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**Places to Exchange Cultural Patterns:
The Market and the “Piazza for Hired Labour” in Sofia**

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The markets are urban areas which bridge the gap between the towns and villages and where the exchange of not only goods, services and labour but also of new cultural patterns, urban lifestyle, and the “urban” modes of behavior take place. It is here that cities, in our case the Bulgarian capital, obtains everything they need in order to function normally, and at the same time changes the “intimate world” of the patriarchal village. This makes the marketplaces a highly interesting object of research as both a historical and an ethno-social phenomenon. In this brief exposition I shall concentrate on the periodic growth of the capital of Bulgaria- Sofia- within the weekly or annual calendar cycle of events via the inflow of populations from the villages around the city, such as the *Šopluk* area, and from more remote areas. My interest is directed above all towards the opportunities and the ways of accepting and acquiring urban cultural modes, and their penetration into the village life; my general hypothesis is based on previous findings that there exists a “*dramatic difference between the popular culture of Sofia on the one hand, and the traditional culture of the villages around Sofia, on the other hand*” (Georgiev 1984: 36), and that this holds true for the period beginning with the Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule (1878) until the middle of the twentieth century.

Historically, before the Liberation, Sofia was a typical garrison town in the Ottoman Empire and consisted of quarters-municipalities, which were populated on the basis of an ethno-confessional principle with centers most often around the respective cult buildings such as mosques, churches or synagogues. A special *ferman* (ordinance) of Sultan Mehmed IV of 1663 contributed to bringing together the Bulgarian Christian neighborhoods. In this *ferman* the Sultan explicitly prohibited Turks and Jews to settle in the “Bulgarian part” of the town known under the name of *Varoša* (Tahov 1987: 19). Similar to an oriental town scheme, the central part of Sofia housed the so-called “*Čaršija*” which traditionally combined craftsmen's workshops with a market place and where the roads coming into the town met. Ever since the Roman times, these roads in the Balkan countries have been main roads.

In the time before the Liberation, this *Čaršija* had actually been a real town quarter, a

neighbourhood of crafts divided after a production principle (Georgiev 1983: 45; Tahov 1987: 249): butchers (*kasapska*), shoe-makers (*papukčijska*), goldsmiths (*zlatarska*), painters (*bojadžijska*), makers of leather articles (*kožarska*), tailors (*šivaška*), and cloth-weavers (*platnarska*), or after ethnic characteristics: Jews (*evrejska*), and Greeks (*urum čaršija*). The *čaršija* was a centre for production and trade, but also a hub for the most ardent of social activities and public appearances. One of the eminent researchers of the Sofia *čaršija* Vasil Alexandrov, writes that one can find and purchase in the “*open and sheltered marketplaces of Sofia the most incredible things, beginning with a drug of doubtful medical value to very expensive decorations from abroad*” (Alexandrov 1978: 51). Dozens of years of “war” for a market section of the *čaršija* were waged between the different associations of craftsmen. For instance, there were several court disputes in the 1700's between the shoemakers and the boot-makers, ending in a reconciliation whereby it was decided that the shoemakers would sell the products of boot-makers (Tahov 1987: 254).

Beside the craft fairs, there also existed traditional market places for agricultural products for the needs of the town, the so-called market places *žitni* (corn), *konsky* (horses), and *goveždi* (cattle) markets (*pazari*). The weekly market was of prominent significance. The day on which it was organized changed several times before Liberation. Until 1862, the market was took place on Tuesday. The day was shifted by the newly elected mayor of the capital, G. Mihalkovič, to Saturday. Since the Jews' shops were closed on Saturday, the population from the villages around Sofia would come as early as Friday and gradually Fridays became the newly established market days for Sofia (Tahov 1987: 253). During the period of Ottoman rule, executions were carried out on market days on the square between the craftsmen's shops (to warn the subjects of the Empire coming into the town).

