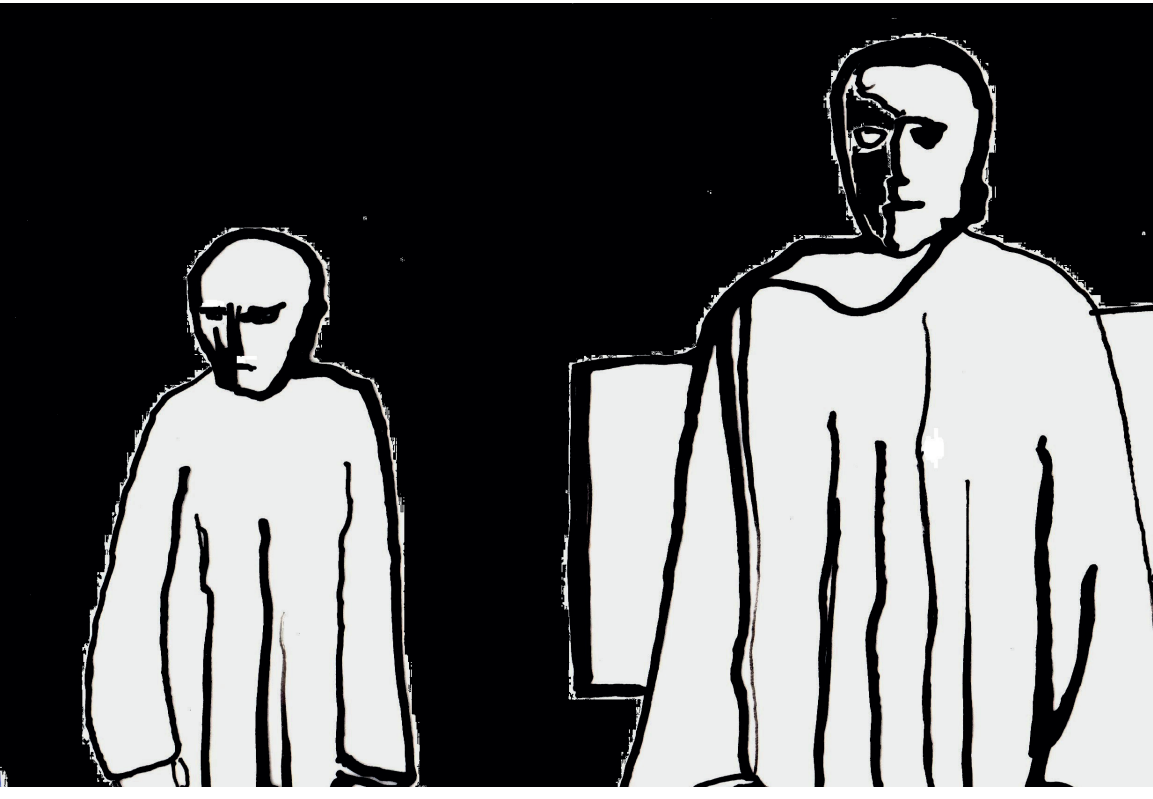
A Funeral Feast in Sfiştofca

Tales from the Danube Delta



Text: Camillo Breiling
Illustrations: Robert Petschinka

Contact: camillo@breiling.net
Self-published

Translated into English by Robert Mcinnes

Layout: playa media

INTRODUCTION

It was August. I was sitting on the deck of the ship taking me from Tulcea to Sulina and thinking about how I was going to spend the coming time. My aim was to carry out thirty interviews with people living in Sfiştofca, a small Lipovan village 25 kilometres north of Sulina. I wanted to analyse and present these interviews in my diploma thesis with the title of "Survey of the Language and Culture of the Old Believers in Sfiştofca/Romania".

The Lipovans are a subgroup of the Russian Old Believers living in the Danube Delta and other parts of Southeast Europe. Like all Old Believers, the Lipovans were not willing to accept the liturgical reforms in the Russian Orthodox Church introduced by the Patriarch of Moscow, Nikon, in the year 1653 and were subsequently persecuted in the Russian tsardom. Many Lipovans fled to remote regions of the country or to areas beyond its borders to escape oppression. The first Lipovans found their way into the Danube Delta from the north at the end of the 18th century and, in the following decades, spread over the entire delta that was entirely in the Ottoman Empire at the time. The Ottoman Sultan guaranteed the Lipovans unlimited religious freedom making it possible for large communities of Old Believers to become established in the Danube Delta and surrounding region in villages such as Sarichioi and Jurilovca.

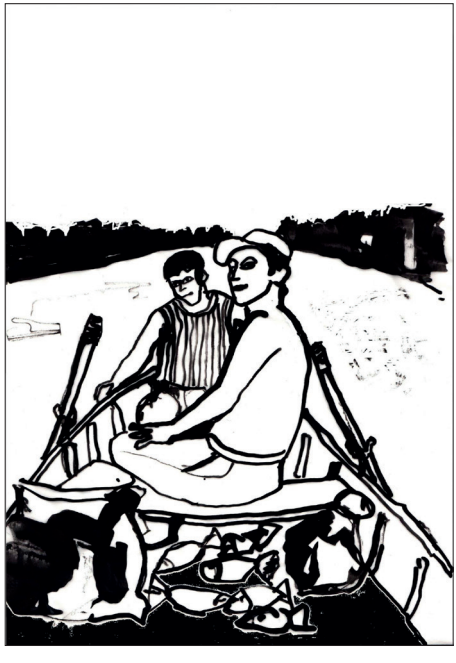
The Lipovans have remained a central ethnic group in the Danube Delta until the present day. They only married each other until the Second World War and had little contact with other ethnic groups. The Dobrudscha, where the Danube Delta is located, was annexed to the newly-established Romanian state in 1878 and this increasingly influenced the lifestyle of the Lipovans living there. After the Second World War and introduction of Socialism in Romania, the Lipovans began to give up their traditional life as fishermen, craftsmen and farmers. As a result, numerous Lipovans emigrated to the cities in search of work and the village communities, together with the associated traditional culture and language, increasingly declined.

After the Second World War, Sfiştofca had around one thousand inhabitants but, today, less than one hundred people live in the village. Although individual houses are built of concrete, the majority were constructed of clay. All of the houses are single-storeyed and the church tower, the highest building, dominates the scenery

and can be seen from far away. There is no running water in Sfiştofca and the inhabitants have to collect their water it from wells. As a result of the massive emigration, many houses are now empty and have become dilapidated to a lesser or larger extent. The half-ruined houses provide shelter for the wild horses that are a common feature of Sfiştofca and the surrounding area. There are only a few old cars in Sfiştofca and the most important means of transportation is still the horse and cart. The villagers use this to go to the well to fetch water and shop in the C.A. Rosetti Community Centre about three kilometres away. The majority of the population are elderly – or very old – people. One sees very few children and young people as most have emigrated to the surrounding cities such as Sulina, Tulcea and Constanza to look for work. In summer, Sfiştofca is frequently visited by tourists who, however, usually only spend one night in the village. Many tourists to Sfiştofca come from Western Europe. The average Romanian tourist finds Sfiştofca uninteresting on account of the simple living conditions and lack of comfort.

As I thought over the history and fate of the Lipovans sitting on the deck of the ship to Sfiştofca, I took a hearty sip from the cup of coffee in front of me and asked myself whether I would be able to find thirty people to give me interesting and substantial interviews during the summer. I intended to make three interviews daily. I could then evaluate them in the evening and prepare myself for the interviews planned for the following day.

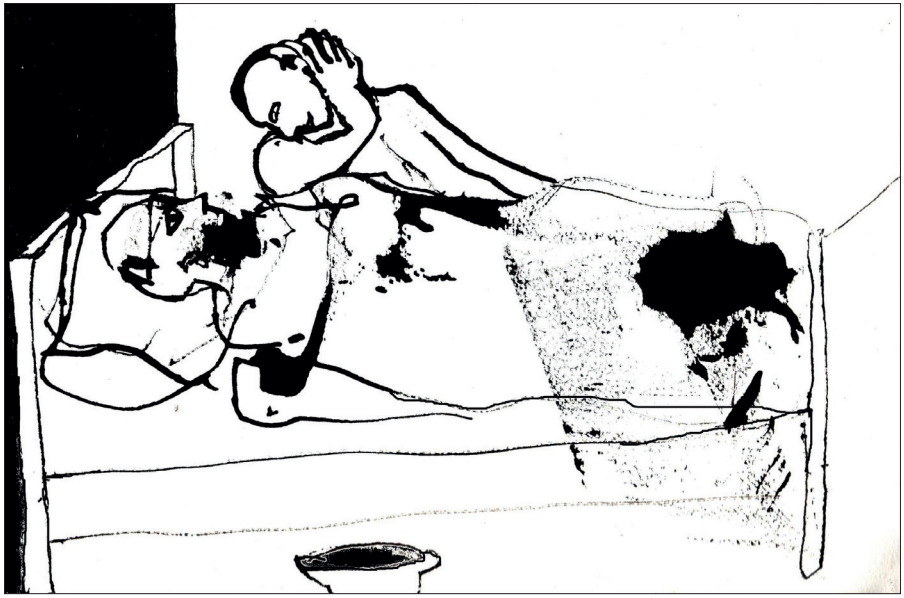
While I was lost in my thoughts warmed by the rays of the hot August sun, our ship entered into the long Danube harbour in Sulina. I was brought back to reality in a flash by the ship's arrival signal. I quickly finished my coffee, grabbed my two bags and went to the exit of the ship; I was the last passenger to go on land and then wandered slowly along the harbour. I met somebody I knew from Sulina at a small landing place and he took me to Sfiştofca over several narrow canals. I fell asleep as the boat made its journey and was awoken by a light bump about one hour later. We had reached the moorings at Sfiştofca and my companion tied the boat to it with a thin hawser. My friend Vassily Serbov, who I was going to live with for the coming period, was waiting for me on the bank of the canal. After bidding farewell to my acquaintance from Sulina, I greeted Vassily who I had known since my first visit to Sfiştofca.



That was when one of the women living in the village had advised me to ask Vassily if he had a place for me stay. Vassily was kind enough to agree and I got along well with him from the very beginning. My first stay in Sfiştofca lasted two and a half weeks. I lived in the largest room in Vassily's house and my host cooked two meals for me every day. We always ate together in the evening. These meals often went on for several hours as Vassily and I told each other the story of our lives

so that – by the end of the two and a half weeks – we knew each other very well. A friendship developed between Vassily and me during my first stay in Sfiştofca. On the day that I left, I knew that I would want to live with Vassily whenever I next visited Sfiştofca.

Vassily lived with his father Sergei, who has since died, in a house near the church in Sfiştofca. He works as a fisherman and builder. Vassily goes fishing in a lake near Sfiştofca several times a week and helps in building works for his relatives, friends and acquaintances in Sfiştofca and other villages in the vicinity when they renovate their houses or build new ones.



When he was a young man, Vassily married a Romanian woman and they had a son, Mihai. The couple divorced after a few years and Vassily has had little contact with his family since those days. After Mihai was born, Vassily worked as a builder in Serbia for several years. He enjoyed his time there very much because he was able to learn many valuable things at the various construction sites; he was always well-treated by his employers and he got to know many new people. And, of course, he earned considerably more money in Serbia than would have been possible in Romania.

