

## THE (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL STORIES OF THE BULGARIANS FROM WESTERN THRACE AND OF THEIR DESCENDANTS – THINKING OF THE HISTORY AND THE IDENTITY

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The topic is focused on the age and the generation of the informers and their connections with the historical events. The reflection of the changes in their lives and identity could be observed in them realizing that they have experienced dramatic historical events during the same period of time in their lives. The victimization/ heroization / mythologization of their ancestors, the pride to be a part of the grand historical events, the connection with the diaspora, the metropolia, the homeland and the issues which are connected with it – its understanding, experiencing and perception, are aspects that also have to be analyzed. These common moments create a part of the group consciousness of the respondents – their shared remembrance and values, but also show that people from various generations with a similar historical background develop common remembrance, values and beliefs even though they remember different historical processes.

**Keywords:** immigrants, Aegean (Western, Greek) Thrace, identity, relocation, memory.

The biographical direction in the social studies presents good opportunities for analyzing the relation personality-socium-history. In some particular researches the archive and terrain materials have been additionally combined – this is a method with priority for the historical ethnology; the researchers view it as an advantage<sup>1</sup> and as anecessity<sup>2</sup> with primal meaning<sup>3</sup>.

The need for this method emerged during my work on the topic ‘The migration of the Aegean Bulgarians in their family stories’ and in connection to my participation in the project ‘Cultures, remembrance, heritage in the region of the Southern Bulgarian border’ (2012–2015, financed by FSR, contract K01/0003). The (auto) biographical stories of the immigrants (my ancestors) from Aegean Thrace became the basis of my sources and here I have chosen them as a field of research. The majority of the memories are located in part of the archive documents from Funds

<sup>1</sup> Ст. Генчев, *Теренното етнографско изследване*. София, 1989, р. 103, 120, 179–180.

<sup>2</sup> Св. Ракшиева, “Какво ни предлага теренът днес и как да оптимизиране изследването на „народната“ култура”. В: Попов, Р., Й. Манкова (Съст.) *Стожери на народната традиция*. Враца, 2008, р. 28–30.

<sup>3</sup> М. Беновска-Събкова, “Размисли върху методите за проучване на традиционната култура в съвременността”. В: *Етнокултуролошки зборник*, кн. IX, 2004, Сврлиг, р. 29–34.

‘Individual memories’ and ‘Individual funds’ of the Municipal National Archive – Kardjali. They have been recorded between the 60s and the 90s by different colleagues-historians and more rarely – by people who were specially employed for doing the task<sup>4</sup>. During my work between 2012–2015 I have used around 70 archive units. Additionally, mainly in 2013, I conducted around 20 polystructural biographical interviews among the descendants of the immigrants. I have further collected information by observation, collection and analysis of photographical material – this was a dynamic process of accumulation, which generated different ideas.

In the exposition I will try to present my informers and will partially construct their profile through the relation age-generation and the connections between the story-teller and the historical events – the second relation is among the central problems in the biographical researches. Some authors implement in it the notions of generation and age, which they further relate to the modern temporalization of the social contacts and view them as structural categories such as class, gender and race (R. Kozlek). Here, I accept the view of A. Luleva that *‘the thing that makes an age group a generation is the belief of its members that they have experienced certain historical events in the same period of their lives. This differentiates them from the generations before and the generations after them’* and that the generations make their own groups with *‘shared memory’*<sup>5</sup>.

I also base the exposition on reflection and self-reflection. Even though I am a researcher (an outsider) for today’s members of the Thracian community in the city of Kardjali, I am also an insider – because of my origin which is identical to theirs and also because I have witnessed some of the processes in the group<sup>6</sup>. These facts, my empathy and my interest in this topic revitalized my informers, tore down their barriers and awakened their memories and their trust. They perceived me as ‘one of us’, ‘our girl’ who will tell their true stories and by that will ‘do something for us’.

