

So here we are, Iris and me. In a remote corner of Bulgaria in a place called Rosen, close to the Romanian border. To give you an idea of scale: the next pictures were shot in Dobrich, a modern city with close to 100.000 inhabitants. Push buildings, shops that cater for everything and large-scale squares that help you remember that communism was here not so long ago.



Moving on to a smaller place called General Toshevo: with 5000 inhabitants the local capital of the area we're in. Some shops, restaurants, swimming pool... a laid-back atmosphere and some great advertisements depicting the (unfortunately still current) role of the female in Bulgarian culture:



And then there is the peasant town Rosen: 50 inhabitants, mostly older women. Many men have died from serious alcohol abuse and kids have left for the city to study or work. In this place we'll work until end of June. We are staying in a fine small house at a wonderful place from our friend [Alan Laurillard](#), where we have everything to survive this rough rural area ;-)



Rosen, main street



Rosen's only shop

It's obvious we want to do something with the history and the inhabitants of this place: once a flourishing town, now a run down place waiting to be left as an empty shell, like many places in this area. In nearby Kraishte (literally meaning 'End'...) there are only 5 people left and even the graveyard there seems to have seen better days.



The announcements of who has passed away are visible just to the right of the shop's entrance.

Speaking of which: we were curious about the death-announcements we see everywhere (not uncommon in many East European countries). Who was making them?

We traced it down to a very little shop called 'Sirius' Funeral Monuments in Toshevo.

One woman there does them with Office templates you can choose from a big book on the counter. She does all announcements for this area (...) and you can see them everywhere: on shop-windows, trees and of course on walls of municipality buildings. We were hoping she would archive them somehow, but it seems she did not.



'Sirius' Funeral Monuments



...and the more obscure uses of MS Office



Speaking English is rare in this part of Bulgaria, so we're very happy with the Google Translate app, which raises eyebrows as we speak Dutch into our iPhones and instantly show them the Bulgarian translation: like a device you only could have seen Spock using in outer-worldly places !-). It also works the opposite way, as long as they speak slowly. And you can write the Cyrillic characters in it by hand, which is helpful when you don't understand squat from what you're reading. Highly recommended! Wish we had this back in Vietnam, were we could hardly do anything without a translator by our side.

And though the app is great and all, it's not very helpful in natural conversations, so we still need an interpreter. And since we are on our own budget and trying to get any funding for an art project in Rosen will not happen in our lifetimes, we have to find one our self.

So we simply went to the local high school in Kracen (a town nearby and just a bit bigger than Rosen) and were greeted by Daniela, an English teacher who seems happy to assist us in interviewing the inhabitants of Rosen. Great!

Finally two things worth mentioning: there is this small theatre inside the Town Hall that doubled as a small cinema, back in the 60's/70's. It is still there, needs a broom, but might be useful to us to present something. It would be the first activity there in over 40 years....



The theatre, with a record player still in place...



Iris is checking out the venue...

And on June 24th, a big Folk festival will take place near Rosen. Not sure whether we want to hook up with that, but maybe I can do something with sounds that I'm recording here: for any nature lover and recordist, this place is heaven: no sound pollution whatsoever and a broad arena of sounds to record: insects, birds (nightingales go on 24/7), wind brushing the lush vegetation and an occasional thunderstorm in 3D surround ;-)



## Bulgaria Travelogue II

Rosen, Monday June 13, 2014

We have entered our last week here and have come up with a plan. After some research, most of what we have learned about Rosen and its inhabitants is rather sad. Like so many villages in Bulgaria, the collapse of communism was followed by a slow decay of the bigger companies in the countryside, resulting in a loss of jobs and a lack of work. Young people move to the cities and abroad and the villages remain as skeletons of better days. It actually happens that when people pass away, their house gets locked (when they're lucky by their own relatives) and stays locked for decades to come. And Rosen is no different: many houses like that are covered with weeds and host a sleeping past inside.

