

## IN SEARCH OF THE LOST SOUND

*The story we are sending is a story of search. For traces and signs, for people and memories, for stories and versions. In the course of one month, we, a team of students from the French Language School Antoine de Saint Exupéry in Plovdiv, together with our Bulgarian language teacher Tsvetelina Draganova, sought to see and hear the places and faces behind the statistical data provided by the District Police Directorate. According to these statistics, since 1989 there have been 7 registered cases of stolen church bells on the territory of the Directorate. To the case in the village of Gradina we were directed by the curators of the Historical Museum in Plovdiv. It was also from them that we heard, for the first time, about the family of the hereditary bell-casters Veleganovs. In the meantime, Plovdiv Bishopric gave an official answer to our inquiry to the effect that there was no information about bells being stolen but it 'calls down God's blessing on us' and 'remains' our 'supplicant'.*

*The routes and the succeeding words, which follow next, are travelled over and recorded by **Tsvetelina Angelova, Ganka Peykovska, Marinela Dinkova and Lilia Anastasova** – all of them 11<sup>th</sup> graders at the French Secondary School.*

### The Case of 'Sahattepe'

*Sahattepe is one of the hillocks in Plovdiv famous for its Clock Tower which commands a beautiful panorama of the city. The earliest evidence of the tower dates back to 1623, it was built in its present form in 1812 and it is 17.5 m high. In 1883, a new big Viennese clock was placed in the tower. The clock bell is the work of engineer G. Limonov – an heir to the renowned bell-casters Veleganovs. According to police information, the bell was stolen in 2001. Climbing up the hillock, we heard the sound of the bell but the tower itself was locked up. The near-by technical service could not tell us anything with regard to the bell, so we asked the people living at the foot of the hillock.*

#### **S n e z h a n a D i m o v a:**

To be honest, I hear it from you, I don't know of such a thing, nor have I realised. Well, what's the sound of the bells for me?... There was a period of time when it was pleasant, very pleasant. What can I tell you? I grew up here – I spent my childhood, my youth here, I walked my dog here. We used to play and slide down these rocks. When the bells chimed for Easter – both up on the hillock and down in the city, we opened our windows and listened, and one felt glad. And up the hillock it was full of people. I also went up there, but now I don't dare any more...

This modern time brings evil. Now it's only drug-addicts up there. Huh, I don't like it, this damn modern time! Now the bell chimes once every half an hour and every full hour, to indicate the time.

And maybe it isn't the Gypsies; we have all become evil... One can steal a bell out of evilness, out of poverty. And such an arduous toil – to be honest, I am at a loss. My advice is to turn to Sasho Dyakov – his house is here, opposite mine, he grew up here and he was mayor of the Central Region. During his term of office the bell was stolen, and thanks to him it was restored. Ask him, he'll tell you.

Do you know, there is one boy, his name is Kamen, probably you know him? He carries around the stuff of the painters by the excavation works. He is a day labourer; he also helps to the people in the neighbourhood. In the evenings, when I go out to have a smoke, I hear him playing a small whistle, every evening he goes up the hillock. Ask him, he should know.

**Dr. Elena Dyakova**, Alexander Dyakov's wife:

I don't know anything, I haven't heard of the bell being stolen, but I will give you my husband's telephone. If anybody knows anything, it would be him.

*(Note: In a phone conversation, Mr. Dyakov expresses willingness to meet and to share interesting facts about the history of the tower, but he cannot remember the bell's theft.)*

**A man** who is cleaning the grass nearby:

I am from here, yes, but I know nothing, I haven't heard, I don't know of such a case. *(He continued working.)*

**Kamen** who was mentioned by Snezhana Dimova:

To be honest, I don't know that the bell was once stolen, but I can tell you who it was, I know them well. There are those Roma, three of them, they are like twins; they keep on hanging around, stealing, they have robbed the whole neighbourhood. And they don't work alone; they have accomplices in the police, arrangements with the scrap metal merchants, those Gypsies. I know them very well, those three – short, disgusting vagabonds, one of them has a scar on the face, as if by a burning. I will even show you how they act, all is clear to me.

*(He led us into his yard and showed us where, in his opinion, they climb down and enter to start stealing.)*

Last year was the last time I climbed up the hillock when I was feeding a bitch with her puppies; I was taking care of her. But I don't go up anymore. This used to be my and my girlfriend's favourite hillock, but I don't go up there anymore. She is to blame because she left me. *(He smiled.)* I find it pleasant to hear the bell but I haven't noticed it being stolen. And the fact that people don't know, that they are irritated by the sound – well, they get irritated by themselves! Everyone here is a big wig, they care for nothing. They were born here, but they all have taken to bad ways...

Let me tell you something. Before entering the EU, there were several Japanese girls in the Historical Museum, they were helping us integrate faster. I knew them; I spoke to one of them. She was robbed already on her way here, at Sofia airport. Money, documents, everything... She was very indignant. So if they robbed the Japanese girls at the airport, what would stop them from taking the bell? You can quote me here, word for word.

I don't know, I haven't heard but I will ask around. Call me, if I hear something, I will tell you...