He went back to work in Serbia several times before finally returning to his home village of Sfiştofca where he has lived ever since. When I asked him whether he could imagine living and working in a foreign country for a period once again, he answered that he would like to do it but that the roots he had in Sfiştofca were so strong that he would find it difficult to leave the wonderful, unique landscape of the Danube Delta for a lengthy period of time. In addition, Vassily had to take care of his ailing old father who relied on the support of his oldest son.

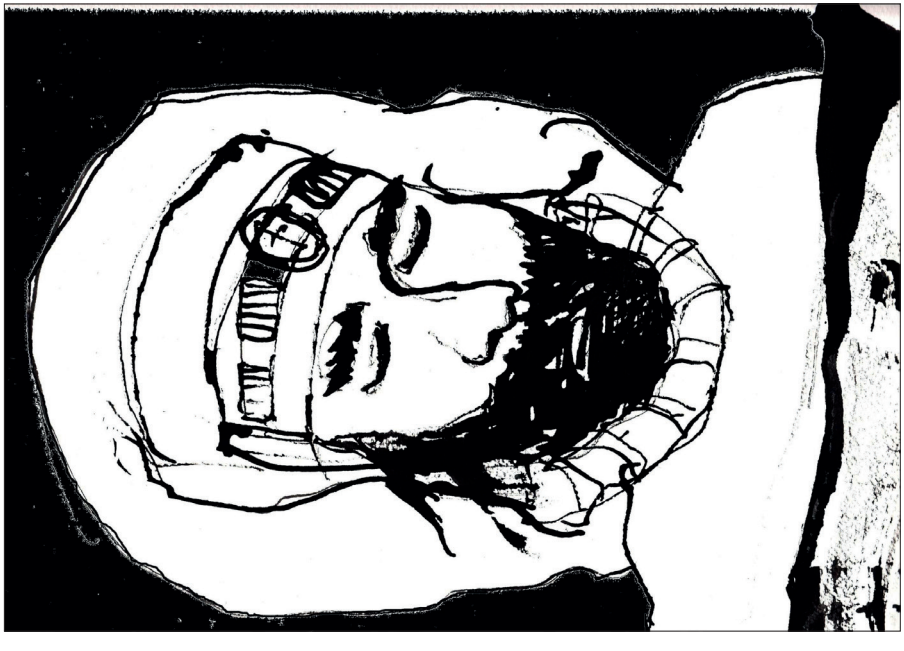
I did not get to know Vassily's father Sergei Serbov very well because he was already extremely ill at the time and spent most of the day in his own room. I had only a single conversation of any length with Sergei. On a warm summer morning he came out of his room and into the yard in front of Vassily's house. He supported himself on his walking stick and called for his son. I went to the old man and told him that Vassily had gone to visit a friend of his. Sergei amiably asked me how I liked living in his son's house. During the conversation that followed, I discovered that Vassily's father was a friendly person who was full of humour and interested in the welfare of his fellow human beings.

I also noticed that Sergei could be rather angry when things did not go as he wanted when a relative came to visit Vassily one day. After the two had chatted together for a while a quarrel started and Vassily ordered his relative to leave his property immediately, Sergei had noticed what was happening. He went to the two arguers, loudly rebuked the relative and demanded that he get off of Vassily's property without delay. Sergei had another son and three daughters who are all younger than Vassily. The four siblings had left Sfiştofca and Sergei only had contact with his other children when they came to visit the village on festive occasions and during the holidays.

Sergei had had an accident several years before in which his eye was injured by the branch of a tree and he had been completely blind in one eye since that time. His vision became increasingly poor during the last years of his life and he was almost completely blind at the time of his death.

Vassily cooked several meals a day for his father and regularly cleaned his room. Even in his old age, Sergei had a firm, confident – and rather stern – voice that he often used when he asked his son Vassily to do him a favour. The forceful sound of his voice made it easy for me to understand how – in years long past – he had ordered his five children to obey the rules laid down by their parents.

Vassily's voice was just as confident and forceful as Sergei's but sometimes I heard Vassily talking softly to his father in the old man's room when he asked him if he needed or wanted anything. I wondered whether Sergei was possibly telling his son about what he had experienced in his childhood during the Second World War. Or, were the two men talking about how the Vassily's younger brother and sisters were getting on. Vassily's younger brother, who lived in Spain, has also since died. His sisters live in Tulcea and Sulina but regularly go to work in West European countries such as Italy, Germany and England for certain periods.



I usually only heard Vassily and his father talking together in the morning or evening because I spent my time interviewing other villagers or going on long hikes in the vicinity of Sfiştofca during the day. I had just come back from one of these hikes when Vassily told me that his father had died shortly before. Vassily was very sad about his father's death but also appeared to be somewhat relieved seeing that it also meant that his years of strenuous nursing had come to an end. In the evening after his father's death, Sergei sat on a bench in front of his house and drank a beer. When I sat down next to him and asked him how he felt, my host replied that he now felt very free and that a great load had been removed from his shoulders. Vassily then cheerfully added that, after his father had passed away, there were fewer mosquitoes in the yard in front of the house.

Shortly thereafter, Vassily called some friends who washed the corpse and prepared it to be laid out in the house for several days. When I entered the room where the dead father was lying, one of Vassily's acquaintances ordered me to cross myself in front of an icon on the wall. By doing this, I was asking God to make sure that Sergei had a life full of blessings in heaven. I did as I was told and then noticed how several men were washing the father's corpse and dressing him in a white shroud.

The coffin with the corpse of the father in it was placed in the largest room in the house and I moved into a smaller one for the time-being. A valuable icon with an oil lamp in front of it was hung in a corner of the room above the coffin. Vassily slept in a bed next to the body until the funeral in order to bid farewell to his father's soul.

In the days after Sergei's death, a great number of members of the family came to the house in Sfiştofca to pay their respects to their deceased relative. There was a cheerful atmosphere in the front yard of the house when Vassily's family told each other about the latest developments in their individual lives and the memories they had of Sergei who had just passed away. The children in particular loved their visit to Vassily's house where they could run wild and play with the dogs, cats and chickens.

On the day of the funeral, a priest came into Vassily's house and blessed the body of his father. After this ritual, Vassily took the icon down from the wall and chose four men to carry the coffin to the church. On the way, Vassily walked in front of the pallbearers with the icon in his hands.

Vassily's father was lain in the section of the church reserved for men when mass is celebrated. Candles were placed on both sides of the coffin where they burned until the end of the service: Each one present kneeled in front of the coffin in turn and wished the deceased all the best for his coming life in heaven.

The bells of the church in Sfiştofca tolled as the coffin was borne to the sandy cemetery where a ditch had already been dug to receive it. The open coffin was, first of all, placed next to this grave where the priest carrying out the ceremony said several prayers to accompany the dead man on his way into heaven.

After the priest had ended his prayers and the weeping and sobbing family had bidden farewell to Sergei one last time, the coffin was nailed shut and then lowered into the grave. The priest once again began praying as he started to cover the coffin with sand. After he had done this a few times, he handed the shovel to a young man who then completely filled in the grave.

When the other mourners went into the vicarage for the funerary meal, I looked closer at Sergei's filled-in grave on which the eight-pointed cross of the Russian Old Believers had been erected. The upper beam symbolises the inscription I.N.R.I. which indicates that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth is the King of the Jews. The lower beam is slanted so that one end points towards heaven and the other to the underworld; the people living in Sfiştofca believe that this symbolises the two criminals who were crucified on both sides of Jesus. According to St. Luke's Epistle, the repentant criminal rose up to heaven together with Jesus and this is the meaning for the beam pointing upwards. While looking at the eight-pointed cross, I also noticed that it had been put up at the foot of Sergei's grave. The villagers explained to me that this was so that the first thing the dead person would see when his soul left the grave on the day of his resurrection would be the cross and that this is only possible under these circumstances.

I noticed that, although some of the graves at the cemetery in Sfiştofca were very well-cared-for and lovingly decorated, most of them were neglected and overgrown with high grass. When I asked why many of the villagers did not take better care of the graves of their loved ones, Vassily answered that the memories of the dead lived on in the thoughts of their relatives and friends and that it was therefore unnecessary to visit the grave regularly or take care of it. As a result of this, the cemetery at Sfiştofca was rarely visited by the people living in the village and therefore had a somewhat deserted feeling about it that in turn made it seem very serene. The dead could really rest in peace and quiet in this cemetery where all that could be heard was the whistling of the wind between the eight-pointed crosses of the Lipovans and the rustling of the leaves.

THE FUNERAL FEAST

After I had spent some time looking at Sfiştofca's peaceful cemetery, I went to the vicarage where a large group of people had already gathered. A long table had been set up in a building next to the church and the aroma of fresh fish goulash wafted towards me from a kettle over an open fire. As I watched the people gradually sitting down at the table which was covered with a lavish array of bottles of wine, fruit, sweets and the various accompaniments to the fish goulash, Alexei – somebody I knew well in Sfiştofca – came to me and invited me to also take my place at the table. My stomach was already rumbling after the long funeral ceremony and I accepted readily and sat down with the other mourners. After the meal had been opened, Vassily's relative Vladimir raised his glass and announced that now each of the guests would have the opportunity of telling about the life of a dead friend who they had respected and known well. Vladimir then dropped a black cloth onto the table and said that the person who was actually telling his or her story should place this next to his plate.

FYODOR ŠUKOV

Vassily's acquaintance Artyom was the first to reach for the black cloth and announced that he would talk about his friend Fyodor Šukov. Fyodor had died when he was sixty four years old and had lived alone in Sfiştofca until the time of his death. Fyodor had divorced his wife, who he had a daughter with, many years before and that the two women had then immigrated to America.

After this short introduction, Artyom continued with his story.

Fyodor had left school after the sixth class to help his parents at home. He began working in the cement factory in Somova when he was seventeen and received an award as the best worker. After he left the cement factory, Fyodor went to Teleorman where he completed his training as a bus driver. When he had finished his national military service in Tulcea, Fyodor began working as a driver for the hospital. He was then employed as a seaman until the fall of Communism in 1989 and sailed to West Africa on the ships he worked on. Later, Fyodor returned to Sfiştofca and worked in farming until his death.

Fyodor had heart problems and asthma. In his spare time, he enjoyed watching espionage and war films.

Fyodor was born in Sfiştofca as were his parents. He and his wife separated while he was employed as a driver and she raised their daughter. Fyodor did not see his daughter for a long time after his former wife had emigrated to America together with the girl. It was not until seventeen years later when his daughter – an adult woman by this time – travelled to Romania and visited her father in Sfiştofca that personal contact was re-established.

Fyodor was not absolutely sure about where his forefathers came from. During our conversations, he often mentioned that they had been driven out of Russia under Peter I and had found new land where they could live across the Danube. According to Fyodor, more than one thousand people had once lived in Sfiştofca but now there was hardly any work and most of the young people had had to leave the village to look for employment in the cities.

When speaking about Communism, Fyodor said that he had lived very well under Ceausescu because he had an interesting job as a seaman that made it possible for him to travel and that he had also been to East Berlin. After the fall of Communism – he continued – the situation became worse and he was unable to find work anywhere. He also felt that Romania's accession to the European Union had been negative because there was a feeling that rich parliamentarians were earning a lot of money and, as a result, there was very little left for the poorer people living in the countryside.

When he was asked if he went to church, Fyodor always said that he did when he wanted to and could but never missed the services at Easter and Christmas. In earlier days, he had often repaired or renovated various things in the church.