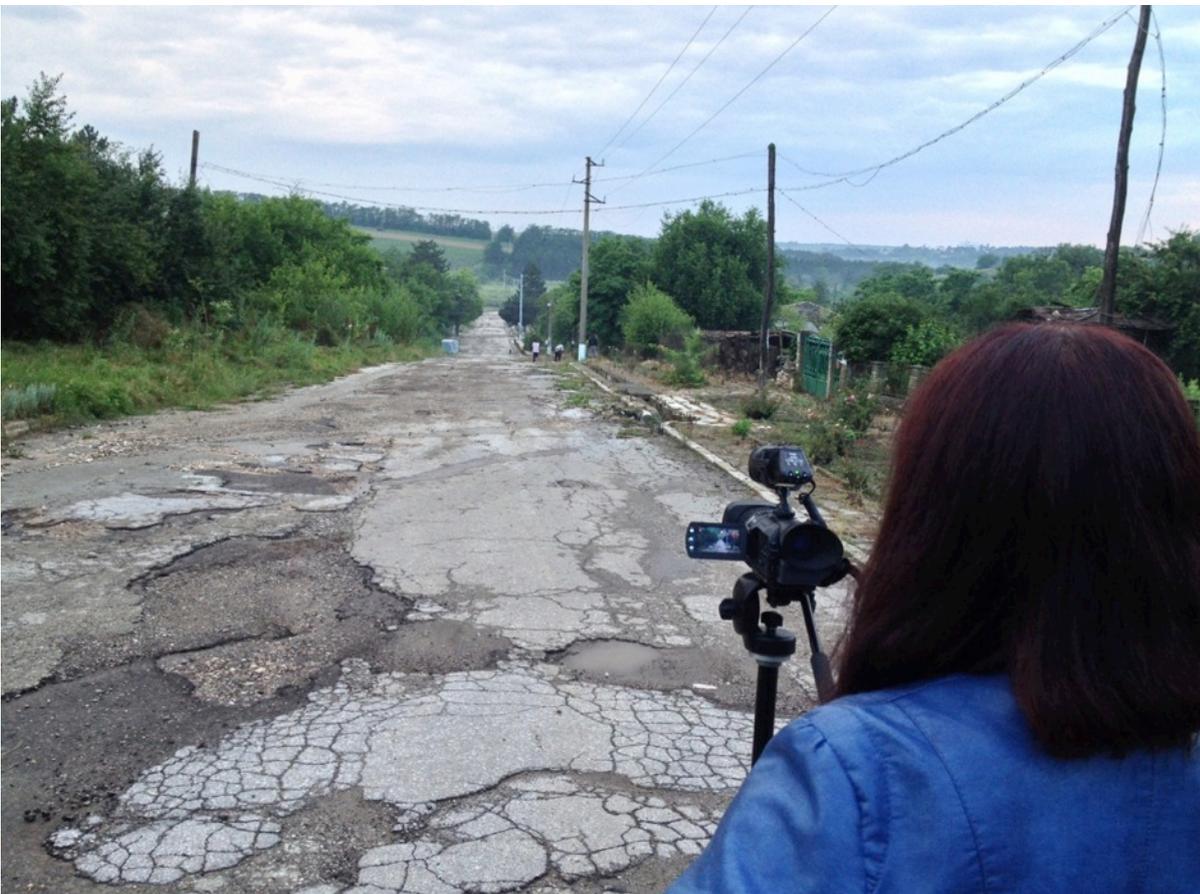


Rosen in better days, when there still was a café...



...and young people started families

So what to do with a small peasant village with just one shop, broken roads and a growing graveyard?



Rosen's main road with some Roma kids playing with a tire: rolling it downhill, fetching it...and then again...(and again...)

Well: maybe you remember I mentioned in the former travelogue that there is a small theatre here, inside the town hall. It also doubled as cinema, screening 3 to 4 films every week, back in the 70's and 80's. It has not seen any activity in over 20 years.



Although 'Art for the Masses' had a slightly different meaning back in those days, it still is better than nothing...

So for starters, we want to bring some life in there. Theatre and cinema are places for imagination, to forget your daily sorrows, to drift off in dreams maybe; it's the right spot to revive this sad and sleepy place.

Our host [Alan Laurillard](#) has been living off and on in Rosen's former school for over 8 years. He is also composer and musician and has been involved in activities with local kids playing instruments and theatre, so he's the obvious companion in this. He has rounded up some ladies to practice some songs to perform in the theater. And before we even have a decent program, we have picked a day for the

## фестивала "Животът на Росен"

('Rosen Live Festival'). So come Saturday the 28<sup>th</sup> of June, at least 'something' will go down in town. Aside from the Rosen All-star Choir, we just need to fill in the blanks... There is a writer and poet who lives nearby: maybe he wants to read some poetry? Maybe a Bulgarian dubbed James Bond in the afternoon? What about some kids playing live percussion? How about live music anyways?

Meanwhile, we should also present our work that day, for sure. But what should it be?