*Two week later, in a conversation with **Engineer Limonov** we got to know more:*

The first bell on Sahattepe was a church bell, it was made by Old Blago (Veleganov) for the church in a Rhodopi village, somewhere above the village of Manastir; it seems the bell was cast sometime at the beginning of last century. And in those years, it was easy, you know, the governors took the bell from the village church and brought it to Plovdiv, for the tower on the hillock. When they decided to send it back, I cast the same bell. They stole it once again, the Culture Directorate at the municipality asked me to cast another one, so I cast it again. I have cast this bell three times, just consider... The last time even Chomakov (*Note: the former mayor of Plovdiv*) himself placed the order – apparently those from the Culture Directorate had grown tired dealing with this.

And why don't people know? ... Well, they don't know, it doesn't come as a surprise to me in these hectic times, hectic in all senses of the word...

### **Around Sveta Nedelia Church**

*Sveta Nedelia Church in Plovdiv was our second 'target'. When we went there, first we met with the sexton, who said that she didn't know anything, and then with the young priest, Father Dimitar Kirev. He also knew nothing, he had been in the church only for a couple of weeks, but he was ready to talk as long as we 'don't discredit the church'.*

#### **Father Dimitar:**

In my view, this must have been done by people without Christian conscience and consciousness. I don't want to blame anybody but it could have been drug-addicts who needed the money. People often do this out of atheism, or for pleasure, destroying and robbing temples. As to the Gypsies – I don't want to blame them because, this, as I told you, is the work of people who are possessed by evil spirits, and not only Gypsies are such. I assume that it could be them but, above all, this is the work of people without conscience. And everything gets its due punishment...

*We also asked the people living in the vicinity – two of the women didn't know anything, the old Mr. Feschian, too, but he supposed it must be the Gypsies, they stole because of the metal, they sold it for recasting. 'But why are you asking me about that, do you suspect me of something ...'*

*The young chap, who opened the door after we rang several times, also hadn't heard of the case, but he had an opinion: 'Well, certainly I hear the bell; it tolls around 9 in the morning and around 4 in the afternoon. It annoys me when I sleep, that's it...'*

*Several days later we talked to the old priest, **F a t h e r L y u b e n** – a fifth-generation priest in a direct line of descent (something exceptionally rare in his words), he has been in the church since 1990:*

The church is the biggest and the oldest one in Plovdiv, it was built in 1832, while the belfry dates back to 1905. The bell is cast by the Veleganovs and has a major tonality. Actually, the bells have never been stolen; they are very heavy; it's difficult to take them down. Only the *topuzi*, that's a slightly Turkish word, the clappers, the clappers have been stolen. They were stolen 3-4 years ago and the bells were silenced, they were silenced, weren't they... This was a very unpleasant event for the temple. Each clapper weighed 26 kilograms. We replaced

them with new ones, now there is no difference in the sound. They are made, like the bell, from a silver and bronze alloy.

My work is related to two polarly opposed occupations – major and minor, birth and death. In the case of death, the bell tolls differently – for a man it tolls 3 times (dun-dun-dun), for a woman it tolls 3 times, and for a child, once. Usually, the bell tolls for a liturgy, but many times it has tolled to announce emergencies – fires, disasters, the death of great people, the visit of donors... You can understand – the church has also become like this... commercial. Whatever happens in the church immediately gets known by the people, there is only one priest; everyone knows him: ‘Why didn’t you toll the bell?’ they would ask sometimes.

When I came here 18 years ago, the church was doomed to demolition. And the small chapel in the yard dates back to 1674. We collect, collect money. The money comes from the people, they are willing to give. But it seems that these are mostly grannies. There are grannies that come and give 10-20 leva from their pensions.

I don’t know who stole the *topuzi*, but there are many Turks here. Here, in my parish, three quarters of the population doesn’t speak Bulgarian. These are Turks, Greeks, Armenians. People from the Turkish neighbourhoods have hinted at me: ‘Hey, *papaz*, why does the bell toll, it delays me?’ which makes me think that they could also be the perpetrators of the theft. The bell bothers them and, in my opinion, that’s why the *topuzi* were stolen, they are a thorn in their side. That’s what the behaviour of some Turks and Gypsies in the neighbourhood speaks of. And the children, they smash windows with **bottles**. And thieves always find a way to steal; they always find a way to enter. So they stole the *topuzi* and the investigation was terminated for lack of evidence. There were cases of stolen icons and a Gospel. Some connoisseurs hire people to steal icons for them.

This, in my view, can be done by someone who lacks morals. And the punishment, the punishment comes from the inner policeman or militia, it’s important to stand in front of him because when conscience speaks, one cannot sleep. You must know, you have read Jean-Jacque Rousseau, haven’t you? Here, see now, this piece of paper in the belfry shows the sequence to be followed when tolling the bell – ‘left – right – left and so on’. See, the woman has left a pair of gloves here to protect her hands from the ropes because she has to pull with strength, pulling requires strength... So that’s how it is, the bell in our church has a unique melody. (*He started humming it, then he told us about his granddaughter, his childhood and his collection of books among which he had the original ‘Nedelnik’ by Sofronii Vrachanski, published in 1806*)

I have many weaknesses, *he said with a smile*.

