The map of Albania has its significance, Vasil was on a mission there in 1997 as an observer of elections. Albania has a rich history, testified by all the medieval castles up in the hills and unknown to most of us. It had been his most exciting experience ever, sometimes being under fire, always traveling in an armed escort. Just to check in at a hotel was an

adventure by itself. Guards with Kalashnikov. One night he had been disturbed by the shootings, one shooting provoking another, just as barking dogs make other dogs bark. When he had complained to the manager, he had been offered the manager's own Kalashnikov to join in the fun. The former president Berisha may have been a bad guy, at least in the eyes of the EU, but his son, who had served as Vasil's interpreter had been poor and honest, belying the accusations of widespread corruption. There were many stories that really should have been published putting EU-officials in a bad light. But how to prove them, I asked. Not all things which are true can be proved he replied exasperated.

Back at the apartment we discuss the British historian A.J.P. Taylor, whom he likes a lot, much to my surprise because of Taylor's leftist views. We share an interest in Bertrand Russell, but unlike me he never got around to read his autobiography, and he definitely would not be interested in any biography on him. He refers to some memoirs he had recently read and which were written back in 1917. People really could write back then, he ruefully remarks, while nowadays young people cannot write at all, and he refers to another mission as an election observer, this time to Latvia. The young people in his team were bright and committed enough, but when it came to writing a report, they could not deliver. I complain about how confusing it is to encounter say the history of a region with which you are unfamiliar. Just one damned thing after another. He replies that in order to profit from any lecture you need to know most of it before. I have taken that to heart, learning is a matter of compactifying a dense open set.

### **Plovdiv - His Maternal Home**

The following spring, I would spend the month of April in Bucharest, giving me a golden opportunity to visit Vasil again, and this would turn out to be the last time I would see him. This time we would be a bit more planned and take a longer hike in the mountains close to Plovdiv and revisit the family dacha situated in Biala Cherkva, of which I had such fond memories since the fall of 1984, and to which Vasil was deeply emotionally attached. It is, I believe, important to have a fixed point in life, a place you know that you can always return to, and to which you have a strong sense of belonging. In no language I know of, apart from Swedish, do you make a distinction between paternal and maternal grandparents as well as between paternal and maternal uncles and aunts. In fact the general term grandfather cannot be directly expressed in my Native tongue. Thus to most people the distinction is secondary but to Swedes fundamental. As I have already remarked Vasil always spoke about his grandfathers, who had been very influential in his life, but I was bound to confuse them, and only in retrospect have I appreciated

that the two families were very distinct. His mother's family was very bourgeois in contrast to his father's (although of course Communism as a theoretical entity is very bourgeois). His maternal grandfather was named Vasil Peev (1883-1963), and indeed following a family tradition, Vasil was named after him, just as his own son Valdemar was named after his father. The reader who did not already know may now have guessed that it was with Vasil Peev and his daughter Neda (1920-99) that Valdemar Tsanov sought refuge after his act of terrorism, and that he later married Neda after the war and their only child Vasil was born in 1948 in Plovdiv.

This time our rendez-vous was not at an ungodly hour in the middle of the night but early in the morning in the main railway station of Sofia. In fact he is right there in front of me on the platform his big rucksack on his back his face glowing with joyful expectation, relieved that I turn down his invitation to rest at his place, we can catch the early 8:15 train to Plovdiv. But we have some time to kill and should have something to eat. I have no local currency but there is no problem, we can settle our accounts later. His idea when traveling together is to have a common fund from which one draws without worrying about whether everyone ends up paying their fair share. If you decide not to have that extra beer it is your choice and should not affect others. As we enter our reserved compartment we have to chase away some squatters, and as the train moves Vasil engages on a long lecture on the problems of unifying Bulgaria after the liberation from the Turks, and how they settled on the only available prince, a German one of the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha line, who was duly elected by the National Assembly in 1887. But the prince was formally not a king, and until 1908, when he proclaimed himself a Czar much to the consternation of his Russian colleague, the formal sovereign was still the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire.

