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The Past of the Socialist Childhood through the Lens of the Bulgarian Literature

The Childhood during the State-socialist Bulgaria is thematized in a plethora of novels and auto-fictional literature, published in the last three decades. Many of these works pose the question "Is the past of my own childhood a 'foreign country' for me"? This is a question very close to the anthropological one: "Could we know and understand our own (childhood's) past as insiders?" In this paper I will take a close look at the presentations of the Socialist Childhood in some popular Bulgarian novels, written after the Fall of Communism by authors belonging to different generations. I will discuss them from an anthropological perspective. How this past is presented, reflected, and as such – becomes an important part of the cultural memory about the Bulgarian State Socialism, is the main research question of this paper.
Key words: state socialism. Childhood, literature, anthropology of postsocialism

Детињство у периоду социјализама у Бугарској сагледано путем књижевних дела

Детињство у социјалистичкој Бугарској предмет је великог броја новела и ауто-фиктивних књижевних дела публикованих у последње три деценије. У многим делима се поставља питање „Да ли је прошлост из периода мог детињства нешто што је мени 'страно'?" Ово питање је врло блиско оном које постављамо у том контексту у антропологији: „Да ли можемо да сагледамо и разумемо нашу сопствену прошлост (детињство) као инсајдери?" У раду анализирам описе детињства у социјалистичкој Бугарској који су дати у

појединим бугарским новелама написаним након пада комунизма. Писци тих новела припадају различитим генерацијама. Описе анализирам из антрополошке перспективе. Главно истраживачко питање овог рада је како се ова прошлост представља, рефлектује и како она, као таква, постаје важан део културне меморије о бугарском државном социјализму.

Кључне речи: социјализам који власт спроводи, детињство, књижевност, антропологија постсоцијализма

INTRODUCTION

The personal stories of people who lived during state socialism are at the centre of my research interest as an anthropologist. The autobiographical stories I collect and record from men and women of different generations, from a variety of social, ethnic and religious backgrounds, are the main source for understanding how ordinary people experienced dramatic historical events such as World War II and the change of the political regime in September 1944, or the eventless everyday life of "developed socialism" (Luleva 2005; Luleva 2013; Luleva, Troeva & Petrov 2012).

For the anthropological study of socialism and postsocialism through the prism of memory, the essential questions are: What is remembered, and how? How does memory work upon the experience of state socialism? How is individual memory connected with group and collective memory? What does the cultural memory of socialism look like? These are some of the essential research questions addressed in the last two decades (Luleva 2013; Todorova, Dimou & Troebst 2014; Kiossev & Koleva 2017). The memory of socialism includes not only private, individual and family stories, but also fictionalizations of personal experiences and other cultural texts that draw upon the public memory, collectively constructing the cultural memory of the socialist past. In short, from an anthropological point of view, the literary and the ethnographic (exploring the vernacular) can be viewed as intersecting fields of memory for the recent past.

In this article, I will undertake an anthropological reading of three novels, in which the childhood is a central topic of narrative. These are: *Almost Life* by Rada Moskova (2015), *Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria* by Kapka Kassabova (2008) and *The Physics of Sorrow* by Georgi Gospodinov (2010 [2015]). The analysis also leads to reflections on the relationship between anthropology and fiction, on the writer as an anthropologist and ethnographer, and on fictionalization of personal experiences as a source for studying the socialist past.

STATE SOCIALISM IN PUBLIC MEMORY

A common thesis about Bulgaria and the Balkans is that they are burdened by too much history/historical memory, and at the same time suffer from a lack of memory for their recent communist past (Znepolski 2001, 207–224). Thirty years after the end of the communist regime, Bulgarian society continues to have a problem reworking its recent past. In the years of transition, two theses on this issue were formed. According to the first one, there must be made a pact of oblivion in order to achieve national reconciliation and agreement in the name of the future. It was raised by the political left immediately after the fall of the regime, and evolved into the thesis that the socialist period did not need moral condemnation because it was a time of modernization and progress. This thesis is associated with the nostalgic story of everyday life in the period of mature socialism, which today is shared by broad strata of Bulgarian society. The opposing position – voicing the need to remember communist repression and condemn the communist regime – was seen as an expression of belated justice, and was commonly held by anticommunists and citizens who supported the democratic change after 1989. Over time, some supporters of the democratic right have become radicalized and today share increasingly popular nationalist positions, coloured by nostalgia for the pre-socialist past (Luleva 2013; Luleva 2017).