After Liberation, together with the first plan for the city of Sofia as a capital (drafted in 1879 and adopted in 1881), the traditional concentration of *čaršija* and marketplaces in the central part of the city was drastically changed. The oriental image of the city vanished. The square at the church “Sveti Kral” (today's “Sveta Nedelja”) was chosen to be the center of the city's street system, but no space in this center was reserved for any *čaršija* (Georgiev 1983: 27-28 f.). At the end of the 1880's, an accelerated process of destruction of the craftsmen's workshops and marketplaces for agricultural produce that were situated in the city center took place. The craftsmen's workshops and marketplaces were moved to the then suburbs, mainly to *Jučbunar* (along the Pirotska Street) and on both sides of the main roads coming into the town, to serve the rural population streaming into the city every Friday. The speedy growth of the capital caused changes in the way the agriculture developed around the city, that is peasants began to work for

the Sofia market. At the end of the nineteenth century, Konstantine Ireček stated: “*After Sofia was turned into the capital of the country, the peasant began getting rich through food*” (Ireček 1974: 149). In the early 20th century, aided by the efforts of gardeners from the town of Ljaskovec (Central Bulgaria) as seasonal workers, the villages around Sofia formed a vegetable belt around the city, producing mainly for the Sofia market (Bliznaška 1984: 118).

Although peasants from the neighboring villages streamed into the Sofia market to sell agricultural produce every Friday, the market was not really a place for exchanging cultural patterns of lifestyle. Irwin Sanders¹, explains this in his study of the village of Dragalevtzi (1935-36: 134): “*Even when a peasant moves about the town, it is still in a rural environment; he passes with his cart through the back streets of the town, talks predominantly with other peasants and visits preferred pubs, where he can have a talk with friends from other villages*”. Sanders draws the following conclusion: “*His (of the peasant from Dragalevtzi - P.H.) psychological world is still rural, though in the town he is surrounded by noisy trams, sounding vehicles and merrily decorated shops. Though going to town every week, he actually does not come into real contact with the ideas of the city and the urban life.*” Only a few peasants remained permanently in the town, namely the ones, who were deprived of any means of living (Whitaker 1979: 80-90). They joined the workers hired at the respective *piazzas* for hired labor.

Of greater importance for cultural exchange, to the penetration of urban ways, and the transformation of the more intimate, private spheres in the life of the traditional village are the seasonal migrations of the rural population looking for work elsewhere: the Balkan' "*gurbet*". People migrated from the mountainous western part of Bulgaria and from Eastern Serbia and Macedonia to the fast developing Bulgarian capital. The men began working there as gardeners, masons, owners of small restaurants offering “Bulgarian cuisine”, and producers of *boza*² etc. Young girls were hired as servants. I will focus on this market of hired labor and services in Sofia, its scope, its places (*piazzas*), and its terms of operation.

The importance of these seasonal migrants to the city is revealed by the fact that in an estimate provided by municipal authorities, the number of these “temporary citizens of Sofia” as in 1941 amounted to about 40-50 000 persons, almost 15% of the town's population. According to approximate data from the Commercial and industrial chamber in 1896, seasonal workers only in the area of construction (*djulgeri*, masons) amounted to 75-80% of the workers (about 2-3000 persons; Georgiev 1983: 118). In the entire period after the Liberation, men predominated among

¹ Sanders was a young teacher at the American college in the village of Simeonovo, near Sofia.

² *Boza* is thick nourishing liquid made of oats, a Balkan specialty.

those going out “to earn money” (*pečalba*), but after the 1930's, a growing number of young women and girl going to Sofia is noticeable (Georgiev 1983: 66-67). They worked mostly as housemaids and domestic servants (*sluginja*).

A larger number of those moving permanently to Sofia originated from the central regions of the Balkans. The masons came predominantly from the region of Trăn, from Radomir, and from Macedonia, while gardeners came from the regions in the Central part of Balkan mountain range (*Stara Planina*) around the towns of Liaskovec, Tărnovo, and Elena (see Georgiev 1983: 118). Much to the regret of the researchers of the period after 1878, official statistics do not take into account the seasonal workers hired for less than 6 months (Natan et al. 1969: 408). This increases the significance of the empirical data of my attempt to reconstruct the importance and scope of seasonal hired labor in the capital.

