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Autumn In Bulgaria: September. 15, 1998 - February 15, 1999

Kenneth Rosen

Having taught forty years at a minor state university constantly reinventing itself from affable mediocrity and teachers' college-hood in a rural state with a similarly mediocre though less and less benign tradition of crony-hood and ragged administrative improvisation, I found the arrangements made by CIES in Washington, D.C., for my overseas orientation, and that of the Fulbright Commission in Bulgaria for on-site orientation and general support, irreproachable. I would describe myself as cheerful and strenuously easy to please. More eager to make the acquaintance of people and of my thoughts than of places, in Washington I left the Loew's Lafayette Plaza Hotel that Fulbright had so presciently commandeered only once: the hotel had restaurants with large portions, a friendly and intrepid staff, an adequate exercise room and a rooftop swimming pool where informal tribes of children splashed and played under the languid, oblique observation of lovely mothers needlessly adding the sun's cosmetic solace to their lithe beauty, protected from intrusively extended gazes by oversized husbands whose thickness of neck was accented by thin golden chains, their menacing mobile-phones, in those days still a novelty, nearby and ready to ring or be rung. I had visited Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, several times about a year ago. I could have blinked my eyes and persuaded myself that CIES orientation had already transported me, by magical carpet, from America's capitol to Bulgaria itself, where Europe and Turkish Asia enjoy mutual interpenetrating territorial salients.

I have taught or visited classes at several universities in Macedonia, Bulgaria, Turkey and Egypt, all countries whose social culture reflects in one way or another the distinctive vitality of the Ottoman Empire. If centuries of change have taught us anything, it is that culture is most vital in its hybrid self-proliferation, that it is futile to seek or strive to preserve cultural purity, though such yearnings are perfectly natural and no doubt contribute a tragic resonance to the inevitability of cultural evolution. My closet Turkish friends include a Crimean Tatar, English and German expatriates, and several Turkish professors of American culture. In Macedonia and Turkey I addressed classes that reminded me of America: the students were intelligent, bored, competent, attentive, numerous, polite, equally eager to be informed, entertained, and to escape at the end of the lecture. In Bulgaria this was true when I taught at the American University in Blagoevgrad, a hundred kilometers south of Sofia, in 1997, during the winter and spring Bulgarians refer to as "the Crisis," when obscurely financed demonstrators froze Bulgarian commerce, namely travel and food delivery by nation-wide roadblocks, and brought about the collapse of the recently re-elected Bulgarian government. Evidently I encountered elements of the aftermath of "the Crisis," when I returned to Bulgaria to teach at Sofia University in 1999 as a Fulbright professor. Students, I was soon informed, would not attend classes during the first week or two of the semester to commemorate the successful student strike of 1997 and their role in governmental change. When they did begin to dribble into my classes after the first week or so, I discovered that not only would I have less than a dozen students spread over two classes, but that many of them

had full-time jobs as translators or teachers of English or else had other classes scheduled to meet at the same time mine did. In any case, since they were principally concerned with their preparation for standardized tests they would take at the end of their program, a test based on a syllabus of many American authors of whom I had never heard, although they evidently had enjoyed the favor of Soviet bloc educators. Thus at best my classes were ornamental, and at worse irrelevant. My best students were frustrated that I had so little interest in teaching American literary rebels, such as Beat Generation poets or Charles Bukowski, figures who flaunted personal outrageousness in ways they could emulate and thereby empower themselves with a validated American style that might cushion them from the hopelessness they found themselves facing. The situation at the University of Plovdiv, which I visited to lecture on the poetry of Wallace Stevens, seemed more orderly and productive than at Sofia University, which is apparently more financially challenged and burdened than other Bulgarian universities. This is due in part to its maintenance of two faculties: a non-teaching faculty that had been dismissed at the time of "the Change" in the early 1990's, namely the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet bloc, but which an elected Socialist government obliged the University to rehire, and the teaching faculty which had been hired to replace the faculty that had been previously fired.

The physical circumstances at Sofia University were worse than I had ever seen. In the English and American Studies department, one secretary served a teaching faculty of at least sixty. Finding toilets on the classroom floors were the more daunting adventure, a journey into the Heart of an implacable Darkness. Here one must forget about toilet seats, pray a discarded newspaper and the flush. Indeed there were locked toilets for which one could request a key in the library funded by the British Council, where books by American authors donated by visiting Fulbright professors were discreetly removed to the American Studies faculty office, where I eventually met my classes, when snow on the ground and a bitter wind from Vitoshe made teaching in my original classroom in "the block" unfeasible.