Thus, with regard to the recent past, Bulgarian society has not reached a consensus and remains divided into diametrically opposed memory groups. Socialist past continues to be a rich field for the work of memory, it is multiple, remembered and commemorated differently by different memory groups, in private life and in public. This is because the past is not 'what happened' in any unproblematic sense, but "is a product of the complexities of memory and the strategic and tactical uses in which it can be placed [...] past is what we believe, argue, pretend, and propose (and so on...) happened" (Jenkins 2002, 273). The past is illusory and imagined, being the subject of memory, of individual memory. It is reconstructed in the memory, and the present – the "invisible time of everyday life," is the only possible gateway into it.

Debates about the recent past continue in academia. Differences are even expressed at the terminological level in the naming of the period: according to some researchers who share the theory of totalitarianism, the period should be called "communism". According to others, the terms "socialism" or "state socialism" are more relevant (Luleva 2006; Gruev & Mishkova 2013; Kabakchieva 2016; Kiossev & Koleva 2017). Literary

works focusing on the socialist past constitute an important part of cultural memory. They form the "soft" memory for socialism (Etkind 2004, 36–59), as opposed to "hard" memory, represented in museums and monuments. After the end of the communist regime in Bulgaria, a kind of 'memory boom' took place in the literary field. Liberated from past ideological restrictions, public memory was pluralized. For the first time, the voices of those repressed for political reasons were heard – political prisoners and survivors of labour camps[1] – and their memoirs published. The flow of emigrant literature also took shape, dominated by the memories of political emigrants, who had escaped from the communist regime. Another flow formed the memoirs published by members of the former ruling communist elite, including Todor Zhivkov himself, as well as his advisers, business leaders and writers, who had held high party and state positions. All of them distanced themselves from the mistakes of the Communist rule, and presented their version of the regime (Todorova, Dimou & Tröbst 2014).

STATE SOCIALISM IN THE LITERATURE

In novels set in the socialist past, autofiction is a preferred genre. One of the most widely circulated novels, developing themes from the socialist past are *Pochti zhivot* [*Almost Life*] by Rada Moskova (2015); *Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria* (2008) by Kapka Kassabova [*Ulitza bez ime. Detstvo i drugi premezhdia v Bulgaria*, 2008], and *Fizika na tagata* [Gospodinov 2011; *The Physics of Sorrow*, 2015] by Georgi Gospodinov. Kassabova's novel is written in the classic autobiographical genre, combined with travelogue genre. The first half of her book contains the author's recollections of her childhood. The other two novels – of Rada Moskova and Georgi Gospodinov – contain elements of autofiction with the main characteristic of the genre – suggestion of identity of author, narrator and protagonist (similar to autobiography), while injecting elements of pure imagination (as in fiction). The suggestion of autobiographical recollection dominates and creates a feeling of a special confession of the story, although both of these writers insist that their works are novels, works of fiction. Immediately after the title, Moskova says: "My book looks at reality, but doesn't look for real people in its char-

[1] Labour camps in which people identified as political opponents of the regime were interned without a sentence existed in Bulgaria until 1962 (Luleva, Troeva & Petrov 2012).

acters!" (Moskova 2015, II). In the text, speaking in the first person, Moskova (born in 1933), refers to her memories to convey the atmosphere and destinies of the people, including her own family, who were affected by the 'measures' of the new government and State Security after September 9, 1944. The most traumatic memories are these connected with her childhood and the stigmatization of the school girl due to her 'bourgeois' family background. She was not allowed to join the Youth organization – an act which posed her as an outsider and excluded her from the community of her classmates. This happened in the years of early socialism, when the fight against the class enemy was most acute.