Iris has filmed beautiful material: many people here think they are being photographed, so they simply stay in their pose the whole time they are being filmed. Classic, but as art it's only interesting for outsiders. But some of it is useful: many haven't seen themselves on film ever, so a short compilation might work. Also I have been recording: not only sound, but also many pictures and short movies with both my GoPro and my iPhone with special lenses. Timelapses of the sunset, butterflies on a flower and snails moving by. But mostly insects:





I've never seen a variety this big. Lots of unknown creepy crawlers that alone could fill at least a 10-minute horror movie! All familiar animals to the people here, but never seen up-close on a big screen. Also many old ladies take big pride in their flower gardens, so a simple slideshow of those will probably appeal.



So two shorts: one on the people of Rosen and one on the nature that surrounds them. But what else?

When we first arrived here, we noticed the death-announcements everywhere (see Travelogue I). It is an omnipresent reminder of loss and grief. We figured: why not turn this around? Why not have a sign saying who is alive and well?

Maybe unconsciously we picked it up from signs you can see in the bigger towns like Dobrich and Toshevo: they depict excellent students that made their degree, young athletes that have won medals and other excellence among groups of people.





Example of a display in Toshevo, showing (in this case) which students graduated with excellent marks.

We could use this kind of display, to 'put Rosen on the map', literally. Having a print of a satellite view of Rosen in the middle, and all of its smiling inhabitants around it. It might look something like this:



Photoshop impression of the display. "Inhabitants of Rosen on June 28, 2014" it says.

We actually thought of having names and numbers under each photo, physically linking the people to their homes on the map, but since we want to keep our little present a surprise, we cannot know upfront whether people would like to disclose such information: yes, even in Rosen, privacy counts...

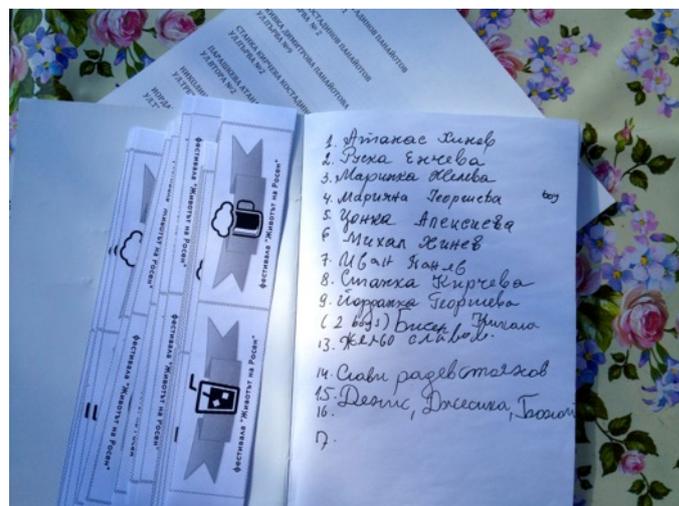
So up next: how to get all inhabitants on photo?

We devised a simple plan: ask the major for all addresses in Rosen (45) and invite each inhabitant (75 it seems) by personal letter to come to the Town Hall today and tomorrow to get their picture taken. In return they get 2 coupons for free drinks during the festival and a copy of their own picture, also on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

To make it more personal *and* official, the major and we signed all 45 invitations.

We wanted to send them by post, which would be fun, since there is no post office here and people need to pick up their mail at the shop, but it seemed better time wise to deliver them by hand: the advantages of a town that small.

No idea if our incentive will work: today we just finished the second of four sessions in total and we have 24 pictures now.



Meanwhile, we have a new helper. The English teacher that was so enthusiastic at first (see Travelogue I) withdrew all of a sudden when she realized she actually had no time. Oh well....

But enter Temenuga Hineva, or Timi for short: a woman from Toshevo who has relatives living in Rosen. Her daughter, a beautiful 23-year-old student called Magdalena speaks very good English and is assisting her, but her mom is the most active. Having backgrounds in chemistry and even nanotechnology, she is technical and seems to arrange things without us having to think along. Up until now, a beamer could be arranged and she brought us to a craftsman who can make the display for us *and* anchor it in the ground for just around 100 Lev (€50) in total. Courtesy of her former classmate she says. And this morning, some guys showed up at the theatre to see if they could fix the electricity there (no luck), but we didn't even know she had arranged for that. Wow. We are very happy to be working with her.

So now off to find that James Bond movie... Or maybe check the Bulgarian Movie Top 10 first? And what about those 65 picture frames: can they be here in time? Oh, and an A2 print from Google Earth: where can we get that? Need to get hold of the number from the cultural attaché from the Dutch Embassy: maybe they wanna spend a dime or two on this?

