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The Sorrow of Raicho Gunchev

Scholar-Hunter Turns to Conservation and Video in Bulgaria

by Paul Swider

Stara Zagora, Bulgaria:- Saturday, 30. November 1996:- His feet as bare as his chest, Raicho Gunchev strides through the mountain pasture with supreme masculine confidence. A former champion wrestler, javelin thrower, biathlete and military officer, with a reputation throughout Bulgaria as a consummate hunter, Gunchev is all man. But there is no room for machismo beneath the athletic exterior. There's too much sorrow there.

"There used to be huge herds of deer here just a few years ago," he says pointing to an empty meadow high in the Stara Planina, Bulgarian for Old Mountains, otherwise known as the Balkans. This comparatively peaceful part of the peninsula so named is the scene of another form of cleansing: that of wildlife. Poaching and lack of management have let the numbers dwindle.

An unofficial spokesman for mountain wildlife, Gunchev is one of its proponents in Bulgaria. Through an interesting transformation, he has gone from a pursuer of animals to their protector. He now seeks to share this endangered wealth.



"I've been hunting ever since I was a kid," says Gunchev, son of a forestry engineer and grandson to a wildlife ranger. "I've probably

killed 1,000 animals. That's not a number to be proud of."

As little as 15 years ago, Gunchev said, Bulgaria held expositions showing off its teeming hunting grounds reserved for the Communist elite. With the political changes in 1989, the nature reserves were opened to all. Damaging pollution decreased with the crash of heavy industry but so did money for wildlife protection. Populations of most game animals dropped by half.

The new freedoms also opened up gun ownership, Gunchev says, allowing more people to hunt. Economic collapse made it necessary for some. This year's triple-digit pace of inflation may exacerbate the problem.

Gunchev is not the typical mountain man, though he stands among the best of them. A scholar with more than 30 publications to his name, the lithe 43 year-old holds a doctorate in the study of the Balkan brown bear. He has also studied other flora and fauna, including the bighorn sheep, wolves, wild goats and boar he hunted before - during and after his own 13-year career as a ranger. He is also a poet, painter and historian.

The 70,000 hectare expanse Gunchev used to patrol still shows signs of animals, to be sure. Here there is a bone left over from a wild colt a wolf has eaten, there a cow's skull, over there holes in the turf made by rooting wild boar. Gunchev still catches bears, to survey the population. But, though there is abundant small fauna to support them, large animals like the 450-pound bears are widely spaced.



"Now with animal populations sharply diminished, I've stopped hunting," Gunchev said. "I don't want to contribute to their extinction. I've found another expression for my hunter's passion: a video camera."

Gunchev collects plenty of evidence on film to substantiate the bounty of the mountains. He is working now under contract to a French television station making a sequel to an earlier Gunchev-shot film, 'Bulgaria: The Wild Garden.' He regrets only that there used to be a healthier menagerie.

With the economy threadbare, Gunchev must make his own work,

including eco-tourism expeditions. He still leads hunting parties but kills no animals himself and insists that all others follow the rules. There's not much here for neophytes anyway, only for the experienced eyes and ears of a mountain man.

From the top of the first range of high hills, the view south reveals the fertile plain Gunchev now calls home, near the city of Stara Zagora. His house is in the foothills, though, so he can be in his real home quickly and easily. Over that early ridge is another world, the one Gunchev prefers.

In the mountains' interior, he leaves behind the grimy post-Communist Bulgaria and returns to the real nation, one of people who have survived in the mountains. Above the treeline now, the rocks heave out of the wild grasses in great folds of grey matter containing the memories of an oft-oppressed people.

Here in the mountains, the 'haidouti,' Robin Hood-like bandits of centuries past, waited to rob passing caravans of their spoils - "wild tribes hid their footsteps, sleeping until dusk," as Gunchev writes in a poem. Elsewhere in the mountains, monasteries protected Bulgarian culture from Byzantine and Ottoman domination. These crevasses also secreted revolutionaries like Vassil Levski, who encouraged rebellion against the Turks.

Gunchev himself lived here once, for a year. Some of his beloved bears had killed a few sheep and the shepherds were out for revenge. Gunchev stayed in the mountains right through the winter, sleeping in caves and tents, to see to it the shepherds did not succeed. Not a hardship for Gunchev, he enjoyed the opportunity to bind with the environment he now shares with all comers.

He rolls his pants to his knees in the mid-summer heat and they billow at the thigh. With his curly hair and close-trimmed beard, he resembles the centaur that is the symbol of his eco-tourism company of the same name. He eagerly discusses the opportunities available, from photo safaris to survival courses to simple excursions for education.

"We're ready to do whatever people want to do," he said, brimming with enthusiasm to describe this land he knows so well. "Even if they just want to go into the mountains and make it up as we go along, that's fine. We're willing."

Gunchev had once been as eager about hunting. His poems bespeak not just the thrill of living in the wilderness but also the chase and the kill. As time passed, though, he began to relate the loss.

"You slash beauty and it hurts," he writes. Elsewhere his poems express a more generalized sorrow for the loss of natural connection,

an urban-driven vacuum that pulls him further from his roots. "People leave the mountain with their multi-colored vanity."

The 'final straw' for Gunchev's hunting career was when his wife was injured in a car accident at the same time Gunchev was hunting bear.

"I started thinking seriously about my hobby of hunting and the senselessness of killing helpless animals," Gunchev said. "But if this was the sign, the real reason (to stop hunting) was my conclusion that animals should be protected, preserved."

"To a greater extent, this has been motivated by my observation of foreign hunters I have accompanied. Many of them have huge amounts of money and now spend it killing wild animals, stealing with that death a little adventure for themselves, a little true wild life and maybe false pride and self-esteem."



In a poem titled "Deviation," Gunchev vents his frustration with the modern world - and vaguely warns against its incursions.

"I will be alone far from the city.
I don't want chains in my life.
I hate the designed way.
I don't care if someone points at me.
The blood boils in my haidouti kin."

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