Kapka Kassabova and Georgi Gospodinov belong to another generations, these born thirty-five years later, in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Their accounts of socialism are different and bear distinct marks of their generation's memory of socialism.

Regarding the genre of the novel *The Physics of Sorrow*, Gospodinov says that he dislikes definitions and is "not so interested in the clean genres" (Gospodinov 2015, 167). The novel is defined as a fairy tale and a fiction by critics. Regarding the understanding of 'autofiction,' I follow Serge Doubrovsky, who defines it as "Fiction, of facts and events strictly real" (Doubrovsky 2013, i). It is important to highlight that autofiction is quite radical in the sense that instead of demarcating fiction from reality, it blurs the border between them. This can be accomplished by promoting a picture of the authorial self which confirms, negates, transforms or plays with the public understanding of this self (Hansen 2017, 49). The novel *The Physics of Sorrow* does just that: it tells truthfully without being a documentary; it contributes to the understanding of the past without being specifically realistic or describing factual reality. This attribute actually makes it an interesting object for anthropological analysis.

Different approaches to anthropological analysis of literature are possible: the literary work can be considered in its social context and its reception by the readership, as well as in connection with the discourses it produces; the literary field can be an interesting object for analysing the relations between writers with different social and symbolic capital, in light of Pierre Bourdieu's theory; and the literary work can be considered as creating an historical memory.

"THE PHYSICS OF SORROW" AS ETHNOGRAPHIC SOURCE

My attempt at an anthropological reading of the novel is limited to its 'narrative of socialism'. This, of course, significantly reduces the seman-

tic layers of the work, which is much more than a narrative of socialism. Another caveat is needed here – in my understanding the narratives are not faithful mirrors of reality, but instruments by which reality is represented and rationalized (Atkinson 1977, 325–344). As the sociologist Mariano Longo wrote:

> "Once the question of truthfulness has been left aside, literary narratives show their relevance as a mode of reality cognition and reality construction. Moreover, if we assume, as will be clarified later, that narrating is less a way to report about facts than a peculiar form of cognitive approach to reality, narratives (whether fictional or non-fictional) appear as relevant instruments through which we are able to give order to the fragmented and apparently dissociated elements of our experience: by narrating, we connect events, propose relations (temporal, causal, of mutual implication) among differentiated aspects of the world… while recounting, a story is told and, at the same time, values are transmitted and reinforced. So, telling a story is not simply a form of sociality, it is one of the ways whereby social reality is reproduced, value systems strengthened and behavioural standards confirmed. And the former holds true both for everyday and literary narratives. Indeed, literary narratives contribute to constructing our sense of reality, the way we perceive events and relations" (Longo 2015, 5–6).

In other words, literary narratives help us understand the social world, and may help to define and modify the way in which we make sense of our reality (Ricoeur 1984). In this respect, they would be comparable to the stories told in interviews, taken by the anthropologist. Autofictional narrative also gives something that is rare and difficult to achieve in an autobiographical interview – self-reflection on emotions, motives, states, associations and the assembling of different times in the story. Discussing the boundaries between ethnography and fiction, Didier Fassin acknowledges that fiction (literature or cinema) can be valuable as source texts for anthropology "because of their capacity to depict real and unveil truths" (Fassin 2014, 52). Moreover, he argues that these works can be:

> "more compelling, more accurate, and more profound accounts of the social worlds they explore than in those proposed by scholars who study them… *Compelling* suggests efficacy, *accurate* evokes reality, and *profound* refers to truth" (Fassin 2014, 52).

Or, in short, from an anthropological perspective, facts are of interest *as represented*, rather than the facts themselves represented in the fiction; of interest are the emotions, associations, and interpretations they evoke.