Plovdiv reminds me of Greece, and Vasil confirms that in the old days it was in fact thought of as the gateway to the Orient. The bus will not leave until later in the afternoon so we have plenty of time to look around and have lunch. We pass by the house that was during Communist times seized from his mother's family, but then later re-instituted but still unrestored. Of his grandfathers Vasil seemed to have been most attached to his namesake, maybe his interests and political views as a conservative may have been more congenial to him, or he simply spent most of his childhood under his eyes. The paternal grandfather of Vasil Peev was a certain Peyo (1780-1861). He had been orphaned by the Turks who had killed his family. He had escaped to Plovdiv where he had joined the Guild of craftsmen of leather coats, done very well, made a major fortune and a very advantageous match marrying the daughter of the president of the Guild, thereby eventually inheriting that post, which he was also later able to pass on to his son Kostaki (1843-1920), the father of Vasil. Peyo supported with his wealth the construction of several churches

and a school in his native village. More importantly he got engaged and played a key role in the struggle, led by clerics such as Ilarion Makariopolski, to revive the old Bulgarian Orthodox Patriarchy which had been abolished by the Ottoman conquest and instead the Bulgarian church had come under the Greek dominated Patriarchate of Constantinople. It met with success in 1870 when the Sultan, in a so called firman, proclaimed its restoration as the Bulgarian Exarchate, in the face of the opposition of the latter claiming that such a division on ethnic grounds was tantamount to heresy. This recognition constituted the core of the emergence of Modern Bulgarian consciousness in anticipation of the eventual liberation by military means. Kostaki as a young man took part of the April Uprising in 1876 financing it partially due to his wealth, but as it failed, being ruthlessly suppressed by the Ottomans, he barely escaped death. The suppression of the Uprising shocked Europe and bolstered Russian morale. The defeat and the subsequent partial liberation in 1878 was thus hailed all over Europe. Kostaki became the first freely elected mayor of Plovdiv that year, although he was formally still a vassal to the Sultan, until the unification in 1885, when he was again elected mayor. The Conservative People's Party was founded in his home and as a member he served both in Parliament and Government, until he was ruined by the depression and returned back to Plovdiv. His wife Ekaterina was from an old Greek merchant family and together they had 13 children of whom Vasil along with his brother were the youngest. Greek in fact turned out to be the mother tongue of Vasil, and when in old age his speech would be troubled he used to sporadically lapse into Greek. By the time Vasil came of age his family could no longer afford to finance his studies and he had to work as a teacher for two years, saving money and eventually went to the Free University of Brussels to study law. As our Vasil would later remark that teachers salaries at that time were high enough to make such ventures feasible. Vasil Peev married rich, a woman by name of Stoianka Nikolova Kravareva (1892-1957) stemming from traders in rose oil (which incidentally was the first thing I, and perhaps many with me, associated Bulgaria with as a child). They had met at Brussels, where she studied economics very successfully, but as a married woman she did not pursue a career but was satisfied with charitable work and participating in various cultural clubs, while her husband, who had not been quite as successful as a student, took over a law-firm and succeeded his father in the conservative party. But most important to his grandson Vasil was that he was an active member of the Archaeological Club with a passionate interest in history. In fact he wrote an important book on the history of Plovdiv and made many discoveries as well as predictions later to be vindicated.

We head for the amphitheater. Vasil scoffs at the complaining Romanians. The austerity of the 80's made for tough life all over Eastern Europe, but the Romanians had been spoiled by their economic flourishing of the 60's and 70's under the young Ceausescu. But one should never forget that nothing of this could compare to the 50's a time of mass killings and general intimidation, largely unknown to the Western world. The Romanians may have lost a fair amount of young educated people by emigration, but whereas those figures count in the hundreds of thousands, those in Bulgaria involve millions out of a much smaller population. In fact entire villages are depopulated and real estate can be had for literally nothing. Vasil entertains plans to buy a house cheap up in the mountains, but with isolated unprotected property you have to contend with the gypsies. They will simply break in and ravage.

We climb up to the entrance of the amphitheater. The rusted gate is locked. Next to it there is a house with a fence, a man and a very angry dog barking furiously. Trespassing does not seem to be a comfortable option. Eventually we gain access by paying a nominal fee and soon we are lounging on the marble steps glaringly white in the sun. It cannot be compared to Colosseum in Rome, after all it belongs to the periphery of the Roman empire, but sometimes the peripheral view is preferred. It gives the whiff of authenticity by merely suggesting the grandeur of which it is but a faint reflection. Inspired by the surroundings I bring up the books by Graves I read last fall while traveling on trains down here. Vasil is disdainful. Commercial stuff, was it not even made into a TV.series? He shakes his head. Vasil read Suetonius as well as Plutarch when he was a boy of ten, upon the recommendation of his grandfather Vasil. When it comes to antiquity, he surely will have known more before getting into his teens than I would ever hope to know. Like many European mathematicians he attended the humanistic branch of the gymnasium and not the one of Natural Science. Our reveries are interrupted by the presence of a tall guide eager to supply some information in the hope of getting a remuneration. Vasil suffers him, although he probably knows much more of this place than the guide will ever do.

