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Bulgarian rose story blossoms on Iowa soil at Hearst Center for the Arts, connects diaspora, community

BY ANELIA K. DIMITROVA
editorcft@gmail.com

They say a picture is worth a thousand words.

Since the 1920s, this phrase has stuck as an adage for the impact an image may hold in storytelling.

As a journalist, I work with both words and pictures, and with practice, I have learned their value, so I think of pictures as gifts instead.

For me, images are gems, strewn haphazardly around us by the hand of fate.

Some we miss, others we wish we had captured.

The few we do reach out to grab and salvage from oblivion end up in the museums of our memories.

There, while gathering dust and yearning for another look, they earn their stripes, gradually becoming precious because they capture a treasured moment of time that can only be re-lived in the heart.

Revisiting that museum of our collective memories has taken a serendipitous turn for my husband Rick and I in the past few months, as we decided to share with the larger community, in the format of an art exhibit, a journalistic project we did in 1997, in the fields of Bulgaria's Rose Valley.

On Feb. 2, a quarter of a century after we had finished the field work of project, a full-blown exhibition bloomed in the Hearst Center for the Arts in Cedar Falls, our home for the past 26 years.

In 39 photographs displayed in the welcoming, light-filled space of the center, once the home of poet James Hearst, Rick's pictures and my text tell the story of the rose pickers we met in the fields then.

As it turns out, 1997 was one of the toughest years of the country's rose industry, which, like the rest of the country, was going through the pains of transitioning from a state-run to a market-driven economy.

A matter of national pride, the rose industry is deeply rooted in the Bulgarian soul through folklore and the generations of rose pickers and producers whose sweat helps make the world's finest perfumes and cosmetics.

For us at the time, it was a story that deserved telling as it was an off-the-beaten path way to capture the essence of a tradition in flux.

While on the ground, it quickly became apparent that there were two intertwined themes to the rose story— one was the story of the glamor of the annual celebration, with local and international guests and performers. The other strand, which interested us deeply as journalists, was the story of how every day people eked out a living in the fields.

Looking at the images through the lens of today and in that generous space, beautifully organized



RICK TRUAX PHOTO

During Bulgaria's annual rose harvest in May and June, villages and towns across the Rose Valley celebrate centuries-old traditions established and practiced to this day in the nearby fields and villages. Here, dancers in traditional costumes reenact the legend of the Bulgarian rose in a field on the outskirts of Kazanluk, where the largest festival is held.



RICK TRUAX PHOTO

True to folkloric depictions of rose pickers, women appear to far outnumber men in the fields. But contrary to the idyllic depictions of rose pickers as young women with delicate hands filling willow branch baskets, many of the pickers we encountered tended to be older women with calloused fingers carrying their roses in plastic bags or well-worn, homemade sacks.

by Emily Drennan, the creatively minded curator of the Hearst Center, brings back the idealistic expectations we held at the outset of the project; the journalistic challenges we worked through and the nuggets of knowledge we picked along the way. The people we met handled with dignity what history had brought to their doorstep and showed a resilience in their daily existence.

It was the first project Rick and I collaborated on fresh out of graduate journalism school. Returning to my homeland, for a professional project, held a fascination Rick well understood. For him, going to Bulgaria would be a new discovery. For me, it was a return to my roots. In so many ways, it was a professional test to our compatibility as a creative team, and a litmus test for our marriage, fairly recent at

the time, as it is well documented that photojournalists and writers are not always of the same mind when confronted with journalistic challenges and choices.

Looking back on this wealth of experiences that emerged as a result of covering the story of the Bulgarian rose, we appreciate how wholeheartedly the rosepickers in the Valley of the Roses, nestled in the fist of the Balkans, accepted us in their reality, albeit for the short time we worked alongside them while documenting their lives.

At the time, we undertook this project on faith, as enterprise journalism, but with passion and purpose and let serendipity guide us along the way.

Upon our return, after we fulfilled our obligations to a small grant from UNI, which included a multi-media show and lecture, we

closed that chapter then and went about life.

But it wasn't forever.

The images, shot on Fuji color slide film, had sat in our archive all this time.

We printed only one photograph of the thousands Rick shot in the field and displayed it in our living room. It features four women dressed in traditional Karakachani costumes at the annual rose festival.

"It spoke to me," Rick told me. "I felt connected to it."

One day, we got a tap on the shoulder by fate when the photo accidentally fell down and the glass broke.

Rick took it to the basement to get it out of the way with the intention to repair it "one of these days."