In *The Physics of Sorrow*, the author, narrator and protagonist have identical names (Georgi). Obsessed with melancholy and a desire to explore his sadness, the author / protagonist returns to the past of his childhood and adolescence, wanders in the labyrinth of his memories, carries his sadness as he travels the world and seeks refuge. The self-study of the protagonist and the unfolding of the semantic layers of the narrative are revealed through the fictional. Of course, the fictional can be contained in both the autobiographical and the memory, but in the novel it is clearly present and has a particularly important place.

The novel has a faceted structure, consists of many short stories in which the author tells his own memories, feelings and experiences, and others in which the protagonists are his father and grandfather. He gathers different layers of the past together, and tries to understand sadness [taga], pondering the unifying character – the Minotaur, locked in its labyrinth, a metaphor of abandoned children (of socialism), of the voiceless, the rejected, the strangers, those deprived of love and compassion. In the prologue, he declares multi-essence with the categorical "Az sme" [We am]. The protagonist has the painful ability to empathize:

> "…pathological empathy or obsessive empathetic-somatic syndrome to feel the feelings of others, to experience pain and to experience their memories: 'To embed himself,' the word would come later 'into their bodies.' To be them." (Gospodinov 2015, 59, 93).

Over time, as a middle-aged man and writer, he lost this ability and replaced it with an obsessive desire to recover and remember the past of his childhood, or at least a small part of it. Like Borges (his favourite writer), the author / protagonist tells "stories that are like a dream woven from pieces of the past." The past is "his," the beloved country of the author / hero. It is, as he will call it later in his next novel, his "time-shelter."

With the stories "Magesnikat" [The Sorcerer], about his grandfather's meeting as a boy with the Minotaur child shown at fairs in 1925, and "Hlyabat na tagata" [The Bread of Sorrow], about his grandfather abandoned as a three-year-old in the mill in 1917, the author creates memorable paintings of the first half of the century, then connects them with the world of the child of the 1970's and 1980's in socialist Bulgaria. The thread

that connects them is sadness and childhood fear – an eternal theme, from the time of King Minos to the present day. Different layers of the past mix, myth and family stories intertwine with personal and narrated memories. The paintings are at once phantasmal, fictional and authentic. The story branches out like a labyrinth, because as the author himself says, "I can't offer a linear story, because no labyrinth and no story is ever linear" (Gospodinov 2015, 53). In the sections "Skrinat na pametta" [The Chiffonier of Memories] and "Mazeto na istoriyata" [The Cellar of the History], World War II is told as a (real or imagined) military story.

The greatest place in the novel is given to the childhood of the protagonist. There, the picture of socialist Bulgarian everyday life in the 1970's and 1980's unfolds. These are the pages in which, with ethnographic accuracy, Gospodinov reconstructs the everyday life of the real small provincial town, digs into the memories of his self / protagonist and achieves almost physically tangible authenticity in portrayal of the picture and associated feelings.

The everyday life of socialism is a topic that excites Georgi Gospodinov as a researcher as well. Along with the publication of personal stories from the project *I Lived Socialism*[2] *(Gospodinov, Ivanova, Manolov & Petrov 2006), as a team with Yana Genova he realized another idea: they collected and published the collection Inventory Book of Socialism* (Gospodinov & Genova 2004). This was one of the first attempts to look into the past of socialism through its material culture.[3] In 2016, together with Georgi Lozanov, Gospodinov curated the exhibition "The Afternoon of an Ideology" at the Sofia City Art Gallery, in which the central theme was again socialist everyday life. Canvases by Bulgarian artists from the period of socialism were selected, united by four themes: childhood / guilt, way of life / holiday, window / contemplation and transport / city. In the catalogue of the exhibition, the two curators interpret the theme of the everyday life of socialism, and each of them sets out his search for it.

For Gospodinov, the challenge lies in what concerns him in *The Physics of Sorrow*:

[2] The collection includes 171 short life stories, reflecting the Bulgarian socialism between 1950's and 1980's. See note 3.