We have lunch outside in the cool shade overlooking the river Maritsa and a bridge with stalls, all of them staffed by Turks, he informs me. Vasil had earlier thought of the Romanian town Bechet as an interesting place for a Rendez-Vouz, being situated across the Danube from the Bulgarian town of Oryahovo to which there is a ferry. But been dissuaded by more worldly colleagues that this was madness, especially dangerous to Westerners who would certainly get robbed, maybe even getting themselves killed. Much illegal transport of goods was taken place on that ferry. Maybe Vasil is not so worldly after all, having basically a romantic view of life just as I have. He refers to an American couple who were going to visit them

in Sofia. At the last minute they backed out, possibly worried about the KGB. If so rather ironic, as the country is much more dangerous now than it was in the communist times, especially if you are a foreigner.

We get some provisions at a market before we board the bus. Cucumbers and scallions of which there is a profusion, they must be in season. Vasil warns me though of the tomatoes. In regular shops we pick up bread and Feta cheese. Then we find ourselves short of time, Vasil flags down a cab to take us to the bus station, around which we pick up some more bread, including some sweet one, traditional for Orthodox Easter.

### **The Dacha in the Woods**

The bus negotiates the streets of central Plovdiv, then passes through the suburbs, and after a flat sustained expanse starts to climb. The beeches are all denuded, spring has not yet arrived at this altitude. Their grim gray trunks eventually get replaced by pines, and when we get off at the last stop we are alone save for a vicious dog restrained by a chain. Vasil discards a half-empty plastic container with mineral water. The water to be had further on will be much better he explains. The hike is about to start.

Vasil walks slowly. It is some time since he had hiked and he is not sure about his strength. Thus he makes a stop soon after at an opening of the forest and we lie down on the soft grass in which he points out there are croci growing. It is of course too early for the berry season, he remarks wistfully, but then one may pick raspberries and blackberries and if lucky even strawberries, I assume he means the wild variety. Our talk drift to the recent success of Le Pen in the French presidential election. Everybody is incensed, but predictably not Vasil. What is this fuss all about? Is Le Pen really that bad? He finds the Western attitude hypocritical. We lie down, looking up at the sky, blue with patches of white clouds. Vasil resumes his walk, slow but at least not flagging. We pass by a hotel, all deserted save for barking dogs. A big building fashioned out of concrete which adds to it drabness. Further on a lot of smaller buildings, also for tourists. No tourists come this way now, it is all left to decay, and once again he refers to the exodus of talent, for which he himself is responsible. He has many students, and if they are any good he sees to it that they can travel abroad, mostly to the States. He was able to place a very promising young woman at M.I.T. and he has a contact with Bogomolov at U Penn, providing a good outlet. We trudge on. There is snow along the road. Remarkable for being that late in the season. He talks about gypsies in Plovdiv not paying for their electricity. The town tried to have them evicted. But of course,

he pauses, the petty crimes of the Gypsies pale compared to the crimes perpetrated by huge conglomerations which have swindled the country of unbelievable sums, contributing significantly to its financial problems.

Not far from their dacha is a monastery. The monastery of Peter and Paul. It was burnt down about two months ago, and it made the national news, was in fact the leading item at the time. He grew up with that monastery. He has not been here since the disaster perpetrated by some gang. When he now encounters the charred remains of the destruction, he stops, bows his head and says nothing. It is as if he is crying. We stand there for some time in total silence. Eventually he regains his composure and starts to walk with heavy legs away from the scene, thereby taking a lower path that leads to a Gypsy camp next to his house. Cars are parked in the mud, and where there is some grass, horses are grazing, A faint trickle of smoke is slowly rising up through a chimney. It used to be a hut built for the forest service, he tells me. Now the gypsies have taken over. It is all incredibly dirty. A small gypsy boy comes over. Vasil addresses him in a very friendly manner and they exchange a few words. Afterwards he asks me whether I noticed how the boy's face had shone up, unused to such treatment from locals.

