

My children haven't stolen the bell, no, darling, never ever.

I am telling you this as if you were my daughters.

- Elena, the mother of Pavel (who hung himself in prison and who is rumoured to have stolen the bell).

Pavel is the name of my son. They called for him about the bell; was it three or four guys? And Rosen, too. And so the two got beaten up. My son, we put potatoes on his back... And the children said: 'We haven't stolen the little be, not us.' When they take something, they admit to it there. We know the militia, it's always against us, and we tell them like this: 'Hey, people, we are humans, too. We are not dogs, right? When the children steal, then yes, we tell you: 'Well, he's taken this, he's stolen that,' but we tell you now – no and no.

The children got a thrashing for nothing. Now can you carry a bell like this in your hands, now tell me! It's not small, we know this, it's big. It's taken a car, three-four guys, all's done. No one has seen, no one has watched. And then they come here... One of the policemen said it himself: 'It might be others who steal, but we come to you again...' It can't be like this. Others steal, and

They got released, but so what? The children became like wild lambs... I am so sorry for my son. It still hurts me so bad that they thrashed him for nothing. And this can't be the way, darling. Right now you caught me in such a moment, it's either for food or this and that, let's say. Well, I am hungry and I've taken something, either bread, or something else. I am hungry, and so should I get a beating again? Do you know what people do in Sofia? They break in to steal food, and if they get caught, they say: 'We are hungry, that's all...'

And we are here, the old people, here is my husband, Yuri, me... The youth, let's say, make mistakes, you know. We tell them: 'You won't steal, will you?'

And the bell – no never. No, no, no, no.

Pavelcho was in prison because he ran from the army. And in the morning, as you know, we are tinning, and we left a bottle of gas on the window sill. And he took a sip and collapsed by the door. And the militia came and saw him. I said: 'Hey, what are you looking at? Why don't you take him to hospital?' They took him, loaded him into the car and drove him to Mihailovgrad. And he stayed there a day or two and then got sent back for having run away for one day because of his wife.

That's how my son died...

.....

Three men were accused (of the theft). Pavel, Rosen, Dako, my son-in-law; he had my daughter. She died. Now he cannot live here because he is nobody to me. Three men were accused.

They were summoned and questioned one by one: 'Hey, children, if you've taken the bell, tell us where you've left it, what you've done with it.' 'We haven't taken the bell. We don't even know about it. It's a big thing, how can we carry it? It's not us.' And then came the thrashing... First this boy, then the other boy... And when I tell you: we are people, just like you are people. When I tell you – no, it's not me, it's like you tell me – no, it's no me. And they gave such a thrashing to the children that I still hurt. Everything inside me hurts for my son.

How long did they keep them in prison?

They kept them for a day, just that, but this day equalled for a whole year, in Varshets.

And then?

They got released, but the people were nearly dead. We peeled potatoes and arranged potato slices on him. Well, I am telling that... Oh, what can I say... It still hurts me.

Yes, it's our children. See now, it's true that they were hungry, but we – the older ones – told them: 'No thefts. Go to that man and ask him for two leva. He'll give you. And when the man comes and says: 'Give me back my two leva,' you'll say: 'Uncle, I have none,' no one is gonna come to trash you.' And the children understood, but as to the bell no, no, no, never our children. For the bell and for the rakia distiller, too, it was with cars, my dear, it wasn't one man to come and demolish the wall and take the distiller. The distiller is rather big. We have one in our village, too, so we know what a distiller is. It was three-four men, a car. They loaded and left. That's it.

Do people say who it was? Are they from the area?

No, no, there are some people who pass by here, in our village, to look for walnuts. He hasn't come once, because we told him we have no walnuts. And today he will pass by again. This man can't be if he doesn't have a look for himself...

It's not our people. But we have no Gypsies, we are two houses here: here's my son's, others and from here onwards it's only Bulgarians.

These are people from other places, darling. It might be Gypsies, but from somewhere far away. He went there, sold the bell, sold the rakia distiller. Why didn't he get caught for so many years? We have policemen, we have this and that, don't we? So why didn't he get caught? And they steal with the rascals.

Why did one policeman steal cigarettes, why? Huh, let's talk this way and that way. Okay, we steal because we are hungry, but the police who have so much money, why did he go to steal cigarettes...

You say that you steal because you are hungry? What do you steal?

Nothing. Well, we steal from the shop. Now, the other day I got a 100 leva pension. I bought sunflower oil, sugar, potatoes, beans, we have meat from the pig. That's it, sister. What else do I need to steal? No, no, there is no such thing with us. And my husband, Pavel, he won't pick a plum.

Everyone talks like this about him.

So, do you see how they talk, that he is honest.

But not about the rest. What's your explanation?