### **Engineer G e o r g i L i m o n o v** *about the theft in Sveta Nedelia Church*

The bells are ours, Veleganov’s. When they stole the *topuzi* some years ago, the priest came over, we made new ones. It became evident who it was – a neighbourhood gang of youngsters, drug-addicts, if it comes to money, there is no stopping them... And they stole from me (note, the smelt-furnace which for many years used to be close to Sveta Nedelia Church) 7 times. They are one and the same guys. And the grandfather of their leader was a priest, a wonderful man. His father Dancho, he is also a neighbour there, we haven’t ruined our relations, but you know, you’ve read what drug addition is all about.

*(In the course of our conversation, we discovered that it was the same man Dancho who actively assisted us in finding out Veleganovs at their new address).*

## **Zvunigradski (Chimetown) Melodies**

*It was St. Lazar's Day. Kalofer welcomed us calm and serene, with the fragrance of blossoming trees and smoke. It was easy to find St. Archangel Michael's Church where two bells were stolen in 2006. It stood composed and stately on a hill above the old school, visible from afar. In spite of the holiday, the church was locked up – the sexton Ivan had just left, we had only just missed him. At the level of human height, there were two shiny bells hanging, the year 2007 was marked on them. While we were looking around, we didn't realize how we started a series of interesting and exciting meetings and conversations from which we learned that the old name of Kalofer is Zvunigrad (Chimetown!), that in the past Kalifer Voyvoda had forbidden Turks to set foot in the town – that's why they had to take off the horseshoes from their horse's hooves so as not to make noise when passing through – and that apparently there was no one who could not and would not talk about the bells. Everyone had their version, everyone claimed to know.*

### **Aunt Velika:**

My name is Velika (in Bulgarian *velik* means *great*) – it's a great name! There is one version about the disappearing of the bells – that they were stolen by a gang from the village of Levski during the night. After the case with the theft, they placed also lighting up there. The old bells were from post-Turkish times, a gift to the town. We have no Gypsies here, only 2-3 families, but they are very reasonable, they are part of us. And shall I tell you, well, even the sexton is one of them. No one thinks that they could have stolen the bells.

Here in Kalofer, we managed to reach an agreement and restored the bells, but it's not the same... Those were old bells, and as to their melody I have no words... Uuuu, such a melody, when they chimed in, we all knew that these were St. Archangel Michael's bells. And now they toll differently... Otherwise, they toll every day at 8 a.m. for good morning and in the afternoon at 5 o'clock. An old custom, and our church is old, too.

When the bells were stolen, the convent gave us a small bell to have service. I don't know who stole the bells, but let me tell you something – Bulgarians started stealing more than Gypsies. Well, best ask the priest's wife, old Father Ivan who died, his wife. She is here, she knows best about the story and she also keeps documents.

We, the people in the upper part of Kalofer, support each other a lot, unlike the rest. My sister lives in the lower part and she says: 'Lower part, lower people'. It's a different thing here, we constantly meet; we are always together.

### **Sister Ksenia, Convent of the Holy Mother's Assumption, only the river separates it from the church:**

On several occasions, things have been stolen from the convent and the church, and St. Archangel Michael's bells were stolen shortly after the Father's death, they took advantage of the situation, of that ownerlessness back then. No, we haven't given a bell to the church. The presbyter was in charge of collecting money for new bells.

I don't know who stole the bells. I suppose it could be teenagers or Gypsies who sold them for re-melting. Most often these are such groups of teenagers or Gypsy gangs. These people must be disbelievers, with no fear of God, young people. They are not from Kalofer. The people here are different, they are enlightened people! They have preserved their faith and have an active stance on these matters. We have Gypsies, but only 2-3 families, they are good people. And our sexton is one of them.

***K a t e r i n a, a woman around 30 who lives exactly behind the church:***

Well, the bells were stolen because of the aluminium, it weighs, and by recasting the bells they take money. It was people from another place, not locals. The bells were not found, there was an investigation but nothing was discovered.

Aunt Olga, our neighbour, heard some rattling around 3 o'clock in the morning, but she thought it was the neighbours mixing ballast. She is an old woman and she was afraid to go out and have a look. And in the morning, I went out to buy bread, the bells were not tolling and Uncle Ivan (the sexton) said they had been stolen. It was not local people but there was someone from Kalofer to help. The bells were big, around 500 kg. Oh, it was very hard to get over the theft ... (*She broke into tears.*) Everyone felt like crying, people were very sad... Here we have Gypsies and Bulgarians – all are one. All suffered! When money was collected, everyone gave as much as they could afford. Talk to Dimo Novakov, he is preparing to become a priest at the church. He is my sister's husband. Ask for Dimo, the priest, they will tell you where he lives, everyone knows him.

And the young one, my daughter, how she rejoices in the bell! When they toll them, I take her to listen, but they toll the bells very loud and she is almost frightened. And if Uncle Ivan is a little bit late, she calls out from the church: 'Ivaneee! Ivaneee!'

