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My grandfather said "Screw the Communists, but we all have to vote for them"

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History books say Bulgaria's Communist regime collapsed in November 1989. My grandfather could not believe this basic fact for most of the 1990s. What many Bulgarians perceived as genuine change, for better or for worse, he saw as moves in a long game played by the regime. The roundtable negotiations, the demonstrations, the mouthy media, the multiparty elections were all ploys to unveil the disloyal. At an opportune moment, the regime would drop the charade, round up the naïve fools who believed in democracy and punish them. Some would go to labour camps or to prison, the luckier would only lose their jobs, but all would have permanent stains on their biographies. As several governments came and went, he spent the 1990s dreading the day of authoritarian restoration.

My grandfather died on April 19th, 1997, still believing *the Communists* were lying in wait. April 19th was no ordinary day. It was the day the former Communist party, now renamed Socialist, finally lost a national election convincingly. It was a democratic breakthrough, marked by the first clear turnover in power through elections. In effect, my grandfather died on the last day of the post-Communist transition.

This essay is based on my teen diary and my recollections and is dedicated to the memory of Col. Marin Nikolov (1923-1997).

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"I bet there will be thousands of people out on the streets of Sofia, celebrating" I wrote in my diary as our bus rolled through the Macedonian countryside. My high-school class was returning to Bulgaria from a whirlwind four-day trip through Yugoslav Macedonia. Besides seeing some historical sights, I had learned three things: even in the throes of economic crisis, Yugoslavs had more fashionable clothes than we had; the Yugoslav version of Balkan history was dramatically different; and, Macedonian and Bulgarian were less mutually comprehensible than we had assumed. The most memorable part of the trip, though, was the timing—November 7-11, 1989! On the 9th, as we sipped sweet tea in the hotel restaurant, we saw the newspaper's front page proclaiming the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Macedonian wording sounded amusing to our ears—

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the roots of the words identical, the rest seemingly "wrong"—and we spent more time joking about it than discussing the actual news. The next day, the same newspaper told us Bulgaria's Communist leader for the last 35 years, Todor Zhivkov, had also fallen and that got us talking! Why? How? What now? But mostly we laughed, retelling jokes about the old geezer and trying to come up with new ones. One classmate whose parents were high up in the Communist nomenklatura hierarchy looked withdrawn and muttered something about the Yugoslav papers telling a bunch of lies.

When I saw my grandfather upon my return to Sofia, I asked him why people were not out on the streets to celebrate Zhivkov's removal. At 14, I already held assumptions about Zhivkov and the regime. I do not know if my family subtly fostered them, or I picked them up elsewhere and no one pushed back. I believed Zhivkov was a simpleton; his long stewardship of the country was responsible for the lack of nice stuff in stores; we all had to hear and repeat propaganda, but no one took it seriously; and his political survival depended on the Soviet Union. I knew a ton of political jokes that illustrated each point. At the same time, I loved my school, the trips they organized—summer camp at the Black Sea and fall/winter camp in the Rila mountains, the elaborate end of the year concerts we put on for our parents, and I adored the Ancient History teacher who told us stories about speaking Latin at home with his classicist wife who had come up with a Latin word for "fridge". I even did not mind the compulsory trips to the opera or ballet, because we surreptitiously passed notes. I did not wonder whether my childhood was good because of or despite the Communist regime, nor did it cross my mind that the collapse might jeopardize anything or anyone, like our Russian teacher who eventually had a nervous breakdown. On November 11, 1989, I was sure Zhivkov's fall had to be good news, however you looked at it. My grandfather's reaction surprised me. "There is nothing to celebrate. He retired. They replaced him with someone from the Politburo. End of story," and he changed the topic.

Within a couple of weeks, however, thousands of people were out on the streets of Sofia. On a warmish late November afternoon, I walked home from school through the small park near the university and stumbled upon the edges of Bulgaria's first opposition rally. A couple of thousand people, many with posters, listened to speakers and intermittently yelled in approval. I stopped to listen, but in my diary, I did not note any triumphalist or optimistic vibes. I only wrote about why I left, more anxious than inspired. A speaker calling for the destruction of the regime had started yelling "Communist skins are going to hang on the walls all around you!". My grandfather was a Communist party member, and he did not deserve such grotesque threats. Who skins people, anyway?