The Dacha is much bigger and sturdier built than I had recalled. Its windows protected by red wooden shutters. Vasil produces the keys from his rucksack, and opens the door with some difficulty. We open the shutters to let in light and fresh air and Vasil aims straight for the fire place to get a fire going. His hands are numb. I assist by getting some fire wood from the cellar. He admonishes me to get pine, as it burns quicker. Electricity has to be connected, and as I am taller I get to screw in a fuse on the second floor, while Vasil holds up a lighted match. More fire wood and the fire burns brightly and Vasil huddles in front of it desperately trying to nurse life into his numb body. The physical effort of the hike and the emotional shock of the burnt down monastery must have taken its toll. Afterwards we try to connect the water but to no avail, the pipe must have been broken further up. It has now started to rain, the rain making a nice splattering sound on the roof. While I am tending the fire and laying the table, Vasil walks away with some plastic bottles to get water. He is gone for quite some time and I am getting worried. When he returns it is already dark. He had met the gypsy boy again and had a very nice conversation with him. We have a frugal meal from our provisions and Vasil supplements it with a soup he makes out of powder and eggs. He claims that as an Oriental man he cannot do household work, but when it comes to a crunch he clearly knows how to rise to the occasion.

On the wall there are various pictures. One of his grandfather Vasil who had the dacha built in the 20's, big enough to be able to house all his children and their families, who now own it jointly. There is a picture of Vasil as a boy. Touching to



see those pictures from the 50's, as distant in time now as the turn of the century was when we were children. But to my dismay I have no recollection of them as I write now. They are not even described in my notes. I guess the reason being that I had no idea at that time that it would be my last opportunity to see them. As



The Peevi family in the early fifties, Vasil is the young boy on the left.

already noted Vasil was born in Plovdiv and his parents shared with his mother's parents the top floor of a grand family house, which was later (1974) confiscated by the state and destroyed. This continued until 1957 and consequently Vasil got to be closer to his maternal grandparents than his paternal. Although diametrically opposed in politics the two grandfathers got on very well, ironically the leftist one complaining more about the Government than the rightist. Vasil started school in 1954 when he was six. Most likely he was able to read before that, no doubt having taught himself to read as intelligent and curious children tend to do. He told me once that he knew the Latin alphabet before he learned the Cyrillic and that he was equally at home with both of them. Anyway both his grandparents had extensive libraries, as one would suspect his parents had as well. This meant that he had great opportunities to read and he no doubt availed himself of them. In particular there must have been many books on history, especially local Balkan ones, due to his maternal grandfather. But he also read books on philosophy and science, Poincaré being a favorite combining both, and which his grandfather Vasil had picked up in Brussels as a student. The best education for promising intellectuals is to have access to a great variety of books during their childhood and teens. The great polymaths of the 19th century all grew up in large libraries, acquiring eruditions unmatched today. In fact formal schooling may get in the way for an enterprising student. Mathematics also came his way. Both of his parents were mathematicians, also his mother Neda had studied mathematics under the

well-known Bulgarian mathematician Petkanchin (1907-87) who had been a student of Blaschke. She would later teach mathematics and become the principal of a gymnasium. People tend to think that if both your parents are mathematicians you will get extra tutoring and get unfair advantages. If this was the case teaching mathematics would be no problem as anyone could be taught. The advantage of having parents in mathematics is that you get to know early in your life that there is something like mathematics and that it is exciting and important. Clearly mathematics was part of Vasil's cultural inheritance. However, I know nothing of his mathematical prowess during his school years. He had a classical education and Latin and Greek may have come his way. He obviously became proficient in English and to a lesser degree in French, I do not know about German, but I suspect he spoke English with his German friends. He had also studied some Polish and picked up a smattering of Turkish during his two years as a conscript in the army. And then above all Russian, a language he loved and whose literary culture he adored, and to which he had been introduced by his mother. In fact he used to claim that he knew Russian better than his Native Bulgarian, at least he read much more in Russian than in Bulgarian. Not surprisingly he would seize the first opportunity to visit Russia for an extended period and after his doctorate he spent a term in Moscow, where he met and made friends with Andrei Tyurin, who shared with him a passionate interest in history, and would introduce him to a circle of dissidents. Traveling around the country side outside Moscow made him predict the downfall of the Soviet Union within ten years and even made a bet of a bottle of cognac with Tyurin, who duly received one in 1988, but paid back a few years later.

During his childhood the family would alternatively live in Pleven and Plovdiv, and when Vasil was ready to enter the Gymnasium around 1961/62 he would live by himself in Sofia until his parents would arrive and then his mother becoming principal of his Gymnasium would necessitate a move to another Gymnasium, in fact moving from the Second English to the First. He would start his university studies in Sofia in 1966 and would soon be spotted by Jaroslav Tagamlitski (1917-83) a student of Koebe and van der Waerden. Tagamlitski was the most prominent mathematician at Sofia at the time and was running a seminar on Functional Analysis. It was Tagamlitski who made him write a master thesis in three days, to make him eligible to become a doctoral student at a sudden opening. Eventually, under his gentle guidance he would complete his Ph.D in 1978, under the title of Hyperelliptic Riemann Surfaces and Doubly Generated Function Algebras. Like most young males his studies were interrupted by two years of enforced idleness in the army. It gave him the opportunity to study mathematics at an indulgent pace, in particular the book by Ahlfors and Sario, and he would always look back upon