[3] As the authors themselves present the album, "The Inventory Book of Socialism provides an initial archive, inventory, catalog, collecting and describing over 500 everyday objects from that time, the items of the then light industry – household goods, packaging, detergents, cigarettes, food products, etc. A book about the traces that remain and do not remain" (Gospodinov & Genova 2004, 1).

> "Is it possible to make a sociology, a cultural anthropology and an archaeological analysis of what everyday life was like during the socialist period in Bulgaria? Can the gallery's paintings be viewed and interpreted like an invisible museum of everyday human emotion? …Is it possible to find the little mortal personal stories which dropped out of the Grand Narrative of Socialism?" (Lozanov & Gospodinov 2016, 26–27). In both the exhibition and the novel, Gospodinov seeks to capture the traces of the past, and concludes that

> "What remains are not the exceptional moments, not the events, but precisely the nothingeverhappens. Time, freed from the claim to exceptionality. Memories of afternoons, during which nothing happened. Nothing but life, in all its fullness" (Gospodinov 2015, 272).

Gospodinov finds some of the main themes of his (autobiographical) novel in the exhibited artists' paintings. They are seen as another argument for his thesis that "Socialism, especially in Bulgarian version, was largely uneventful, devoid of genuine occurrences" (Gospodinov 2015, 27), that it could be described as joyless, melancholic time, as "directionless travel," as a union of patriarchy and industrialization (in another text he calls it "patriarchalsocialism") (Gospodinov 2015, 234),[4] and as a reason to return again to an untold story, important for him, of the second half of the Bulgarian twentieth century – the story of the "invisible Child of Socialism" (Gospodinov 2015, 35) and make the claim: "Just as in antiquity, the children of socialism were also invisible" (Gospodinov 2015, 98). He also observed that one of the potential stories of socialist everyday life is the one about absences:

> "The story of Bulgarian socialism can be told through life's various absences, shortages and deficits, starting with the shortages of vegetable oil, black pepper, colour TVs, housing and oranges, and going all the way down to those of freedoms and political rights. As in the novel, the paintings emit this peculiar deficit – a peculiar shortage of everyday joy. All this at the expense of an abundance of officially unacknowledged sadness and melancholy, lethargy and a sense of nothing-happening" (Lozanov & Gospodinov 2016, 43).

[4] Patriarchy during state socialism is discussed e. g. in the yearbook *Aspasia* 2007 and *Aspasia* 2016.

Sorrow is the feeling that rules over the character in the novel:

> "incomprehensible sorrow, longing for something lost or that had never taken place, which pulled me inside, into the dark galleries of the unspoken" (Gospodinov 2015, 94).[5]

Exploring it, he returns to his childhood memories of the 1970's and the last socialist decade. Sadness floats in the air of the small town, in the small flat on the ground floor, in the long days of the "abandoned child."

> "He was six when they started leaving him home alone...They left him food in the refrigerator and went out. A typical 1970's childhood. Left on his own all day, with that early unnamed feeling of abandonment" (Gospodinov 2015, 36).

> "Patriarchy and industrialization rolled into one. Three months at the village every summer, with their grandmothers ... But there's a very slow, creeping fear, too. I've been abandoned. They've left me here, they've gone back to the city, they're gone" (Gospodinov 2015, 71).

The childhood in Gospodinov's memory was diagnosed with a "Minotaur syndrome":

> "The 1970's. Our mothers were young, studying in the first, second, third year, working in the first, second, third shift. We were there in the empty apartments, ground floors, basements, lost in boredom and fear, roaming amid the vague anxieties of the one left on his own. Is there a Minotaur Syndrome?" (Gospodinov 2015, 80).

The author / protagonist tries to capture the past through its traces, which he turns into archives and collections, makes catalogues and lists, puts them into a time capsule. He states: "The world was simple and ordered, simply ordered. On Wednesday – fish, on Friday – Russian TV" (Gospodinov 2015, 102).

[5] In his next book, *Vsichkite nashi tela* [*All Our Bodies*], he writes: "Bulgarian sadness is over something you have lost, without it being certain that you have ever had it... sadness over a failed world. And things that don't happen last longer. In this sense, the Bulgarian sadness is enduring" (Gospodinov 2018, 100).

