

## Chronicling Ephtim D.'s Disappearance

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До старите балъци: Не сме ние виновни че сте грозни, кърави, глупави.

To the old suckers: It is not our fault that you are hideous cockeyed dunces.

Graffiti on the wall of an apartment building in Lozenets, Sofia<sup>1</sup>

Many films of post-communism made across the countries of Eastern Europe show cities and villages populated by the elderly and chronicle the gradual disappearance of the previous generation. These 'Oldies' are the former fully-fledged builders of communism. Now marginalised and mocked, they are well aware that the only thing society expects of them is to quietly fade away. The final days of these people is, more or less, what this unassuming work of Bulgarian visual anthropology zooms on.

*A Month in the Life of Ephtim D.* (Месец от живота на Евтим Д., 1999, Antony Donchev), a one-hour long film, is produced by the Association for Balkan Anthropology, financed by the World Bank (with the respective disclaimer that they do not necessarily endorse anything in the film), and realised under the supervision of veteran visual anthropologist Asen Balikci.

The film follows around, from November 5<sup>th</sup> to December 5<sup>th</sup> 1998, a Bulgarian pensioner based in Sofia — Ephtim Dechev, and his silent wife, Ginka. It comes with English

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<sup>1</sup> I first came across this graffiti in 2013. It was still there in 2020.

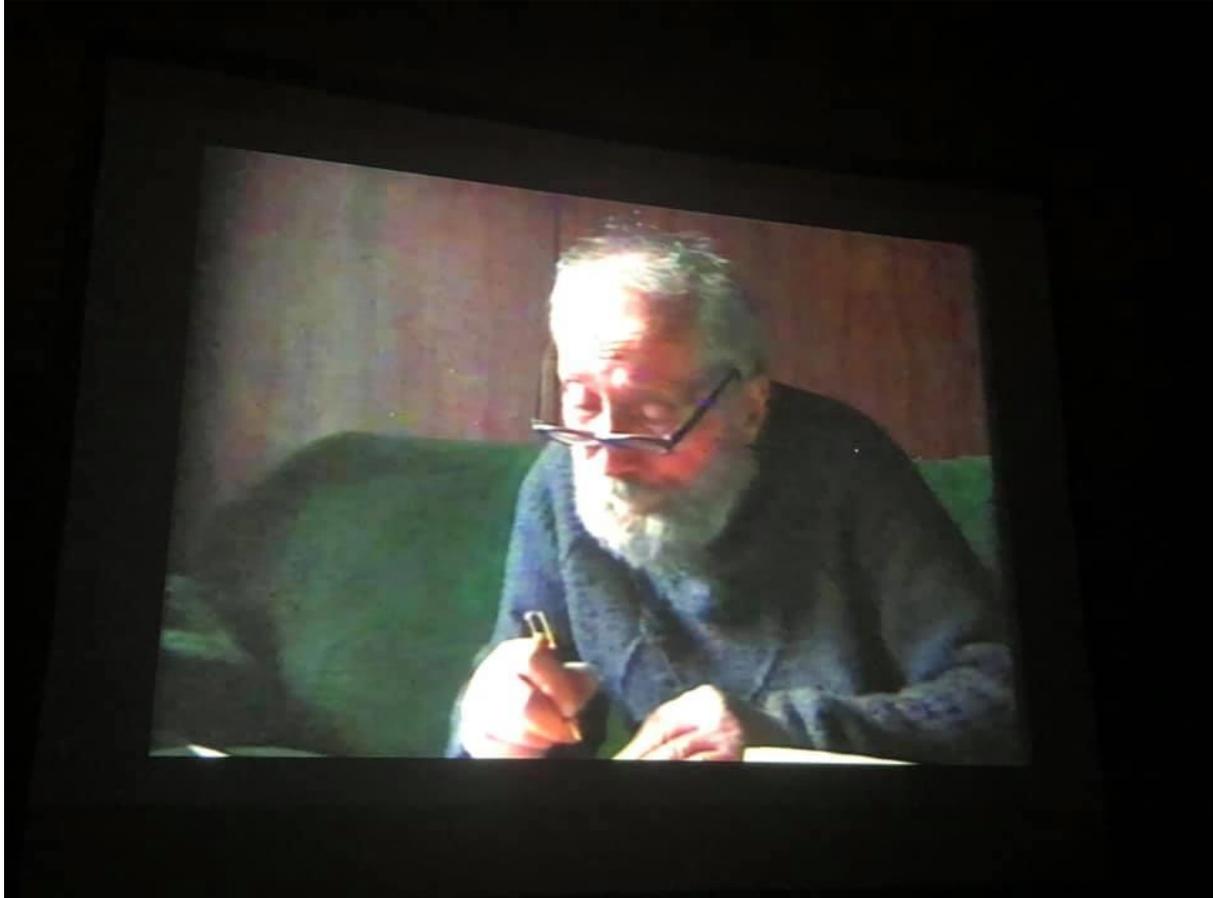
voiceover commentary by Balikci, which elaborates matter-of-factly whilst abstaining from assessing, as per the methods of ethnography.