The University also had a faculty and staff dining room called ‘The Egg’ due to its shape and status at the basement of a rotunda. In the middle of my four-hour classes (two for lecture, two for discussion), I would go to ‘The Egg’ for my lunch. I enjoy cafeteria food, especially when served by women with large arms, flushed defiant faces and flying strands of hair. But at ‘The Egg’ Bulgarian tolerance for cooked food served cold reaches new levels of complacent intensity. “Go late!” advised my colleagues. “When they run out of the day's food, they bring out the sausage!”

I was grateful for the freedom I enjoyed in tailoring courses which suited my interests, and I’m not sure I would have sacrificed that freedom for a larger place in my students’ anxieties and sense of commitment. Still I suffered twinges of the metaphysical inessentiality that invariably afflicts poets, whether or not they are visiting lecturers. I taught the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* for my Contemporary American Poetry class, and the new Penguin collection, *Contemporary American Short* Stories, for my short story class. With the bulk of my book allowance, I bought individual titles, single-author collections of stories and poems, which I gave to the English and American Studies Program Library, though as indicated, these were destined for our faculty office, not the library shelves.

Besides my anthologies, I xeroxed for my classes some English translations: a story by the Jewish Czech-German-Czech, Franz Kafka, some by the Ukrainian Jew, Isaac Babel, and some by contemporary Bulgarians, namely, Ivailo Dichev (who I later discovered was a

colleague of mine at Sofia University), Victor Paskov, Ivan Kulekov, and Stanislav Stratiev. I also brought with me a video of the film comedy *Montenegro* by the Serbian filmmaker Dusan Makaveyev. What I wanted to convey was how the qualities of life that attracted me to Bulgaria could be the foundation for creative and literary perspectives that enjoyed triumph on an international stage. My success in this endeavor was limited. My poetry students, as indicated, would have preferred contemporary popular poetry by Allen Ginsberg and Charles Bukowski; i.e., the rude, gothic, bizarre and exultantly adolescent style they identified with contemporary American culture. If not that, at least something fractal and electronic, such as post-structuralist L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E=P=O=E=T=R=Y, but I persisted in articulating my preferred social and cultural paradigms and critiques, persisted in leading them around the American masters of the century and the contemporary period. My short fiction students appeared more uniformly responsive, but they were younger, 4th year students rather than 5th (Sofia University awards a five-year M.A. in English and American Studies), and perhaps still more eager to please their professor.

As I've suggested, I struggled with the character of my limited relevance to an examination-based program with a fixed curriculum. I was determined to be helpful and interesting, and to ration purposefully my responses to their avid appetite for American kitsch – and my best students tempered my delighted consumption of Bulgarian kitsch. Fortunately, I had also brought along the Robert Altman movie, *Short Cuts*, based on the short stories of Raymond Carver, and one wintry afternoon my short story students and I made a pilgrimage to the American Center where I could use their somewhat more reliable video system for our big dose of the pitfalls and allure of California and Coca Cola culture. I don't know how to solve the video problem, or anticipating the difference between American and European systems. I tried to research it in advance. In the end, we were able to watch what I brought, one way or the other, and I would advise others to be patient and exploratory, intrepid if possible. There's no place like the Balkans for making impossible things work, at least for a while or the time being, where improvisation has been an art for centuries.

During my first three weeks in Sofia, I got lost whenever I walked a single block: initially I could get lost in the middle of a block, though this defied reason. As previously noted, I got lost in the halls and staircases of Sofia University. Once I got lost climbing the stairs to my apartment. Suddenly my stairway was lined with pots of dusty geraniums I'd never seen before. I was certain I'd entered the wrong building. I have wandered around major European cities before: Paris, Munich, Rome, etc. But I have never been so overwhelmed by the density of strangeness I experienced in Bulgaria. Not even Istanbul confused me the way that in Sofia streets appearing identical were in fact several blocks apart and unrelated, how an ordinary street could overwhelm my capacity for situational continuity and memory, appearing to undergo in the space of a footstep total transmutation. In the case of the dusty geraniums, I had absent-mindedly ascended an extra floor. I offer this confession for the benefit of anyone prone to suffer from the instability of the empirical world, particularly its Bulgarian avatar.