***M a r i a n a S t o i l o v a, a family hotel owner, her hotel is located just below the church:***

The hypotheses about the theft are that an organized group stole the bells with a crane. To dare to steal a bell, you must be a paltry fellow – the bell announces birth, death, disasters, it is a holy thing! I think the bell was stolen and sold as non-ferrous metal. I doubt a little bit that it was Gypsies, it was done in a highly organized way; they don't work like this. The neighbours heard some noise around 3-4 a.m. And the thieves knew when to act, too. If there were discos, the youngsters had just come home, while for the rest it was too early to get up. There are no Turks in the village, it was still Kalifer Voyvoda who forbade Turkish women to stop and give birth here.

After the bells were stolen, the Church Board of Trustees took the task of collecting money and restoring the bells. But the new ones toll in a completely different way, I was even indignant the first days. Sharp, harsh sound as if a saw was rasping! The old bells were somehow soft. They had such a nice sound! And when they started chiming in the evening! First, it was our bells, then the goats with their bells came; then the cows with their cowbells, finally the other church would be heard, announcing that they day was coming to an end... It was totally different! But these bells also started to improve slightly. I don't know if I got accustomed or if the metal had already settled down, but now the new bells seem better to me. Ask Ivan, the sexton, he has grown in the church's yard; his father was a sexton, too. Well, after the theft, the priest's wife drove him away and for a while somebody else was a sexton. But now he came back again.

What kind of people are those who stole the bell? They must be disbelievers. The bell is a holy thing! I am neither a believer, nor a non-believer, but everything which is in the church is sacred! It's not only the church they robbed, but also the chapel, 'St. Kuzma and Damyan'. Now, it is locked up and the icons are brought in only for holidays, otherwise they stay in another church. And on the place of this chapel there used to be a home for elderly called *Bednitsa*, built by Georgi Shopov, that's how the street is called, too. A great citizen of Kalofer, a donator! This home was run by nuns. Once there used to be a huge monastery here, with over 90 nuns. Anastasia Dimitrova was also trained here. All this that you can see (*She showed with her hand.*) is a holy place, spiritual. And the people are religious. The older ones can even tell what the bells are tolling for. When somebody dies, they can tell, just by the sound, if it is a man or a woman.

I will send you to engineer Boev, the former mayor. During his term of office, the bells were stolen. He was the one to place lighting and he may tell you something.

### **E n g i n e e r B o e v, the former mayor of Kalofer:**

The old bells were made of brass. When they got stolen, an investigation started but then it stopped for lack of evidence. There is no Regional Police Department here in Kalofer and I wanted very much to have one established, because one policeman came here, asking around, but they didn't discover anything. We have other problems as well, but there is no Police Department. One of the reasons is the police's negligence.

I think that somebody from the neighbouring villages stole the bells – Osetenovo, Tuzha, the Turks there are 70-80%. Those from the neighbouring villages have a contract with a scrap metal merchant, and probably that's where the bell went. I can link it also to the theft in Rozino, a village nearby. There are, however, some Gypsies from Berkovitsa, Montana District, they come over here supposedly to do trade but they steal a lot. I have considered them, too. Well, to tell you the truth, we, Bulgarians, have turned out worse even than them... Bulgarians have become the most thievish people, next come Gypsies.

Otherwise, the main sponsor of the new bells became Commissariat Service and Gena Seleva; we don't get along very well with her. The bells are part of the town. When they got stolen, it was awkward, embarrassing, and uncomfortable. They say that if you hear a bell in the morning, it means you are alive! And this church had a belfry, but it was demolished during Turkish times. The Turks shot with cannons from the neighbouring top and tore it down. And now the bells are down here.

*At that moment a local Gypsy boy passed by, it turned out he was from an orphanage to whom the former mayor gave money for bread. They exchanged a few words. Then, we asked him, too, about the bells:*

Huh, I don't know those guys who stole the bells, how could I know them? To tell you the truth, the most honest and hard-working are the Turks, then Gypsies and finally Bulgarians. I heard that somebody from the village of Osetenovo stole the bells. They dragged them with belts, then in a trailer. I believe in God, in Jesus Christ. I can tell how the bells toll, sure. It's bad without bells: when somebody drops dead, there is no way to spread the word.

*We went back in front of the church at 5 p.m. – just in time to hear I v a n, t h e s e x t o n, toll the bell:*

I was born in 1944 and I grew up over here, in this house. (*He showed a shanty in the church yard.*) Here we played, and with the priest's wife, and with my sisters, we grew up together. Before me, sextons were Granny Elena, then Granny Minka, she was a sexton for 40 years, after her it was Granny Chonka and after that it was me. These bells have been down for a very long time. Once, there was a belfry, but it was shot at from Nikola Peak and the Turks pulled it down. And since then, the bells have always been here. The old ones were 130 years old, they were made in Russia.

Huh, it was vandals who stole them. I came here in the morning and I saw – the bells were gone. When they were stealing them, they erected scaffolds to take them down, it must have been around 4-5 people, strangers. But somebody from Kalofer was involved, too. They had thrown the clapper and later it was found behind the church and taken to Karlovo for the investigation, and now it's still there.