Even before 1878, the so-called “*Čir mahala*” existed in Sofia, probably named this way because of the master-masons from Debăr, Ohrid and Bitolja, who settled there and had a privileged status. They were employed to build fences, fortresses, enforcements, etc (Tahov 1987: 96, 250). The Masons’ Market (*djulgersko sborište*) was located close by. The masters-masons from the southwestern Bulgarian lands and from Macedonia brought with them not only their skills but also made their imprint on the technical and terminological specifics of the traditional construction trade, similar to the Italian stone-masons in the construction of monuments (Kovačeva-Kostadinova 1984: 124). Before 1878, however, Sofia was not the main destination of work migration (*pečalba*) for the masons from the central regions of the Balkan peninsula, in the literature not quite correctly referred to as *Šopluk*, where today the state borders of Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia meet (see Hristov 2004: 67-82). Legends were told about these master-masons who “*could nail a bug and they could split sole leather into nine sheets*” (Cvijić 1906: 194). Their destination was Istanbul, the capital of the Empire, or the then free countries of Serbia and Wallachia (*Vlaško*). As early as 1853 the report of the Austrian vice-consul in Sofia, von Martrit, published in Vienna in 1853, stated that “*the Christians citizens of the region around the town of Trăn were so poor that they could hardly pay their taxes, therefore a big part of these would leave the native places in the spring to go elsewhere and seek for opportunities to earn money in Istanbul, even Asia Minor, from where they came only as late as in the winter.*” (Mihov 1943: 331-332 f.). People told Ireček after 1878 that “*during the time of the Ottoman Empire a group of 5000 men regularly went to Serbia to work as masons in summer*”. Later, he adds: “*In the area around the town of Trăn as well as around Radomir and in Kraishte there live mason-vagrants and work in bunches of 40 to 50 persons.*” (Ireček 1976: 559). In the area of Trăn, the seasonal workers in free Serbia were called “Shumadiers” (*šumadinci*) In order

to differentiate them from “Stamboldjias” (*stamboldžii*) working in the villages surrounding the capital of the Empire (Petričev 1940: 150). In Wallachia, the masons from the region of Trăn (today in Bulgaria) and of Crna Trava (today in Serbia) used to build the so called “*bienici*”: houses of stamped/rammed earth or clay, popular especially among the Vlach population (Mironova-Panova 1971: 69-70). Legends are told about the masons from Crna Trava, how they built Belgrade, and about those from Trăn who “built” the new capital of Sofia. Every spring their groups of “*kărkavci*”³ left their homes to go abroad to earn money (“*u pečalbu*”).

The city of Sofia, newly declared as capital of Bulgaria after the Liberation, turned into a center of attraction for seasonal workers from around Trăn and Caribrod (in Bulgaria), the regions of Crna Trava, Vranje and Pirot (in Serbia) and from those regions that had remained within the borders of the Ottoman Empire in northeastern Macedonia. According to approximate data from eastern Serbia (Petrović 1920: 28) in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, about 8000 persons came to Sofia annually, 2000 of whom were from the area of Pirot⁴. In a number of villages of southeastern Serbia, up to 25% of the men were in Bulgaria “for profit” (“*u pečalbu*” = ‘to earn money’), mostly in Sofia. One estimate of the number of “people going elsewhere to earn money” gives the interesting fact that during the first decade of the twentieth century in the villages around Pirot, Bulgarian and Serbian banknotes have been used as currency on an equal basis (Petrović 1920: 28). This becomes a cause for administrative measures by the Serbian authorities. The great Serbian politician Nikola Pašić, during his forced migration after the *Zaičar Buna* (a revolt in the town of Zaichar), worked in Sofia as a construction contractor, together with Cvetko Radkov, a Bulgarian from Trăn, and they jointly created the Town Garden of Sofia (Hristov 2003b: 113-120).

