

Close-up: Bulgarian Section

by Emiliya Karaboeva

The place where Michaels and me met for the Bulgarian part of the tour was Russe, which was considered as an important node for the project, because it combines international truck transport, a harbor, and there is the bridge – one of the two – between Bulgaria and Romania across Danube; and because it is a place where different international corridors are crossed.

Following the information obtained beforehand from interviews with international truck drivers and from archival documents, we knew that there are several parking lots, where the truck drivers stop for meal, rest, repair or spending the night. We chose [one of the parking lots](#), which was one of the biggest, but also was built during socialism as a part of the SO MAT network. It was near the city and actually was one of the two there built for SO MAT. Now, the parking is a property of Willi Betz, who bought the SO MAT company and now, Betz offers all the facilities for renting by other private companies. The complex consisted of car wash, office, restaurant, facilities for repairing and checking the trucks, and parking.

The complex appeared to be in a rather poor condition, but still used and there were a lot of trucks. One of the truck drivers, with whom we talked, complained that Betz invested zero money in the complex and that the building and the facilities were not renovated and maintained since 1989.

The restaurant was very simple, with mainly meat food, relatively tasty, and considerably cheap. But still, the driver said that comparing with the other parking lots, the food was expensive and that if here one could buy beer for two leva, in other places it is only one lev.

There were a lot of trucks, from different countries. One of them was painted with science fiction paintings – scenery from other planets. We did not see the driver to ask him who painted them.

The driver said also that in Bulgaria they work for 700 leva per month (350 Euro), and that's why many drivers go to Western Europe, hoping for more money, but at the end according to him, after all the taxes, they do not receive more than 1000 leva per month (500 euro), while the German drivers receive 2000 euro – it was not clear what he does mean – after or before the taxes. But, he continued, because of the tensions between the cheap Eastern European drivers and the Western ones, France and Belgium has introduced a rule, according which the driver cannot spend the night in the truck, but is obliged to spend it in a hotel, which should discourage the Eastern truckers to work for the Western companies, because paying for the motels reduces considerably the salary they are paid, so they do not have any profit.

In Russe, we had also a meeting with the director of the [Historical Museum](#) – Mr. Nikolay Nenov, who was willing to work with us and said that they had already an exhibition for traveling. Also, as an outcome of the exhibition, there was a research, published in a journal about the music brought by the truck drivers during socialism. The last meeting in Russe was with the owner of [the hotel](#) in which Michael and Michael had spent the previous night. They had found that he actually was a former truck driver working for SO MAT, but after he left SO MAT, he became the founder of the first Bulgarian private trucking company.

He started as a truck driver for the Russe branch of the SO MAT company. According to his own words, the driver was young, handsome and had a considerable popularity among the girls. A rather big share in this popularity were the goods he smuggled from the Western countries, as well as the Western car he had bought, which was the first in its kind in Russe. At some point he decided that he will not work anymore as a driver, and started to work as a road officer, but maintained his close relationships with the leaders of SO MAT and with some representatives of the Ministry of the Transport. At that time, he started to think about the private business. Again, according to him, it was partly because of his experience over the Iron Curtain and experience as a truck driver that allowed him to learn some basic business rules, but also it was his own nature. So, using his connections, he started before 1989, first not quite legally, but then already legally, (using the Act N 56, which allowed small private business), to rent some places. He claimed that he rented an entire (even small) island in Danube and grew water melons there, which after he personally transported to the Sofia markets, where the prices and the demand were rather higher. That was the way he started to accumulate a capital, with which after 1989 he bought a parcel near the main road and built a motel, and gradually, constructed a complex, which in fact repeated the structure of the bigger SO MAT terminals – he had a cheap motel for the drivers, with simple food, a parking for the trucks, car wash and gas station.

At the moment of the interview, he already had expanded his business activities and actually already was not focused on trucks. He had vineyards, producing wine, but also he said that he is the only Bulgarian, who produced the paper packages for eggs in the shops. In the still existing parking lot there were parked mainly busses for international tourists.