Artyom finished his story with the worlds that Fyodor had led a very interesting life as a young man because he had been able to try out many things and, as a seaman, make long trips. He stressed that it was great shame the Fyodor's wife had left him and that he only rarely saw his daughter. Fyodor would have liked to have spent his old age in his family circle and his last days with his wife and daughter. Artyom also stated that Fyodor had lived with Vassily until his death because he had no money to buy a house of his own.

Fyodor, the former "globetrotter", had returned to Sfiştofca in his old age and once again met those people who had been part of his childhood and youth.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased man and prayed in silence for his salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

NIKIFOR SUVUROV

After Artyom, Pavel was the next to raise his hand to speak and he remembered his friend Nikifor Suvurov.

Nikifor had been seventy fours of age when he passed away. He had lived with his wife Irina in Sfiştofca until his death and the couple had two sons and a daughter.

Nikifor had worked as a salesman for most of his life. He was pensioned off in 1997 and worked as a farmer and fisherman after that.

After this short introduction, Pavel continued with his story.

Nikifor found work as a salesman immediately after finishing four years of primary education. In 1960, he went to the army in Bucharest and then continued in his former line of work. Nikifor dealt with grain and also administered fields on the side until his forced retirement in 1997.

Nikifor's parents were Igor Suvorov and Ekaterina Suvorova who had three sons and a daughter. Nikifor's daughter and a son live in Sulina and the second son in Bucharest.

When I asked Nikifor about the history of the Old Believers, he replied that they had been driven out of Russia under Peter I and were scattered all over the world today. When they fled from Russia, the Old Believers often had to hide in forests where a large number of linden trees grew. The name "Lipovans", which is used for the Old Believers in many parts of Southeast Europe, stems from "lipa", the Russian word for the linden tree.

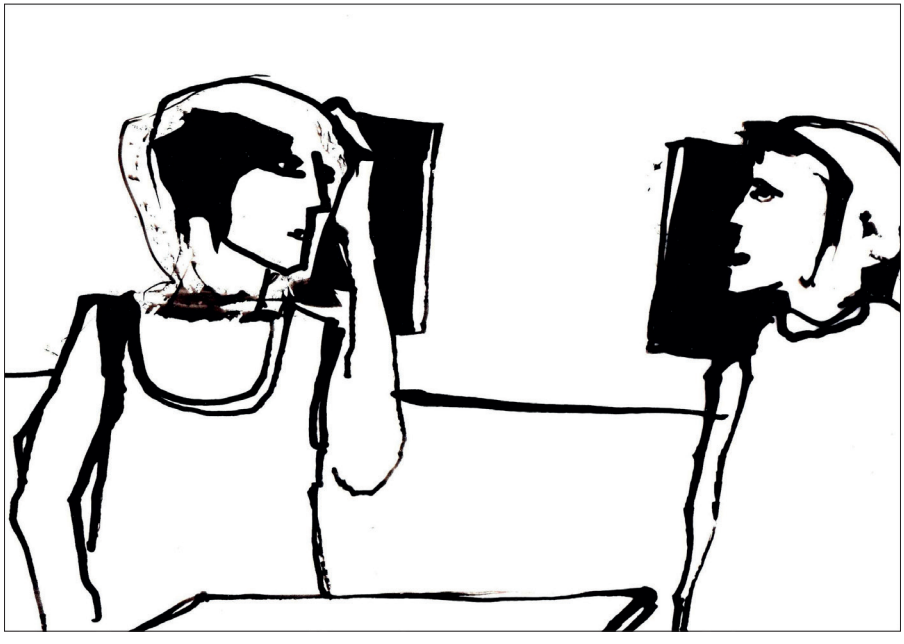
Nikifor also had connections in the Ukrainian Danube Delta region. His aunt lived in Belgorod in the Ukraine and was married to a man called Romanov. He was a priest in Primorskoje and had several children with Nikifor's aunt; one of them was the famous Officer Romanov. Nikifor had once wanted to visit Officer Romanov in Primorskoje but he could not be reached.

Nikifor felt that, in the Communist period, although the people had money, there was very little that could be bought with it. After the change, there were many more things in the shops but, this time, the people did not have enough money. The low pensions made life especially difficult for elderly retired persons.

When I asked him about travelling in former days, Nikifor told me that he and his wife had gone to Donetsk and Odessa in the then Soviet Union in December 1989. The Suvurov couple had been given a Soviet visa valid for one and a half months. Nikifor and his wife were still in the Soviet Union when Ceausescu was overthrown.

In Nikifor's eyes, many people had profited from what was formerly common property after the fall of Communism but the majority of the population remained

poor. He also told me that – in spite of the economic crisis – he still had work after the change. Nikifor considered Romania's membership in the EU a good thing because he felt that the other member states helped his homeland financially.



With respect to the church, Nikifor stated that he visited services almost every Sunday and on the high holidays.

At the end of his eulogy, Pavel looked at the listeners around him and concluded with the words that Nikifor had been a very industrious man who was able to keep his job or find new work in difficult situations. Nikifor lived together with his wife until his death; Irina helped him in everything he did and always supported him.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased man and prayed in silence for his salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

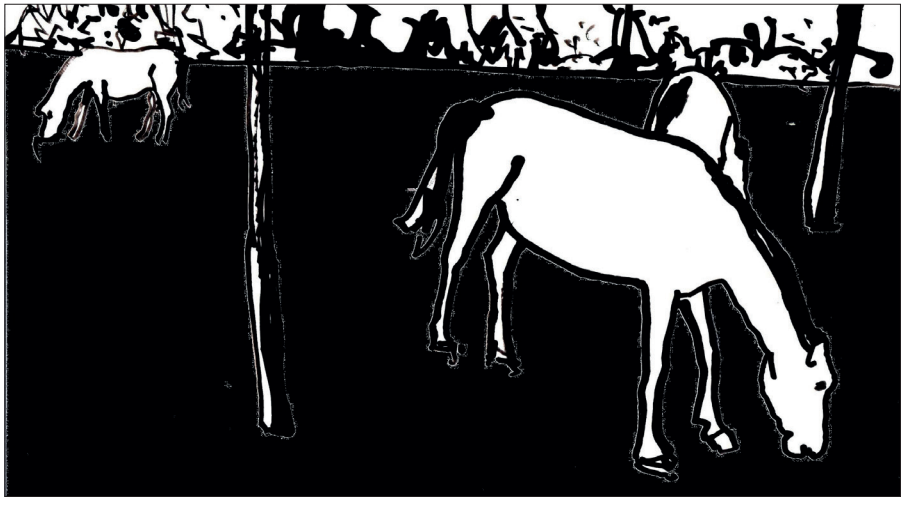
KULINA VUTILKINA

After Pavel, Marina was the next to raise her hand to speak and she remembered her friend Kulina Vutilkina.

Kulina lived together with her husband on their small farm in Sfiştofca where they grew potatoes and other vegetables. The couple sold their produce and were able to buy clothes and other necessities with the profits they made. Kulina's husband returned wounded from the war but he was a good worker and did not drink very much alcohol.

After this short introduction, Marina continued with her story.

Kulina's husband was over eighty when he died and she then lived alone in Sfiştofca. She and her husband had married at the end of winter and the couple went to harvest reeds together only a few days after the wedding. Kulina and her husband were both very industrious and were able to live fairly well without asking for any help. One of Kulina's brothers had lived in the Ukrainian city of Vilkovo (Vylkove) and she had a nephew there. Kulina worked with horses in the Communist period. Once a horse kicked her so badly that she fell, unconscious, to the ground. After that she was blind in one eye and deaf in one ear. The listeners gasped in astonishment and pitied Kulina for all that had happened to her during her life of hard work.



Kulina told that she sat at home and waited for somebody to visit her although her daughter, who lived in Sfiştofca, actually did this every day. Kulina was still able to prepare her meals for herself and also clean her small house when she was more than ninety years old. When she made her way through the rooms, Kulina had to hang onto the furniture for support because her legs were weak. She often said that she was waiting for God to call her.

When she was younger, Kulina went to church regularly but – at the age of ninety – she could no longer physically cover the distance.

Marina felt that the way Kulina had lived revealed clearly how difficult everyday life had been in Romania in the post-war years. The fact that Marina and her husband had gone back to work so soon after their wedding day showed that celebrating was more or less irrelevant in those days. People struggled to lead a life that was half-way financially and materially secure and this meant working hard.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased woman and prayed in silence for her salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

KARP SARAJEV

After Marina, Anton was the next to raise his hand to speak and he remembered his friend Karp Sarajev.

Karp was only fifty four years old at the time of his death. He was married and had a daughter and two sons. Some of the listeners had tears in their eyes when they heard this story. Many of those present had known Karp well and all regretted that, though his premature death, he had left his wife and three children alone behind him.

After this short introduction, Anton continued with his story.

Karp was out of work until he died and hoped to receive help from the state. Sometimes he went fishing or took tourists on boat tours through the canals near

Sfiştofca. He received a few lei for this but it was not enough to live on. Karp had to get up early in the morning to take care of his chickens.

Karp stopped going to school after the sixth grade and then worked as a tractor driver and fisherman. In addition, he collected the reeds that were needed to cover the roofs of the houses in Sfiştofca. Karp was a practical type of man and liked his work. His daughter has lived with her husband in Letea for some years now; the older son works in a small fishing enterprise in Sulina and the other son has emigrated and is looking for work in the Czech Republic.

Karp had relatives in Vylkove and his father's godmother also lived in that city. Karp had a very positive attitude towards Communism because he had work in those days. After the change in the system, he felt that the situation had worsened compared with former times. However, he noticed that his life was also not all that bad after the fall of Communism.

Karp often mentioned that it had been very difficult to travel during the Communist period. As just one example, he had never been to the neighbouring Ukraine but, after the change, it became possible to travel by boat directly across the Danube to Vylkove.

According to Anton, Karp had been a friendly man and full of the joys of life. That he died at such an early age was especially sad for his wife and children.

Karp had a very positive impression of the European Union because he felt that the member states helped each other reciprocally. Karp's position on this matter is interesting because he considered this provided a chance for Romania while most of the other people living in Sfiştofca were annoyed that corrupt Romanian politicians had managed to siphon off EU money for their own purposes. When they heard this, the listeners started to grumble and curse the European Union and complain about the relatively poor living conditions in Romania.

When asked about the church and its services, Karp said that he liked to pray and was fond of his religion. He told me many times that he always went to church whenever he had enough time.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased man and prayed in silence for his salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

MAURA VARNAVITSCHA

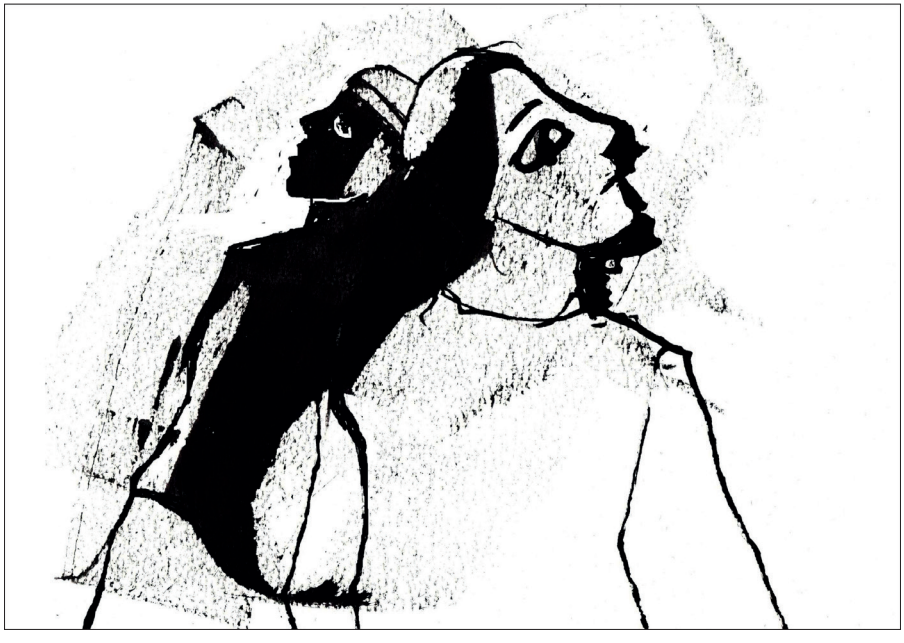
After Anton, Olga was the next to raise her hand to speak and she remembered her friend Maura Varnavitscha.