Born in the 1930s, Ephtim came to Sofia from the northern village of Russalya in 1959 and stayed. He became a member of the communist party, and still is. Initially he had an office job but later on became a postman and worked in that capacity for many years, until retirement. An ordinary character, his only quirk was wearing long hair and a beard. And he once wrote a letter to the Soviet official daily *Pravda*, reporting how nice life in Bulgaria was. At the time of filming, both he and his wife have been retired for some years.

The film's subject is chronicling the life in dignified poverty that largely summed up the situation of pensioners after the end of state socialism. The previous systems of social support vanished with the disappearance of the socialist system whilst new patterns of social security took time to come into place. Health care, disability, maternity — all areas were affected, but the pensioners probably were the worst hit. For the many years of their contribution to society, they were downgraded to living under the poverty line and could only survive if they make themselves very small and if they manage to find support networks. As Ephtim and his wife are shown to have done.

About a third of the film is taken by detailed descriptions of the costs of things and how one goes about living in a context where most goods have become unaffordable to pensioners. The couple no longer care about inflation as all their savings are gone anyhow. But at least they are not handicapped nor destitute as some of the old friends Ephtim will be seen visiting. Luckily, they have a place to live, even though they have had to turn off the central heating as it is no longer affordable. Ephtim is shown as a man who is in control of his life mainly as he

is keeping tight control of his finances — with everything being tightly calculated and accounted for, to reduce the stress of poverty.



Ephtim and Ginka had two children, son and daughter. The son married and had three children of his own, then prematurely died in a freak accident.<sup>2</sup> The daughter married an Orthodox priest, and they have two children. All family live in Sofia, albeit in different parts, so they are not able to get together very much. The daughter drops in occasionally, however, and her assistance is a godsend. As most other pensioners, Ephtim and Ginka also rely on the occasional aid provided by the Red Cross. The family ties and the social assistance from

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<sup>2</sup> The son of Niki Ardelean, the retired protagonist of Lucian Pintilie's *Niki and Flo* (2003), has also died under similar circumstances.

international organisations proves crucial in a context where their means of life are minimal. It is the tradition in Bulgaria that elderly parents are taken in by the children to be cared for until they pass. The prospect of going to a care home is dreaded and unacceptable, and generally regarded as an abject humiliation. The belief is that old people are vulnerable to ill treatment if in care home, and why would they want to be amidst strangers, especially if they have their own children...For the younger generation caring for the elderly is a matter of saving face, even if done reluctantly.

The couple's household income comes to some \$66US per month (\$43 from Ephtim's pension and \$23 from Glinka's pension); their monthly fixed expenses are set at \$45, which leaves them with \$21 for food and everything else. It is a tall order, so the film spends quite a bit of time following Ephtim around on his shopping trips to the market where he searches for bargains. One of the most meticulously photographed trips is his monthly pilgrimage to the central market where he is seen buying a kilogram of feta cheese. Later on, Ginka is shown cutting this down into 16 identical pieces, which she then stores — each piece to be used over two days.

They still have access to health care, free of charge for basics, as long as there is no need to go to a hospital (which all pensioners fear and regard as a dangerous place where people are bound to get infected and die). Ephtim monitors his health as frequently as permitted. The medication prescriptions, even if relatively healthy, make for the second-largest expense of the household and come to about 20% of the family's total income.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In the years prior to my mother's passing in 2015, the prices for medications had risen even further and, in her case, the monthly spend on prescriptions regularly came to an amount larger than the pension of 270 lv. she was receiving for her 35 year-long professional service.



In all aspects, making oneself smaller and leaving quietly is what is expected of pensioners. Ephtim does not actively resist the scenario of inobtrusive disappearance that is proposed to him. Yet he likes going to the park where he spends time singing and chatting with old buddies and attending various protest in open airs as well as ‘вечеринки’ — evening gatherings with comrades where Soviet songs of their youth are sung in sing-along commemorations of the anniversary of the Great October Communist Revolution of 1917, or articles in the communist newspaper *Duma* are discussed. It is a self-contained social life that exists in parallel and does not overlap or intersect with the new life out there. A life that is to expire softly.