On Monday nights, the Fulbright lecturers in Sofia met at my apartment for a Bulgarian language lesson, and afterwards we would take our teacher somewhere on Shishman for dinner. It seemed a Fulbright colleague or Fulbright student was always available to share a meal and a glass of wine, and when I left Bulgaria it was as if a family of a half-dozen of us were saying goodbye to each other forever. Generally speaking, I improved my eating habits every morning, with fresh fruit from the market, yoghurt and granola-like cereal from the

store downstairs, and I destroyed my best intentions every evening with fried cheeses, stuffed peppers and other foods, and ‘93 Sliven.

There was no lock on the downstairs door to the street, and my apartment had very ordinary locks, no metal door or bar, my laptop computer sat in full view of the technicians who installed and programmed my television cable, and though I worried a little, I was never burgled. I drank water from the tap and I never got sick. I was never cheated by anyone. If I was inattentive, old ladies kissed me. I worried about the inconsistencies between my residency permission from the police (one month), my visa (three months) and my Fulbright grant period (five months), but unlike my more scrupulous colleagues, I assumed these difficulties were self-explanatory, and never made frustrating pilgrimages to the police station on Maria Luisa Boulevard, and never had any problems. As for clothing, I brought too much, but Sofia is a city where one can enjoy wearing a sweeping overcoat, unlike Portland, Maine, where I’m living again, and overcoats are more unusual. But soon as I got off the airplane in Portland, after my Fulbright, I purchased a full-length double-breasted black leather overcoat out of nostalgia and solidarity for Bulgaria.

The American Embassy and the American Center took little interest in us Fulbrighters. They requested our addresses, but never sent us their newsletters, and we often learned about events, films, lectures, and readings, after they occurred. Near the end of my stay, at the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission Christmas party, a joke-telling contest developed between Director Julia Stefanova and myself. By the time we had each told about twenty jokes, I realized I was scraping the bottom of my memory, whereas she was just tapping into her copious repository of Balkan humor:

> ‘Why doesn’t God speak to us as in the days of the patriarchs? Because he doesn’t want us to know He’s Bulgarian’

> ‘How about the wrestler who caught a goldfish and was about to throw it back because it was too small, and the goldfish squeaked, ‘Wait a minute, what about the three wishes?’ ‘All right, but hurry up,’ growled the wrestler, ‘I am waiting.’

> ‘A mosquito was making love to an elephant who suddenly died of a heart attack. "Oh my God," whined the mosquito, reaching for a shovel to prepare her grave. "A moment of pleasure and now a lifetime of digging!’

Jokes such as these were instructive in sensitizing one to culturally specific faultlines, and to heightening one’s awareness of what humor is transnational and what is dependent on a particular language’s puns and signifying anxieties. Anyhow, I surrendered to Dr. Stefanova’s superior trove of comedic lore, acumen, energy and wit, bade all remaining revelers farewell, and vanished into the Sofia night.

A few years after my Fulbright to Bulgaria, I went to Egypt to teach for three weeks at Minia University, approximately two hundred miles south of Cairo, as a Fulbright Senior Specialist. Education in Egypt is free, but material provisions and prospects, career opportunities, textbooks, professors, classrooms, were even more limited than at Sofia University in Bulgaria. At Minia, American and European students were non-existent. At my first class, I faced about 300 students separated by gender, most of the women in headscarves, a few with veils. The mid-October heat was extreme. The students at first resisted my somewhat corny American instinct to loosen things up. They were 4th year majors in English in the Faculty of the Arts and Humanities, in Arabic called Collegia Adeb. There was a somewhat parallel but not related Faculty of Foreign Languages called Collegia Alsun about a mile across campus. After months of inquiry I had no idea what my students were studying, or what I was expected to teach. Nor did I understand, at that point, that such questions were irrelevant.