The capital was “over-run” with masons from around Trăn who built a number of large buildings in Sofia around the Central *Hali* (roofed bazaar), the Central Post Office, the Theological Academy, the Bricks Factory, the Spirits Factory in Knjaževo, the Leather Factory and at many other sites (Mironova-Panova 1971: 76). The master-builders from *Znepole* (region of Trăn) built private houses and public buildings not only in Sofia but also in the surrounding villages in the Sofia plain (Krăstanova 1984: 269). However, in the capital itself, the builders from Trăn, Radomir and Debăr gradually left aside their traditional techniques and began acquiring the new professional architectural and construction techniques and skills which they had

³ Dialect name for “crane”, used for seasonal workers from Serbia and Bulgaria, cf. Nikolić 1912: 231, Mironova-Panova 1971: 65.

⁴ Excluding the villages around Caribrod (today Dimitrovgrad, Serbia), which until 1919 was within the Bulgarian borders.

taken over from the first foreign professionals⁵, who had established workshops in the town as early as 1880 (Georgiev 1983: 188).

Together with masons from Trăn, the most famous master and construction contractors in Sofia at the end of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century were those from Macedonia (Petrović 1920: 28). The route from Macedonia to Sofia via Kriva Palanka has, by contemporaries, deservedly been given the name “the Road of the profiteers” (“*Pečalbarski drum*”), because every spring more than 10 000 men from Macedonia earned their living away from home, traveling along this road to the Bulgarian capital (Cvijić 1906: 197). From the villages around Kriva Palanka in Macedonia alone there came about 3000 male migrants (Petrov 1896: 593). Together with construction workers, the male laborers from Macedonia developed a number of other crafts in Sofia, such as bread-baking, *boza*-making, *halva*⁶-making, etc. They were also the first to abandon the traditional forms of labor organization, the so-called “*jurija*”, of safeguarding a territory of their own and of grouping together in “*tajfa*”. As early as the late 1880's, a number of observers ascertain that the masons from Debar had stopped working collectively, influenced by “*ill understood individualism*” (Georgiev 1983: 118). The market for construction workers, which appeared without any organization, made it possible to avoid the restrictions on craftsmen's groups. As early as in the 1880's, the “Mason's piazza” (*djulgerska piazza*) began to function in an unorganized manner at square Trapezica Square, the workers finding a shelter in the winter months in the surrounding pubs and cafes, especially in café “Loza”. In the period between the two world wars, the *Piazza* moved without any special organization to Văzraždane Square, where some 500-600 men gathered every day (Georgiev 1983: 55).

The close relation between the seasonal workers' *gurbet* (temporary labor migration), especially that of the masons, the sharing of the life of the urban population, and acquisition of urban ways and new cultural patterns becomes obvious when we follow the growth of the capital. In most cases, the directions of the seasonal labor also mark the later migration flows and/or the road of the immigrants to the big city after the political changes in the Balkans following the Congress of Berlin, the Balkan Wars and the First World War. After various population exchanges between Bulgarian, Serbian and Macedonian territories, people with a pro-Serbian went to Serbia and those with a pro-Bulgarian orientation moved to Bulgaria (Cvijić 1906: 197; Hristov 2003-A: 233). The census of the late 1920s shows that the main flow of migrants after the First World War came to Sofia (a total of 24076 persons) from Aegean Macedonia (32,8%) and

⁵ The German and Austrian architects Landen, Handek, Brang etc.