My grandfather turned white as a sheet when I told him I had hung around at the demonstration. "Next time you see people gathered like this, don't stop, walk by as fast as possible, all the while looking away from the crowd and the speakers!" He explained that the secret service was watching these fools who were turning out, recording their every move, and soon there would be dire consequences. And he told me the story of my mother's classmate at the English Language High School, who had stupidly walked into the US Embassy to ask for a good dictionary. It was the early 1970s and the poor sucker thought that Nixon's ping-pong diplomacy meant a friendlier

Bulgarian-American relationship too. Within a week he was expelled from high school. My grandmother, who was the school secretary at the time, said his parents' apologies fell on deaf ears—the expel order had come from high up.

I didn't take my grandfather's admonitions seriously, because I thought of him as a worrier who feared a whole lot of things in life. Surveillance by the regime was one of his frequent worries. In 1984, as a fourth grader, I was selected to participate in the National Assembly for Peace—an international arts festival for kids started by Zhivkov's daughter Lyudmila Zhivkova. My diary reveals that the highlight of the two-week event was not the ceremony where I got to read one of my poems, but the closing banquet at Zhivkov's Boyana Residence. Zhivkov gave a forgettable speech with a fly on his bald head, and we all giggled to shushes from the teachers. The banquet had so much lavish and tasty food that I called my grandparents to share my shock and glee from a random phone I saw near the toilets. I just had to tell them that I had eaten bananas and oranges, even though it was August, rather than New Year's Eve! As soon as I said that I was calling from Todor Zhivkov's house, though, my grandmother, usually an attentive listener, mumbled something and hung up. I dialed several more times, but she did not pick up again, because my grandfather had begged her to end this dangerous conversation. He was sure that all phones at Boyana were bugged, and he feared that *they* would become interested in my family. Attention by the authorities could never be a good thing, but especially when I was exposing that Zhivkov ate bananas in the summer.

The fear of surveillance was common, but particularly heightened for anyone with mixed political background. My grandfather had both Communist and bourgeois (i.e., class enemy) links intertwined in his biography. On the one hand, he had grown up in a lower-middle class, Communist-leaning family in the 1920s. His parents had migrated from the village as newly-weds, settled in one of Sofia's working-class neighborhoods, and built a small house with their bare hands. They literally baked the bricks! Initially, my great grandfather worked at the Veterinary Institute, looking after the animals used for experiments. At the Institute, he joined the Communist party where he met and once helped a young fellow. The guy went on to become a major figure in the Party and was executed in 1942 for his underground resistance. During the Communist regime, he was in the pantheon of heroes, and we learned about his life in school. This was the solid, desirable part of my grandfather's biography—a card-carrying Communist father who had known a Communist hero. At some point, though, my great grandfather left the Institute and opened a butcher shop in his neighborhood. His business grew in the 1930s, so he sent his children to elite schools—my grandfather to the Commerce Gymnasium, his sister to the French Lyceum, and the youngest to another gymnasium. My great grandfather's emphasis on education complicated my grandfather's biography during the Communist period.

At the Commerce Gymnasium, many of my grandfather's classmates were the sons of major industrialists. He hung out with his mates in the central Boris Gardens, he borrowed their fancy bikes to impress the ladies, and once a guy, whose father owned the biggest store on Main Street, helped my grandfather cheat on a very important geography exam. My grandfather was so grateful

he remembered the topic of the exam even in the 1980s. After graduating from the Commerce Gymnasium, my grandfather completed a Royal military academy in 1943 or 1944. He never talked about the academy or his experience in it. He never expressed an interest in military issues. And he never said a good word, or anything at all really, about the King or the pre-1944 regime.

He did often talk about September 9, 1944—the day the Red Army entered Bulgaria. On the eve of that fateful day, Bulgaria abruptly switched from a royal cabinet aligned with Nazi Germany to a Communist-backed Popular Front government, which surrendered to the advancing Soviet army without firing a shot. The overnight political change was obvious not just in hindsight, but also when it happened. But, again, my grandfather offered no political commentary. Instead, he told me how he met a high school friend whose family had decided to emigrate. The friend encouraged my grandfather to go too. Supposedly, they planned to meet at the train station a couple of days later and leave for either Argentina or Israel (my grandfather varied that part of the story). My grandfather did not show up. I heard some regret in the story, but he never answered my follow up questions—why did you consider leaving? What made you stay? Do you regret staying and why? What is done is done, he would say.

Instead of emigrating, my grandfather fought briefly in World War II as an officer in the Bulgarian army, which followed the Allies on their way to Berlin. He did not talk about his own experience in the war. The war came up only when he talked about his best friend, Iosif. Iozeto, as my grandfather called him, was MIA in the war, and no information ever came about whether, where, or how he died. My grandfather insisted Iozeto must have met and married a beautiful woman and stayed. "Why wouldn't he write home or show up all these decades after the war?" I remember asking with some doubt, not grasping that my grandfather wasn't in denial, but simply refused to hear himself say out loud that his friend had been killed. "Perhaps he married an Austrian woman and that is why he cannot tell us about it" he would say. And I imagined the nice, normal life Iozeto was leading but couldn't tell us about because he had married a capitalist and stayed behind the Iron Curtain.

