

• **My Street** •

★ **Cuban Stories**

edited by

Diana Ivanova

Babak Salari



My Street | Cuban Stories

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My Street
52 Cuban Stories
from
Havana, Holguin, Casablanca, Gibara, Santiago de Cuba,
Trinidad, Cienfuegos and San Jose de las Lajas

Edited by Diana Ivanova and Babak Salari



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• Foreword •

An Anthropology of Emptiness

by Diana Ivanova

“However, it is not enough to speak about someone, to include him or her in the history of the world... Of crucial importance is the way in which you speak.”

*Giovanni Levi**

Now, as I sit down to write these lines, I wonder if I’ll be able to tame the emotions flooding over me that this trip to Cuba unleashed. I have a clear picture in my mind: the rumbling ocean at two o’clock in the morning on the Malecon (Havana’s seaside street), the pale yellow street

lights and the video cameras observing everything from above, while in front of me – hundreds of human bodies pressed closely together, kissing, sweaty, colorful, with guitars, bottles, cigarettes, raising noise. It was the day before we left the island. This sight blew me away. It was a huge Babylonian crush of people who were alive. I was struck by the sense of space, of expansiveness, of freedom. The thought occurred to me – these people are free. It contradicts other thoughts and feelings this trip had awakened. This contradiction itself also struck

* Giovanni Levi. Exercises in Microhistory. Sofia: House of Human and Social Sciences, 2008.

me. But it seems that this is always the case in Cuba – there’s a thin line separating the charming from the devastating and I’ve never quite been able to follow it without tumbling onto one side or the other.

On every one of my visits to Cuba – this is already the fifth – I have been surprised to realize that mentioning Bulgaria elicits reactions – lots of personal memories, stories about Bulgaria, even whole Bulgarian words and phrases squirreled away in people’s memories. *Na baba ti hvurchiloto*,* canned strawberries, perfume, yoghurt, apples. This has always surprised me – in Cuba I’ve never run up against the indifference to the word “Bulgaria” that I’ve gotten used to elsewhere. For that reason, I think I should be honest and admit that the Cuban project was also born out of a utopia – can we provoke Cubans into telling stories to us as Bulgarians? In this ever more similar world, can we – we, who come from two small countries that are almost equal in size

and that have preserved some sense of excitement about each other, thanks to the thousands of shared fates, mixed marriages and joint projects that took place before the political changes in Bulgaria in 1989 – can we begin to tell our stories to one another and to discover some new meaning in them? Despite the fact that for Cubans the historical turning point is different – 1991, the break up of the Soviet Union and the subsequent beginning of the “Special Period” of severe shortages, a period of crisis – and despite the fact that the trajectories we are now moving along are fundamentally different, we still share a common experience: the world our parents lived in no longer exists, and each of us has to cope in his or her own way with disintegration, emptiness, the loss of this world.

One of the most interesting conversations we had was in San Jose de las Lajas. We were sitting on the veranda in the hushed late evening, we had al-

* This is a Bulgarian nonsense phrase that literally means “your grandma’s kite” and is often used in response to exasperating or unanswerable questions – translator’s note.

ready read quite a few stories and now were simply talking. The conversation turned toward the topic of what had happened in Bulgaria and I realized that everyone was listening to me with great interest, and so I was quite long-winded (later Babak told me that I really had overdone it). That was the first and only time we had talked about the transition and how we ourselves could change things. “Silence is much more powerful, it alone can change things,” one young man said and his eyes made it clear this was not just a front. “But I’m 20 and I don’t want to be quiet,” I want to scream, a girl replied. I remembered that exchange, because it encapsulated all of my own experience.

My Street is an attempt to speak concretely about the details, surfaces and rough contours of our everyday world.

It is an attempt inspired precisely by microhistory and oral history, which have changed the focus and scope of history as a discipline in order to try to reconstruct the complexity and intricacy of the human world. During the 1990s I was deeply intrigued by the project of certain Czech sociologists called SAMISEBE** (“Our Very Own Selves”), in which, due to the lack of reliable public data about the society in which they lived, the sociologists decided to turn themselves, their biographies, their families and their apartments into data for analysis. At the beginning of the 21st century I came across a book of American stories collected by Paul Auster, *I Thought My Father Was God*: “We all have inner lives,” Auster writes. “We all feel that we are part of the world and yet exiled from it. We all burn with the fires of our own existence... We are not per-

** Zdenek Konopasek. *Our Lives as Database – Doing a Sociology of Ourselves*, 2000.

*** Paul Auster. *I Thought My Father Was God*. New York: Henry Holt, 2001.

**** I will mention only a few here: Georgi Gospodinov, Rumen Petrov and I created the website *I Lived Socialism*; Mariana Asenova and I have continued to organize the festival of memories in Bela Rechka; Boris Deliradev and I began the *My Street* project in Bulgaria.