Busy, looking forward!



From left to right, Major Marinka, Magdalena, Timi and Iris

This last part is actually an epilogue. We're home, safe and sound and have finished editing our material and we are looking back satisfied and fulfilled: yet another successful project!

But before you lean back, I will let you in on the most typical details of our work. About some derailing endeavors and tough challenges, but also in on the joy it is to overcome these and meet the gratitude of the people we do this for and with. And it's all not so much about art as it is about communication...

First off, we were looking for a partner to get some finances into our plan for a little Festival. We would pay for the artwork (which would turn out to be around € 300 in the end) and have no budget left for drinks, food and the unmissable live-music! We did try to the Dutch Embassy, but they were closed... At the Dryan Folk Festival I mentioned earlier, we met Mr. Balabanov, a local celebrity who is a writer, poet and successful agricultural businessman. He was immediately overly enthusiastic: why not turn this into a Big Festival To Celebrate The European Bonds Between Holland, England And Bulgaria? What Dutch group could we hire to play Dutch folk music? And he would plant 3 trees to celebrate our European comradeship. We friendly tried to explain we had slightly different ideas and that Alan is *Canadian*, not English, but he did not seem to understand or we failed to explain it better. BIG it should be! We planned a meeting and would discuss further.



Mr. Balabanov and Major Marinka, later, dressed for the occasion

So there we are, a few days later in the major's office, with language-support from Timi and her daughter.

Across the table, Mr. Balabanov, who unfolded some sheets of paper and started reading out aloud. It turned out he had written a complete program for his European Festival and (literally) only had to fill in the blanks where our names should be spelled.... The National press would be there; we could share our view on Bulgaria and all: it would live up to international standards!

Now, we know from experience one should stay calm and not get agitated and (important) *smile!* He truly means well, and to be honest: with just a few days left and no options left, we have to depend on him.

But when we tried to explain we already had a festival lined up: cozy and small just for the locals themselves... *and* wanted him to contribute, things started to backfire...

How can a festival be a success without any press? How can we leave a mark for generations to come? How will they be able to remember this historical day in Rosen's' history?

He decided he would not cooperate anymore. His name is fame and his reputation could be on the line here.

And what about us? Do we even have any experience in organizing things like this? (...) Don't we need his expertise?

Now, again: he means well, but simply has a hard time listening to others beside himself and simply is not used to accept no for an answer. We have to deal with that.

So after some pokerfaced staring, shaking hands, cracking jokes about Europe and its abilities to compromise (...), we found the solution. It would be *our* festival. He would not perform himself, but was willing to help out, since our program resembled his ideas very much. Now the trigger here is that we made him feel notified, taken seriously. So all ended well with him slapping 160 Lv (€ 80) straight from his wallet on the table for Alan to find musicians. He would pay for the drinks and food... everything!

And he would still plant his trees: as a gift to the community and to remember the strong bonds between Bulgaria, Holland and... England.

Meanwhile, Iris and Timi had a pretty hard time getting all the material for our artwork: around 60 photo-frames, a photo shop that could print, frame and laminate the pictures and where we could get our Google Earth map printed on A2. I'll spare you the details but as usual it was time-consuming (and therefore nerve wrecking) to get these kinds of apparently simple errands done.

But most important was the miscommunication with the hero I described in Part II, the man who would make us the display. He somehow misunderstood that it was about the *whole* thing and thought he would merely sandwich our photo board between two plates of glass and that would be it.

So on Friday, some 30 hours before our event, they took off to a company in Dobrich, at least an hour drive over some of the worst roads in Europe. Once there it took such a long time to explain what we were after, that once understood, it was simply too late: the shop would close before they could finish it and the price meanwhile had tripled....

Oh well... Off to plan B: *no display!*



A Photoshop impression of what we had in mind...

And then it was Saturday: D-Day. All except for the artwork itself had been arranged: even the cinema's electric plan had been restored by workmen all the way from Toshevo! Not an easy task, judging from the Russian-style fuse boxes: it took them 3 days...!



Ancient hazardous technology

Ready to receive the audience!

As mentioned earlier, some ladies worked hard to tidy everything up, clean the windows, hang up curtains etc. Alan and me moved all things old and heavy down to the basement, assisted by some young Roma boys.

Now the small-town cinema was ready to shine once again (and hopefully for years to come).