I carefully witnessed their emotions, their (self) reflections, evaluations, the changes in their mood and behavior<sup>7</sup>. The way my informers treated me made my contact with them easier; it also facilitated the collection of information straight

<sup>4</sup> Until the beginning of the 80s the collection is under the initiative of the director from that time who was actively searching for materials on different topics. Later, in regards to the movement ‘The national remembrance tells a story’, the institution starts employing people for the task – this is how a part of the memories of the immigrants and of my ancestors have been collected.

<sup>5</sup> А. Лулева, „Но бяхме млади та не го чувствахме това толкоз“. Тематизиране на младостта в автобиографичните разкази. – В: Костов, А., Парушева, Д., Р. Прешленова (Съст.) *И настъпи време за промяна. Образование и възпитание в България XIX-XX в*, Sofia, 2008, p. 186–203.

<sup>6</sup> When talking about the choice of type, areal and the manner of conduction TEI, St. Genchev says that: ‘it is even better if the first choice’ of the researcher ‘falls onto a settlement which he knows and where he is known. As a consequence he receives not only an ease when constructing the questionnaires but also contacts with story-tellers that are known beforehand whose help and partnership is expected’ (Ст. Генчев, *Теренното етнографско изследване*. Sofia, 1989, p. 103).

<sup>7</sup> This is why I will acknowledge the need for self-reflection which can identify the context of the communicative situation and the role of the scientist for creating the empiric material.

from their live memory and the reality which I saw and knew. All of this made me come to the conclusion that the topic of the research is present in the lives and thoughts of several generations.

### THE INFORMERS

Choosing the informers as ‘people with knowledge of the culture’ of the group (according to the definition of St. Genchev<sup>8</sup>) is a principle that the historians use when collecting memories – I used it while conducting the terrain interviews.

My respondents belong to different generations. A part of the archive stories have been recorded from people who have personally lived these events (1913, the 20s and the 40s) and another part are memories from the childhood of their descendants. The present informers are mainly the grandchildren and/or the children of the immigrants<sup>9</sup> who came to Bulgaria at the end of the 20s, but can be first generation immigrants from Greece from 1944–1945 as well. For the contemporaries the events until the end of the 20s are a part of the lives of their ancestors but the processes from the 40s onwards are part of their own memory.

During my research I came across some **key informers**<sup>10</sup> – well-known people in the community with knowledge of the events that they lived through or heard of when they were children. I worked with some of them for a longer period of time and analyzed their information from different points of view. Sometimes their data was not corresponding to the official historical data and in other instances it added important and unique details to it.

Main informers, for example, are two men with recollections that had been archived a long time ago – the stories are regarding the time when they were 18 and 13 years old respectively when they experienced the events of the late summer of 1913. The first respondent is from the village Sachanli. By using earlier events, he explains the violent behavior of the Turkish towards the Bulgarians. *‘In 1912 I was a shepherd in the village of Kardjali and saw how the Bulgarians from*

<sup>8</sup> The scientist needs to choose his informers while bearing in mind special criteria. They have to be ‘people with knowledge of the culture’ ‘in the limits of every group’ – this is a basic quality criteria in every choice of informers (Ст. Генчев, *Теренното етнографско изследване*, p. 124).

<sup>9</sup> St. Genchev marks that ‘the ethnographer will have to choose informers from all of the groups and to make sure that in every one of them there are informers of different ages. Fulfilling this requirement will allow him to realize the diachronical aspect of TEI’. The informers have to be in groups with age difference 8–10 years and every group has to have at least 3 people (Ст. Генчев, *Теренното етнографско изследване*, p. 123, 125). In order to complete the picture of the research I tried talking to younger people as well but in the majority of the cases they showed uncertainty and asked for the knowledge of their parents.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Among the informers are the individuals who the ethnographer chooses as main informers, as a kind of experts who he uses for evaluating the information received from others’ (Ст. Генчев, *Теренното етнографско изследване*, p. 59).