He was not really willing to share his stories, behaved suspiciously and boasted with his entrepreneurism, diligence, and artifice, and did not agree to have another, already proper interview, though gave me his phone number. He also was rather critical to the current government, saying that the communists have never abandoned the power and the democracy is just an illusion, but on the other hand, an interesting question is how he was allowed by the state and the state security services to become a businessman

in such a sensitive field, if he was not connected to the same power, communist and intelligence services.

The next stop was near Svilengrad, on the old road of the Turkish border (Kapikule), where we found by accident another [parking complex of SO MAT](#), built in 1988. The complex is rather spacious, bigger than the one in Russe and with more facilities. It consisted of two parking grounds for 160 parked big trucks, a hotel for 50-60 persons with double rooms with bathroom with a toilet and one apartment with two rooms, separated by a curtain; there was a canteen, which actually had never worked; a restaurant; a special building for bathrooms, toilets and dressing rooms, only for the truckers, who prefer to spend the nights in the trucks; car wash; gas station; and hall repair.

The complex was closed completely and the only person that was there was the director Bekiarov, who told us that his mother had worked in the administration of SO MAT. He told us that the complex was finished shortly before 1989 exclusively for the needs of SO MAT, and was closed for the drivers from other companies. Gradually however, the complex became more open, not only for the other drivers, but also for the other businesses. Slot machines were installed inside and also prostitutes became part of the place, but soon both were banned and again the complex was restored only for the needs of the drivers. He told us also that at the time of SO MAT the drivers did not pay for the hotel, they had only to register, but paid 10 leva only if they wanted to rent the apartment. Also, according to the director, in general, the drivers did not prefer the hotel, not because the hotel was bad, but because they transformed their trucks into homes and felt much more comfortable and safe to sleep there, so they had used the hotel predominantly when they brought with them prostitutes.

We were allowed to look into the hotel and to take pictures. In the hotel office there was a cashbox, because the drivers carried money paid for the delivery with them along with the money which they needed for the taxes. On the second floor there was a model building, which showed that there was a garden in front of the hotel, which now is destroyed.

According to Bekiarov, the complex is empty and almost abandoned now, due to political instability, which causes the lack of investors. Though the owner Willi Betz is offering the complex for renting, no one wants it. But in the same way as the parking in Russe, the condition of the complex showed that apart from the garden destruction, nothing was changed or maintained in the complex since 1988. The tables, inscriptions, everything was in the original state, including the SO MAT's logo, i.e., even the logo of SO MAT was not replaced by the new owner. Now, the only occupants of the complex are Bekiarov, two small dogs and spiders.

After the stop in the complex, we [headed to the border](#) with the intention to cross it and to visit Edirne and probably to see the parking lots at the other side and to

interview the drivers there. But after we passed the control checks, they send our car for drugs' checking. They searched inside the car and asked us whether we go to Turkey in order to look for work there, took our documents and left us to wait for a long time. Almost no one of the custom officials was able to speak English (the only one who was able to communicate in English, was woman), but at last they sent us back without allowing us to cross the border with the explanation that the car should be considered as a truck, not as a car, and we just had chosen the wrong queue. The whole situation was absurd and at the end I was not convinced that the formal reason for rejecting us, was the wrong queue.

Then we headed to Dimitrovgrad, where to look at the famous weekly markets there and we spent a night in the city. The next morning we visited first the [clothes market](#). There we found clothes, but also carpets, household goods, shoes. The prices and the quality of the clothes were very low and reminded me of the old post-communist markets right after 1989, but still, the old ones were real flea markets, while this one was regulated by the municipality market, with uniform stalls, most of which could be closed fully and to be used as storage places. There were many Turkish, but also Bulgarian, Russian sellers, also from some Far East countries, probably Chinese or Vietnamese. But there were also people, who were selling goods right on the ground. The second market was a [market for cars](#) and was located in the local park. There were no stalls, nor regulations and not only cars were for selling, but everything related to the cars and also a lot of things, which are (I guess) considered related to technology. My impression was that the first market was something like the women market, and this one – more for the men. There were parts of computers, vacuum cleaners, microwave ovens, fridges and washing machines, but also watches, sewing machines, even one typing machine.