it as important for his mathematical development. During his early student years he married his high-school sweet-heart Tsveta Ljubenova Damianova, by then a student of philology and pregnant with their daughter Milena who would be born in 1970. However the marriage did not last long and his wife deserted him while the child was still an infant. This affected him deeply. Eventually he met Julia Kristanova Temelkova born in 1950, a student of mathematics stemming from a family of landowners from the area around Plovdiv. They married in 1978, thus at the time of his thesis defense, and the union resulted, as already noted, in two boys - Valdemar (1980) and Kristan (1989) - to whom he was very close to the end of his life.

We try to turn on the electric heater, but there is a problem with a suitable extension chord. Outside the sky is now very clear and as a consequence it is rather cold. A full Moon bathes the landscape and in the West Jupiter is glowing. It is eleven o'clock and time to go to bed. There are eight proper bedrooms in the house, and maybe thirty beds altogether. I get the pick and take advantage of it to secure a bed on the top floor offering a view that captures me completely. It is a view of receding mountain ridges, as in a well-known painting by Caspar David Friedrich. Furthermore it fills me with a pervading mood of peace and sweet resignation in the face of death so admirably expressed by Goethe's poem 'Über alle Gipfeln..'. And in the background lingers the overture to Gluck's opera 'Orpheus and Eurydice' always in my mind associated with the Thracian mountains. It turns out to be Vasil's favorite room, and he will have to do with a bed downstairs. It takes some resolution to get into the cold bed, but soon it is warmed up by my body, and the room by an electric heater on a rickety table. I descend into the most blissful sleep.

## **The Hike**

When I wake up in the morning the sun is already up, and the view flattened and softened by morning mist, not quite as spectacular as when lit by the Moon. Vasil is already up, maybe annoyed that I have been sleeping so late, as we have a long ambitious hike ahead of us, and really would have needed a head start. But if so, he shows no sign of it. We have a breakfast of boiled eggs and sweet bread and that day we have indeed a long hike across open fields and forests imbued with the smell of resin, but we will in the end have to forego the ascent of the mountain of which Vasil had dreamt, as it turns out to be too much snow, and we end up staying at an isolated hotel where we are offered beds and a simple meal at a very modest rate. During the hike Vasil occasionally loses his way to his great frustration, due to unexpected cuttings of forests, obliterating familiar landmarks. He points to a quartz stone he had found down in a valley as a boy and decided

to roll up to the Dacha. He refers to the entire summer of his second year at the university which he spent here leading a very healthy life, running every day, chopping a lot of wood, and doing a lot of mathematics. His mind goes further back to traveling along on a mule with his grandfather who wrote a travel book of this very region. We make a few stops to rest and eat, and he regales me with stories and comments. He admits to a certain disappointment that he found nothing in his secret file, apparently the authorities had nothing against him. He deplores the hypocrisy of the Western liberals and expresses admiration for the Poles, who due to their lengthy struggles with the authorities, got to know who were their enemies and who were their friends.

Our rooms are heated at full blasts, and we can dry our socks and shoes sogged by the snow turning soft in the afternoon. Outside dogs are barking and one of the staff, an old and muscular man, with short cropped white hair, reports that he had spotted some wolves last week. The whole compound was bought by a German, who had expected to make a nice profit, but realizing not he was now trying to sell it, but where would he find people willing and able to put up that kind of money? Vasil remarks that it is good for them to encounter a normal Westerner like me. A sudden hail storm pellets the rood making a racket and temporarily covering the ground with a white layer of melting ice. Dinner is cooked on a make-shift store next to us on a terrace, by a young tanned woman with strong teeth, a sharp nose, long black hair, and very dark eyes. While we eat Vasil tells me how he in 1980 delivered some popular lectures on science on the radio. It was a great success, and as a result he had been able to take Julia on a tour to Budapest. Recently he had also appeared live on TV and taken advantage of the situation by being rather outspoken. He doubts that he will get another opportunity. Then he embarks on an involved lecture on some ancient King Boris the upshot of which seems to be that he blinded his son for some offense, and is now remembered as a saint.