The bells had a strong voice! In clear weather, one could hear them three kilometres away! As far as Paradzhika Peak, here in the mountain, and down to the train station! Also, the old bells were slightly bigger. As to their sound, what can I tell you? I was born with the old bells... When the new bells were placed, half of Kalofer gathered and we all cried. I and one friend of mine, Stoyan, we both cried. While we were still without bells, we were given a small one from the monastery. Then, when the new ones arrived, I told them: 'Quickly, take it back to where it belongs for we shouldn't keep another's bell here'. When the bells got stolen, the people in Kalofer collected 1400 leva, the rest was paid by Hristo Botev Plant; it's written on the bells. All in all, it came up to 8000 leva and the bells were cast in Plovdiv. There were Turkish times, Bulgarian, there was communism, no one dared to take them down, and now with this social order... The thieves are people with no feeling. God will punish them to the ninth generation! Not just to the first or to the second, but to the ninth!

I tolled the old bells for a year and a half, at 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., just like now. People set their watches by them. There is a difference in the way they toll for death, for liturgy. There is an evening toll: we call it a death knell. Young people come; they come for Palm Sunday and for Easter. Sometimes when these scoundrels – that's how we call them here – get drunk, they start tolling the bells, so the whole village starts wondering what's the matter. And sometimes children come to play, but I tell them off and they calm down... Children...

***On the meadow, in front of the church, D i m o N o v a k o v was scything the grass. He expected to be ordained soon as a priest of the church:***

The new bells came out at 7000 leva. And the old ones, I think, were sold as antiques, because they are very precious – their price can reach up to 50 000 leva. They are Russian, cast in Odessa. The investigation was terminated, they found nothing. Well, but they didn't search that much. They came and had a look around, but they did it in such a way that I only had to make a few steps aside to find the holding clamps of the bells, and one of the clappers. I told them; supposedly they took the clapper for fingerprints, but found nothing. There was also one shirt, and scaffolds. One could tell how they dragged the bells.

As to the people's reaction, what can I tell you – there were a lot of curses, may his arms shrivel, may god kill him, but every miracle lasts for three days only, and ours here – for nine. The bells were stolen between July 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 and the new ones were placed on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007, for the church holiday (*Note: The previous name of the church was St.*

*Petka and many of the older people remember it like this*). We were without a bell for about 3 months, until we got the one from the monastery, and it was from that school over there, you can see it down there. It was most hard that we had no bell for the funeral of a young woman, she was 35, died of cancer, and that's how the funeral went by, without a bell. Since 1869, when the church was founded, up until today, this has been the worst case.

Now the bells are Greek, cast entirely with money from Hristo Botev Plant. The people in Kalofer collected 2200 leva, but this money is kept for the church, for repairs and restoration works. And now we are trying to do something – we are trying to restore it, there is money coming, the new wall paintings are from there and we want to turn this house (*He pointed at the sextons' birth place.*) into a place for meetings, symposia; a shelter where we can accommodate tourists.

As to the punishment, what shall I say – God teaches us otherwise, but I know that there is always justice...

***Mrs. Velichka Naydenova, the wife of Father Ivan, the late priest at St. Archangel Michael Church:***

I know every stone of the church, that's where I've grown up. And I've had so much distress with this church. (*She broke into tears.*) I took it to heart when they stole the bells. And there is no understanding from priests or people, although the spiritual life in Kalofer has always been at one of the highest levels in Bulgaria. Both my father-in-law and my husband were priests. And now in Kalofer there are not enough graduate priests.

When the bells got stolen, well, what is there to comment, it was a wail. These were the most melodious bells in town. It was terrible without them! The bell serves in times of disaster or emergencies. When they were gone, fire broke out and it was terrible! The monks from the monastery lent us a small bell. And during the investigation – a lot of pain and sadness! They did nothing. Now, we have bells, but somehow it's not the same...

The old church bells were around 150 years old. Even I tolled them – when my husband got ill, I was a sexton for a while. The old bells were cast in Odessa and the big one even had one end chipped, I could see it while doing the tolling. Now, I hope we can find this chip somewhere inside the church, to find out what the alloy was made of. Only our old bells and the ones in Koprivshtitsa contain some gold and silver.

I know who stole the bell, I have versions but I could not set thing going on time and prove it. There are two neighbours' kids, their father collects scrap metal for re-melting. Some time ago, they had stolen money and I said to my husband we should warn the parents, but he replied to me that the children are just like their parents, so they won't understand. So I have my doubts about them, but there is something else. There are two men here, when they get drunk, they admit to having stolen the bells and taken them to North Bulgaria for re-melting, but I have no evidence. They have committed other crimes, too.

We looked for sponsors for a very long time and it was very hard to choose bells for the money we had. Eventually, we ordered them from a catalogue, they were cast in Greece. When we bought them eventually, we drove them with my car from Plovdiv, we drove them home and they had to stay for two weeks in the cellar, there was no one to fix them up. Finally, people were found, several strong chaps. And indeed, it was a great celebration when

the bells got hung. They were consecrated by Father Damyan from the monastery and another priest, an acquaintance of Father Ivan's. Here, I have photos, I will show you. I will even give you some. Here are also some materials which my son wrote at the time.