fect, but we are real.” ***

In recent years I myself have felt the urgent necessity – most probably due to the lack of future prospects – to change the focus of my work, to do small things in which I attempt to observe myself. The feeling that reality is slipping away from me, that there is an everyday order in which I am not participating fills me simultaneously with rage and helplessness. It was precisely these feelings that brought me together with like-minded people and provided the impetus for several experiments.**** Our own personal biographies, our own choices, doubts, feelings: in short – our own subjectivity – had to reassert their place in the public arena and to fight for a new significance there. At first glance this seems paradoxical – only when you are as subjective as possible do you give the Other a chance to compose an objective picture, because you allow them to know more about your very self. In delving into a private story, in reducing the scale, there is first of all

a recognition – to paraphrase the Italian historian Giovanni Levi – a recognition that we live in a world which no longer believes in a universal and shared foundation. However, there is also the curiosity to discover the meaning in each private world and to ask questions about it.

This is exactly how the story of *My Street* was born. It is precisely that private world that forms the essence of this project.

What that the Cuban streets gave me was the sense that any state, whether emptiness or joy, can be lived intensely.

That very intensity of feeling is a way of announcing that you exist. I found something new in this that I had not discovered until now in the Bulgarian stories that had been collected based on the same principle three years earlier.* The feeling itself is your tie to life and sometimes the most important thing is for it to exist, even if it is made up. For exam-

*My Street. 39 Stories with Streets. Janet 45 Publishing, 2006

ple, I was astonished by the Cubans' nostalgia. How could 20 or 30-year-olds be nostalgic? For what? For the times when Cuba was magnificent, the times of the colonial architecture, times they never lived through, but which they still miss in a strange way. A kind of ephemeral, unreal nostalgia, a striving towards some other time, a dream about some other past. This intense experience of nostalgia, especially in Havana, reminded me of the *hüzün* that Orhan Pamuk describes in *Istanbul*** – that collective sense of melancholy, a general “black mood,” which thousands of Istanbul natives experience, having been born in a city that was once an imperial capital, but which is now simply a city. However, since I was not born in Havana and do not live there, I realize that I will most likely go astray if I let myself get too carried away in a search for parallels.

The fact remains, however, that if it weren't for *My Street*, I would never have come into contact with these complex and fragile states of Cuban

sensitivity, with that intense sorrow that we don't see as tourists and have no way of glimpsing on Cuba's seaside streets. I think this intensity has seized me in some strange way, crashing into me like the waves that pound the Malecon every day. It grips me still.

Last but not least, the big questions remain. To what extent can we be sure that the voices which we encounter and hear and which tell their own stories are authentic? Who are we to make that decision? Is the inclusion of those who are silent sufficient to change the picture in and of itself?

Only readers can answer this question. If you sense some excitement, if something happens to you as you read this book, that means we have succeeded in coming out of the emptiness.

** Orhan Pamuk. 2005. *Istanbul: Memories of a City*. London: Faber&Faber.

• Foreword •

From Shiraz To Havana

by Babak Salari



For Mama N

Flash Back: Nostalgia

Tomorrow, February 11th, is the 31st anniversary of the Iranian Revolution. Since 1979, I have been travelling and living in many streets, in many places around the world, including my own city, Shiraz, the City of Secrets. Since leaving Iran 27 years ago, and not counting my eventual immigration to Canada, I've moved almost 27 times and I've been questioned, over and over again, about my idea of home, displacement, and the emotional effects of being far from the place where I used to belong.

It is difficult to give an image, I've discovered, to an idea as complicated as the idea of "home". I have stayed in various streets in many countries but still I have a hard time saying: This one is *mine*. I still cannot figure out a place of my own where I don't fear being abandoned by society. Yet, in spite of this feeling, I've enjoyed every single moment of my life anywhere I've found myself up to this moment.

In September and December 2009

I flew with the Bulgarian journalist Diana Ivanova to Cuba to start the project *My Street*. Both of us were amazed by the lively interest of the Cuban participants in our proposal, and by their willingness to tell us about the street in which they live. And I have to admit that my involvement in their views, histories and stories stirred up memories that had been buried inside of me for a long time.

Travelling with Diana and our assistant, Ulises, from La Havana all the way to Santiago de Cuba gave me the chance to take part in a series of workshops with local people and to hear their very personal stories. We asked each person to describe the street they lived on, and to describe it to someone – like us – who had never been there before. Their writings could be about buildings, neighbours, shapes, colours, recollections...

One's own *street* turned out to be, for the Cubans, an easily accessible topic. The street was a micro-model of the larger society that they had in common, regardless of their external differences. By reading, listening and



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