

STUFFED PEPPER

by Elka Agoston-Nikolova (Groningen)

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Soon after my arrival in Holland (a long time ago) I decided to impress my dinner guests with a typical Bulgarian dish »stuffed peppers«. But already at the first greengrocer's that I visited that afternoon, I realized that I was facing a serious problem. In the shop I found only three shriveled peppers. »Do you have more?« I asked the shopkeeper. »How many do you want?« he asked back. I made a quick count in my mind and said »About 24« and saw the amazement on his face and heard the astonished gasps of the other shoppers. For at that time in Holland peppers were almost unknown, only used as an ornament for salads, cut in small pieces. So after going round to all greengrocers in the vicinity, I ended with ten shriveled specimens and needless to say that my dish of stuffed peppers failed.

Now picture the modern market place in any Dutch town and you will see piles of red, green and yellow peppers of the Dutch glasshouse variety and very often also the imported long stemmed light green variant from Greece, Turkey or Spain. In fact, »stuffed peppers« has become almost a Dutch dish, while the traditional »stampot« has almost disappeared from the menu of the average Dutch family.

Just as exotic as »stuffed peppers« at that time was my Bulgarian origin. Invariable the Dutch reaction to my »I am from Bulgaria« would be answered with »We have been to Budapest« or »How is life in Bucharest?« but Sofia was almost never mentioned.

Now in a relatively short span of time (some thirty years or so) we have witnessed here a revolution in culinary habits, music styles, travel culture, not to mention TV and Internet. Not only do my Dutch acquaintances know where Sofia is, but some of them even own apartments in that city. Foreign and local mix comfortably in almost everyone's life nowadays.

Having spent my formative years and my whole professional life so far here in the Netherlands, how do I perceive my identity – as a Bulgarian, Dutch or European? I find myself in a rather schizophrenic situation – for I am more Dutch in Bulgaria and more Bulgarian in Holland, while for my neighbors in the little Brittany village, which I visit a few times a year, I am »la Hollandaise«...

Then there is the question of the languages – the languages that I speak, work with and communicate in. I have the feeling that I am constantly walking along the fault lines of these languages in a constant process of transmission and translation. But so are many people around me. The Dutch language, especially the language of the media and advertisement, is rapidly becoming globalized. And what about the SMS language that most young adolescents use daily. Not long ago a Dutch newspaper published as a kind of weird example a school essay written by a Dutch girl – written in ... SMS style!

Having dislocated myself from my roots, I feel quite comfortable with a multiplicity of positions. I agree with Gombrowicz, who writing first from Argentina and later from France, defined the state of exile not as one of deprivation but as one of privilege, as a stimulus for SELF-FASHIONING. Yes, that is the word I would like to use to define the ongoing process of discarding and appropriating, of fusion, which can at best describe my identity as an individual.

For in those first weeks, after my arrival, next to the uneasy sense of being somehow »exotic«, I discovered another even more important aspect of my new life, which has stayed with me from then on as a most precious gift – my freedom.

When I arrived one October afternoon at Schiphol, I could best describe myself as »a battered example of totalitarian indoctrination«. For me and my peers the only resistance was to engage in »double think« and »double talk«. I had not been allowed to read George Orwell's *1984* in Bulgaria, but when I read him in 1971 in Holland, I knew immediately what he meant by »double think« for I had lived like that. As students of English Philology at Sofia University, we had little information on the recent developments in English or American literature. About certain authors and certain books it was whispered, but the official interpretation was »decadent capitalistic propaganda«. At the top of the list of forbidden books, as one of the most decadent, was Samuel Beckett.

After the failure of my cooking experiment, I withdrew into more intellectual and private exploits. Soon I found the city library in the city of Oss, where I was living at that time. Imagine my surprise, no, my ecstasy, when to my question whether they had *Waiting for*

Godot by Samuel Beckett, the librarian not only answered positively, but asked me whether I wanted the Dutch translation or the original play! Holding tight the precious book I ran, nay, I flew home and started reading immediately. By 5 o'clock in the afternoon my mother-in-law reminded me that I was supposed to cook a dinner for my working husband. As I had been reading the thin book slowly, rereading almost every line, I had not yet finished. So I propped the book on the kitchen counter, continued reading and started to indiscriminately tomatoes cut and cucumbers for the salad, while I burnt the meat... The dinner conversation that evening was dominated by my minute recounting of Vladimir and Estragon's plight. I was exhilarated, dizzy with excitement. I understood that I could now read all those forbidden books. Already, the next day, not wanting to depend on libraries, I, in my unlimited freedom, single handedly found Hatchards telephone number and from the little city in Brabant phoned the famous London bookshop and ordered, nay, demanded that they send me the works of Samuel Beckett. As the days and months followed, I had become a Beckettian. For when he spoke of ›the tyranny of the words, the words of the Others‹ he described for me my life in Bulgaria.

At school I had had to repeat endlessly the Party's terminology, to speak of ›equality‹ and a ›shining future‹ – slogans which we had to use in almost every school essay, while from the age of 6 we knew that those were empty words, phony, false.

And here I was then in Holland, anonymous and free to read any printed book, magazine or paper, be it in Dutch, English or Chinese for that matter.

Just about that time we got by post an offer for a subscription for a quarterly journal of Chinese literature in Chinese for the ridiculous price of 99 Dutch cents per year, sent all the way from China. It was, of course, a propaganda stunt, but we subscribed nevertheless, as for us ›the children of the totalitarianism‹ this was a symbol of our freedom to read at our own choice.

These first months were extremely important for they set me on a path of personal exploration for the rest of my life.

›To be at home is more a state of mind that does not depend on an actual location‹, wrote Svetlana Boym.

I can feel at home in any place where I can read the books that I am interested in, I can listen to the music I love, and mix exotic ingredients to cook a savory meal for my friends, who may speak different languages, but there is no need for translation, for we understand each other perfectly...

Elka Agoston-Nikolova is senior research member of the Slavic Department of the Faculty of Arts, University of Groningen. She teaches South Slavic languages and culture, Balkan history and culture and gender representations in literary texts. She has published on representations of gender and cultural identity in written and oral literature and on the changing perception of national and ethnic identity in post-totalitarian South Eastern Europe.

Contact: E.Agoston-Nikolova@rug.nl.