Timi had arranged for a professional beamer and I thought up a movie-program that could appeal to everyone. In the afternoon, "[The Foreigner](#)" would play, a romantic comedy by Nikolay Iliev from 2012. It ranked #2 on the list of Best Bulgarian Movies on IMDB and had a suitable theme: a Frenchman falls in love with a hot-tempered Bulgarian country girl, leading to all kinds of intercultural misunderstandings.

After that, we would screen an older National Bulgarian TV documentary "What is Memory Left ..." that Timi happened to have in her treasured possession. It featured some inhabitants of Rosen and was much sought after. It was suitable too, since it deals with the forced resettlement in 1940 of Bulgarian people from Romania to Bulgaria, as a result of the [Treaty of Craiova](#). It would be a very emotional experience for the people of Rosen, because most of them are themselves descendants of these so-called "settlers" and because some people in the film are their fellow villagers who died recently and are known and remembered by all.



A still from "Какъв е спомен останал..."



... and a moved audience, some of them in tears...

Since Iris and I were too busy finalizing our work for the evening-program, we left it to Alan to take care of the projection, but were very happy when he informed us that most seats were taken on both screenings.

In the evening we would not only present the artwork to the villagers, but also would show a short that Iris made with all the portraits. She had no photo camera with her and shot them on video to take the best frames out: where we were able to get them smiling! She used slowmotion on these moments and put the rather intense choir music of [Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares](#) under it. Pretty well known and not very original maybe, but it was the best we could think of. A bit more on that later.

And I decided to show a short nature movie I compiled of my shots and stills of mainly insects, snails and spiders Especially using a macro-lens (enlargement by 4) would provide a different view on all the creatures the villagers know so well. And for good measure, I threw in some flowers, since it is obvious gardening is a second nature to the locals and their flower gardens are their pride and joy (and it would lighten up my taste for spiders and other creepy crawlers ;-)

So come 7PM Iris and I were still finishing up: I rounded up my editing-frenzy and was in high demand to help Iris with cutting and gluing. Alan suggested to simply shift the program to 7.30 and that was a deadline we could make.



The artwork presented: "Where's my picture?"



No display, but still a nice thing to look at (the artwork I mean ;-)

It is important at this point to explain that the whole purpose of our work is to connect people: sometimes with each other, with their problems or their past. The way in which we achieve that is our art, not so much the visible end result. We always adapt to the local circumstances and flavors: we want people to feel really represented and respected. You could argue to make it our mission to bring Art to the People, which certainly is worthwhile, but that is not what we are after.

So during the rest of the evening, we had performances of the "Rosenski Avligi" as the choir was now called (the local name for the Eurasian golden oriole, a tropical looking bird with a parrot-like song). Eleanora was performing "Move" by Missy and Gypsy girl Luba was showing her best moves on "Boom Boom Pow" a thumping R&B track by The Black Eyed Peas. And we laughed wholeheartedly along with the quirks of Mr. Bean, who is capable of moving facial muscles worldwide.



They have come a long way in just a matter of days...



Mr. Bean on his way to the dentist...



... and the audience having a great time!

The reaction to Iris movie, which we felt could be a bit dramatic since the soundtrack of sacred sounding hymns could make it look like an obituary were completely different: people were laughing out loud when they saw their face light up full size and it seemed to bring a lot of joy. So much for cultural expectations!

Mr. Balabanov, who turned out to be the host of the evening, ended the program sooner than was agreed (he switched on the lights during Mr. Bean) since there would be still enough light to plant his trees in front of the City Hall.

So in the middle of taking down the equipment I was ordered outside and was looking into the lens of a photographer, while I had to ceremonially shuffle the sand back into the holes, where the young pines have been rooted. A Bond Between Nations was made!



The evening ended with the best thing yet: the villagers dancing on the square, hand in hand in a big circle: lights of the shop were on, people chattering, drinking and laughing. The village was alive!

Luckily it seems this is not going to be a one-time occasion, since Alan is already busy with organizing the next event. That is the best thing we could hope for!

We sincerely want to thank him for giving us the opportunity, practicing with the choir and the kids lending us his car, sponsoring the drinks and his uncurbed enthusiasm!

And Timi for all her enduring assistance: it was not easy between her daily chores as a mother, housewife *and* professional translator to assist us with all these unusual shopping!

And finally, we thank all the citizens of Rosen who gave us the trust to let us in on their lives.





Villagers dancing into the night!



Alan playing along with the band

Watch Iris' film "Faces of Rosen" [here](#). The music is different due to copyright restrictions of YouTube. My 'The Nature of Rosen: up-close' is online [here](#).