*Kaladjidere, Yasuk and Evrenkyoi did unspeakable things – they attacked the Turkish families, took the valuables from their homes, they violated their naked women and killed 16 people in one evening, most of who were young ones. In 1913 when the Bulgarian authorities left the Aegean, the bashibozuks came and with them the Turkish population rose and they did a terrible revenge towards the locals [...] Later, when the Greeks came, the Bulgarians who ran off to Bulgaria formed alliances and attacked the Greek barracks, killed the policemen, infuriated the Greek authorities towards the Bulgarians and they became the reason why a lot of Bulgarians were exiled at the islands and why the Bulgarian population was forced to run away in Bulgaria, naked and barefoot ...’* (ОДА-Кърджали, ф. ЛС, а.е. № 552, p. 3).

The second informer, from the village Golyam Dervent, Sofliya, describes how a lot of abandoned children were saved from the forests near the village Chernichino. *‘It became dark outside and my mother and I hid in a bush. In the morning there were Turkish everywhere [...] In the mountains there were a lot of young children, abandoned by their mothers, and lots of wounded people [...] My mother got up and went around the forest – she found berries for food. We found a couple of children crying in the forest. [...] There were twelve children. They started crying – some of hunger, some for their mothers. Some of them were really young – they could not say anything. My mother found a carpet that belonged to a person who had been killed and took it so that she could cover us with it’.* The Turkish commander saved the woman and the children and allocated them in an abandoned house in today’s village Malko Popsko – he also sent there other children he found. After the Bulgarian troops took the village, the Bulgarians *‘took all of the children, put them in baskets, which they put on top of the horses and brought them to Harmanli’* (ОДА-Кърджали, ф. ЛС, а. е. № 216, p. 4–7).

The terrain interviews also brought out main respondents. One of them is a man born in 1930 in the city of Xanthi. A friend of his called him ‘walking history’. He presented really valuable information about his birthplace during the 30s and the mid-40s, the relationships between Greeks, Bulgarians, Turkish, about the problem of identity (national and religious), the years under Bulgarian rule, the perception of the newly come Bulgarians, the events surrounding 9<sup>th</sup> September 1944, the arrival in Bulgaria and their life here as immigrants. For years he has been collecting photos and documents, he has been making descriptions of his family, drawing family trees and is constantly updating the map of his birthplace. He manifests a nostalgia towards Xanthi and a desire to often return to Greece. He is very emotional when talking about his birthplace including speaking of the time when he visited it for the first time since he left – in 1989.

A contemporary example is a woman born in Kardjali in 1935. In 1978 during a trip to Greece for about a week she was looking for her aunt who her family had been searching for about 50 years. The restored relationships with her family have been well maintained up until today. The informer is very interested in

the topic of the Thracians and she openly speaks about her connection to Captain Petko voyvoda. She has sorted out the relatives that she found in Bulgaria, Greece, USA and Australia (*'I have arranged 300 years of my lineage. I have nine generations'*) in two huge family trees which are about 4 metres long. The informers copies and further completes them with small maps and after that she sends them to her eldest relatives so that they could give them to their children and grandchildren. When I met her she maintained a constant connection to her relatives and had already organized two family reunions consisting of 50–70 people.

All of the respondents are equally connected to **the factor of age**. The people whose memories have been archived and which tell about their own experiences<sup>11</sup> were children or young adults during these events. The middle age of every one of these generations is between 12–13 (lower limit) and 20–28 years (upper limit).

The same correlation can be observed in the contemporary respondents – they have heard and memorized the stories of their parents and relatives until they reached the age of 20–25. The period from 1941 to 1944 is linked to their youth when the final big migration of the immigrants from their birthplaces in Aegean Thrace to Bulgaria occurred.