After returning from the front, my grandfather went to university to study economics. Some time in the late 1940s, he got a summons to go to a government building. The person he met there explained that the new People's Army needed young officers with both pre-1944 professional military training and a Communist biography. My grandfather was among the few who fit the oxymoronic bill—no Communist could or would send their son to the Royal military academy and no military family would have connections to the Communist party. My great grandfather, the Communist, had made an odd choice. My grandfather had no intention of becoming an officer, though. He tried to get out of it. My great-grandfather found some fellow from his village who was in a position of power in the army and he "misplaced" the order. Unfortunately, the reprieve was temporary. A few months later, my grandfather literally got picked off the street and told in no uncertain terms that his university studies were over, and he was now an Army procurement officer. That is how he started a career he didn't choose for himself.

The military uniform was a straitjacket. He was not a regular Joe with any job, but part of the regime and he felt watched and judged to a higher standard of loyalty. He expected any misstep to be punished. In the 1950s, when my mother and aunt were born, many young couples faced a dilemma—baptize their children in church to please traditional parents or forgo baptism to please the regime, which rejected religion. I have no idea how my great grandparents felt about religion, but my mother's aunt planned a baptism for her in secret. When my grandfather found out about it at the last moment, he made an impulsive decision to attend. In his military uniform. My grandmother told me about his panic attack afterwards. "They will fire me for sure, Marche! What's going to happen to us? Going into a church in uniform! I would be better off cursing my commanding officer to his face!". He did not baptize his second daughter.

His "bourgeois" past kept haunting him. One time, he was seconded to Sofia's Central Prison to help procure prisoners' uniforms. In the series of meetings, one of the participants was an inmate, rather than an employee. My grandfather realized with horror that the prisoner was one of his gymnasium classmates. Not a friend, but an acquaintance. With his heart in his throat and his mind racing, he tried to come up with a lie to explain why he knew the guy. Luckily, the classmate generously saved him. He winked secretively and warmly and then pretended they did not know each other. My grandfather burned most of his high school pictures when he got home that night.

Burning the pictures did not bring him peace. He felt in permanent danger of being exposed. His anxious mind produced the following logic: any misstep, any conflict—be it with a co-worker, a neighbour, or a random passerby—could trigger a malicious investigation into his background; the investigation would inevitably reveal his high school friendships; the consequences could be dire. As a result, my grandfather was always overly courteous to people he didn't know, always avoiding conflict with neighbours at all costs, always bending over backwards to please.

Despite the forced start, he came to enjoy his work as a procurement officer. He was proud of managing the department that kept Bulgarian soldiers clothed. His big achievement was a redesign of the parade uniforms. Another highlight were his travels with the Army's cycling team to competitions within the Soviet Bloc. He must have had good friends at work, whose opinions he valued. In a radical departure from Bulgarian tradition, he gave his daughters names his colleagues had suggested, instead of following tradition and naming his kids after his parents. He developed a drinking problem, which he blamed on peer pressure. "How could you be in the army and not drink?" he explained "people would think you're some kind of traitor or spy with something to hide!".

He also appreciated many of his commanding officers. Some he respected because they had risked their lives as partisans during the 1940s. Others because despite their high rank, they did not demand his department find mink furs for their wives or use the highest quality cloth for the parade uniforms to make stylish coats for their adult children. Those few officers were the real Communists, he would say. But then there were the assholes who had invented their heroic Communist biographies, like the guy who claimed to have been a partisan, hiding in the mountains

and fighting the fascist government, when in fact he was simply herding his father's sheep, the damn liar! And these mouth-shitters were the most dangerous. They ruined lives with their lies and manipulations. Someone like my grandfather, with his mixed biography had to be extra careful what he said about and in front of them. At home he could curse them all he wanted, but far from the phone and not too loud, so the neighbours would not overhear.