Maura was forty seven years of age when she died. She was married and had one son. She was unemployed until her death and had hoped that she would receive some social welfare from the state but this was not forthcoming. Maura often complained that life was not easy for her and her family.

After this short introduction, Olga continued her story.

Maura was born in Periprava and moved to Sfiştofca after her marriage. She did not finish her schooling because she found studying too difficult. Maura had two brothers; one in Sulina and the other in Ploieşti. The brother who lived in Sulina was a pilot. Maura also had a sister who had drowned.

Maura had no connection to the Ukrainian section of the Danube Delta. Her father was Ukrainian but he had died long ago; she therefore had relatives in the Ukraine but did not know if they were alive or dead.



Maura thought that she had had a difficult time in the Communist era but felt that the EU had made Romania's situation even worse.

Maura only went to church when she had money. She felt that if attended a service, she would have to buy a candle and light it.

Olga told that Maura had always made an extremely dejected impression on her; she often cried and had the feeling that everything around her was deteriorating. Maura attempted to come to grips with her sorrow through amiable contact with the other villagers and community. The reason for Maura's sadness was possibly caused by the fact that she had to live in extremely impoverished circumstances in Sfiştofca together with her unemployed husband and son who was also without work. With a sad look in her eyes, Olga continued by saying that, in the last years of her life, Maura had seen no perspective for any improvement in her life or that

of her family. Olga also reported that Maura had suffered from muscular atrophy and that this finally led to her death. At the end, Maura probably thought of death as the only way out of her misery. According to Olga, Maura always remained a warm-hearted person in spite of all of the sadness she had experienced in her life. Maura confided her most secret feelings in Olga who also felt that, in return, she could trust Maura absolutely. By the time Olga had finished her story, some of the guests had tears in their eyes and regretted that Maura had had such a sorrowful life full of worries.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased woman and prayed in silence for her salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

TOMA ATANASIE

After Olga, Ivan was the next to raise his hand to speak and he remembered his friend Toma Atanasie.

Toma was sixty years old when he died. He lived with his second wife in Sfiştofca until the time of his death. He had three children with his first wife; they are now adults and have families of their own. Toma's second wife was also the mother of three children from her first husband.

Toma lived in Sfiştofca where he repaired fishing nets, did renovation work on his house and often went fishing. Toma was blind in one eye and received a small pension from the Romanian state as compensation. He worked in the fish factory in Sulina until the fall of Communism. He previously owned a house there and lived in it for twenty five years. After losing his job in Sulina, he moved to Sfiştofca to cultivate a plot of land in the village. This made it possible for him to live fairly well in spite of being without fixed employment.

After this short introduction, Ivan continued with his story.

Toma had gone to school in Letea for seven years before moving to Sfiştofca where his first wife lived. He then went to Sulina with her and the two built a house in the town. He went back to Letea after the Revolution and death of his first wife before once again moving to Sfiştofca.

Toma told me that his children lived in various towns in Romania. He and his children supported each other. For example, when they visited him, his children often brought a sack of potatoes with them for their father. Toma was proud to say that, after the collapse of Communism, all of his children had remained in Romania in contrast to the others who had left the country for America, Italy and Spain.

Toma had many relatives in the Ukraine and he was able to visit them in 1980. At the time, he travelled to Tatar Bunar – where the members of his family lived – by way of Izmail. During his stay, he also visited the cities of Odessa and Sevastopol: he had been given a visa for forty five days but returned after only eighteen in order not to overstay his welcome with his relatives. The contact between Toma and his family in the Ukraine gradually decreased after 1980.

When he spoke about Communism, Toma said that, although people had money in those days, the food supply functioned badly. In the Communist era, people went to work regularly and punctually and received a fixed salary at the end of the month. Factories and blocks of housing were built under Ceausescu so that the people had steady work and places to live.

However, Toma also criticised that, in times of so-called democracy, some politicians in Bucharest misappropriated a lot of money for their own benefit and no longer had any interest in the country's poor people. Desolate blocks of flats were not renovated. He also feared that Romania was going down the drain because many factories had fallen into disrepair and most of the Romanian ships had been sold to foreign countries. Toma recognised that the European Union was aiding Romania but felt that it would be better to create new jobs rather than expect even more assistance from the EU.

Toma only went to church once a year. He was annoyed that people spoke so loudly during the service that he was not able to understand what the priest was saying. In addition, he felt that going to church should be treated with great respect.

Ivan ended his story by stating that he was convinced that Toma had led a peaceful, simple life. He and his wife were rarely seen at social events. However, when he had visitors from time to time, they were always given a hearty welcome. He invited his visitors to sample his self-distilled vodka and some of them even took a bottle home when they left.

At the end of Ivan's story, some of those present recalled Toma's pleasant character and his excellent home-made vodka. And then, many of the mourners stood up, raised their glasses that were full of vodka, and drank them in one go in honour of the deceased.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased man and prayed in silence for his salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

ZENA SEPATKINA

After Ivan, Alexandra was the next to raise her hand to speak and she remembered her friend Zena Sepatkina.

Zena died at the age of sixty one. She had lived alone in Sfiştofca until her death. Zena had two sons; one of them was born in Mila 23. After her marriage, Zena moved to Sfiştofca but she left her first son in Mila 23 to be brought up by her parents. Zena's husband from Sfiştofca had six children from his first marriage. He had one more son with Zena and he lives in Sulina today.

After this short introduction, Alexandra continued with her story.

Zena worked in a day-care centre and as a fisherwoman in Mila 23. She married her husband from Sfiştofca, who was forty seven years old, when she was twenty eight. Zena worked in her vegetable garden in Sfiştofca and also kept chickens until her death.

Zena's only schooling consisted of the eight years she had in Mila 23. She was born in Old Kilja and her father then moved to Mila 23 with the family. Zena never moved again after her marriage. She saw her son quite often up until her death. Sometimes they visited her in Sfiştofca and, at other times, Zena went to see them in Mila 23 and Sulina.

Zena's mother had a brother in the Ukraine and they remained in contact until the end of her life. Zena could not remember in which city her uncle lived.

Zena was always positive when she recalled the Communist period; she had led a good life but things became more difficult for her after the change in the system when all she had was a small garden and a few chickens. The feed she needed for her chickens became very expensive and cost between eighty and one hundred lei at the time. Life had been better and less expensive under Ceausescu. When he was in power, everybody had a job but today many people are unable to find work and have no idea about how to spend their time or get the money they need to survive,

When talking about the European Union, Zena felt that everything had become more expensive and that the poor people had no money. She also had the idea that, in the age of democracy and EU, a mafia had developed that had a lot of money and could afford anything it wanted. In her opinion, all that poor people could do was to work in their garden and live off of the potatoes, onions and other vegetables they grew there.

Zena went to church regularly and was also a member of the Sfiştofca choir, which is still led by Senovia Sepatkina today. The church and choir rehearsals provided Zena with a welcome break to her everyday activities. She often told me that the group of old girls in the choir had a lot of fun singing, dancing – and even crying – with each other.

Alexandra ended her story by saying that Zena had been a woman full of the joys of life. As a member of the choir, she enjoyed travelling to Old Believer festivals all over Romania where they sang Russian folksongs.

When she said this, some of the other guests recalled that Zena had had a very lovely voice and that there were not many people who were able to sing the Russian folksongs as melodiously and infectiously as she could. All of those present regretted that good-natured Zena was no longer among them.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased woman and prayed in silence for her salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

MARIA PANKRATOVA

After Alexandra, Anja was the next to raise her hand to speak and she remembered her friend Maria Pankratova.

Maria was seventy four years old when she died and had four children. One son lived in Sfiştofca, two sons in Sulina and her daughter lived in Tulcea. Maria said that life in Sfiştofca used to be a lot of fun when many people lived and worked there.

After this short introduction, Anja continued her story.

Maria was a housewife. Her first husband was a fisherman and, after he died, she married again. Maria told that, in former times, there were large gardens, many cows – and even sheep – in Sfiştofca. She always regretted that the young people went to the city to look for work and that only old people, who were no longer able to work, still lived in the village. Maria had attended the Russian school in Sfiştofca for four years but had no further education because schooling was not free at the time and her parents had many children and not enough money.

Maria was born in Sfiştofca as were her forebears. Her children usually only visited her once a year because they were so involved in their own lives. Sometimes, Maria went to visit her children but travelling became more difficult as she got older.

She did not know exactly when her ancestors had made their home in the Danube Delta region but she said that Sfiştofca had been founded around two hundred years ago by Russian migrants. Maria's predecessors had lived mainly from fishing in the lake near Sfiştofca. After the church and first huts had been erected, people starting farming in Sfiştofca. Maria said that the Lipovans not only lived in Sfiştofca but also in Periprava and across the Danube on the Ukrainian side.

Maria had many uncles and aunts in the Ukraine and she visited the country regularly until 1995. She was also there in the Ceausescu period.

When asked about life under Communism, Maria repeatedly said that everybody had had work while Ceausescu was in power. In those days, they had large farms and received a decent salary for their work. After the change, however, there was enough in the shops but many people had become unemployed and could not buy anything. In her old age, Maria received a pension of 300 lei; after she had bought the medicine she needed, there was nothing left for other things. Maria was able to live from what she produced in her vegetable garden in summer but she found herself in a difficult financial situation when she was forced to buy food in winter.

Maria said that she was not interested in the European Union and that politicians were bandits who told the people a pack of lies.

Maria went to church regularly and was well informed about the holidays of the Old Believers.

At the end of her story, Anja said that Maria had been the only person in Sfiştofca who always had part of her family around her. Her son Jakob and five grandchildren lived in the house opposite Maria's. Her grandchildren visited her often and their youthfulness and joy of living kept the old woman young at heart. Maria taught her relatives Russian folksongs and she sang with her daughter-in-law Ljuba and two granddaughters in the choir in Sfiştofca.

When Anja talked about Maria's grandchildren, some of the guests said how much they regretted that there were so few children in Sfiştofca. They though that it would be wonderful to hear the sound of children's voices and to be able to give them sweets when they were playing.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the decease woman and prayed in silence for her salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

EVDOKIA VOROBEVA

After Anja, Oksana was the next to raise her hand to speak and she remembered her friend Evdokia Vorobeva.

