

ARTICLE

It was hot and sticky and the passengers were waiting for the carousel to disgorge their luggage at Varna airport. We were becoming a little impatient as we had disembarked from a Balkan Airways flight an hour earlier. At last, our suitcases appeared. Someone recognised my holdall for me and I went quickly through Customs. Suddenly, my hand was taken in a firm grip and I heard a voice say 'Mr. Colin?'. It was the 'Reception Committee' from the National Association of the Deafblind in Bulgaria. It consisted of the President, Dimitar Parapanov, his son, Svet, acting as his interpreter and a woman Bulgarian/English interpreter. I was led through the darkness and then taken in a school minibus to the Varna Boarding School for Blind and Deafblind Children on the outskirts of the City. It was exciting to be in a new environment and I got to bed at about 1 am.

The Next morning my holiday began with a trip to the city of Varna with the interpreter and with the Finnish participants who had arrived 2 days before. It seemed a pleasant city but did present some difficulty for visually-impaired people: the pavements were uneven and had kerbs every which way. That was Saturday and the bulk of the participants were due to arrive on Sunday. We had magnificent thunderstorms on the Sunday which had been omitted from the program! We had all arrived by Sunday evening and we had an introductory meeting that evening in the school refectory which had terrible acoustics.

I was attending the 8th European Deafblind holiday (3-10 July 2005) being held in the Black Sea resort of Varna, Bulgaria. I was the only person from the UK as was the case when I attended the previous holiday (2004 in Sweden). Unlike all the other participants, I had no guide/communicator but I was greatly assisted by the fact that English and Bulgarian were the working languages of the holiday. Generally speaking this worked out for me. Supplemented by my sponging on other people's interpreters who all spoke English. The holiday was based at the boarding school which normally housed 168 visually impaired boys and girls from the age of 6 to 19. It was an attractive building, airy and spacious but with echoey corridors which are very difficult for people like me. I have Usher Syndrome 2 which means that I am a registered blind person with severe hearing loss ameliorated by two powerful hearing aids. I was able to explore the school and speak to many of the teachers who had come in, during their holidays. I was impressed by the facilities and the quality of the teachers. What interested me was that the pupils had the whole spectrum of sight problems including many who in the UK would not be at a special school at all. The concept of inclusive education does not seem to be popular in Bulgaria. The children were mostly boarders and I am told they were reluctant to leave the school and I can imagine that was so! The quality of education seemed to be high as is the case throughout Bulgaria despite deterioration in the last decade or so.

The Association had arranged a full program for us and on most days we were taken by hired buses to sites of interest. On the Monday, we were taken to 'Pobiti Kamani' Field of Stones which is one of the leading archaeological sites. On another day, we were taken to Tchururovo with its local museum and ethnographic centre. We also visited local resorts and cultural centres. We had many opportunities to see and hear Bulgarian folk dancing both in the School and elsewhere.

A highlight for me was our meeting in Varna Town Hall with the City's Director of Social and Health Service and top staff. I had asked for this but was very pleasantly surprised to have that request met and that all the participants attended the meeting. We were able to put some searching questions and given frank responses. Dimitar was clearly delighted at this meeting as no doubt it put a question of blindness and deafblindness well onto the agenda of the local Council. Varna is the third city of Bulgaria in winter but the second in summer. It has a population of 150,000 although the area seems quite big for that size. It is very leafy. I had last been in Bulgaria in 1964 when I drove through the country from Turkey to Yugoslavia. My lasting memory is of the tens of millions of newly planted trees in town and country. That foresight has clearly paid off as has the high educational standards which I noticed in the schools at that time. French was the main Western language then, English being hardly known. The opposite is true

today. I have got to know quite a few Bulgarians and they are certainly very 'civilised' and exceptionally clean and healthy. The men are sturdy and strong and the women slim and very conscious of their appearance. Nearly all had black hair which most had streaming down their backs. Sadly, the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer which everyone acknowledges but seem resigned to it. Some students said that they are waiting for a Ho Chi Minh or a Fidel Castro but did not seem eager to do anything themselves! The population is told that accession to the EU will solve everything...

There were 72 participants, including interpreters from 12 countries including Bulgaria itself on this holiday. I thoroughly enjoyed myself and commend the Association for hosting this holiday. However I think it would be in the interests of everyone to express some reservations. There was a problem with communication mainly due to the fact that most meetings took place in the refectory which was large and acoustically disastrous. The interpreter saw her role as acting for the President rather than for the participants which caused many of us not to hear her or to understand what was happening. We foreign participants had difficulty in communicating with the Bulgarians as we were reduced to talking to them in a variety of sign languages with limited success. What we needed was a small supply of Bulgarian/English interpreters. It was obvious that the organisers did not realise how much extraneous noise handicaps people with hearing problems. There were many young Bulgarians in the school and being young, they liked to play CDs, Television and radio, all at the same time and all the time. I have developed my constructive criticism elsewhere.

A feature of the holiday was our access to various workshops in which we were able to see the good quality of the classrooms and the Bulgarian teachers. As for the food, it was simple but sufficient and went some way to explaining the obvious health of the population. We saw none of the terrible sites you can see in any Tesco store here with acres of tattooed flesh spilling out from inadequate clothing. As normal, we had the final dinner-dance on the Saturday night and the sad parting of the next day or two when we drifted back to our countries. I myself stayed in Varna until the following Friday. This was because I had taken a cheap charter flight instead of the expensive schedule flight but it meant I had to stay a full two weeks to catch the return flight. So ,
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spent the last few days in Varna failing to find a cheap hotel (despite the assiduous help of one of the school pupils) and so that was only a partial success. You can't win them all. I spent the last two days trapped in the most expensive hotel in Varna, the only one with vacancies; I was as lonely as a Bulgarian lesbian- of which there are three. I left Varna in the rain on 15 July.

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