The public order is recalled as a part of personal experience: in the ideologically correct atheistic education, in the suggested threat of nuclear war and chemical attack, and which is why the military training, is considered as vital for the children of socialism ("when it became definitively clear that World War III was inevitable and the end of the world along with it"); in the early lesson at home that you should not repeat outside what you hear at home, which starts "a long chain of secrets and lies that made us a normal family"; in the acquiescence of parents with social political order; in the silence of adults as a survival strategy; in the secret listening to Radio Free Europe, which was prohibited; in the death of the Soviet leaders, causing fear rather than grief ("Yes, fear was stronger than grief"); and the early lesson that you should be invisible to authority ("Like all the others. That was the greatest trick of the whole conspiracy being like the others"), not to trust the neighbours ("We know that where the neighbour has been, the police are sure to follow").

The ethnography of socialist everyday life also includes the numerous written testimonies attached to the text of the novel as part of the documentary archive – the time capsule made by the protagonist. Such are the emblematic documents that mark important rituals of transition for the socialist young man: the note for the transition from pioneer to the Komsomol organization,[6] or the List of Recommended Items, which the new recruit should bring upon entering the armed services. In the document, solemnly presented to each pioneer who turned 14, we read:

> "Dear Young Man, There are moments in a person's life that are never forgotten. Today, with trembling hands you untie the knot of your scarlet Pioneer's neckerchief, replacing it with a red Komsomol membership booklet. This is a symbol of the great trust the Party and our heroic and hardworking people have in you. Be decent and daring in word and deed! Dedicate the drive of your youth and the wisdom of your mature years to that which is dearest to all generations in the Homeland!" (Gospodinov 2015, 141).

Gospodinov's comment is laconically ironic:

[6] During state socialism children and young people in Bulgaria were included in the so-called "mass children's and youth organizations": Chavdar detachments, for children from 6 to 10 years old (first – third grade in primary school); Pioneer detachments for 9 – 14-year-olds (fourth – eighth grade) and a Komsomol organization (DKMS) for young people aged 14 to 28. The last one was under the leadership of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

> "Yet another stellar example of socialist-speak. I now see that it is a mouthful: *Be decent and daring in word and deed! Dedicate the drive*... What are all those Ds, why make the tongue scoot along on its ass?… Don't worry about the kid, we have already preordained his fate, first he'll become a young Pioneer, then he'll put on his Pioneer's neckerchief, then he'll replace it with his Komsomol booklet, it's all written here. Set. In. Stone" (Gospodinov 2015, 141–142).

I myself tried to remember that moment in my life when I was handed the Komsomol book, but I could not. It is clearly not one of those which are "not forgotten". This is just one of the cases when the novel awakened my memory, tempted me to deviate into the labyrinth of my memories and unforgettable feelings, so close to those described in the novel.

In the novel, the material and immaterial world of late socialism are recreated with a special attention to detail and ethnographic authenticity. They saturate the text, create a kind of Clifford Geertz's "thick description" of the socialist everyday life and the embeddedness of narrative into the discourse of that time. Gathering fragments of this past, striving for it, the protagonist realizes that "remembrance is never innocent" and "the past can be a dangerous place" – a thought that is the leitmotif of Gospodinov's next novel, *Vremeubezhishte* [*A Time Shelter*], published recently, in Spring 2020. In his recent work the author continues to reflect on the themes of the past, memory and oblivion which he introduced in *The Physics of Sorrow*.