It took several years and lots of pangs of remorse as he walked past it on his way in and out of his basement office, but it stayed there, leaning against the wall, untouched.

Then, without a prod, one day during the monastic isolation of the pandemic, guilt must have kicked him in the gut harder than usual, so he took action and got it re-framed.

Seeing the picture with a new set of eyes at that moment, he decided to dive into the archive and pull out a set of images to hang on our walls.

But getting into it, he realized he had so many images that have now become a part of history that our walls simply would not do.

Then serendipity took over and thanks to the enthusiastic guidance and patience of the late Julie Ann Beddow from the Rod Library, Rick was able to display 15 images

on a single wall there and conscientiously rotated pictures in and out for the 2022 fall semester to accommodate the story.

Meanwhile, fate was working elsewhere in his corner, as it usually does, and in no time, the exhibit was accepted by the Hearst Center for Arts board.

The exhibit, which will remain in place until March 26, has been a joy for us as it connected us with our community in ways we could not have expected.

On opening night, as we wondered if we would be alone with the staff marking the kickoff on that February Thursday evening, we were overwhelmed with the presence of neighbors, colleagues, students and friends.

They looked at the pictures and read the detailed captions, learning a bit about the plight of the rose pickers. Many commented on the fact that it takes 150,000 rose

petals to extract one ounce of rose oil.

Watching them browse and engage with the images felt like walking on a bridge connecting two cultures between two capsules of time.

The exhibit also became a magnet for people with Bulgarian roots, something we didn't expect.

In the 1920s, about a 100 Bulgarian families settled in Iowa and many ended up in Waterloo, including the families of former Waterloo mayors Leo Roof and John Roof. But today, just a handful, including my small family, remain here.

Because of the rose story, Rick and I discovered a Bulgarian diaspora we didn't know existed.

In itself, it added another story layer to the images displayed on the walls.

Our connection with our newfound Bulgarian friends was instantaneous.

Among them was Rumens Hulmequist, a master's degree student in kinesiology and sport performance at UNI, who was adopted, along with his sister, by a family in Minnesota as a 4-year old. We also met Mallory and Ryan Riggs, a Cedar Falls family, who recently adopted a little girl from Bulgaria.

Through the rose, I also connected with my colleague, Dessy Stoycheva, who has taught in the Department of Educational Psychology and Foundation since 2017, but had no idea that she, too, hailed from Bulgaria.

The exhibit, it turns out, held a special place in the heart of another Bulgarian, Ivan Valtchev, a local architect, who took his wife, Esther, and their two kids, Iliyan and Kostandina, to the Hearst Center on Valentine's Day. They could not come to the opening as they had planned so he made it special on a special day, and even donned traditional Bulgarian clothing for the occasion.

A small Bulgarian community is beginning to take shape, as a result of this.

My belief that pictures are gems took on a new dimension.

I had known for a long time that stories yield unexpected joys to the soul of a journalist, but I have never felt it so viscerally.

The budding connections that emerged from the rose story, not to mention reconnecting with long-treasured friends, have been an unexpected gift from the exhibit for us.

Having our work shown in a gallery, just a block away from the place we got married at a friend's home in 1996, and just a few blocks away from where we live and teach, has brought the story full circle for us.

Sharing it with our community has blossomed into a real blessing, and reminded us of the privilege of living in a community that has an arts center, and the audience to enjoy it and support it.

Being able to share it with our students, present and past, and people of all walks of life who have visited since the opening, has added more joy to us as teachers and hopefully inspired some to venture out on their own in pursuit of their dreams.

In a nod to serendipity, one of our students asked if we had thought about going back to the rose fields to learn what happened to the people we portray in the exhibit.

In truth we have not thought that far in practical terms but I know that we are leaving it to serendipity and to the bouquet of human connections that have blossomed since as a result – to lead us forward.

What we learned from the experience is that there are more than just a thousand words to a picture.

A picture's worth, we found, is best measured by the human connections that blossom from it.



COURTESY PICTURE

Ivan Valtchev, a local architect and one of the few Bulgarians living in the area, made the exhibit a destination for his family on Valentine's Day. Pictured here are his wife, Esther Meuer-Valtchev, infant son Iliyan and daughter Kostandina.



COURTESY PHOTO

Three generations of Bulgarian women are pictured here with me. I am flanked by Mallory Riggs, holding her daughter, who was recently adopted from Bulgaria, and Dessy Stoycheva, a colleague from UNI with her two daughters, Sevdalina and Madalina Droste, in front. Had it not been for the rose exhibit, I would never have met any of them.