

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters



Module 2

Activity 3: Stories of encounter

A day with an elderly couple in a mountain village in Bulgaria

A couple of months ago, I had the opportunity to meet with people from a Bulgarian Muslim village in the Rhodope mountains. My boyfriend and I spent a day there visiting his grandparents; both of them are nearly 100 years old.

I was a little nervous and also very curious. I asked about some of the things I was not familiar with but I remained silent about other things and, on the whole, I tried not to show how strange everything appeared to me. Thinking back, I could have certainly been more communicative than I actually was, but I found it hard to understand them. Most of the words or expressions they were using I was hearing for the first time and although Alexander explained everything that was unclear, I was amazed how their dialect could be so different.

Our hosts were happy to have us because they had not seen their grandson for a while. Our visit broke the monotony of their everyday lives. I think they were curious – they asked me about my family, what I did and other things. At the end I was left with the impression that they liked me.

I wasn't immensely puzzled, but I wanted to find out more about their traditions – for example, the way the table was laid on a big round tray from which everyone took their food. Later on I learned that was a custom typical of the Rhodope mountains.

Another interesting thing about this trip was the historical fate of this region and the current attitudes of its people. I wanted to know how these people defined themselves. I asked my boyfriend about this and I looked for information on the Internet, but I did not find much. I am still interested in this issue and I intend to look for what other people say about it. I know that most of my friends would be implicitly negative and skeptical about them. On the part of the Bulgarian Muslims there is this fear that they are not accepted by the people they identify with: to a great extent they identify with the Bulgarians and they ARE Bulgarian. A consequence of all this is that some representatives of this ethnic group are immensely uncomfortable about admitting their Muslim ethnicity.

I don't think this visit changed me much in terms of attitude, but it was an experience which made me think and enriched me. I hope to make another trip to this region soon :-)