*(Note: Mrs. Naydenova's son, Ivaylo Naydenov, is senior assistant and lecturer in Theology at Sofia University St. Kliment of Ohrid.)*

### **A church by the road**

*The oldest case on our list is from 1997 when the church bell in the village of Trivoditsi was stolen. St. Spas Church is located just behind the train stop, where the Plovdiv-Sofia passenger train stops, but it is outside the village. We found it locked up and dilapidated. It was obvious that the old belfry had no bell. There was one building in the yard and somebody had inscribed on its fence the telephone number of a healer. The closest building to the church where we expected to meet people was the scrap metal merchant. After that the road diverged in two directions – towards the villages of Hadzhievo and Trivoditsi.*

*The scrap metal merchant **Spaska**:*

About the chapel bell, I know nothing, I have heard nothing. Once, many people used to gather at the little monastery, for the holiday of St. Spas, but not any more. It gets opened only for holidays, not every day.

To tell you honestly, people realized that they shouldn't steal. Long time ago, in 1989-1990, some bells came here, people brought them, but not recently. Bells don't come whole, they are brought smashed into pieces, but you can tell. Whoever takes them breaks them. If they bring me a bell, I will keep it and give it back. I am a Christian and I believe this is a sin. When I was small, my mother took me to church, I am a Christian and the priest is my first cousin. That's how we were brought up. Go to Hadzhievo, you can find the healer there, the one from the church. The priest is from Trivoditsi, but he is not here now, go to Hadzhievo.

**Granny Ivanka Kaloferova**, *from the village of Hadzhievo:*

Folks went to the monastery, but it's no longer... For 2-3 years there is no bell... Ba! Ba! How can people know who took it! Well, and the bell was smaller. Those thieves can do anything! We have Gypsies, but our Gypsies are not thieving! I can't tell anything about the ones in the village of Trivoditsi. The bell was probably sold for that, you know, for scrap.

**Maria Kaloferova**, *daughter-in-law to granny Ivanka, and daughter to the priest who serves at St. Spas Church:*

First of all let's get things clear – I am a priest's daughter and I don't defend any causes. I am simply telling the truth. About the bell, I don't know. I know that the priests got robbed. But you know how it is with scrap merchants (*When she learned we went to the one next to the church, she exclaimed: "What shall I tell you... now she is my aunt!"*) I have grown up in the church, I was born in 1967. We built the fence with my father, the old priest, I carried stones. I have grown up in this church; I know too well how much effort has been put into this.

The church holiday is on St. Spas Day, and the little monastery is called God's Ascension. We keep on calling it a little monastery, because once there used to be a big monastery there; but it was pulled down and only a bare meadow was left. Then, one fortune-seer, Bonka, send people to dig there and that's how the monastery remains were uncovered. This church was erected on the very same fundament. There are three karst springs here, with healing water, people get healed with it. That's where the village name comes from: Trivoditsi (*Three Waters*). Once, people from all over the country used to gather for the holiday, but it's not like this any more... And the temple was broken into three times. Well, people've started stealing after 1990. The bell was small, not more than 20-30 kg, it was stolen by people who knew what to take. So as the saying goes, no bell tolled for the bell.

In my view, when they stole from the villas up there, they ransacked, on their way, the little monastery, too. And who stole the bell – I don't know. Gypsies or somebody else... I haven't witnessed, I cannot tell. Gypsies, well their way is much simpler. And then people blame Gypsies first. But there are Bulgarians, too, ones from whom you least expect it, but they do it. In 2005, when there were the big floods, a Gypsy family squatted in this building and it was hard to drive them out. They had demolished everything, but no one had entered the church. Now, the healer repaired the building, set it right and is using it. People come, they seem happy.

All in my family are priests – my father, my brother, my uncle, my sister – she, too, graduated Theology. Now, the priest is trying to build a church in Trivoditsi – it's a torment for him that the village has no church. The first sod has been turned but there is no publicity. The Plovdiv's Bishop was here, people came but not as many as I wished for. The money is collected and once they find a company, the church is going to be built. My father does a lot of running. While he is alive, I am sure, nothing will stop him. It's a pity he is in Pazardzhik now, so you can't meet him. We have given for the church in Hadzhievo, and we shall give for the new one, too. This is now I am, if there is work to be done, I do it, I don't wait on others. I don't do it for myself, not even for the people; I do it for the church, for god...

### **To the village of Gradina and back**

*The case with the bell in the village of Gradina, Parvomai Municipality, differs from all the rest for two reasons: the bell belongs to the school, not to the church, and it was not only stolen, but also found. The school dates back to around 1928, this is considered also to be the year when the bell was cast. It has "lived through" the big earthquake in those days and during all the reconstructions of the school building it has invariably hung up in its place. It is made of bronze and weighs 20 kg. According the expert report made by specialists from the Historical Museum in Plovdiv, such bells are a rarity now and represent objects of cultural and historical value. Its overall value is estimated at 1200 leva. It was stolen on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006, and found several months later.*

*In spite of this, in April 2008, the small belfry of Hristo Botev Primary School was empty. Our first interlocutor was a 15-year old boy from the village studying at the school.*

**Dimitar, a school pupil:**

There used to be a bell, but now it's taken down because it got stolen. They found it, but they didn't fix it up again, it's kept in one of the school rooms. Old Nas and the Gnome stole it.