My explanation is because we have gardens here. Where we plant things. And Bulgarians steal from each other. And say: 'It's the Gypsies.' So how does this happen? It's not us. Bulgarians steal, my apologies for insulting you, but I don't meant you, I mean our Bulgarians here. I had gardens down there, a neighbour, you know, because I didn't go into her garden, she came into my garden and was plucking the leek. Come on now, say she is a Bulgarian. I went to the Council to tell the mayor and the mayor said: 'Elena, tell me now what can we do with her? Come on!' So far, he hasn't done anything about her. So Bulgarians steal more than Gypsies, just bear this in mind, that's it, sister.

I am trying to understand why people say: 'It's the Gypsies from Dolna Bela Rechka who stole the bell.'

And do you know why? Because they probably saw the police taking them to the police station and that's why. *(said by her son sitting next to her)*

I also know the people who've told you, but they should have watched out. If the bell was brought here, let's say, after all people could see. But when the militia came here, they thought he had stolen I don't know what...

As to the bell, no, my darling, never. I am telling you this as if you were my daughters. I have three daughters just like you.

Everything I've told you so far, nothing is a lie. Because I love you. Everything I said, nothing is a lie.

The village, Dako, says that our children are stealing. Well, they may have sinned at times, now it can't be otherwise, but for these things, no. Didn't they say that our church was robbed, too... Now, there are no icons, no nothing, just a table where the dead are placed, and that's it.

How are you money-wise, how do you support yourselves?

I receive a pension of 102 leva, my husband gets 80. And for taking care of my daughter's two orphans I get 72 leva each, this is our support. And we don't eat much so that there's food forever.

You plant potatoes, onions. I have 7-8 rows, you plant beans, cucumbers, and what's there more to it. We slaughtered the pig last winter, and it still lasts. We have lambs, kids.

It hurts me a lot how they speak of our family because these children pass through here, everyone passes through this yard, they go empty-handed, they come back empty-handed...

When were you born?

In day time.

What date?

No year, no date. When I go to get my money, and when they start asking me when I was born. Give me the money, I was born in day time. They start laughing. Well, you can laugh if you want.

And do you know when your children were born?

No, God! I don't put it down. One has to be literate, I can't write, nor read, nor remember when this child was born. I know when Pavel was born, on January 13th, but I don't know the date.

How come you remember?

Because we celebrate on this day.

***The story of Pavel's death:
Lilyana, a daughter-in-law to Elena***

Pavel is my brother-in-law... It was 16-17 years ago, it's 14 years since he died. Pavcho ran from the army, you know, and his wife was staying at my mother-in-law's. And she ran away with the husband of my sister-in-law, and got married. And he found out about this in the army, in Pleven, and ran away, and came here and was hiding. And they sentenced him for deserting the army. And they said he hung himself in prison, but was this the truth? His wife ran away with the husband of his sister, she has 2-3 children from him.

They called to say he hung himself... It was a month later or so. And the mayor said: 'I got a phone call from Pleven that you son hung himself, to go and collect him.' They took a car from here... But did he hang himself, did he get beaten up? When they brought him, our men noticed that his fingers were broken, blue, almost snapped in two. When a man hangs himself – I saw one man in our neighbourhood who hung himself, I was young, I wasn't married – afterwards he was blue here, around the neck, when they took him off the ropes. While Pavcho didn't have anything here, on the neck, only one blue stripe at the back of his head...

Elena: And this stripe with an iron stick from the back and all's done.

Well, there is God, and we don't know for sure, but we can imagine, because Pavcho was probably hit with something and if he placed his hand to protect himself, he got his fingers broken...

There was no one to investigate, to call a forensic pathologist. We know our rights... but back then in this tragedy, in this horror, there was simply no one who could do this, so that's how things were left... The first day we brought him, the second day we buried him and that's how it was... Then, the military from Pleven came over. They called my mother- and father-in-law to the police station, showed them pictures of the drop, how they took picture of it, they've seen it, I haven't... When we went to Vidin – I have a sister-in-law who is married there – and we went to visit them. It happened so that there were some of his friends there, they had gathered to celebrate a birthday. There were some boys there. And when we started talking about our family

and we mentioned Pavcho, one of the boys came forward and said that they were together in the army, and added: 'He didn't hung himself, he was beaten up.'

Elena: I had a dream how he was thrashed by three men, from the big wigs, not from the rest.

There is simply no one to confirm this, there are ways, but now it's too late.

Back then, we were small children. If this happens now at the age I am, I know my rights, I can already reason...

Elena: Well, we went then to the judge in Pleven. He said: 'Whom shall we sentence? Look at the photos.' My son cannot hang himself. I've entered there, there is nothing to tie a rope to, to hang yourself. You can't do it on the ceiling, there is nothing there. I entered into the room, there was nothing. 'You've killed him, all right,' and that's what I said to the judge. 'He was alive when I gave him to you, and I want to see him at the table. Why are you showing me these dead photos...'

Well, and supposedly we were the uneducated, we were the stupid people...

12th April, 2008, in a conversation with Diana, Mariana, Albena, Lea, in the village of Dolna Bela Rechka