Evdokia was eighty eight years old when she died. She was married but had no children. Evdokia had a sister and two brothers. One brother lived in Sulina with his daughter's family. As she grew older, Evdokia rarely saw her siblings because she was very frail and almost blind. Evdokia's mother came from Odessa and her father was born in Sfiştofca.

Evdokia used to work for a big land-owner at a time when farming was extremely strenuous. Romania was still a monarchy with King Michael I as its ruler in those days. Evdokia worked for six months at a time with various landowners in Brăila, Černovoda and other places. The farm labourers slept on straw and there was no segregation between men and women. When the Communist leader Gheorghiu-Dej came into power, the estate owners were expropriated and large kolkhozes established on the confiscated property. Construction of the kolkhozes was, in part, carried out by prisoners.

After this short introduction, Oksana continued with her story.

Evdokia was born in Sfiştofca. Her father, who worked as a fisherman, drowned in the Black Sea while she was still a child and her mother was left with the children. Evdokia went to school in Sfiştofca for four years followed by three in C.A. Rosetti. She had to speak Romanian at school; using Russian in public was forbidden but the language was spoken at home. The school in C.A. Rosetti used to be considered a good one that was almost at the level of a grammar school. After she finished her education, Evdokia and her siblings went to Tulcea in search of work. Evdokia thought of this time as very hard and she had to work all the time in order to survive.

A few years later, she married a Moldavian who worked for the C.A. Rosetti council as a forester. After she separated from the forester, Evdokia married the Sfiştofca doctor. The doctor passed away after nine years of marriage and Evdokia lived alone from that time on. Evdokia had an impoverished life as an old woman and lived from what her hands and poor eyes could produce in the garden.

Evdokia's parents had met in Russia, where her father was active as a soldier, at the time of the October Revolution. Evdokia's mother gave birth to her first child after the October Revolution and the family then moved to Sfiştofca. Evdokia's sister later lived in Tulcea while one of the brothers stayed in Sfiştofca and the other moved to Sulina. Evdokia's mother had a brother in Odessa who worked for the court. During the reign of King Michael I, Evdokia worked on a farm and had to sleep on straw where insects bit her. She was given work on a kolkhoz after the Communists took over power in Romania where she farmed the land and took care of the cattle. When talking about the differences between life under King Michael I and Communism, Evdokia said that, in the monarchy, there were contracts for human workers but the Communists made contracts for livestock.

After the Communist takeover, public transport became available for all while, under King Michael I, Evdokia often had to walk due to lack of money. Once, she and her siblings walked all the way from Sfiştofca to Tulcea along the banks of the Danube to look for work. Public transportation made it easy to travel throughout Romania in the Communist era. On the other hand, foreign travel was very difficult because many documents were required if one wanted to leave Romania. Travel to capitalist countries in the west was forbidden for most people.

Evdokia was of the opinion that life became free after Romania's accession to the European Union. Everybody had an identity card and could travel without any problems. However, when she spoke about the EU, Evdokia had the feeling that the distribution of money was not functioning as it should. While those in the government in Bucharest were making big profits, only little money remained for the needy people in the countryside. Evdokia often compared the non-functioning distribution of money in the EU with the chaos in the Russian Empire at the time of the October Revolution. The aim was to create justice by taking away the property of the rich. Evdokia's mother, who worked as a maid for a rich family in Odessa, said that, during the October Revolution, black cars came to the wealthy citizens to take away their valuable possessions. One night, one of these cars came to the

family Evdokia's mother was working for. After the secret police had confiscated the family's valuables, they took the head of the house away with them as well.

Evdokia also complained that there was not a hospital in the vicinity of Sfiştofca. She had had to travel to Tulcea for her eye operation. She also felt it a great pity that so many good doctors had left Romania and moved abroad.

Evdokia never went to church services.

When we discussed tourism, Evdokia said that she had previously provided accommodation for tourists herself and that it would be a good idea if more visited the Danube Delta.

When Oksana mentioned Evdokia's eye operation, some of those listening said how sorry they were that she had been in such poor health in her old age. They felt that such an industrious and hospitable woman deserved a more peaceful and pleasant life as she grew older. Others talked about why Evdokia never went to church and why she had never had any children with her two husbands.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased woman and prayed in silence for her salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

ERIMEJ HALKIN

After Oksana, Afanasij was the next to raise his hand to speak and he remembered his friend Erimej Halkin.

Erimej was seventy one years old when he died. He had four daughters and worked as a fisherman until his retirement; after he stopped work, a leg had to be amputated as the result of blood poisoning.

After this short introduction, Afanasij continued his story.

Erimej was born in Sfiştofca and attended the Russian school there for four years. He had no further education and then worked at home together with his parents, who were also fishermen, and continued in this profession until his retirement.

Two of Erimej's daughters live in Tulcea, one is in Sulina and the other in Sfiştofca. The daughter who lives in Sfiştofca took care of her father until his death. The other sisters visited their father often and helped their sister in her nursing.

Erimej had no connections to the Ukraine. When he spoke about Socialism, he said that he thought some things were good and others bad. Erimej never travelled. After the change, he felt that his life was better than it had been in Socialist days. Immediately after the fall of Communism, most of the people still had work and could say what they felt without fear and travel freely. However, later, many workers were let go and it became increasingly difficult to find a job. Erimej had a positive opinion about the European Union. He felt that it was good that the other member states were helping Romania and that the situation was steadily improving.

Erimej used to go to church regularly but this became impossible after his leg had been amputated.

At the end of his story, Afanasij stated that Erimej had been a very simple, peaceful man. He always gave Afanasij good advice when he separated from his wife and went through a difficult crisis in his life. Life became very difficult for Erimej after his leg had been amputated and he had to depend on his daughter. He found it difficult to walk on the sandy paths with all the potholes in Sfiştofca. Under these circumstances, it was even more positive – said Afanasij – to see that Erimej had managed to keep a clear mind and had not lost his joy of living. When they heard these words, those present applauded and said how much they had admired the deceased man.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased man and prayed in silence for his salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

MARCO SEPATKIN

After Afanasij, Ignat was the next to raise his hand to speak and he remembered his friend Marco Sepatkin.

Marco was sixty five years old when he died. He was married to Senovia Sepatkina until his death. They had two daughters and both of them are married.

Marco worked as a fisherman in Sulina and Sfiştofca. After he retired, he stayed at home and did work around the house.

After this short introduction, Ignat continued with his story.

Marco was born in Sfiştofca and went to the Russian school in the village for four years. In the post-war years, he did not have the possibility of continuing with his education that was limited to the primary school. He began working as a fisherman when he was eighteen. He spent two years in the army starting in 1969 and then returned to his former profession which he carried out until his retirement.

Marco's two daughters had lived in Sulina for a long time. Later, they emigrated to Spain, France and Italy in search of work. Marco was not absolutely sure about this. He had seen his daughters often while they both lived in Sulina.

Marco felt that his life had not been much different after the fall of Communism; he lived a simple life before and after the change. He never travelled because he had no relatives outside of the Danube Delta and felt that visiting members of the family was the only reason for going on a trip. Marco was very critical of the European Union. He thought that Romania's membership in the EU was the reason that the situation in the country was permanently worsening. More and more people were losing their jobs and those in need received very little social welfare.

Marco went to church on Sunday and all holidays.

In contrast to his wife Senovia, who still leads the choir in Sfiştofca and is also head of the Lipovan Society in the village, Marco led a fairly inconspicuous life. While his wife travelled all over Romania to Old Believer festivals with the choir several times a year, Marco almost never left his home village and was hardly seen in public there.

Ignat closed his story with the statement that Marco had been a peaceful and pleasant chap who one could meet for a beer and tell him many things without him making any comments.

After these words, some of those present recalled that they had chatted with Marco on the bench in front of his house and then been offered a glass of the schnapps he had distilled himself. Some of the younger mourners recounted that Marco had taken them on his horse-drawn carriage to go shopping in the neighbouring village of C.A. Rosetti.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased man and prayed in silence for his salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

ANNA SHIGAROVA

After Ignat, Aljona was the next to raise her hand to speak and she remembered her friend Anna Shigarova.

Anna was ninety when she died and, in her old age, had lived alone in Sfiştofca. She had given birth to ten children but only three sons and one daughter had survived.

Anna used to work on the farm together with her husband. They had pastures, cows, horses and as many as one hundred chickens. Anna stopped farming after her husband's death because she was not able to do all the work alone. She recounted that her husband had always said that he would live longer than his wife but he had actually been the first to die. Anna felt that the reason for this was that, when he was ill, his homesickness for her made him not want to stay in hospital.

Anna liked watching television in her free time. She had had to pay a lot of money for the antenna but was prepared to do this for her entertainment. This antenna made it possible for her to receive up to one hundred programmes in Romanian and Russian.

After this introduction, Aljona continued with her story.

Anna was born in Sfiştofca and never went to school. She had eight siblings and her father died young. Her mother needed the children's help on the farm. The children took care of the cows and helped their mother in the garden. Anna married a merchant from Sfiştofca in 1945. Anna's husband was relatively well-off; he owned a shop in Sfiştofca and another one in Sulina. Anna's daughter and two of her sons live in Sulina while the third is in Tulcea. The sons had rarely visited their mother but her daughter came from time to time to see that everything was all right in the house. Anna's brothers and sisters had died while she was still alive. One of her brothers had lived on the same street as she did. He had a lovely house and many children; the youngest had been killed by an electric shock. Anna often said that her forebears originated in Chabarovsk and had worked there as fishermen. Her cousin from Chabarovsk had visited her a few years ago. Anna was invited to return the visit but said that it would be too strenuous for her to make the trip.

Anna was happy that her ancestors had moved from Chabarovsk into the Danube Delta and also believed that they had received a good education in Romania. Anna's daughter learned Romanian well and attended high school; her granddaughter could speak many languages and was leading a good life in Ankara.

Anna had many relatives in the Ukrainian town of Vilkovo. Her sister lived there with her family. Many years ago, her Ukrainian niece visited Anna together with her husband and children. In earlier times, she had often visited the Ukraine and, on one of these occasions, travelled by bus from Vilkovo to Odessa.

Anna did not notice any differences between the period of Socialism and what came after it. She had been afraid that the Communists would ban religion but, when the soldiers of the Red Army were stationed in Sfiştofca after the Second World War, the Old Believers went to church together with the Soviet officers. One of the officers wore a chain with a cross around his neck and could identify all of the icons. He knew more about them than the Old Believers themselves. Anna basically believed that the living situation was good under Socialism and also after the change in the political system. She had managed to make her trips to the Ukraine in the Socialist period. When asked about the European Union, she stated that she didn't need it and had no idea what it was all about. She felt that Ceausescu should not have been executed. He was known as "father" in Romania and – in her eyes – it would have been absolutely in order to have let him live. On the other hand, she also mentioned that life was probably better for those who had suffered under Communism after Ceausescu's death.

Anna went to church on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. She explained that, apart from attending church services, there were no other possibilities for amusement in Sfiştofca.

Looking at her listeners, Aljona said that – taking her friend Anna as an example – one could see that the Old Believers from all around the world were linked with each other even though most of them lived in rural, very isolated, regions. Aljona was always interested in the question of why Anna's ancestors had come to Sfiştofca from Chabarovsk and whether the relatives in Vilkovo were also their descendants.

Unfortunately, Anna was not absolutely sure of this and could not give a definite answer to Aljona's questions. She simply thought that the climate was better in Sfiştofca than in Chabarovsk and that her ancestors had more to eat in the Romanian village.

