

About....

What is this site all about?

This site is primarily devoted to the field research in traditional Bulgarian singing that I, Martha Forsyth, carried out starting in 1978, with the inestimable help of my husband Dick, and my son Peter. But—full disclosure: Martha is interested in a few other things besides Bulgarian traditional singing, so don't be surprised to see a stray post about Something Different!

And how did Martha get to Bulgaria in the first place?

Well, that's a lovely little story I've told many, many times. Goes like this:

In planning my third year of college, I needed one more course. What should it be? I flipped through the (extensive) course catalog, and my eye came to rest on a course called "Introduction to Slavic Folklore." Well *that* looks interesting, sez I—I like folklore - and look! It fits into my schedule! So, I took it. In a nutshell, it turned out to be more than "interesting"—it changed my life.

My professor (a wonderful woman named Svatava Pírková-Jakobson) introduced me to village Bulgarian music, playing me Albert Lloyd's "[Bulgaria](#)" album in the "World Library of Folk and Primitive Music" series. The thing I remember most clearly is her comment about the very close intervals (musical seconds) used in western and south-western Bulgaria. "When you first hear this," she said, "you'll think you're going to die! But keep listening...it will gradually become familiar, you'll start to be a little comfortable with it and even like it. And one day, you'll miss it when it isn't there!" Truer words were never spoke, except that it really didn't take me all long at all to become fond of this singing.

So, in the summer of 1976, my husband Dick and 3-year-old son Peter took a little trip to Bulgaria, and attended the famous folk festival that happens every five years in Koprivštica. Needless to say, we fell in love with the country! and the people we met there - and I did notice that there were older women working in the fields...surely they must know some songs? I went again, alone, in the

summer of 1978, to attend a language seminar for foreigners, via an exchange program run by [IREX](#). In the last week of my stay, I visited several villages where I was able to make some recordings! on a \$40 Radio Shack portable tape recorder.

And then the fun begins! Fast forward to 1979, when I learned that it was possible for people like me (neither a PhD holder nor a candidate for one) to get a grant from IREX, as an Independent Researcher. What the heck - I applied. I sailed through the “language test” which I’d been dreading but which turned out to be fun, and somehow managed to—I think the correct word is “survive”—the interview that was run by someone not very sympathetic to what I wanted to do. I finally got angry. I told the gentleman I didn’t know what he wanted from me, but that I was determined to do the research I was trying to outline to him (on the rare occasions when he let me finish a sentence without changing the topic to something irrelevant), and *I was going to do it, whether he funded me or not!*

To my considerable surprise, I got the grant: to spend three months (December 1980 through February 1981) wandering around the Šop and Pirin regions of Bulgaria learning and recording whatever I could about the local traditional singing. I later came to describe this process as “recording old songs from old ladies.”



Martha talking with Alefe in Breznitsa, 2015 (photo Ann Schunior)

In the spring of 1985 I went back for more—this time with funding from a consortium of small organizations, and in the summer of 1988, funded this time by [Fulbright](#), this time concentrating my efforts in four villages in the Sámokov region in order to get a more in-depth understanding of the summer fieldwork songs in that incredibly beautiful region, a high-altitude plain in the northern foothills of the Ríla Mountains. As my husband said, “If you drop a camera on the

ground, it's going to take a beautiful picture!"

But all of this is what I want to write about in this blog, so I'll refrain from overloading you with details here. Enjoy your reading, and don't forget to check the earlier posts.