The age is constant factor with all of the informers even though they are from different generations<sup>12</sup>. The informers always connect their age to the historical context of their stories because their youth coincided with events that left a big mark on their lives and consciousness, which people have been thinking about and rationalizing through their own belief system for years. Here the position that A. Luleva takes is confirmed – in the autobiographical stories the accent is on the formative years, including when they coincide with turbulent times. In this instance they are *'told about within context and they are spoken about a lot'*. *'The case when the period of youth within the personal life coincides with a period of big political and social changes is of a great interest. According to sociologists and social psychologists, the power of the historical events to form in this instance is greater as they are perceived as particularly important during the latter life since they are associated with the formation of the personal identity and the perception of the social reality outside of oneself'*. A. Luleva marks that the story-tellers of biographies always have the consciousness that they have witnessed an age which has drastically changed the life course of most of them<sup>13</sup>. This relativity is heavily present in the materials that are explored here. In the archived memories this is the

<sup>11</sup> Actually these memories consist the main part of the archival materials regarding the migration of the Aegean Bulgarians until the end of the 20s.

<sup>12</sup> This way the reasoning of St. Genchev of the link between the good preservation of knowledge in the memory of a person during his formative years is confirmed: 'a fact that has been well documented in the research practice is that a person keeps a vivid memory of the events that he witnessed after the age of 10. If he has a good memory he can reproduce them fairly well' (Ст. Генчев, Теренното етнографско изследване. Sofia, 1989, p. 123–125).

<sup>13</sup> А. Лулева, „Но бяхме млади та не го чувствахме това толкоз“. Тематизиране на младостта в автобиографичните разкази. – В: Костов, А., Парушева, Д., Р. Прешленова (Съст.) *И настъпи време за промяна. Образование и възпитание в България XIX–XX в.* Sofia, 2008, p. 183–203.

time of the life in the motherland, of the arrival at the places of imprisonment or establishment. In the terrain interviews these are the times of the capitalism, the socialism and the contemporary times. Common parts of all of the narratives are the retrospections, the rethinking in adult age of the years of youth, the comparison of the life of today, including to the lives of the young people.

The information also contains the gender perspective through the variations of the stories of the males and females<sup>14</sup>. The males emphasize the external and the bigger manifestations of a certain fact while the females tend to pay more attention to the details, the internal structure of the event and they often are based on the social structures and relations. The two genders perceive one event in a different way – the women have been victims who also had to take care of their families while the men also had to participate in the military actions as soldiers.

All of the materials also demonstrate the **connection historical events – personal/ family history of the informer**. The historical context of the processes that have occurred during their lives is of a particular interest. The fact that you are ‘chosen’ to tell your story – in written form or in an interview – is accepted as a compliment and is evaluated highly. During the course of the story the big interest in the topic, the tragic faith of the group and the obligation to convey the memories to ‘the generations to come’ is acknowledged. The respondents always say that they have ‘*lived through much*’, that ‘*we, the Thracians (the ones from Chadarli, Sachanli and others toponymal self-titles) have suffered a lot*’ but also that ‘*we remember a lot of things*’, that they have listened to their story more than once and they know it well. They always point out their duty to hand over their memories of the events to their children and to the ‘*next generations*’. The contemporary respondents mix their big interest in the topic with their knowledge of the past of the city of Kardjali. They tried to tell me about it with the words of their ancestors but their interpretation was undeniable – they tried to explain to me in a logical way things that they emphasized on their own or that they thought were important and were not clarified.

The mutual connection between the historical events and the personal / family history forms clear and differentiated (gender-, age-, social-, ethnical and religious wise) pictures of the exact local communities. The informers methodically list their relatives and their neighbours, describe their birthplaces in a geographical and a topographical sense, and give a lot of information about the dynamic within the community (movement of individuals, exchange, weddings, etc.) and the settlement structures. They also inform on the social mechanisms that create certain problems and/or facilitate the functions of a certain group within the diaspora, the metropolia

<sup>14</sup> For another point of view of the gender perspective in the autobiographical stories – А. Лулева, „Но бяхме млади та не го чувствахме това толкоз“. Тематизиране на младостта в автобиографичните разкази. – В: Костов, А., Парушева, Д., Р. Прешленова (Съст.) *И настъпи време за промяна. Образование и възпитание в България ХІХ-ХХ в.* Sofia, 2008, p. 183–203.

or in times of its relocation<sup>15</sup>. The influence of the politics (both state and religious), the local economic development, the types of livelihood, the dynamics of life of the population is also widely spoken about. The respondents are very interested in the reflection of these factors on their individual and family history and perceive them as the mechanisms that influence different stages of people's lives.