The next morning after a simple breakfast we start our descent discussing Gibbon. Coming down to a brook Vasil crosses it dry-shod with remarkable agility jumping from stone to stone, while I get quite wet during my effort. Later on he points to a cave up on a cliff which was connected to ethnic cleansing in the early 19th century. People sought refuge there, but the Turks found them out, lightened a fire and managed to suffocate them all. It was never documented, Vasil heard it from an old man. We stop by a bridge and Vasil looks down on the stream, confessing that he loves to watch water, even more so than watching a fire. He now feel recovered but is reluctant to sit down, and recalls an Old Bulgarian folk-tale of a man sitting down on a stone under which a viper dwelt. The viper told the stone to move so he could bite the man, the stone replied that he had already bitten him. He then regales me with stories how he in his youth used to drive a motor cycle, without a

license of course. He does not have a car, but as it turned out a few years later on he would learn to drive a car and get a proper license and then buy a small car.

Suddenly we find ourselves at a large conglomeration of houses, which at some time may have hosted a few thousand people, now maybe only a few hundred remains, the same story all over Bulgaria. In the village we look for a bus but in vain and continue our walk. Vasil remarks that September 11, which had occurred just six months or so earlier, had a terrible beauty to it. The skyscraper and the jumbo jet, the two most spectacular symbols of man's desire to defy gravity, annihilating each other. I have hardly time to digest the observation when a car stops and the driver offers us a ride. I in the front, Vasil in the back, although the other way around would have been more convenient. There are no seat belts, instead a cross is dangling across the wind shield, and the driver goes very fast and the road winds through a gorge, and I start to imagine that this could as well have been Serbia. The driver takes us all the way to the monastery and refuses any money that Vasil offers. Afterwards he warns me, lest I get the wrong picture of the country, a foreigner and a native traveling together may well reap the best of two worlds, and adds that foreigners by themselves may not be welcome, as many of them are just here, like the German who bought the hotel, to take advantage.

Before we visit the monastery, on this special day a month ahead of Orthodox Easter, which this year lags almost a month behind the Western due to the Julian calendar, we go down by a restaurant at the river to have some fresh trout. While we eat we have to seek protection inside from the rain that suddenly descends. When we walk back the rain is really pouring down in veritable streams that rush down along the gutters. The incline up to the monastery is lined with young women in wheel-chairs protected by umbrellas, and the line into the monastery of people seeking refuge is too discouraging. We get drenched to the bone. By flagging down a mixture of a cab and a mini-bus Vasil gets us to a bus station out of which we can return back to Sofia.

## **Back to Sofia**

On the speeding bus traveling on the wide good road to the capital he refers to the problems of Macedonia a hundred years ago. It was the same problems as with the Palestinians today, namely a state within a state. This cannot be tolerated but must be destroyed, just as the Jordanians solved their Palestinian problem in 1970. The Lebanese did not, and as a consequence their state disintegrated. Clearly the hike has invigorated him. Hiking in the mountains obviously means very much to him. One surmises that without them he would never had had the strength to

deal with the inevitable stresses of his life. But his experiences of nature did not only stem from the mountains around Plovdiv but also to the north of the ridges which bisect the country. His paternal grandfather Ivan (incidentally closer to him in build and temperament than his other grandfather) had also taken him on extensive hikes especially along the rivers of Vit, Maritsa and Panega, and showed him many a hidden treasure. Especially one of which his sons would remember with awe, as he would later in life lead them through a cave, using a lit newspaper for guidance, arriving at the springs of the Panega consisting of a small ice cold lake of an uncanny blue color.

Vasil is changing topic and confesses that Holzapfel had convinced him that Poincaré was the real father of relativity theory. I remain skeptical and brings up the lecture and article by Armand Borel [1], who claimed that Einstein understood the physics better. How, Vasil asks, and I find myself at a loss to provide a good argument. The problem is, Vasil explains, that as soon as you cast any doubt on Einstein's priority or understanding, you leave yourself vulnerable to the accusations of anti-semitism. We would later elaborate the discussion in our correspondence, and Vasil would remain unbudged, giving various possible motives for Borel's opinions. 'Holzapfel, by the way, used to refer to me as the Che Guevara of the right', Vasil chuckles. 'But I never killed anyone'. Then uncharacteristically he embarks on a lengthy account of his mathematics.

## **Conclusion**

A few hours later, after a brief stop-over at his family, I am on the train back to Bucharest. As noted this was the last time I was going to see him, but our contact continued unabated for many more years. For various reasons there was a hiatus, and the last time I heard from him was a few days into the New Year of 2017. A few months later, on July 31th I was informed by his sons that he had just died. It was very sad.