My favorite Army story was about the magnanimous General Dupenov. His last name translates to something like Butts, so naturally, he was butt of endless jokes, always behind his back, of course. One day, he got a call from a distant province and the voice at the other end of the line said: "General Dupenov (Butts)? Captain Guzerkov (Asses) reporting, sir". General Butts exploded: "My adjutant is going to drive over right this minute and if your name isn't Asses, he will shoot you on the spot! If you are shitting me, you are a dead man!". Apparently, the guy's name was, indeed, Guzerkov (Asses). He should have introduced himself by his middle name to avoid triggering the general. But the magnanimous General Butts did not punish him in any way, he didn't transfer him to some hell-hole outpost, he didn't get him demoted, he did not even cancel his summer vacation. That is how generous he was. My grandfather was always incredulous when he told this story and I always laughed so hard my belly hurt. And my grandmother always shook her head and warned my grandfather: "Marine, the kid is going to remember you forever for your foul-mouth. You will be long dead, and she will be telling stories about your endless swearing".

There was one part of his Army experience that my grandfather could not adjust to during his whole career—ideological discussions at party meetings. He despised party meetings and he always talked about *the Communists* as *them* rather than *us*. He was not a dissident, by any stretch of the imagination. He neither criticized the Communist regime, nor praised the monarchy that preceded it. He was not interested enough in politics. The only times I heard him discuss political ideology was when my other great grandfather (his father-in-law) came from the village for a rare visit. That man was an orthodox Communist who wasn't a party member by fiat or circumstance. He had led collectivization in his village in the 1940s and, if he talked at all, it was always about politics. I wasn't allowed to be in the room during those discussions, but I remember hearing the committed Communist scream at the accidental one: "The Party is never wrong, Marine! The Party can never be wrong!".

My grandfather retired in the late 1970s after suffering a serious stroke. He slowly recovered and only a bit of a Kirk-Douglaesque slur to his speech remained. He quit drinking cold turkey and devoted himself to making plans to build a summer cottage for his two daughters and their families. Between 1984, when I was nine, and 1993, when I went to college in the US, I split my time evenly between my parents' and my grandparents' homes. My grandmother still worked, so when I finished school only my grandfather was there to greet me. We would share a quince compote and he would tell me stories or talk about his latest plans and tribulations—hard to get permits, impossible to find building materials, but eventually, he promised, the cottage would have a double garage, a fenced patio with chaises-longues like those in the German catalogue pictures, and terraces with my favorite raspberries growing in abundance. We loved daydreaming together!

During my vacations or on occasional off days from school, I often went with him to the cottage lot. He worked hard and I swung in the hammock he had put between two cherry trees just for me and read. I also often accompanied him as he went about his cottage "to do" list around the city. We would wait hours in line to get a chance to beg some sullen bureaucrat to sign yet another document, but then we went to the movies. My grandfather always managed to sweet talk the power-tripping salespeople who knew they could connect you to desirable, deficit goods at their whim. After an espresso, a few of his jokes, and some well-chosen compliments they would, at least, promise to get him what he needed.

My grandmother had typed and bound my poems in a little booklet he always carried in his jacket. He would read them to whoever sat next to us on the bus and brag excessively about my studiousness and smarts. "She reads all the time, this one! Your grandson won a math competition, did he? Smart boy! Maybe we will be in-laws some day" (wink, wink). At home, though, he often jokingly scolded me for reading too much. "Enough with the books already. Too much reading and thinking never did anyone any good! Take a nap!" He napped and even fell asleep at night with the radio switched to his favorite Serb station. He said he listened to it for the folk music, but Bulgarian folk is pretty much the same, so maybe he liked that when they discussed politics and read the news, he could not understand much. He sometimes woke up from his afternoon nap with a scream and a swear and it was always a variation on the "party meeting" nightmare. In my favorite version, the party secretary asks him to speak and instead of reciting the usual platitudes about the testaments of the 10th party congress, my grandfather starts cursing all of them and their party. Even in retirement, he could not quite forget the regime's need for constant demonstrations of loyalty and the impending doom of any misstep.

After 1990, I kept expecting my grandfather's anxiety and fear to recede. I thought he would realize, gradually or abruptly, that authoritarianism had crumbled. But he didn't. During the 1991 coup against Gorbachev, he was sure the Bulgarian hard-liners would stage a comeback as well. When the coup failed in three days, he assured me there would be other attempts. I do not even know how he heard about the coup because I never once saw him reading a newspaper. He only watched TV with us when they had the Latin American soap operas on. Those soap operas provided prime conversation topics in the hours-long bread and milk lines that pensioners stood in daily. Perhaps he heard the news in line.

In 1992, his high school class gathered to celebrate their 50th reunion. My grandfather had spent the preceding decade telling me about his friends who had emigrated, but when he got a call from his class teacher that two of them were back in Sofia for the reunion and they would be meeting for dinner, he talked excitedly about the event for days and then he didn't go. I didn't press him for an explanation because I suspected the reason. He was afraid to go to the reunion because he was sure that *they* would be watching and taking notes.

