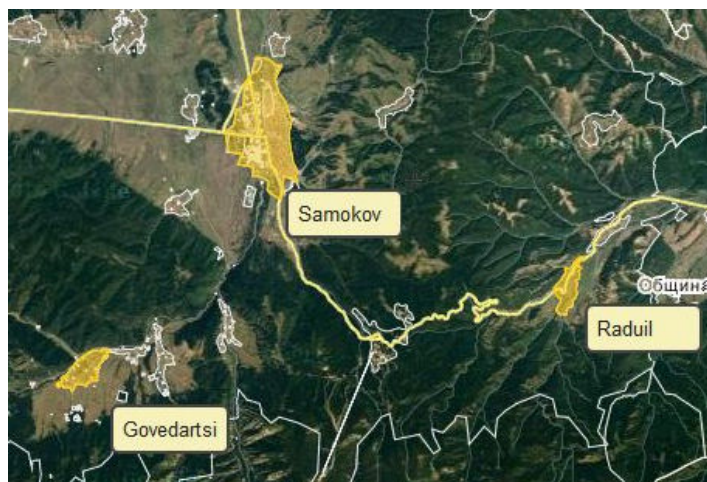


Турското циганче (The Little Turkish Gypsy)

Here is a little story I heard in the village of Govedártsi, south-west of Sámokov, Bulgaria, in 1988. I've been saving it, but I think the time has come to share it:

Dobrínka Spásova Kalpáčka was born on the 28th of November 1918 in the village of Raduíl, some 20 kilometers to the south-east of Sámokov. I met her on the afternoon of August 2, 1988, in Govedártsi, a village about the same distance from Sámokov but to the south-west.



This was a bright sunny afternoon relatively early in my two-month stay in Govedártsi (I had a Fulbright grant to do in-depth research into old songs in four villages in the Sámokov region) and I was a bit at loose ends. I thought I'd look for a woman I'd met and recorded a few days earlier—we had found her out tending her cow and she told me some pretty interesting songs, and said she was usually at home in the afternoon. So I had knocked at her door, but, finding no one about, I started down the road, hoping to find someone who knew where she was. But it was noontime, and no one but me seemed to be out and about. Soon I came upon a little grassy patch with a woman sitting in the midst of it in a little patch of shade. Her legs were stretched out straight in front of her the way village women sit (you can see this in the picture at the end of this post), her shoes were off, and she was crocheting. She looked up, and I asked her if she had seen Tina. “No,” she replied, “what do you need her for?” I mumbled something incoherent about looking for old songs, and she said, “Oh, I can tell you one....”



Dobrinka Spasova Kalpačka

Thus began a delightful session which I remember with great pleasure to this day. My new-found friend was Elénka Ilíeva Mírčeva, herself born in 1921 in the village of Govedártsi. We chatted for a few moments, and her friend Dobrinka walked by. “Dobrinka, come on over here!” she hailed her. Dobrinka replied something that I couldn’t catch, and her friend repeated, “Come over her and we’ll tell the young wife some songs”—and she turned to me to confirm: “Are you married?” When I assured her that I was a married lady, she launched into the song about Krali Marko and Filip Madžárin (not one that, by my lights, would be inappropriate to tell a maiden, but perhaps she was just checking). Dobrinka helped her out a bit, and then it was Dobrinka’s turn. Before she began, I asked the routine information: her full name, when and where she was born. When she mentioned the village of Raduíl, I told her that I had recorded there several years ago. She was excited about this, said I must have recorded her cousins (I could not at the time remember their names, but later checking proved her right). Then I asked her how long she had lived in Govedartsi....

“My father was killed in the war in 1918, and I was born after that, three months later. My mother had been pregnant, and she had me three months after he was killed. After that—my mother came here, she married someone from Govedártsi, and she brought me here when I was eight months old. Trouble was, the people here didn’t want me, and they sent me back. So I lived with my grandmother and my uncles in Raduíl. And—but when I was born, my mother didn’t want to nurse me. She wanted me to die. Y’ know, a child with no father, you know how much *that* costs. And her breasts got infected. They started to hurt. OK, but it wasn’t like it is now, there wasn’t anything you could buy to feed a baby. And so I was

hungry, and I cried and cried, and somebody said to my grandmother, 'Maria, there's this Turkish gypsy woman nearby, she has a little one. Go talk to her, let her nurse yours too, so the baby can go to sleep, and stop crying.' And my grandmother went to see that Turkish Gypsy woman. 'Selíma,' she said, 'would you be willing to come and nurse our baby too, such-and-such happened, its mother is sick and can't nurse it and we don't know what to do—she's very tiny.' And Selíma, granny Selíma, said, 'OK, I'll come. Granny Maria, I'll come and nurse it.' So for two whole months a Turkish Gypsy woman nursed me."