## **Apologies, Augmentations and Appreciations**

Vasil Tsanov is dead. As a dead individual he only lives on in the imagination, just as do fictional characters. The longer an individual is dead the more fictional he or she becomes. No one will eventually have any direct memories of the dead, but as far as they infect the imagination of generations of future readers through the written record, they may survive as fictions for a very long time. Most people fade away into total oblivion soon after their deaths, and at most there may remain

some bare facts having little if any individuality. My ambition in writing has not been to present a list of facts mixed with some standard homilies which tend to make up standard obituaries; but to try to make Vasil come to life to the reader, in the same way a fictional figure enters the imagination. This ambition is of course fraught with pretensions, especially if you would refer to specific inspirations, such as Thomas Mann's Dr. Faustus, yet I refuse to be desisted. For that purpose I have thought it fit to center my narrative on my own direct encounters with Vasil. This gives a unity to the presentation, as well as the limited perspective prevents any claims to totality, but instead hopefully fires the imagination of readers to try and envision the larger picture for themselves.

I would never had had this memory for details had I not been able to resort to written sources. When I visited Sofia for the first time I kept a diary in Swedish, (which has not been accessible to me during this writing, but that I do not think is so serious) and later on I wrote down an account in English for my own entertainment, which has supplied invaluable confirmation of my memories as well as extensions thereof. As you get older your episodic memory for more recent events get enfeebled, probably because you have experienced so much so it is hard to encounter truly new things which by that very aspect imprint themselves deeply. But in recent decades I have been in the habit of taking notes on my trips and rewriting them into narratives. In particular I documented my trip to Bucharest in late August early September 2001 and my month spent there in the month of April the following spring at the gracious invitation by Lucian Badescu. In those I have excised the parts which deal with my two visits to Vasil. Although I admit to a certain pleasure in rereading them and thereby recalling old memories, which as you get older become a more and more important aspect of your life as your future dwindles; I cannot assume that the general reader would be as indulgent as I am. Thus I have distilled those to a denser brew I hope will not tax the readers patience, but to the extent I have not been strict enough, I owe the general reader an apology, as well as to the subject of this mini-memoir, for allowing it to be too voluble.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of Vasil's two sons Valdemar and Kristan, who notified me promptly about the death of their father, the sad fact of which I was not entirely taken with surprise. Their concern touched me deeply, as did their indication that the regard I felt for Vasil had not been unreciprocated. Furthermore, they have been very helpful in supplying me with additional factual matters and stories I had had no inkling of, and which I in slightly edited form present to the readers when they are hopefully ready for it, because, as Vasil may have remarked, you cannot take anything in which your own curiosity has not prepared you for. I also want to thank our common friend Ivan Penkov who has been instrumental in not only encouraging me but also arranging for me to have

my memories of Vasil published in this volume. He has read and commented upon my primary material, to which I have already alluded, and I hope that this final write-up will not make him, nor Vasil's two sons, too disappointed. Sad as it is to contemplate the death of Vasil with the concomitant regrets of not having seen more of him (as I write this a memory comes to mind how I was invited to Bulgaria once to participate in a conference he was arranging but turning it down because I had nothing to say. 'So what' was his reply), the opportunity to revive and formulate my memories of him has been a source of joy.

### **Acknowledgments**

Personal memory is as we know a most unreliable source for historical truth, and the eminent British philosopher of history - R.G. Collingwood (1889-1943) - explicitly warns against using it in writing your memoirs. On the other hand the use of memory is inevitable and often the only channel available to you. However, as I point out in my text, I am lucky that during my travels I have had the habit of keeping running diaries in little black notebooks, consisting of cryptic jottings, which I have upon completing the trips expanded into regular accounts. Without those documents I would not have been able to present such a full and vivid account of my encounters with Vasil. And of course even when consulting your own written documents you are to some extent dependent on your personal memory in order to properly interpret them (which incidentally highlights the added difficulties encountered by a historian interpreting old documents with no such privileged access). Now in this case factual truth of the various episodes recalled is not the main issue, although in view of the above I certainly can vouchsafe for their correctness; but the evocation of the personality of Vasil set in its proper context.