The historical context in the materials is always clear – a certain event or a process is linked to/related to an important moment of the individual/ family history of the informer – it could be the birth, an exact year/event of his life or of the life of his family, etc.

### THE CONTENT

There are a few common topics in the archive memories and the terrain interviews which have a defining meaning for the identity of the respondents, including their biographical one.

The **family origin** has a big meaning. The informers explain their own individual success through the functions of the patriarchal traditions that have been kept, the system of family cooperation and solidarity (at least until the second – third quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century), as well as through the individual qualities of their ancestors.

All of the (auto) biographical stories of the respondents are filled with great emotions and pride of their background. They perceive their ancestors as important and significant people, describe them as good, just, honorable, hard-working, loving and sensitive. Without a doubt they point out their eventual encounters with important people and participations in important and dramatic events. The informers emphasize the extraordinary personas with direct speech in a lively and expressive manner. In their memories they are often idealized, their history is presented as a story from times passed and the life in their birthplaces – as happy, carefree and heavenly. This trend remains throughout all of the descriptions of the settlement and the explanations of the possibilities that were offered by the land. The relationships with the local Greeks and Turkish (linked to the so-called 'low culture') are described as conflict-free.

The memories regarding **the historical events** are a main part of the stories. They are a turning point for the ones that have experienced it, a dramatic instance that turned the lives of whole generations upside down. The historical context, the topics regarding the ethnical relations in the diaspora and the metropolia, the separated families, the dream of coming back, the individual and the collective memory are almost always present in the biographical identities of the informers.

<sup>15</sup> Compare to the reverse processes which the scientists encounter during the study of 'the traditional popular culture' in A. Касабова, "Теми и методи в етнологията. (Само)критичен поглед". *Българска етнология*, кн. 1, 2013, p. 16–17.

The relocations of people are told about in chapters. The archived materials put an accent on the escape of 1913 – it is extremely detailed, sometimes in days and hours, with a lot of data surrounding the victimization and the preserved traumatic memory. There have also been added stories about the Balkan war, the arrival of the Bulgarians, the return of Aegean Thrace to Turkey and the return of the immigrants in the area during the autumn of 1913.

A large portion of the archived memories regarding the 20s contain information about handing the area over to Greece, the repressions and the confinement that were experienced; leaving for Bulgaria, settling in Kardjali and the life there the relationships in the city during a vast period and the impossibility for the immigrants to return.

Some topics are not heavily discussed in the archived materials. The information about the period 1913–1919, when the area was a part of the Bulgarian Kingdom, is more isolated. The same occurs with the male memories of the participation in the Bulgarian army during World War I. There is also not much comment, often at the end of the story, about the topic of settling and the life in the national motherland – probably because it is not a priority for the informers whose interests and dreams are linked to their birthplaces in Aegean Thrace.

In the archived materials there is almost a complete lack of data regarding the processes between 1941–1944, for reasons that are unknown. The information is scarce and is present only at the end of some of the stories about 1913 (the 20s) – there are often just a few sentences and is of the sort: ‘we went to Thrace in ..., we lived in ... and we came back to Bulgaria/Kardjali in ...’<sup>16</sup>. The memories of people who came to Bulgaria during the 40s as infants and who are part of the first generation born here have not been archived.

Some terrain interviews tell about the events in Aegean Thrace following 9<sup>th</sup> September 1944. The respondents comprehend the processes as the main reason that made the Bulgarians leave the area again.

