CHAPTER 1

Heritage of Pluralism or Having Cultural Agency: 
An Introduction

Making Sense of the Past

I grew up in the Western Rhodopes during the 1980s, the last decade of communist rule in Bulgaria. One of my fondest memories from these years is my father's telling stories by the flickering candlelight and the gentle crackling of the fire in the woodstove of my childhood home. His storytelling usually took place in the fall and winter, when the busy tobacco-harvesting season had ended and before the new planting season had begun. In those days, I remember, power outages were a common occurrence either caused by severe weather or purposely scheduled to save on electricity, a necessary relief measure for the ailing communist economy. As often as I turn back to these cherished memories, however, one realization strikes me all over again. As much as I loved listening to these tales from the local past, they also confused me a great deal. On a number of occasions my father would talk about “the burning of the village” and “the fleeing of the people,” phrases that terrified my young mind. “What burning?”—I would ask—“What fleeing? Who was fleeing from whom? Why the burning? When did it happen?”

Even though I was just a child, my father would carefully point out that what he recounted were not mere stories, but the memories of people who had been long gone by the time I was ten-year old or so. While listening to my father's narratives, I vividly remember thinking: “But if something so frightening as burning and fleeing happened right here—in my village and the neighboring communities, how come I never heard anything about it in school, from textbooks, television, radio, or newspapers! Why nobody talks about it, except, my father?” My father's inquisitive mind as a young boy drove him to pose questions about the past to his grandfather, to elderly neighbors and relatives, and to anybody who would care to tell him a story. During the 1960s, when young Mehmed was conducting his impromptu oral history research, elderly people were still the foremost repository of knowledge about the local past. On one occasion, he heard an anecdote about “the corrupted” “Barzev hodzha”1 that went as follows: When Vŭlkossel (my village) was burning, people fled

1 Muslim religious teacher who, in those days, commanded much respect in the community.
southward—toward Greece now, from where they were passing into present-day Turkey. As they were abandoning the village in large numbers, the local hodzha implored them: “Hear me out, people! The cornfields are heavy with bread. Are you not going to harvest it? Are you leaving everything behind?” With heavy hearts, these refugees looked back. They saw their ripened crops, cast a glance at their empty homes, and faltered. Consequently, many returned to Vŭlkossel as the will to leave abandoned them. “Now,” my father would add, “this Barzev hodzha was a collaborator and he was directed by the authorities to stop the people. They knew that he was hodzha in the village and people would listen to him.”

This was the story in a nutshell. Plain enough! But it was perplexing to me. “Who were these authorities? Why was the population fleeing? When did it all happen?” My questions required answers. I needed additional information to make sense of the puzzle. The people whom I asked provided it to the best of their knowledge, obviously not quite comprehending my burning desire to know. After all, I was just a child supposed to occupy her time playing with other kids, not to ask impossible questions. “The kaurs [Christians] burned the village. People fled from them. The year was 1912th.” These answers might have been sufficient for someone with contextual knowledge or a lifetime of experience to fit the pieces together, but not for me—a child, growing up in the 1980s, amid the information blackout of the “Turkish” vŭzhroditelens protses (literally translated as revival process or rebirth). What frustrated me above all in those days, however, was not my own inability to make sense of the bits and pieces, but that the village adults—including my father—could not make them comprehensible to me. It was somewhat distressing to think that the collectivity of grown-ups either did not care to know or genuinely lacked the essential foundation of historical knowledge to have a coherent picture of the past. Sadly, it was both. What many people kept, though, were transmitted oral memories. But, to me, these were so removed from a clear timeline or factual certainty that the whole situation gave an impression of relatively recent events (as I

---

2 The forced name changing against the ethnic Turks was just taking place in 1984–1985 and it was accompanied by an active disinformation campaign, not only censoring literature, but also re-writing history to deny the existence of an ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria. For more information, see Ali Eminov, *Turkish and Other Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria* (New York: Routledge, 1997), passim. See also chapters three and four of this book.

3 *Revival process or rebirth* is the literal English translation from Bulgarian of the phrase “възродителен процес” that has become the accepted academic reference to the forced renaming of Muslims in Bulgaria by the communist regime in the 1970s and 1980s. The term *revival process or rebirth* herein is strictly used in the above sense, without direct relevance to the standard usage of the words “revival” and “process.”