"Wow!" exclaimed her friend Elenka.

"Two whole months."

"That means you have Turkish—blood—"

"Oh, I've got Gypsy in me too," affirmed Dobrinka.

The thing that struck me at this point was Elenka's reaction. Clearly the women were good friends—neighbors, as I later learned, and indeed close friends—but from everything I could tell (short of "breaking" the mood by intruding my own questions) Elenka was hearing this piece of information about her friend for the first time. She spoke almost with a sense of wonder, that Dobrinka had "Turkish 'blood'" in her veins from being nursed as an infant by a Turkish gypsy.

"Turkish gypsy," continued Dobrinka. "Yes! Well, after awhile my mother's breasts got better, and— And then she re-married, and she brought me here [to this village]. Well, that was fine, but they didn't want to have to raise me, here, and they sent me back. OK, but then in '23 they killed two of my uncles. Both at the same time. And the other two—well, they worried them—you know how they worry people like that. So I went to school there, first and second grade, and then when I was ready to go into third grade my grandmother died, and I[???, something unclear] back here. And that's the way my life—"

By this time my own mouth was hanging open. With such a story I would sooner have expected a hardened, embittered person—but the woman who sat with us on the grass seemed to be graced with one of the gentlest, most generous souls I have ever encountered, an impression which did not change as I saw her in later years, on other occasions.

“But,” she continued, “wait, let me tell you something else, Elenka! One year we were in Velingrad [a beautiful spa town on the other side of the Rila mountain range] on vacation with the child [presumably her grandchild], I had Sašo with me.”

“Oh yes, tell the young lady!” urged Elenka. (She seemed to know this story, but later she reacted to it as if hearing it for the first time.)

“I’ll tell it. I took Sašo—he was only this big (she shows me how tall he was), we were on vacation together. OK, but the place where we got our food was a little distance away from where we were sleeping—about as far as to the little square down there [down the hill from where we were sitting]. One morning we were headed down for breakfast. Everybody had gone on ahead, and I was waiting for the child—he was playing with this ‘n’ that. And I was standing there by the road waiting for him, and as I looked down below the road I saw some gypsies picking camomile. And all of a sudden one of them, big as my husband here [husband Spas had joined us by that time], he was a little closer to us, and he jumped over the gully by the side of the road and came up to me. Right up onto the road. And he says to me, ‘Where are you from?’ ‘From Govedartsi,’ I said, ‘and where are you from?’ ‘I’m from Bratánitsa, near Pázardžik,’ he says, ‘but I was born in Raduil. Aren’t you—my mother’s told me that she nursed a little Bulgarian with my milk?’”

“Good Lord!” exclaims Elenka, and we both gasp.

“Well, if you would believe it,” continued Dobrinka, “I felt as if the ground had just fallen out from under me, and then came back. What a thing—just imagine, what a coincidence, to run into your brother like that! So we stood and talked for quite awhile, and—and to this day I’m angry, it just didn’t occur to me to get that boy’s address.”

In 1989 I saw Dobrinka and her husband again, and she told me the story again. At the end of that conversation, I asked how the gypsy had recognized her? (I had secretly wondered if they might have seen each other occasionally as they grew up.) But both Dobrinka and Spas said definitively that it was a “completely chance” meeting, and he did not know or “recognize” her. It just turned out that way. I wish I had a picture of him too!



Dobrinka, Elenka & Spas, Govedartsi

For the die-hards who would like to hear this conversation, I'll put it here—but I don't really expect many people to listen to it!

<http://marthaforsyth.fasterthan20.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2016/02/Govedarci-88-078b-Turskoto-ciganche.mp3>

P.S.:

Later that afternoon, Elenka told Dobrinka how I had visited the village two summers before (with my husband and son) and had gone up into the field where a group of women were haying—another magical occasion. The women had sung, and we had recorded, and Elenka had recognized me from then, although she didn't let on right away.