My students' primary questions were how to improve their English in the absence of native speakers, and how to get to the United States or Europe for study, and perhaps a better life. Secondary questions were whether they'd be safe in the U.S. after 9/11, and about Americans' attitudes toward Arabs, questions I strove to answer truthfully and productively. I told them that I thought in a university context they'd be safe, and that Americans – I offered myself as a prime example – knew very little about Arabs and the Arab world, so generally they relied on stereotypes that made them fearful and negative. I tried to insist steadily that as Arabs and Egyptians they possessed a social-culture marked by highly estimable qualities – mutual affection, amiability, gentleness, community – which despite material deprivations they were unlikely to duplicate in America, despite material advantages. I told them their social culture was an inspiration to me. I told them, invoking a recursive algorithm of deconstruction, that in the 21st century, the center goes to the margins (i.e., an American comes to Egypt to teach and learn) and the margins go to the center (Egyptians want to come to America), but that this was like the behavior of sand grains in a bathtub, that they should be careful not to go down the drain, to remember who they were and take pride in being Egyptian.

At Minia my students' education in English language and literature was philological, with great emphasis on the semantic significance of the phoneme. This resembled, I came to understand, the structure of Arabic as a language, based on a system of roots and patterns, and the prevailing faith in the unalterable stability and authority of the Koran. I told amusing stories that illustrated the need, in English, to appreciate rhetorical motive and context to establish meaning, such as the lady who tells her husband, "I'm going to kill you!" when he makes her an unexpected gift of chocolates, roses, and a diamond necklace: the phonemes alone not establishing whether he's safe and successful, or must run for his life. To that end, i.e., connecting with rhetorical motive to establish meaning, I recommended that they read contemporary Arab writers, especially Egyptian, in English translation, trying to veil the heretical elements of both suggestions: urging a relatively horizontal approach to understanding and study within a system of education and belief that is intensely vertical, deriving its authority from the past, focusing on extremely limited aspects of the present and the future. Toward the end of a class I had great success with the story of the Arab brought to court in Los Angeles. The judge says, "It says here you stole a horse." The translator says: "They say you stole a horse." The Arab: "I stole a horse?" The translator: "He says he stole

the horse." The judge: "Why did he steal a horse?" The translator: "They want to know why you needed a horse." The Arab, even more astonished: "I needed a horse?" The translator: "He says he stole the horse because he needed it."

I would like to go back to Egypt someday, to Turkey, to Bulgaria, even Macedonia, to teach, visit, lecture, and even to live. There is an extraordinarily restorative tonic in what is to the mysterious dignity, generosity and beauty of these countries and in sweetness of the people, in the way Egyptians, Turks, Bulgarians and Macedonians allowed a visiting American poet-professor to feel useful. A snow-covered mountain, Mt. Vitoshe, towers over Sofia. At one of its topmost peaks, Cherni Vreh, an ancient tiny leather-tanned woman lived tending the hiker's hut, offering tea to resting hikers, warming herself with twigs and wooden debris found among the rocks. When we were rested and had just departed the hut, she came hurrying after us, my wife, myself, and a Bulgarian colleague. Perhaps eighty years old, she nimbly managed the rocks over which we were again stumbling with the tireless ease of a practiced mountaineer. I'll never forget the strength in her iron fingers as she seized my arm with one hand and gestured with the other to indicate the path we should follow, her firm smile and clear blue eyes, and I'll never forget the smoky taste of her sweet and delicious hot tea, which I had drunk in her hut and with which she had internally marked me. But many things marked me. I wrote the following attempt to record the indelible after a trip from Bulgaria to Istanbul:

LEAPING THE BOSPORUS

Dumbfounded in Istanbul, and deaf-founded,
Able to make noise, American,
And hear noise, Turkish, but neither understand
Nor speak, I watched a man unhitch
The ferry's fat rope from an iron bollard
Larger than a human head, the boat
From Europe to Asia across, I think, the Marmara
And back, from enraged penury
And sleeping with chicken and sheep in the street,
To inventive luxury and ease,
Orient and origin, the Near East. The ship yawned

From the dock. In a black coat,

Newspaper bunched in his fist, somebody

Suddenly leaped off-board

Across the cow’s mouth’s dangerous widening gap

As the ferryman called out

And laughed: “Keep jumping like a kid,

And you’ll break a leg,

You old goat!” The other one’s face cracked

In a tight accordion grin,

Keeping his toothlessness hidden, scampering

To maintain his upright balance,

Then resumed an inconspicuous pace. Maybe

The boatman had said, “You jump

Like a calf afraid the Greek father of the gods

Is trying to screw you!” But who

Knows what he said? I was just a Fulbright

Professor visiting from Bulgaria.

Maybe he said, “Don't forget to pick up

The lamb chops for your wife!”