Going into the park the market was gradually changing – at the beginning you see mostly spare parts for cars and trucks, also a lot of tires, all of them spread in a rather artistic manner, (there was an entire section only for spare parts for TIR trucks and another – only for tires) and then the goods start to change into small technological gadgets, then a section for pets – mainly dogs, but also fish, birds; and after that the market receives the proper vision of a flea market – selling old reproductions, beads, old books and magazines, and at the end just everything that one could imagine and all in a poor condition and low quality. The sellers also were changing, and gradually became dominated by the Roma population.

I suppose, the very car market was already finished when we went there, because there were a few cars for selling and the man we met the previous night in the park told us that the market for the cars starts very early in the morning, and many people sleep the whole night into the park.

The park (and respectively the market), were located near the two football sport grounds – one official and one unofficial, but both of them almost abandoned and already not in use.

On the road to Pazardjik, we saw several places where the truck drivers used as parking lots. Some of them were proper and well organized parking lots, but others were just places with trucks. One of the first, which caught our attention, was just a place near the road with a small booth, on which wall was written that this is a terminal for the Hungarian truckers. The place did not seem as a terminal at all, it was dirty, without any security, no proper ground for the trucks, nor any facilities except this booth, which was closed at that time. The owner of the near restaurant – a Bulgarian Turkish guy told us that yes, it was a [Hungarian terminal](#) and that the Hungarian truckers stop there for signing their documents and sometimes for eating in the restaurant. According to him, two Bulgarians worked in the booth for the Hungarians. Though the place was considered to be for the Hungarian trucks, there were stopped different trucks, most Turkish. The owner of the restaurant told us also that if we want to see a real terminal or parking, we have to go back and to see the parking called “The Plane”.

We followed his advice and going back saw a parking, which was built as a Medieval castle and actually followed the pattern of the most recently appeared casino centers, most of which built in this aesthetic line. We stopped there and saw that apart the castle, there was also an office and obviously some security was provided for the trucks. The castle was built with tick stone blocks, and inside we saw a spacious restaurant, with two waitresses, and flat TV screens showing Turkish TV. There were truck drivers inside and one of the waitresses told us that the parking and the restaurant are a private property, but that the clients are not only Turkish, but from all nationalities. Still, most of the men inside looked more like Turkish, except one blond and fair guy, who seemed more like Polish. The waitress told us that the place provides bath facilities, but my impression was that they provided also different kinds of services, considering the boxes on the both sides of the restaurant, closed with curtains from the main hall. The place looked clean, organized, well paved, but not very populated.

The next place was the parking “The Plane”, which name was after the old plane in the front of the parking, but also because of the proximity of the local military airport. The place was also well paved, clean, with office and security, and with a hotel. In the parking there were trucks from different countries, but most of them from Central Europe. When we started to talk with the drivers however, we realized that the trucks are from Central European companies – Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, but most of the drivers were Turkish or Bulgarian. In the two Hungarian trucks we found Turkish drivers. One of them did not speak English at all, but spoke a little German, the other drivers seemed to have a better German, but he did not show from the truck

and we just were able to hear his remarks. Both of them were not able to explain why they chose to stop at this parking, not the Castle one.

But there was also a Bulgarian truck driver, who told us that he used to work as a driver in Germany, but now he was back in Bulgaria and is working mainly for domestic haulages. According to him, there are two kinds of parking lots – black and exemplary. “The Plane” was exemplary, while the “Castle” was black. He said that the European drivers choose the exemplary or European parking lots and expect also European service, while the Turkish drivers choose the black ones. The difference between them (according to the drivers) was the quality of the pavement, the security, the hygiene, to have a place to wash yourself, and the hotel. He said also that it was risky to stop everywhere, even in the exemplary parking lots, because everywhere people steal, but still, the risk in the model parking lots is smaller. And he said also that it is very easy to recognize the black parking – they are covered with mud, poorly or not at all paved, with weeds and no facilities, which was a rather proper description of the so called Hungarian terminal, which we saw earlier. But it was not an adequate description for the Castle parking, which formally fitted the exemplary model.