Well, everyone knows, now, it's a village here. They've been caught many times... It's a long time now the bell doesn't toll. I haven't heard it. Now, I am going to take you to the mayor. Oh, here is our teacher...

**Magdalena Ivanova**, *a teacher in literature at the school:*

This was a secret (*the theft of the bell*) and only after it was found, the director said it had been stolen. It doesn't toll for a long time now, I haven't heard it, but there is one granny here who probably remembers.

**Granny Krastina:**

I don't know it got stolen but I remember the small bell was tolled for the school, on the hour when pupils went to school and then it was tolled. There was a servant, that's how we called them then, he tolled it. Morning, evening...

**Balyo Balev**, *the mayor of Gradina village:*

Now you've put me in a tight spot. I know the whole village history, but I don't know anything about the theft of the bell. It was the police and the school that dealt with the case. An expert report was made, was it? Well, tell me then what's there about this little bell, so I know. Once, first bell rang, then second bell rang. I remember this, I studied here, too. Now it's not like that.

Well, who could have stolen it? Some vagabonds. People don't know anything. Here it's isolated, people are closed off.

**Former primary teacher** *in the school:*

It's from you I hear this, I don't know. Once, when I was a pupil, the bell rang out to call us to come to school. Maybe it contains some metal and that's why it got stolen. Now, it's not how it used to be...

**Former pupils** *of the school:*

People here are bad. This bell was taken by some guys, it's well known, we've heard, to show off as men. There is a school buzzer for them and they still don't go into class, now if even the bell starts ringing... (*They began laughing.*)

**Dimitar**, *pensioner, one of the village inhabitants:*

There are many Gypsies here, they all steal. I haven't heard about the bell, but they stole my bicycle, they stole my motorbike... And we were all at home the other day. They took my bike, these idiots, now I have nothing to travel with. That's a disgrace, there is no one to give them a beating now! The teacher will tell you more, the school director, ask him.

**Atanas Yordanov**, *the school director:*

Children's pranks of our former pupils! A former pupil of ours, he went up there, it's rather risky, a man simply cannot go up there. They go up the lightning-rod and so they get up there

and jump over to the roof and take the little bell. But I – having been a director for many years, I keep an eye on it – and one day as I was passing by, I saw that the little bell was gone. I was on leave and my deputy alarmed the police. I started asking here and there but no one knew a thing. After a while, a small boy came to me and we were directed to one of our pupils, a former pupil, who went to a secondary professional school. We called the police, the police got involved and it was them, actually, who wanted to put the boy to trial, but I gave up on all accusations, because he was under age. Otherwise, he is a good boy, so was it him... He took it, he said, he hid it somewhere and then took it out, because it's very heavy by the way. I don't know why he took it, he didn't say. His parents didn't know about this, either. People maybe didn't realize that the bell got stolen. To tell you, that's because we didn't give it much publicity... And to tell you honestly, it should sound like that, but young teachers come, give their lessons and go.

I didn't expect such a thing from this boy! He is a decent boy and I simply didn't want to discredit him. And I still think that somebody urged him to commit this crime. I know his parents, too, they were my pupils. Decent people! We had a good talk with him; he repented for what he had done. Being a historian, I explained to him how things were, I told him that his father and grandfather had studied here; his grandfather must have given money. He even broke into tears. He is such a sensitive boy.

The aim was to take it and to sell it, because it's made of copper and is maybe expensive. From Gradina, now I am not totally sure if it's him, however, there is one man who buys up such old relics, antiquities. He deals in such stuff. We even had an old watch, very nice, from 1928, but it disappeared and we couldn't find it; and now somebody probably offered something for this little bell, too. Now, I've stowed it away in the chemistry room, because I risk having it stolen again.

I am already 47 years in this school and every September 15<sup>th</sup> we ring the little bell. Two years ago, we had the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the school, so everything was very ceremonial and we announced it by ringing the little bell. It was something, how shall I describe it to you, it was an event for the people. It was important for those who had studied in the school. We always ring the little bell on September 15<sup>th</sup>, like in a ritual, so that it ding-dongs several times, because it has ropes and can be rung from below.

Our school is probably one of the biggest in the region. For the municipality, we are one of the best schools, well, there are also a lot of Gypsies, but this doesn't matter. The school has prospects because there are children and the children are very nice. And since they started providing this breakfast, the free one, this helped us a lot, many children began coming to school. We have no problems with Gypsies and Turks, but there are some true Gypsies and they are very difficult. But we manage. (*He smiled.*)

Once, in the summer, I was going to the school and I heard the little bell ringing, but I could not see anyone, and it turned out it was those kids who went fishing. I looked up, but I could not see a thing. I was just about to turn around and go back when they pulled the rope again and the bell rang. I shouted and they scattered in all directions and when I went to the back of the school, I saw where they were – they'd climbed on the mulberry tree and rang the little bell from there with a fishing line...