The (auto) biographical stories also tell about the ethnic relationships in the settlements of the diaspora and the metropolia, the gender relationships and the separated families. The contemporaries have a great interest in the birthplace of their ancestors which they know of from stories and personal visits. They are eager to describe these trips and they connect them to the nostalgia and the unaccomplished dream of their parents to return but also to their self-identity.

The theme of **identity** is also constantly present –in the information about ethnical, regional and religious self-awareness; in the strong and time-persistent attachment to the birthplace, accentuating being Bulgarian and in the collective solidarity. Different records show how the processes of national consolidation in the diaspora which were carried out by the respective countries were the genesis which later developed the national self-awareness of the informers and/or of their ancestors.

<sup>16</sup> Sometimes these records end with gratitude to the communist power which ‘fed us and gave us shelter’.

A common topic is the one of **the individual and the collective memory**. The necessity for the descendants to remember ‘the heroism’ and ‘the suffering’ of the ancestors is acknowledged. Expressions that are typical are ‘I wrote this so that it could remain for my descendants’, ‘so that they would not forget’, and ‘so that they would know’. Different testimonies regarding the past times are often searched for, ancestral, familial and individual stories are created, as well as family trees, maps, etc.

The finale of the archived stories is very **emotional** and corresponds to the nostalgia for the birthplaces, the faith of the immigrants, the separated families and the identities of the story-tellers. The emotional references are bilateral. The employees at the archives have collected the memories by accenting on the correct thing in a precise way, often presenting the event in a very cut and dry manner, while the individual experiences remained in the background. The employees probably omitted those so that they could go along the official methodological course –structuring the historical processes and guaranteeing the objectivity of the written historical source at hand. At the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century they completely changed the way of recording – they strive to convey the information in a literal sense but sometimes again overlook the emotional information.

Until the 80s only a few recorders of memories conveyed the emotions. Usually these are people for who these moments are also part of their individual memory and that way they are preserved in the materials. Such example is Mara Mihailova. The emotion of the story-teller is also present in the archive units that were recorded by the informers themselves, their children and grandchildren. Here the emotions are very strong, the sentences are sometimes broken apart, the text is smudged (probably because of tears), the expression is emotional and reliving the memory is apparent. The feelings of these respondents are most likely an inseparable part of their memory of the events that were experienced.

Knowing the way recording memories worked, I consciously looked for the emotional references in the terrain interviews because they represent the ways of accepting and/or denying in the relationships. I have to say that the emotions of the respondents surged quickly and almost without prompt, especially when the story-teller was a woman. The men were very fixed on conveying the events accurately and in a detailed way but in the majority of the cases this meant being more laconic. In some of the cases they needed time so that they could warm up, let their emotions go and show their true attitude towards the topic.

The (auto)biographical stories in the archived memories and the terrain interviews which are the source of the topic ‘The migration of the Aegean Bulgarians in their family stories’ are most often constructed on the relation age-generation of the informers and the connection between them and the historic events. The informers for different periods belong to different generations but all of them realize that they have lived through certain historical events with a crucial

meaning during the same period of their lives. They present their ancestors in a heroic and mythological way, demonstrate the pride of their suffering and experiencing big historical events, explain in a detailed manner how the changes reflected on their lives and identities. The respondents are connected to the diaspora as well as to the metropolia – this connection for them is inseparable from the motherland and to the issue of its understanding, living and perception. These common moments in the memories and the beliefs show that people who belong to different generations but who have lived through similar in meaning historical events, which have predetermined their similar fates, develop common recollections, system for evaluation and beliefs, independently from that they remember different historical processes.

These common moments create a part of their consciousness of community – the respondents think of themselves as ‘we’ in a sense of a group with shared memory and system for evaluation. This way they (self) define and (self) distinct from the previous and the next generations and create part of their ‘memory of the group’. It is a premise for the ‘look from underneath’ of the participants in the events and the processes, it synthesizes the role and the attitude of the subject towards what was lived and told. Working with such types of stories, the explorer directly oversees the interactions between the individuals and receives access to facts that are socially important to them.