⁶ *Halva* is made of sunflower seeds, the Oriental specialty.

from Vardar Macedonia (48,9%). In the city, these families soon established effective network of relatives and fellow-citizens for mutual support. Both the immigrants from Macedonia and those from the Trăn/Pirot region formed urban neighborhoods: those from around Veles and Prilep in *Razsadnika*; those from around Strumica and Maleševo in *Banišora*, and those from Bulgarian villages in Yugoslavia after 1919 in the *Caribrod* quarter, while people from around Trăn settled in *Krasno Selo*, *Nadežda* and around *Zaharna Fabrika*. Accordingly, the census shows high proportions of people born outside the capital: 93,7% in Krasno Selo, 86,1% in Nadežda, 85,7% in Knjaževo, and 69,8% in Malaševci (Georgiev 1983: 74, 90, 387).

The gender specifics of the seasonal migrations can be best followed during the harvest period, when girls and young women took up agricultural work (“*slizane na Rumänja*”- ‘the descent to the fields’) or showed up at the Housemaids' Market (“*pazar na sluginite*”), as has been described in memoirs. Men’s seasonal labor “*from early spring until late autumn*” usually took the form of hired labor of (mostly) married men whose families stayed in their native places to maintain the poor agriculture. The female variant of seasonal hired labor was exclusively agrarian: girls and young women came for the harvest from the *Šopluk* villages in the mountains (where the wheat ripens a bit later, around the religious holiday of *Bogorodica*- ‘Holy Mother’, August 15), led by their *dragomanin* (interpreter). They came to the villages in the Sofia plain around Saint Peter's Day (*Petrovden*). The largest groups of women came from the mountain villages around the towns of Godeč and Dragoman (Krăstanova 1984: 268; Marinov 1984: 271-281). This seasonal work was particularly popular in the village of Vakarel (Gunčev 1931: 188).

After the 1920s and 1930s, due to the intensification of agriculture and the introduction of new agricultural machines, the seasonal movement of women for harvesting gradually diminished. Shortly before the Balkan war and the First World War and mostly during the interwar period, another form of temporary labor materialised and intensified: village girls were hired as housemaids (*sluginja*) in wealthy urban families. This became an important moment in the life cycle of village families and in the socialization of the village girls from the *Šopluk* region. The girls, aged 9-15 years, were hired mainly from the western mountainous areas of Bulgaria and from the agrarian areas near Sofia, Vakarel and Samokov.

After the First World War, the Housemaids' Market (*pazar na sluginite*) becomes an important factor in the urban life of the capital. The market was organized twice a year for a period of two weeks, around *Gergjovden* (St. George's Day in the early May) and around *Dimitrovden* (St. Dimitri's Day in the fall). In the beginning it took place on Sveti Kral Square and later on Trapezica Square, where in the rest of the year the *Piazza* for the construction workers (*djulgerska piazza*) took place (Georgiev 1983: 55). The girls, who were too young to

get married, were brought and contracted for housemaids at the “market” by their parents, most often by their mothers who also received the money for the girls’ labor (mainly house and kitchen work). This money was used to prepare the dowry for the future bride (see Hristov 2002: 31-32). When the girls reached the age of 15-16, they were taken back to the village to get married. According to the information of my respondents, it was very rare that girls stayed on to live in the city and marry into urban families. Successful marriages took place in the village, and that was the end of the young women becoming familiar with the urban way of life. But what was learned from the landlady (*gospoža*) in the city was taken to the village: recipes for cooking, patterns of house keeping and nursing children, and sometimes urban ways of dressing and social etiquette. While Constantin Ireček (1899: 97) noted that to the villagers around Sofia (in “*Šopluk*”), in the late 19-th century “*Gospoža*” meant “Holy Mother”, in the 1930's the word already referred to the “landlady” in the city.

The changes in Bulgarian society after the end of the Second World War and the imposing of Soviet-type socialism deeply changed all cultural patterns and modes of behavior in the village and in the city. The collectivization of agriculture changed “the model of the world” for the Bulgarian peasant and destroyed their traditional patriarchal lifestyle. As one of my respondents from the *Graovo* region (in central western Bulgaria) said: “*The world, my son, degraded after the time of the collectivization in the village. Never before would a man go to the field to work with other men’s wives!*” The image of the Bulgarian capital changed fundamentally, but this is a topic for another discussion.

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