### And finally:

*If one can still see and hear new bells bearing the trademark of the famous bell-casters Veleganovs from **Bansko**, who settled in Plovdiv at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, this is due to their son-in-law and heir to the craft – Engineer Georgi Limonov. He welcomed us in his workshop with a broad smile, with hands blackened by the work and with apologies for not having been available the day before.*

### **The history and the stories of Engineer Georgi Limonov:**

I told you we should meet today, because yesterday it was very busy here. All day long, I didn't have a minute break. That's how this work is, it's not when you want but when the material wants, then it's possible. Otherwise, there's no way.

I like to say that I am the offshoot, the transmission. I am a son-in-law, but the bells are Veleganovs', and they will remain such. Here, have a look at this catalogue from 1939, here is the company's trademark on every bell. I will not talk to you about history now, you can read. I graduated Higher Military Air School, I am an engineer of military air equipment. And so it happened – from supersonic to sonic engineering. It was my hobby, and since 1990 the hobby turned into a profession. My father-in-law died 14 years ago – Lazar Veleganov, he is a son to Blago Veleganov, he was christened after his grandfather's brother, who was Lazar, too. Now, my son comes after me, we are one – you have spoken to him, but it's as if you've spoken to me. He drove me here a while ago, left me and continued on with his errands. I want to restore things to our ancestors' level. Then he can further modernize and take one step up. I have trust in him – he can do anything here.

There are many subtleties, it's hard to learn a craft. We know for which sound what kind of bell is needed – its weight, size. Alloys are our company's secret. We have also a device to measure tonality. The precise tonality is achieved by taking away – depending on what we want, we take away either from the outside or from the inside. And one has to listen from some distance; it's like with string instruments, in order to clear up the parasite waves, to get a clear sound. One can tell a good bell by its sound. It depends also on the strike – a beating is a beating. Many self-taught masters have cropped up now – people come here saying: “They cast it but it doesn't ring, we want a new one.” When you take a look at it, it has neither shape, nor sound. It happens. Recently it was a bell cast in Italy. They had left it undone and it developed air-pockets on the inside. It didn't weigh as much as its size required. Italian, however... It had to be re-cast. Sometimes they crack, but then bells have a life of their own, too.

As to the thefts, it's clear – they are a disease of the times. It was 6-7 years ago when they started, just I have been robbed 7 times – materials, instruments. Not long ago, we cast a bell for Haskovo Region – their bell got stolen, it was found broken into pieces, the thieves were caught. It was a bell of around 100 years, they ordered a new one. In Varna and the area around there were again three such case recently, in Kyustendil... We had an interesting case – there is one Mother Maria, she has a chapel up, above Markovo, we had cast a bell for her. She called some time ago, crying: “The bell got stolen, what shall I do?” “Call the police, - I told her. “Probably they can do something”. And what do you think happened – those heroes, the thieves, went to the scrap metal merchant, the woman there took the bell, paid it to them, wrote down the name and the personal data of the one who sold it, and also the car's license number and then called the police. And Mother Maria called me happy: “They found the bell,

they brought it back, now I have a bell again...” Now, I haven’t seen, I don’t like to talk about people like this, without knowing, but if bells got stolen, apparently there are people, too, who buy them up...

Who steals more? No, it’s not the Turks, I have very good impressions from them. I had a neighbour, next to the old workshop, the guy often came over to help me, for the heavy work, he came over as a neighbour. People told me that when the church in the village of Osetenovo was built, next to Kalofer, it was again Turks who helped, they worked for free on the construction site. I have met Turks – compared to them Bulgarians can eat their ears... The scoundrels are among the Bulgarians, if you ask me. Well, each nation has people like this and people like that – our scoundrels are more because we are more.

Some time ago, we got an order for three bells – it was from a young family, classical musicians from Plovdiv, but most of the time they live in Germany, Mitko and Magdalena Chikchevi. They wanted us to cast three bells at their own expense – one for the native village of the boy, and one for Dolni Voden, she is from there, and in this village Bulgarians are already a minority. They wanted the bell to be 180 kg, to be heard from afar, not to get silenced by the mosque.

It’s particularly interesting when a musician orders a bell. I had such a case some time ago; the bell was for the village of Hristo Milevo. When it was ready, the woman came, her husband, too – a lecturer in Plovdiv Conservatoire, they brought a whole group of musicians with different instruments. When the woman heard the sound of the bell, she exclaimed and all their tuning forks went down the drain.

I don’t stay without work. I have stayed without money, but never without work. My joy is to see the bell finished, because, you see, it’s a dirty work. To sit down for a bite, I need to wash my hands several times. We do everything by ourselves, times have become bad. We make the alloys ourselves, because if we order them elsewhere, people get tempted – they are going to save from here, to pinch from there. And that’s the most important thing – honesty to the material. Honesty, I am telling you again. That’s the only way to get the good sound out...