At the end of her story, Aljona stressed that she found it fascinating that not all of the Soviet officers in post-war Romania were atheistic Communists and that some of them even turned out to be orthodox Christian believers. She was of the opinion that the fact that a Soviet officer was able to explain the meaning of the icons in the church to the villagers showed that some upper-class people in the Soviet Union secretly followed their religion in spite of the official state atheist ideology or had at least some form of religious education in their childhood before the October Revolution.

Some of those present then recalled that they had played chess on the terrace in front of Anna's house on hot afternoons in summer and that she had served them cool fruit juice as a refreshment. They stressed that Anna had had the best-cared-for home in Sfiştofca. The house and yard were always meticulously clean.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased woman and prayed in silence for her salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

NADJESCHDA KULIE

After Aljona, Alfia was the next to raise her hand to speak and she remembered her friend Nadjeschda Kulie.

Nadjeschda, or Nadja for short, was seventy six years old when she died. She had one son and four daughters. She also had a brother and three sisters who lived in Sulina. Nadja was a housewife all of her married life. In her spare time, she attended church services or went to the community hall in Sfiştofca. At the end of her life, Nadja did not go anywhere due to the pain in her legs.

After this introduction, Alfia continued with her story.

Nadja was born in Sfiştofca and went to the Russian school in the village for four years. Three daughters and her son live in Tulcea while the fourth daughter lives in Sfiştofca in the first house one passes when one drives into the village from C.A. Rosetti. Nadja had occasional visits from her children and siblings.

Nadja's parents came from Sfiştofca and she had a cousin in Vilkovo. After the death of her cousin, Nadja no longer had any ties to the Ukrainian section of the Danube Delta. When she spoke about the Socialist period, Nadja said that life had been pleasant then and that it had remained the same after the change in the political system. Nadja had once visited her cousin in Vilkovo while Ceausescu was in power. She was granted a visa and travelled across the Danube into the Soviet Union. After the fall of Communism, Nadja had some cattle and worked very hard but shortly before her death she only had a horse and a dog. Nadja felt that Romania's accession to the European was not so bad and that, for her, the main thing was that people could live in peace.

Nadja had formerly gone to church regularly but, as she grew older, the pain she felt made this impossible. Nadja said that she just sat at home and waited until death came from Periprava to take her away. She believed that death lived in Periprava.

Alfia smiled and looked at her audience and remarked that Nadja had been a very peaceful, almost stoic, woman who always tried to come to grips with the situation she lived in. The permanent contact to her daughter in Sfiştofca gave her a great sense of security in her old age. Some of the guests laughed when they heard that Nadja had thought about death as a friendly guest coming to her from Periprava and recalled that Nadja was always up for a joke. She constantly managed to find something positive and amusing in the most muddled situation and the people living in Sfiştofca liked to have a chat with her and she was always a welcome guest.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased woman and prayed in silence for her salvation in heaven, the black cloth was passed on to the next speaker.

LAZER KUZOV

After Alfia, Nikolai was the next to raise his hand to speak and he remembered his friend Lazer Kuzov.

Lazer was seventy six years old when he died and had a daughter and two sons. He was pensioned off at the age of fifty five and, until that time, had worked as a fisherman.

He worked for a fishing enterprise in Sulina for twenty six years and then went out to sea to fish for five and a half years. After this, Lazer once again worked for a fishing company in Sulina for another couple of years. After his retirement, he lived at home with his wife. The couple went to get water, chopped wood, went fishing in the canal, shopping and attended church services together. Lazer often said that he and his wife always had something to do and they were happy about the years God had given them to spend with each other.

After this short introduction, Nikolai continued with his story.

Lazer's daughter and his oldest son Vassily are already married. Vassily has three children and lives in Tulcea. Lazer's daughter lives and works in Italy. The youngest son, Alexander, works as a cook on ocean-going ships.

Lazer enjoyed playing the accordion in his spare time. He used to perform at celebrations such as weddings but, after his retirement, only played at home from time to time. Lazer often stressed that playing the accordion gave him great pleasure – even in his old age. Every year, a great church consecration festival was held in Sfiştofca that guests from Tulcea, Sulina, Brăila and Galați also attended. Lazer always looked forward to this festival because he could have a wonderful time with his and the other children who visited Sfiştofca at that time.

Like his father, Lazer was born in Sfiştofca and had two brothers and two sisters. He went fishing and reed gathering with his father and siblings during his childhood. Lazer's brothers and sisters gradually left Sfiştofca and he remained alone in the village. After his retirement, he lived a satisfying life in Sfiştofca together with his wife and enjoyed the rural tranquillity and peace and quiet of the area. He repeatedly stated that the visits of his children, who had also left Sfiştofca, were the highlights of his life. When they came, Lazer sang, played music and danced. He also cooked together with his children and spent many pleasant hours in their company.

When Lazer's children left Sfiştofca, his wife, Marusja, tried to convince her husband to also move to the city. He did not want to do this because he had always felt attached to his home village and also realised that life was less expensive in the countryside than in a town. Lazer's pension was only 650 lei but, in Sfiştofca, he could grow many things in his own garden and did not have to buy them for good money in the shops. In spite of that, he had to spend almost all of his pension on food.

Lazer attended the Russian school in Sfiştofca for four years. In the early 1960s, a few years after the Communists had taken over control of the country, the language of instruction was changed from Russian to Romanian. Lazer's father did not want his children to have more than four years of schooling because he believed that the time would come when people with a higher education would

end up sweeping the streets. Therefore, Lazer started working as a fisherman after his four years at school.

His siblings are all still alive. One sister lives in Sulina and one in Constanta; one brother is in Old Kilija and the other in Tulcea. Lazer organised a family reunion on the high holidays such as New Year's Day, Easter and the annual church consecration festival on 14 October at his home. Lazer would have liked to have visited many of his relatives more often but roads to Sfiştofca are in a poor condition. There used to be shared taxis to Periprava and Sulina but most of them were done away with. Lazer sometimes mentioned that his younger son, Alexander, often visited him but he only rarely saw his older son, Vassily. Whenever Lazer talked about Alexander and Vassily, he always mentioned that he had had a third son who died many years ago in the canal at Sfiştofca.

Lazer's paternal ancestors came from the region near Vilkovo. While he was still a child, his father had told him that his grandfather had moved from Vilkovo to Sfiştofca in the wake of the October Revolution. After the First World War, believers were persecuted in the newly-founded Soviet Union; mass executions took place and many churches were destroyed on the grounds that there was no God.

When asked about his connections to the Ukrainian section of the Danube Delta, Lazer said that he still had some nieces and nephews in Vilkovo, Izmail and other places. Sometimes he said that he regretted that he had not taken more care of his contacts to his relatives. Lazer would have liked to have travelled to the Ukraine to see how his relatives lived there but he would have needed money and a passport to be able to do so.

When he spoke about the Socialist period, Lazer said that life under Ceausescu was not all that bad. Everybody had work and a minimum income from which it was possible to live fairly well. There was also less criminality in those days. Under Ceausescu, all of the shops were owned by the state and run by civil servants while, today, they belong to private people who have to make sure that their stores are sufficiently well-stocked. Lazer often regretted that groceries had become more expensive after the change in the political system and that he had to think carefully about what he really needed and what he could do without.

He was also angry that so many people became unemployed after the fall of Communism and that many salaries were cut. Lazer also pointed out that, with the opening of the borders, a great number of people left Romania to take up better paid jobs and live a more pleasant life abroad.

During the Socialist era, Lazer travelled around the world as a seaman. On his journeys, he visited cities like New York, Halifax, Las Palmas, Nouakchott, Istanbul and Berlin. Lazer recalled that he had seen the Berlin Wall illuminated at night. He not only travelled by ship while he was a seaman but sometimes also by train or plane.

After the change in the political system, Lazer initially thought that things would soon improve for the Romanians but – in his opinion – everything got worse. He saw the continuously increasing unemployment as one of the main reasons for this development.

As to the European Union; Lazer thought that simple people like he did not know what the EU really means and which goals Romania hoped to achieve through the country's accession. He felt that educated people, people with a university degree, were in a better position to understand the aims of the EU.

Lazer said that he sometimes went to church, lit a candle and prayed for people who were important for him. He felt that the path to the church was so taxing that many old people had to lie down and rest in bed after attending the service. Lazer said that only people living in Sfiştofca went to the village's church because the Old Believers in other towns such as Periprava had their own house of worship.

Nikolai then underlined that Lazer had been a man full of the joys of life and that visits from relatives and friends had been some of the highlights in his life. He was definitely sad that his children had moved away from Sfiştofca and mourned his son who had drowned in the canal near the village all his life. In spite of his longing for his children and sorrow over the drowned son, Lazer was almost always in a good mood and showed this in the way he played his accordion. He particularly liked playing Russian folksongs for his guests. When Nikolai said these last words, some of the guests recalled the balmy summer evenings in Lazer's yard where he gave his guests home-made wine and then took up the accordion to entertain those sitting around the table with cheerful music. Many of the listeners had tears in

their eyes when they remembered how tenderly Lazer had spoken about his dead son and with how much feeling he embraced his children when they visited him.

After a two-minute pause during which the guests though about the deceased woman and prayed in silence for her salvation in heaven, the black cloth was handed back to Vladimir.

The rounds of story-telling during the funeral feast had come to an end and the guests started chatting to those sitting next to them. The silence and attentiveness that had dominated while the tales were being told gave way to lively conversation interrupted from time to time by brief laughter or a loud cough.

POST SCRIPTUM

A few years after this funerary feast, I once again set out for Sfiştofca on a day in August to visit my old acquaintances and to see how the village had changed in the meantime. While I was sitting on the deck of the ship to Sulina with the cool wind blowing in my face, I asked myself how my friends and acquaintances in Sfiştofca had fared in the past years. I wanted to know if they were still alive and if we could get together in the Sfiştofca community centre once again for a game of chess or a pleasant chat over a glass of wine. While I was thinking about the life and people in Sfiştofca, I suddenly felt very tired. My fatigue and the monotonous drone of the ship's motor caused me to drift off into a pleasant afternoon nap that lasted until I was, all of a sudden, awoken by a loud voice. The captain of the ship was standing in front of me and said that we had already arrived in Sulina, that I was the last passenger on the ship and that I should get off as soon as possible because they wanted to clean the ship and get it ready for its return journey to Tulcea. Still somewhat in a daze, I told the captain that I was sorry and left the ship as quickly as I could.

In the distance, I could see a large crowd of people that was slowly dispersing. They were the other passengers who had been on the ship and they gradually went to their hotels, pensions and private houses in Sulina. I also saw a tall man waving cheerfully at me. I went towards him and recognised my long-time friend Vassily. He had visited his sister Finica in Sulina and we then went together by boat to Sfiştofca.

I was already so excited on the trip that I could hardly wait to arrive at the village after such a long time; at the village where I had gotten to know so many friendly and interesting people. We arrived at Sfiştofca as the sun was setting and went from the landing place on the canal to Vassily's house next to the church. After I had deposited my luggage in Vassily's house, we decided to go on a short evening stroll.