So, our impression finally was that even the driver was not specific, he actually referred not so much to the pavement and security, but the specifics of the services in some places – consequently, if the parking provides prostitutes and gambling should be considered as a black one, and if not – as a model one. And that is the only reasonable explanation why the Castle was considered a black parking.

The last place, which we visited during the trip, was the [ex-SO MAT terminal in Pazardjik](#), now a property of Willi Betz.

This one was built actually not for and by SO MAT, but for [Texim](#), another big company of the 60-ties, which truck fleet was transferred to SO MAT after Texim was closed in 1969.

The complex does not have a hotel, but has a car wash, a very big hall repair, bath, warehouses, sheds for the drivers, where working meetings took place, another hall repair for the express haulages, which has never worked, gas station, diagnostic center, canteen, two steam machines for heating – one old and one newer, which also has never worked, and ground for trucks. During socialism, according to the guard of the place, 2000 people worked for this branch of SO MAT. Now all buildings are offered for renting, but most of them stay empty and unused. There were only a small sewing workshop, custom office, and a company for parcels. Some of the Willi Betz trucks still come and stop there, but it is not very often.

The guard told us that Willi Betz already does not work with Mercedes trucks; that he did not take care for the complex and everything is abandoned and never maintained. And indeed, it looks like the time was stopped – the old tables and inscriptions are still in place, and everything is collapsing. The guard told us also that the complex

was built on a swamp, which was a Gypsy ghetto (now there are Roma blocs); and also that the initial idea was this complex to be built in Plovdiv, but the Party authorities decided to make it in Pazardjik, in order to develop the local structures. There was a monument in the complex – an old truck Berliet. And a man with his wife came during our visit, who started to work for SO MAT when was 17 years old as a technician. He was living now in Slovakia and was visiting Bulgaria for a meeting with his brothers and their families and used the opportunity to show to his wife the place where he spent so many years and to have a picture in front of the Berliet to show his friends in Slovakia that all stories about this place are true. He was extremely enthusiastic about the SO MAT past and glory and said that as a technician he saw and new things that no one could tell and could and wanted to write a book.

I do not think that we met a driver, who was able to speak English or German relatively fluently.

So, as a main conclusion from all the things we saw during the trip, for me were the most interesting that:

- The parkings and terminals part of the SO MAT network are entirely abandoned, and that obviously Willi Betz is not interested anymore in investing in the Bulgarian truck transport, which is related with information I have from interviews with other drivers that the Willi Betz drivers are not well paid or not paid at all, and the truckers leave their job there. Blaming the political conditions could be only partly relevant as far as you cannot expect to sell facilities in such a poor condition. But for me it was like a golden mine, because in fact I saw the complexes the way they were during socialism.
- In the other hand, when you see the terminals, you realize that the “Thousands trucks” during socialism and the huge complexes cannot work the same way today, which is one more argument for the success of SO MAT during the Cold War. If at that time beyond the Iron curtain the small scale companies prevailed the market vs the big state companies in the socialist countries, now the “big state” monster is dead and there are many small companies, which do not need this kind of huge complexes. My impression is that following the Cold War inertia, Willi Betz tried to continue the previous model of large scale trucking, but failed to acknowledge the new context, which is more favorable for the small companies and of course, the lack of the state support and dotations.
- This in turn again disproves the claims of the former authorities of SO MAT that the company was so independent that did not need the state support at all, and functioned as a fully capitalistic enterprise.
- And the logical conclusion is that Willi Betz is really a key figure to be interviewed for both the periods before and after 1989; for Bulgarian, but also

European truck transport; and for the Eurasian scale of network he built together with SO MAT.

- The parking lots are divided informally into categories, so, our nodes should consider not only the location on the roads, but the quality scale through the eyes of the truckers: as more “European”, “secure” and “clean” or “dirty” and full with weeds, but also with prostitutes and gambling.
- This division also will allow us to identify different people meeting each other in these different nodes – different groups of nationalities, but also different groups of businessmen, and different activities in these places.
- Most of the information and opinions we received were based on stereotypes and pre-given ideas and images about the Turkish population, about the Europeanness, about the differences between the Western and the Eastern drivers, and largely are influenced by the nostalgic sentiments toward the past great glory of the Bulgarian international truck transport and SO MAT.