Although I have vivid recollections of Vasil I have over the years not acquired a coherent picture of his basic CV, let alone that of his background, especially that of his two grandfathers who played such a decisive role in his life. In this regard the assistance of his two sons Valdemar and Kristian to fill in the picture has been invaluable, and I thank them heartily. But my gratitude for the spirit in which this assistance has been given goes even deeper. As I have already remarked above, I was very touched by the concern they showed for me by giving me prompt notification of Vasil's death (which in view of the fact that we had had no previous direct contact was not trivial) and I have been heartened by the enthusiasm with which they have read preliminary versions, and above all the trust they have displayed in me by allowing me to be their father's official chronicler a task which has meant much to me. They have also furnished me with old pictures, of which I have chosen a few to illustrate the text. I regret that due to a move, my own pictures of him are in



storage and hence inaccessible to me while preparing this manuscript. I also want to thank Ivan Penkov, a long time friend and colleague of Vasil, whose relations to him go back to the 70's, i.e. predating my own and those of his sons (one should not in this context forget that Vasil also had a daughter stemming from a first marriage in his youth, but whom he seldom mentioned in my presence, and who thus plays the role of hearsay). With Ivan I have had extended phone-conversations and e-mail exchanges on the topic of Vasil, and he has likewise greatly encouraged me in my ambition, and, as I understand it, it is due to his initiatives and contacts that the present memorial address comes into existence.

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## Ivan Penkov: A Few Words in Memory of Vasil Tsanov

I met Vasil sometime in the late 70's. At that time, I was an undergraduate student in Moscow. My mentor in Moscow was Yuri Manin who was then involved in a breakthrough in the theory of instantons (the famous work of Atiyah, Hitchin, Drinfeld and Manin from 1978) and, more generally, in understanding the role of twistor geometry in Mathematics and Physics. These topics were the point of our first discussions with Vasil, and these discussions grew into a true friendship which lasted until his death. What drew me to Vasil right away, was his confident and *global* understanding of Mathematics, a very rare feature outside the world capitals for Mathematics (Paris, Boston, Moscow, etc.). What makes him even more special, is that he was educated in Bulgaria, and therefore had only had limited contact with first-rate mathematicians.

In addition to his rather unique mathematical talent and understanding of Mathematics as a whole, Vasil had remarkable personal strength and little desire to adapt to the behavioral models of "successful" people in Bulgaria. Both of these qualities, his mathematical depth and strength of character, made him one of the most significant independent and global thinkers in the mathematical community of Sofia in the last 30 years.

Outside of mathematics, Vasil's main interest was in the history and politics of the Balkans. He did not want to be active as politician but made a very concrete

contribution to the Bulgarian democratic process: Vasil was a leader in organizing free elections in Bulgaria in 1990.

Finally, I would like to say that Vasil's impact as a teacher of mathematical talent in Bulgaria is unsurpassed. Strangely at first glance, but fully understandable for those who knew him well, Vasil never supervised a PhD degree. What he did constantly over the years, was to teach bright 3rd- or 4th-year students the fields of Geometry and Analysis at a level which allowed them to understand certain current topics of international interest. The best of these students then wrote a Master's Thesis under Vasil's supervision, and were later able to go to leading institutions abroad to continue their studies. Here is list of Master's Thesis supervised by Vasil:

1. Ventseslav Petkov - 1986 - *Multidimensional Twistor Spaces*
2. Tony Pantev - 1988 - *Quasiaffine Manin Triples*
3. Boyan Alexandrov - 1988 - *Twistor Spaces and Harmonic Maps*
4. Svetoslav Nenov - 1991 - *An Analog of the Theorem of G. Schwarz on Impulsive Dynamical Systems*
5. Dimitar Grantcharov - 1994 - *Energy Spectrum of the Geodesic Flow on a Complex Projective Space*
6. Vilislav Buchakchiev - 1995 - *Applications of Double Flag Fibrations*
7. Lyudmila Kamenova - 2001 - *Twistor Spaces of Ruled Surfaces*
8. George Dimitrov - 2005 - *A Class of 8-dimensional Complex Homogeneous Spaces*
9. Marinos Dimitriu - 2005 - *Minimal Harmonic Functions*
10. Penka Georgieva - 2005 - *Quotients of the Ball of the Second Kind*
11. Elitza Gurova (Hristova) - 2007 - *Geometric Quantization of  $\mathbb{H}\mathbb{P}^n$*
12. Nicolay Chervenkov - 2009 - *Riemann Surfaces with Maximal Automorphism Group*
13. Ivan Penev - 2010 - *On a Class of Lie Groups Admitting Invariant Hypercomplex Structures*
14. Mihail Hamamgiev - 2011 - *The Octonions  $\mathbb{O}$  and the Projective Plane  $\mathbb{O}\mathbb{P}^2$  as a Factor Space  $F_4/\text{Spin}(9)$*
15. Stefan Zhechev - 2012 - *Momentum Polyhedra for Torus Actions on Flag Manifolds*
16. Valentin Milanov - 2014 - *Complex Surfaces with Zero Irregularity*

This list demonstrates the absolutely unique role Vasil played in supporting the mathematical talent of Bulgaria to do research at the highest international level.

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