Several destitute old people are also featured in the film, as part of Ephtim’s routine visit — a female amputee and an 86-year-old former lawyer in need of basic assistance. Everyone

around is old. One of the typical features in daily life of pensioners are the street protests — free to attend, a social opportunity, often evolving in front of the National Theatre or down Sofia’s central strip (“жълтите павета”) near the National Assembly building. At these rallies, the former communists (of which Ephtim, who comes from a family of an anti-fascist resistance fighters, is one) are the best-organised and most vocal. But there are also the religious pensioners, with their newly found freedom to discussing spiritual matters publicly. The film also shows instances where both groups interconnect: ‘All true Christians are communists’, an elderly woman shout. What do they protest about? About their treatment, which they call ‘pensioners’ genocide,’ about their economic conditions, and substandard support and health care. The elderly are shown as one of the most politically active groups, voting in elections and engaging in democratic events, as well as banging their spoons on empty pans during these protests.<sup>4</sup>

Ephtim and Ginka still have one more chance left to improve their financial outlook: they could enter a *viager* agreement. This French approach to buying risky real estate from ageing owners who get to stay in their homes and be paid small maintenance until their passing seems to be available to them. It is a gamble for the buyer who has to put up with the uncertainty of how long the elderly owner may live. Ephtim, however, would not consider selling his property out of fear of being swindled — as he knows is often the case with the elderly in the context of “this crazy democracy.”

The situation with Ephtim (and, generally speaking, with the elderly of postcommunism), is one big *viager*. No one will round them up, but they will know it is better for everybody if

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<sup>4</sup> Argentinian documentarian Fernando Solanas, known as the father of Third cinema, uses similar scenes of protesting Latin American elderly in his *La Dignidad de los nadie* (*The Dignity of the Nobodies*, 2005).

they vacate the house, sooner rather than later. For now, they are kept at survival level and can last longer if they make themselves very, very small — as the protagonists of this film do.<sup>5</sup>

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When, in 2019, I put together a small programme of Balikci's versatile work for the Astra documentary festival in Romania, I insisted that we include this film as well — even if 20 years old I thought it would be of interest to local Romanian viewers as it was set in a similar post-communist context. And indeed, those who attended the screening all confirmed afterwards: 'It is all the same here...'

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## POST SCRIPTUM/ПОСЛЕСЛОВИЕ

*A Month in the Life of Ephtim D.* (1999) is available from Educational Documentary Resources (<https://store.der.org/a-month-in-the-life-of-ephtim-d-p635.aspx>), RAI Film (<https://raifilm.org.uk/films/a-month-in-the-life-of-ephtim-d/>) and Alexander Street

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<sup>5</sup> Deljana Iossifova's sociological study of Bulgaria's elderly depicts a very similar picture. See Iossifova, Deljana, *Translocal Ageing in the Global East: Bulgaria's Abandoned Elderly*. Palgrave, 2020.

[https://search.alexanderstreet.com/preview/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cvideo\\_work%7C764392](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/preview/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C764392)).

I met Asen Balikci in 1991 at his home in Montreal. At the time he had just retired after an illustrious career as founder and chair of the Anthropology department at UQAM; he enjoyed the reputation of one of the founders of the discipline of visual anthropology and was legendary for his work among the Netsilik Eskimos in the 1960s. We became friends and stayed in touch over the years. I would see him occasionally when I would visit Sofia where he had settled. In his late years he did some occasional work in Bulgaria, where he remains largely unknown, but also continued working around the globe and particularly in the Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim, India, where his daughter Anna is based. I have written about his life and work in 'The Professional Foreigner: Asen Balikci (1929-2019),' *Astra Film Festival*, Sibiu, Romania, October 2019. pp. 50-60. The text of this essay is also available from [Dinaview.org](http://Dinaview.org)

The film about Ephtim links, in my mind, with another film that shows weak and underpaid Bulgarians that are encouraged to endure and not make much noise -- Krassimir Terziev's *Battles of Troy* (2005). At a first glance, the two films do not have anything in common, as Terziev's film chronicles the litanies of a group of young Bulgarian men recruited as extras on the production of Brad Pitt's vehicle *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004). Even if I cannot exactly put my finger on it, I think these two films associate in my mind as both are showing people who have found themselves in denigrating financial and moral circumstances yet manage to keep dignified superiority.