The streets in Sfiştofca were already dark and, in the last rays of twilight, we could make out the silhouettes of many dilapidated mud-built houses. As I looked at the ruins of these houses, I had to think of those acquaintances who had passed away and whose lives were the subject of the speeches given at the funeral of Vassily's father. High grass now grew rampant in Lazer's yard where he used to play his

accordion and went to meet his children with such joy when they came to visit him. In the quiet of the evening, I tried to imagine how the people had sung and danced in Lazer's courtyard. When we walked past Anna Shigarova's house, I noticed that the wooden front door had become rotten and that the terrace in front of it, where the people living in Sfiştofca had once played suspenseful chess games in the shade of the high trees on hot summer days, was covered with moist moss and overgrown with a dense thicket of plants. After darkness had set in, Vassily and I reached the house where Karp used to live with his wife and children. The moon had now risen and in its soft light Karp's house made a festive impression. I had the feeling that Karp's positive spirit could still be felt around his house and asked myself how his wife and children were doing. The light inside the house was turned on as I stood outside lost in thought. I looked through a pair of old grey curtains into a small room where I recognised the gaunt figure of Karp's wife. She stood in the middle of the room for a few minutes but the light was too weak for me to be able to see what she was doing. After the light had been turned off once again, I noticed a black cat run through the garden in front of Karp's house in the moonlight and then swiftly climb up a high tree. As I watched the cat, I thought about what Karp's widow could have been doing in the room. Had she possibly been thinking about her dead husband and remembering how she had danced a slow waltz with him in the same room to the music coming from the old gramophone? After a while, Vassily's strong voice brought me back from my thoughts. He invited me to visit his dead father in the cemetery and that is where our evening stroll ended – I was once again back at the cemetery in Sfiştofca.

The cemetery seemed to be abandoned as the villagers usually only visited it when somebody was carried to his or her grave. Most of the graves in Sfiştofca are hardly cared for – and some, not at all. The memories of the deceased are mostly brought back by photos and there is a kind of miniature ancestral gallery in many of the houses in the village. These are usually a number of very small photographs that are glued onto white paper and then framed. As a whole, these photos create a large overall picture on which one can see all those who have passed away.

In addition to these photos, memorial services are also held for the dead by the family and close friends of the deceased person at precisely set intervals determined by the rites of the Old Believers. At these services, a mass is read in memory of the dead person and prayers are said for his or her salvation in heaven. After the ceremony, the family of the dead person invite the guests to have a meal

at their home during which those present talk about the life and family, merits and idiosyncrasies, and characteristics of the one being remembered. Sometimes the guests are given a loaf of bread and a small amount of money to take home with them. This is a symbolic sign of gratitude that the guests have come here to remember the dead person and prayed for him during the church service.

Vassily and I stood at the grave in the darkness of the night for a few minutes and then went home. I decided to visit the cemetery again on the next day to see the graves of those who had been remembered at the funerary meal years ago in the daylight.

THE GRAVES AT THE CEMETERY IN SFIŞTOFCA

I needed some strength to open the rusted gate to the cemetery at dusk on the following day. I could hear the gentle rustling of the evening breeze in the surrounding trees and the purplish light of the setting sun made the cemetery in Sfiştofca glow in reddish-gold splendour. Behind the large eight-pointed cross in the middle of the cemetery in Sfiştofca that towers up over the other graves, I found several old graves whose simple wooden crosses had long decayed and toppled over. High grass now grows out of these graves and I am not sure whether anybody living in Sfiştofca today can recall who is lying at rest in these very old burial places.

The atmosphere at the cemetery in Sfiştofca is peaceful and contemplative. Most of the graves are uncared for because the families have left the village or prefer to remember the dead person at home. The signs of transience can clearly be seen in the toppled crosses, faded inscriptions and rusty metal fences.

The majority of the crosses at the cemetery in Sfiştofca are made of wood and a few of metal. Most of them are white or unpainted to show the original colour of the wood and there are also some blue and green crosses. A few of the graves are surrounded by a fence but most are only marked by a free-standing cross without any enclosure. An old – usually very rusty – metal table stands next to a couple of the graves. This is used for the refrigerium, a meal eaten in honour of a dead person at his grave. In most cases when a refrigerium is held, the members of the dead person's family place a bowl with a mixture of honey and boiled wheat on the metal table next to the grave. The mourners then move to the grave – one after the other – cross themselves, say a short prayer of intercession for the deceased, and then eat a spoonful of the mixture. After eating the refrigerium, they cross themselves again, bow in front of the grave and then give the next mourner the place in front of the metal table.

The centre of the cemetery is marked by a two-metre high wooden cross. There is a roof on top of this cross with three additional small crosses placed at even distances on it. To a large extent, the paths in the cemetery in Sfiştofca are completely overgrown with grass and many trees grow between the individual graves making the cemetery a pleasant place of peace and quiet – particularly on hot summer days.

Fyodor was the first to be remembered at the funerary meal but his grave is not in the cemetery at Sfiștofca. Fyodor died in the hospital in Tulcea and was buried in the Old Believers' cemetery in that town. I hope that some kind person is taking care of Fyodor's grave in Tulcea and that, from time to time, a few people stop and read his name on his gravestone. It is possible that Fyodor still has relatives in Tulcea who see to this.

There is a dark brown cross with the dates of his birth and death written on it on Nikifor's grave. An arrangement of artificial flowers leans against the cross and the rest of the grave is covered with orange ones placed there in memory of the deceased. The grave is well taken care of and I assume that Nikifor's wife, Irina, is the person who does this.

There is a wooden cross on the grave of Kulina but the most of the white paint with the red inscription has flaked off; however, it is still possible to decipher the years of her birth and death. As with Nikifor's grave, there are also no weeds on Kulina's. And, there is also the same arrangement of artificial flowers leaning against the cross. This shows that Irina, Nikifor's widow and Kulina's daughter, is taking care of both graves. There is also a small withered fir tree, which was planted in spring, on Kulina's grave.

I had to look for Karp's grave for a long time before I found it at the edge of the cemetery. The cross on his grave is painted blue and has an inscription in white. Karp's name and the date of his birth and death are hard to read because they written on the cross by hand. His grave is completely overgrown with grass and this indicates that his family do not pay particular attention to its upkeep.

My search for Maura's grave was in vain and I asked myself whether she had possibly been buried in the town she had been born in, Periprava. When I asked Vassily about this, he replied that she actually was buried at the cemetery in Sfiştofca but that no cross had been put up on her grave and it is therefore no longer possible to find her final resting place. When I asked Vassily about the missing cross, he recounted a Lipovan legend his mother had told him many times while he was still a child. According to this, the dead person has to carry the cross around with him in the hereafter and some people do not want to burden their departed loved ones in this way and therefore refrain from placing a cross on their grave.

There is a light brown cross on Toma's grave; the black inscription with his name and year of birth and death is easy to read. Toma's grave is now completely covered with grass. There is a silver lantern near the cross in the high grass. It seems likely that Toma's widow used to light a candle in remembrance of her husband from time to time. Toma's widow left Sfiştofca two years ago to spend the last years of her life with her daughter and the grave has been abandoned ever since.

Zena's grave is marked by a small light-brown wooden cross with her name and the dates of her birth and death written on it in black paint. I had to remove a wreath of artificial flowers that had been laid across the entire cross to be able to read the inscription on it. The grave was cleared of grass indicating that her children – or possibly her friends from the choir – were responsible for its care. There was an upturned saucepan in front of the cross; this was possibly put there so that Zena could keep her food in it as she made her way into the beyond.

Maria is buried in the same grave as her husband. It is surrounded by a white metal fence on a cement foundation and has a gravestone with the couple's names and the dates of their birth and death, as well as an inscription in Romanian reading "We will never forget you", on it.

Two photos showing Maria and her husband have been engraved in the upper end of the gravestone with the eight-pointed cross of the Lipovans between them. There are two white crosses to the left and right of the gravestone respectively – Maria's cross is a little shorter than her husband's. Each of the crosses has a blue metal plaque with a white inscription bearing the name and year of birth and death of the deceased. There is no grass on the couple's grave that is decorated with a few artificial flowers. When one looks at this well-cared-for, rather stylish grave, one immediately understands that their family still thinks about Maria and her husband. The Romanian sentence on the gravestone is an indication that Maria's descendants now mainly speak that language and only have a fragmentary knowledge of Russian.

Evdokia is also buried in the same grave as her husband, which is surrounded by a metal fence that has already rusted. Evdokia's cross is white with an inscription in black. It is towered over by the green wooden cross of her husband; however, the paint has almost completely flaked off. It is almost impossible to read the inscriptions on the two crosses. There is a metal bucket in front of each of the two

crosses – probably intended to be used by the dead persons to store their food in the hereafter. The grave of Evdokia and her husband is still free of grass because it was cared for by one of Evdokia's friends, who recently passed away. It will probably soon be overgrown as all of the friends and relatives of Evdokia and her husband have now died.

Erimej is buried at the cemetery in Sulina where he spent the last years of his life and died. The cemetery in Sulina is divided into six sections (Islamic, Jewish, Romanian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant) and reflects the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional character of Sulina in the days of the Ottoman Empire. Erimej's grave is in the Russian Orthodox part in the north-eastern section of the cemetery. The grave is marked by a white metal cross, with a gilded metal plaque showing Erimej's name and year of his birth and death, on a concrete base and is surrounded by a simple white metal fence. There are withered flowers on Erimej's grave and the place where the coffin was lowered into the earth is free of grass and weeds. It seems that Erimej's relatives who live in Sulina take care of his last resting place. The unassuming metal fence and cross are in keeping with Erimej's peaceful and modest character.

There is a white cross on Marco's grave with his name and years of his birth and death inscribed on it in black letters. In front of the cross, I saw some glass vessels and a rusty metal saucepan; these were probably burial gifts and intended for Marco to use to store his food in the beyond. Marco's widow Senovia Sepatkina takes loving care of his grave that is completely free of grass.

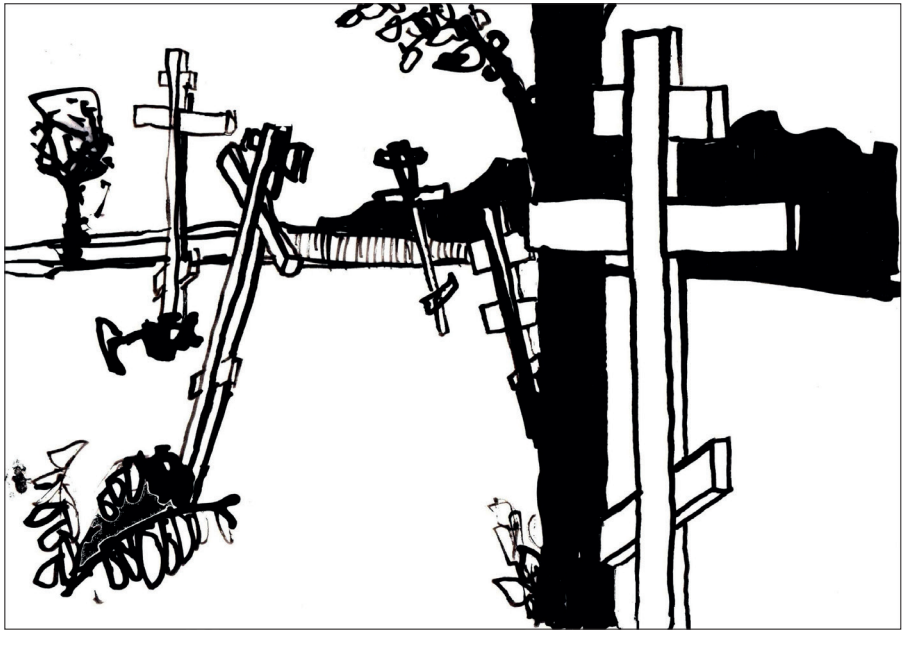
Anna died in Sfiştofca but her family decided to bury her in Sulina. Although I looked for Anna's grave in the Russian Orthodox section of the cemetery in Sulina, I was unable to find it. She was possibly buried in a grave without a cross in keeping with a Lipovan legend.