In 1993, I received a full scholarship and went to Dartmouth College in the US. My grandfather was immensely proud of my academic achievement. He talked about how I should get him a US

visa and a job as a doorman at some fancy hotel in New York City. “I always looked good in uniform,” he joked. In 1995, I interned at the Center for International and Strategic Studies in Washington in 1995, where I briefly met Brzesinski and Kissinger, literally for a minute, in the hallway. I told my grandfather about it during my summer visit back home. He was proud that I had met these important Americans whose names had come up at many a party meeting. But he also made me promise I would not discuss my internships with anyone in Bulgaria. “Why do you have to study politics? *They* won’t let you come back with this degree. Why can’t you stick to writing poetry?”

In the first three post-Communist elections, my grandfather voted for the former Communists (now renamed Socialists) every time. Before each election, I asked him why on earth he was planning to vote for the Socialists when they were the direct successors of the party he feared and cursed his whole life. His answers varied. I was naïve to believe these elections were real. They were just as fake as the compulsory Communist-era elections he had to take part in throughout his life. Sure, there were more parties and names on the ballot, but that was the Communist party’s ploy to have a record of who would dare vote against them. He wasn’t falling for this ruse.

In 1994, I was home for Christmas, and I signed up as an election observer. It was my first opportunity to vote, and I told my grandfather I wouldn’t vote for the Socialists. He begged me to vote for them and to keep a low profile but had to accept that I wouldn’t heed admonitions about retribution. Then he gave me a different line of reasoning. Whatever he believed in or thought about politics didn’t matter one bit. Whether he liked it or not, he had spent his entire life in the Communist regime, in the Communist army, and as a Communist party member, so he couldn’t vote for anyone else now. It was too late. He would be spitting on his own life. I didn’t know what to call this then. Stockholm syndrome? Total loss of personal agency? But it struck me as ironic that upon its demise, the Communist Party had finally managed to secure my grandfather’s total allegiance.

In the winter of 1996-1997, I was in my last year in college in the US, applying for PhD programs in political science against my grandfather’s advice, when Bulgaria was gripped by political and economic crisis. The Socialist government, elected in the December 1994 election under my observer watch and with my grandfather’s vote, had colossally mismanaged the economy. Inflation soared and the average monthly salary plummeted to 5 dollars. There was a bread shortage and other staples started disappearing from stores. The opposition organized daily antigovernment protests and the trade unions prepared for a national strike. The Socialist government resigned, but the Socialist party had the constitutional prerogative to try to form a new cabinet. Protestors demanded the Socialist party return the mandate in recognition of its failure to govern effectively and let the freshly elected (opposition-party-nominated) President appoint a caretaker cabinet and call pre-term elections. After a couple of tense weeks when protests almost escalated to violence, the Socialist party yielded to pressure from the street, returned the mandate, and the President called a parliamentary election for April 19th.

Despite the economy's free-fall, March and April were politically hopeful months in Bulgaria. The Socialists had ceded power peacefully. Constitutional crisis was averted. A caretaker cabinet headed by Sofia's popular mayor worked to stabilize the macroeconomic situation. Polls suggested the opposition would win a resounding victory, carried by hope and a reservoir of trust. It seemed that Bulgaria was about to turn an important corner—a peaceful and democratic change of power and a new path towards reform.

My grandfather, though, was anything but optimistic. He saw the upcoming elections as the day of impending rupture; the day when *the Communists* would reveal the charade and reimpose dictatorship. He was too disillusioned to vote for the Socialists yet again. The country had almost fallen apart because of their corruption and mismanagement, how could he vote for them one more time. But he was too afraid to vote against them. "Let's just not vote," my grandmother suggested. It seemed like the best option, but my grandfather was still haunted by fear. He was concerned that the neighbours would come and remind him to go vote. The only solution was to leave town.

My grandparents decided to spend election day at the cottage. My grandmother later explained that my grandfather was nervous and scared in the morning. He made her feel like they were skipping town under cover, as if avoiding the polls was illegal. He always escaped his thoughts and anxieties in physical work at the cottage—making new flower beds, redoing the stone fence, creating new terraces in the hilly area. He often pushed himself too hard, as if punishing his body for his mind's excessive anxiety. Over the years, my grandmother and I had dealt with his exhaustion-triggered collapses many times. My grandmother would give him medication, scold him, put cold compresses on his forehead and I would massage his numb feet and hands to increase circulation, while he moaned that he would never lift so many heavy stones again in one day. A couple of times, we had to call an ambulance.

On that April day, he collapsed in the yard, pushing a wheelbarrow full of stones and the ambulance doctor only confirmed his death. The election results were not in yet.