KAPKA KASSABOVA'S CHILDHOOD ON THE "STREET WITHOUT NAME"

Kapka Kassabova is born 5 years after Georgi Gospodinov – in 1973, in the capital city. Unlike Gospodinov, she does not use autofiction in order to create the atmosphere of the late socialism and to reveal the feelings of the child during that time. Combining autobiographical with travelogue writing her text sounds more concrete and documentary strict. In the first half of the book, which is called "Childhood", Kassabova relies on her own memories to describe the everyday struggles of an ordinary family of intellectuals between the late 1970's and the end of the regime in 1989. Kassabova's family, like many others, left Bulgaria after the fall of the Communist regime and since 1990 she has been living abroad. Kapka Kassabova has written the book originally in English, from the perspective of her cur-

rent experience in emigration, and addresses it to a foreign public. Being a traveler in her home country in the present days and in her own childhoods' past in socialist Bulgaria, Kassabova creates one historical and one contemporary picture of Bulgaria through the lens of her personal story.

Like Georgi Gospodinov, Kapka Kassabova claims that totalitarian regimes disregarded personal stories ("they are obsessed with the big ideas – the Party, the People, and the Bright Future") and is convinced that the recollections of childhood do matter. These recollections are part of the answer of the question 'Where are you coming from?' – an existential question, which demands an existentially important answer. And childhood is on the center of it. Kassabova leads the reader back in the late 1970's and 1980's describing all the misery of the Bulgarian late socialist everyday life, marked by poor material culture, ugly, but much-desired block apartments in one of the new Sofia's quarters; parents' struggles to obtain the banal scarce goods and their will to keep their own dignity. The school and its ideologically framed disciplinary practices, the longing for freedom associated with Western music and other forms of culture, the atmosphere of distrust and fear of denunciation and repression by the secret services, are some of the tropes of Kassabova's memory that are present also in Gospodinov's writings. The obligatory participation in the Pioneer organization and its activities, usually associated with feelings of proudness or shame (for not completing the task, e.g. delivering the requested amount of paper), and the Lyudmila Zhivkova's "Banner of Peace" Assembly,[7] which was one of the most important international cultural event, organized in Bulgaria at that time, are also remembered.

Kassabova's memory about her childhood creates the impression of an inhuman regime, closed society and freedom-restricting public order, of a regime that seeks to unify people, to make them all faceless, anonymous elements of "the system", living in their poor little panel flats on a "street without name".

MEMORY AND GENERATION

Memory is a constant theme in the three novels; it has an existential meaning for the characters. Their recollections are personal, but not solely. As Gospodinov writes, because of the "empathy" he has, he remembers the past of his loved ones, other people, the world around him ("We am,"

[7] About the Pioneer organization and the "Banner of Peace" Assembly see the papers of Yana Yancheva and Zlatina Bogdanova in this volume.

"We was"), real and imaginary: "I remember, or I imagine that I remember, strange thing" (Gospodinov 2015, 317). And, as he would later write:

> "I realize, probably like many before me, that among my personal memories there are many born of books. Reading produces memories. I don't remember for a long time and I gave up looking for which ones were read and which ones were not. I don't find any difference, everything is experienced, everything makes me shiver, everything has left a scar. On all my bodies" (Gospodinov 2018, 6).

Being personal, writers' memories are also generational. For example, Gospodinov's memoirs are recognized as their own by those born in the 1960's in Bulgaria – a fact repeatedly mentioned by readers and critics. Galina Georgieva rightly defines *The Physics of Sorrow* as a generational novel: "Confession of and for one, I would call it, a provincial generation from a provincial state" (Georgieva 2012, 5). The film director Teodor Ushev, born like Gospodinov in 1968, shares that he read the novel in one breath and recognized himself in the children – "Minotaurs of socialism". He has made his animated film based on the novel, fitting into its storyline and adding his own story. The result is a "film about nostalgia, wasted chances and unfulfilled dreams of a whole generation, told through the personal story".[8] I myself recognize my memories in the memories of the character, my sister as well, etc. For the generation born in the 1960's, the past told in the novel is not a foreign country. It is familiar, close, has the same smell and feeling of sorrow.

The three novels not only speak the generational memory, but they also are cultural memory and create an historical one.

