

**The old-time Gypsies were good.
- Aunt Penka, Dolna Bela Rechka.**

When were you born?

1939.

And since you were born, you remember the bell that it was here?

Oh ... yeah, then, much later it was stolen, we were in Sofia maybe.

And did you go to this bell; did you go closer to it?

I did.

What was the occasion?

We were playing; we were having a chase as children.

Did you touch it, did you toll it?

No, never. We were so to say moral children. We weren't like today's children who try out everything...

And who tolled the bell?

There was one granny Bona, she tolled the bell. She was also a herbalist, being a more progressive granny. We were playing there. And the bell was so very beautiful, it was hanging up there like a sheep-bell, but still it was rather big.

And when they tolled it, we could hear it here ... When there is a bell here, we cannot hear it, we can't hear it now either...

The one here, in the church, you can hear it only if you are somewhere outside (in Dolna Bela Rechka)... But the previous one definitely had a very beautiful ring. And people came up, ready to steal it.

Do you remember what colours it had?

It seems it was in grey and white. How is this colour called...? It's not copper, it was more to the bronze, white... but I was a child.

I think it was mounted, it was like on four uplifted tree-trunks, with a roof, and it rocked so, when it rang, and it tolled... It was beautiful, but this is... See how many things have been ruined...

Did you touch it? Did you come close to it?

I didn't, because I was small and it was hung high up. There was a tiny rope in the middle. Never a child dared to toll the bell without permission. It was locked, that's how I remember

it, with small planks. You cannot see from the road, you can only see that there is something. And otherwise, when you get inside, one could enter from the upper side, not from the road...

What do you remember most clearly about the bell?

In Gorna Rechka, on the side of the bell, the first house above the road, there was one granny Igluka, she was a seamstress. She wanted so much to adopt me, now when I see those for adoption... and I feel like crying at times, because she started telling me: 'I will make you a new dress.' There were a lot of people. 'I will buy you new shoes. I will take care of you better than your mother.' And my mother said: 'If she wants you, take her.' She adopted later one girl, they all died and she died, too...

Now there are houses, but no people. It always stays closed. When a man dies here, the house is locked up, and no one comes.

So I was standing in front of her while she was promising to buy me this and that, and as soon as my mother left, I ran away... What a thing! Let her have more, let her promise me, I will go where I've grown up... And today I thought – once your childhood is over, it's not easy to shake it off. I have been later to other places, I've had the opportunity, but in my consciousness there is only this – my childhood. It's very important how the child lives up to a certain age. So we are without luck...

Why without luck?

Because we were left without a father.

I got married very young. And I got married in three days. Because I had no father, my mother was very poor, my classmates went to Varshets to study, and I didn't have this opportunity, because there was no one to support me. It was necessity to take wood, to pay for rent, textbooks, clothes... And so I stayed. And I went to one village, a neighbouring one to see some acquaintances, and I went back and my husband caught up with me and told me directly let's get married. And I thought that this was the way out.

Hadn't you met before that?

No, I didn't know him. I was trying to enrol there was one school for machines and tractors. I love driving a car, but there wasn't the guy to enrol me, and so I didn't manage, and I came back desperate because all went to school, and this was at state expenses... it was nothing, at the Ministry of Transport and Communications, you become a tractor-driver or something.

I wanted him, I loved him, but it didn't go into my head what this meant for a woman, I was young, 15 years old... And when I came back desperate, without any desire, and I had a step-father, he had come to my mother, he came on his own, I remember him like it was today: 'I am gonna look after your children. Mine are big. You won't have any problems.' And I couldn't accept this man, not having a father, there was no man at home. The guy was very good to me, but I couldn't accept him and I felt embarrassed by him. So when Ivan proposed to get married, and I said to myself: 'Let's, my salvation has come.' And we got married in three days. I didn't have full 16 years. Like Gypsies. And it wasn't easy, but there was nowhere to go. Here people are more different, they have a father, a mother.

People say the bell was stolen by Gypsies from Dolna Bela Rechka. Do you know them?

I know them, they talk like this.

Do you think we can go to them and talk?

Well... nothing can impede you, why not go and talk... I think they won't tell you it was them...

But this is what people say, and this is what you know?

I've heard this. But they won't ever confess, in my view.

Do people talk about them, do they steal other things?

Absolute rascals... everyone knows Yuri's son, but we think they get protected. They have something together with the police, because the police do absolutely nothing to them. Absolutely nothing. And it might be not them. It might be other people. But because they are these people who do these things, stealing, it might be them. No one has witnessed. When you don't see the man, you may talk, but I am sure, they will say 'no', they'll deny.

I don't have much to do with the Gypsies, I don't know them... There used to be Gypsies before, but not like these, they weren't thievish. We lived with them like with Bulgarians. They worked for us. She was spinning, she would come saying: 'Give me something to tin, give me something to spin, you know, something to dig,' but honestly, without thefts. Now these people here, one woman came from Berkovitsa... Pavel, the husband, he is from this family, the honest one, because he really works and I haven't heard anything about him. He is scything, digging the vineyards. The man is hard-working, while the rest – nothing! His wife does nothing. She says: 'Hey you, dirty Gypsy, what have you brought me?' She wants to have no work, he should bring... Since this woman came, since they gave birth to all these children, the whole village is on fire... They said she is from a very thieving family, that's how she has brought up her children.

The old-time Gypsies were good while these now...

9th March, 2008, in conversation with Diana, Nikolai.