While the anthropologist strives to achieve maximum correspondence between the experienced and the narrated through the techniques of interviewing, in the literary narrative it is the narrated, not the experienced, that is decisive. Or, in the words of Louis Mink, "Stories are not lived but told" (Mink 1970, 557). His words on the historical narrative can also be considered in relation to fictional narrative:

> "Individual statements about the past may be true or false, but a narrative is more than a conjunction of statements, and insofar as it is more it does not reduplicate a complex past but constructs it" (Mink 1987, 19).

For Gospodinov, dominant is the possibility of admitting different var-

[8] https://www.bnr.bg/radiobulgaria/post/101193627/nai-noviat-film-na-teodor-ushev-fizika-na-tagata-arak-akcent-v-kinomania-2019 (Accessed July 14, 2021).

iants of the story and what happened; he himself shakes the identity of the experienced and told, and emphasizes the presence of the imaginary in his memory / story.

> "That which has not been told, just like that which has not happened 'because they are of the same order' possesses all possibilities, countless variations on how they could happen or be told… I try to leave space for other versions to happen, cavities in the story, more corridors, voices and rooms, unclosed-off stories, as well as secrets that we will not pry into... And there, where the story's sin was not avoided, hopefully uncertainty was with us" (Gospodinov 2015, 261).

Storytelling is a tool for self-understanding. Anthropology also strives for an understanding of the social world. The difference between them is in the approach to understanding reality. While the anthropological text follows certain rules of analysis and standards of ethnographic description, requiring adherence to factuality, the literary text is freer and follows a different logic. While introspection is at the heart of autofiction, it is rather unacceptable for ethnographic description, in which the voice of the author and the voice of the group of people studied must be clearly distinguished. Literature allows us to delve into the depth of emotion, personal experience, and the complexity of memory, to achieve an impact that academic anthropological research usually cannot achieve.

As Mariano Longo writes, "literary narratives may give the empirical and theoretical sociologist deep insights into reality, thanks to a mode of representation which, within fictive stories assumed as real, is adequate (sensu Schütz) to the reality as typified by normal actors" (Longo 2015, 139).

So, regardless of the process of reduction in the reading of fiction from an anthropological or sociological perspective, reference to literature as a source is an important strategy for enriching the capacity to understand and describe social reality.

CONCLUSION

The novels which are presented above – *Almost life* by Rada Moskova, *The Physics of Sorrow* by Georgi Gospodinov, and *Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria* by Kapka Kassabova can be read as an ethnographic source, and in this case, narratives are methodologically comparable to interviews of informants in ethnographic re-

search – especially interviews using a biographical approach – life-history and autobiographical narrative interviews (Roberts 2002). In this perspective, the story bears the marks of its author (gender, social and generational affiliation) and his time, like the narratives in interviews collected by anthropologists. Yet, one important difference between the two should be mentioned. An essential aspect of the ethnographic interview is the communicative situation that occurs between the interviewee and the anthropologist, in which the memory is awakened and the narrative is created. In this situation, the role of the anthropologist is active, and following the rules of interviewing is important for successful communication and the quality of the narrative. Such is not the case in the novel. There, the author is alone and free to create his story following only the logic of the novel and his ideas. Still, novels, as Thomas Eriksen writes, also form part of reflexive socio-cultural reality and to this extent are part and parcel of that society within which they were written (Eriksen 1994, 191).

Reducing the semantic layers of the novel, in *The Physics of Sorrow* we can see the past of late socialism through the eyes of the generation born in the 1960s, and in *Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria* – the memories of generation born in the early 1970's. And here, let me emphasize again, it is not the factual that is dominant and valuable, but the way in which certain events were experienced, and the eventless everyday life, emotions and meanings of the late Bulgarian socialism were recalled, as well as the way they are culturally articulated. Looking at the micro level, in the experience of living in a small provincial town or in the capital city through the memory of childhood, in a life world in which the stories of the past of the family and the disciplinary order of socialist institutions coexist, is what makes both novels at the same time generational novels and part of the cultural memory of late socialism. For the authors, as well as for those who 'lived socialism', the past, reconstructed in the novels, is not a foreign country.

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