Of all those dead persons whose life story had been recalled at the funerary banquet, Nadeschda has the largest and most striking grave. She is buried in a family grave that is surrounded by white metal fence with several small metal crosses.

Nadeschda's gravestone is a white stone sculpture with an eight-point cross of black stone worked into it. This form of cross is the only one recognised by the Lipovans. A photo of Nadeschda and her name, as well as the years of her birth

and death, have been engraved in the sculpture. In addition, it bears an inscription in Romanian reading: "This is where our dear, beloved parents lie – We will never forget you". The gravestone is decorated with many wreaths of artificial flowers and a number of glass sculptures lie in front of it. The white metal crosses of other family members can be seen behind the gravestone. There is almost no grass on the family grave that is taken care of by Nadeshda's daughter who lives in Sfiştofca.

There is a dark brown cross with Lazer's name and the years of his birth and death, as well as the letters I.N.R.I. – the initials of Christ – in white letters, on his grave. Lazer's cross is somewhat larger than most of the others in the Sfiştofca cemetery. It is on a wooden base that has been rammed deep into the sandy soil. A wreath of artificial flowers hangs from one of the beams and there is a similar bouquet in front of the cross. Up until now, Lazer's son Alexander took care of his father's grave. He lived in Sfiştofca for some time in order to recuperate from his hard work as a sailor but has now once again found work on a ship in the Mediterranean and it can be assumed that Lazer's grave will soon look neglected.



There is a light brown cross on the grave of Vassily's father Sergei with his name, as well as the years of his birth and death, written on it in white. The grave is located directly next to those of two other family members. There is hardly any grass on Sergei's grave. In addition to his son Vassily, other members of the family live in Sfiştofca and occasionally visit and take care of the grave. I saw the wire frame of a wreath of artificial flowers that have since become undone and lay scattered over the graves of Sergei and his relatives. The fact that it had not been removed from Sergei's grave was an indication that – when I was there – it had not been visited for quite some time.

THE FUTURE OF SFIŞTOFCA

Not only at the cemetery in Sfiştofca are the signs of transience omnipresent; they can be sensed throughout the village. There are numerous dilapidate mud-built houses in the empty streets that, after a while, wild horses or cattle use as shelter. In the fields next to the ruined houses, one frequently comes across old toys that show that many children lived in Sfiştofca a few decades ago. Now these toys – most of them are old-fashioned dolls or figures out of films that have long been forgotten – lie in the wet grass where they slowly disintegrate and gradually disappear into the same sandy soil that the remains of the houses also sink ever deeper into. It is still possible to recognise the foundations of a small hotel that was never built in a meadow, in the midst of old trees and half dilapidated bathing-huts, in the south of Sfiştofca. These foundations show that a few people intended to develop Sfiştofca for tourism some time ago and give the village a new breath of life – but were unsuccessful in their attempts.

Not only the houses in Sfiştofca, but also the language and religion of the people living there, are vanishing. Most of the young people have now moved to other cities in Romania where they frequently no longer speak Russian and do not go to the church services of the Old Believers. Many of those who have left Sfiştofca find it difficult – if not impossible – to identify themselves with the language and religion of the Lipovans so that the culture of their ancestors will possibly come to an end with their generation. Hardly any villagers still attend church services in Sfiştofca itself. A few old women still strictly observe the religious order of the Old Believers and often go to church several times a day but they are the exception and most of the villagers only participate in the major religious celebrations that are only held a couple of times a year.

This leads to the question of how the village of Sfiştofca and the culture, language and religion of the Lipovans will develop in the future. One possibility is that Sfiştofca – which is already entered in the official church books as a monastery – will develop into a pure place of pilgrimage for the Lipovans and, possibly, other believers, The village has a large, impressive church with a number of old – and very valuable – icons. In addition, the open landscape and the beauty of the Danube Delta invest the location with a very individual charm and almost religious feeling of tranquillity and reflection.

Sfiştofca could possible not only be an interesting place of pilgrimage but also a unique meeting place for artists, writers and other intellectuals. They could be inspired by the peace and seclusion of the village that would then lead to interesting discussions and the creation of visions for future projects. There are many possibilities for the future development of Sfiştofca, but we still do not know the shape in which this village at the eastern end of the Danube Delta will present itself to us in the future.

OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF THE OLD BELIEVERS

In the 17th century, Russia experienced an economic and cultural boom under Tsar Alexander Michaelovich as a result of which he attempted to assert Russia's traditional demands. One of the most important of these was the call to be recognised as the legal successor of the Byzantine Emperor and sole orthodox ruler on earth. In addition, the rites of the church were to be standardised and the level of education of the clergy improved. The Tsar proclaimed reforms for the standardisation of the ecclesiastical rites and appointed Patriarch Nikon to see that they were implemented. During these reforms, liturgical books were corrected and many aspects of the liturgical traditions changed; however, the dogma of Russian orthodoxy remained untouched.

Many of the faithful considered the modifications of the liturgical books to be a great sin because they believed that the baptism of the Rus' by the Greeks in 988 was holy and could therefore not be changed. When the "corrected" books appeared in 1653, they led to a storm of indignation in wide sections of the Russian populace. The Tsar was repeatedly beseeched to rescind the reforms in order to protect himself and the Russian people from disaster. Those against the reforms saw Patriarch Nikon as their main opponent and made him responsible for the fate that would befall the Russian people as a result of these reforms.

The protests against Nikon's changes started in Moscow and soon spread to the Russian provinces. The opponents to the reforms initially believed that they could assert themselves over Nikon but, in the following decades, they had to recognise that the majority of the Russian population submitted to Nikon's directives and that Russian orthodoxy had left its traditional path forever. As a result, the opposition joined ranks as the Old Believers and decided to resist the teachings of the reformed Russian state church. The Old Believers venerated antiquity and the old traditions and attempted to act accordingly in their civic and family life. The Old Believers also rejected any form of progress, opposed everything that was new or foreign, and believed in the sanctity and infallibility of all rites from the time before Nikon's reforms.

Crossing oneself with two fingers developed into the Old Believers' most important symbol. In this, one places the index and middle finger next to each other and bends the middle finger slightly so that the tips of the two form one line.

This is intended to express the human and godly nature of Christ: the slightly bent middle finger represents the firmament from where the godly nature of Christ emanates while the index finger represents His human nature. The two finger tips in one line symbolises that godly and human nature are both present in Christ. The other three fingers are held together in the palm of the hand and symbolise the Trinity of God. In contrast, Nikon's followers crossed themselves with three fingers in which the tips of the thumb, index and middle finger were held in the same way as one uses to take a pinch of salt. In the eyes of the Old Believers, the third finger in this form of crossing oneself stood for a third nature of Christ that could not exist. For this reason, the Old Believers rejected making the sign of the cross with three fingers as sinful.

The monastery at Solovki developed into the centre of the Old Believers in the 17th century. It was stormed by the state's army in 1676 and this marked the start of a major wave of persecution throughout Russia. Those people who refused to accept the reforms of Patriarch Nikon were threatened with torture and execution. Many Old Believers chose self-immolation over execution at the hands of the state. The most severe wave of oppression took place under Patriarch Joachim and lasted until his death in 1690. Joachim's successor, Adrian (1690–1700) punished holding on to the old beliefs with imprisonment in a monastery instead of death and tempered the ill-treatment of the Old Believers. However, they continued to be persecuted more or less severely in the Russian Empire until 1905 when Tsar Nicholas II proclaimed religious freedom.

Those Old Believers who neither wanted to accept the state church nor suffer martyrdom frequently sought their salvation by fleeing to secluded areas of the country or regions beyond the Russian borders. At the end of the 17th century, an important settlement area of the Old Believers developed in a forest region on the Kerženec near Nizhniy Novgorod. Around 100 monasteries and nunneries, where approximately 700 monks and 2000 nuns lived, were established there. The land around the religious institutions was farmed by Old Believers and their families. After the settlement area on the Kerženec lost its importance as a result of a wave of persecution under Archbishop Pitirim of Nizhniy Novgorod, the small town of Starodub in the Bryansk Oblast became a new centre for the Old Believers. There were three monasteries, a nunnery, seventeen community churches, sixteen public chapels and numerous prayer rooms and hermits' cells in the Bryansk Oblast at the end of the 18th century. The Old Believers not only settled in the Bryansk Oblast

but also in the north of Russia and later in Siberia. The centre of the Old Believers in North Russia was the Epiphany Hermitage Monastery that was built where the small River Sosnovka flows into the Vyg.

Most of those Old Believers who no longer felt safe within the borders of Russia fled to the Austrian or Ottoman Empires. The Old Believers' first metropolitan was ordained in Belaja Krinica, which belonged to Austria at the time, in 1848 and this is also where their first episcopal see was established. The region around Belaja Krinica developed into the most important centre for the Old Believers in Austria under Metropolitan Amvrosij. The episcopal see of the Old Believers had to be transferred to the large Romanian city of Brăila after the region around Belaja Krinica was conquered by the Red Army in 1940.

The main settlement area of the Old Believers in the Ottoman Empire was located not far from Brăila in the Danube Delta. The small town of Vilkovo, which is now in the Ukrainian section of the Danube Delta, was established there in the 18th century. Many Old Believers left Vilkovo in the following decades and moved to the central and southern regions of the Danube Delta where they founded villages such as Periprava, Sfiştofca, Jurilovca and Sarichioi. The Old Believers were called Lipovans in the Danube Delta and other regions in Southeast Europe. It is possible that this name can be traced back to the Russian word for linden tree "lipa" and is an indication that, when they fled from Russia, they often hid in linden forests to prevent themselves from being persecuted by the Russian authorities.

The Lipovan villages in the Danube Delta had their heyday in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. In the isolation of the Delta, the Lipovans were able to live their religion freely and preserve their language, culture and traditions. Their survival was guaranteed because there was an ample supply of fish in in the Danube Delta and the river itself. Many fish kolkhozes were set up in Danube Delta after the Second World War and parts of the delta transformed into farmland. The Lipovans had to give up some aspects of their traditional way of living and adapt to the Socialist societal model of the newly-established Romanian People's Republic. Numerous people left the Lipovan villages in the Danube Delta and went to the cities in the vicinity in search of work. It was no longer possible to maintain the isolation that had existed before the Second World War and many mixed marriages took place between Lipovans and people of other faiths. Another wave of emigration occurred after the fall of Communism in 1989 when the local

fish kolkhozes and fish processing factories, in which many Lipovans worked, were closed. In addition, the opening of the Romanian borders gave the Lipovans the possibility of migrating to countries in West Europe and finding better-paid work there. Now, most of the people still living in the Lipovan villages are very old men and women who spend their years after their retirement in their hometowns and meet their needs through subsistence farming. There are very few children and youths and it must be expected that, as a result of the lack of employment, more young people will leave in the coming years. This makes it uncertain if it will be possible to preserve the Lipovan villages in the Danube Delta in the coming decades and, if it is, what their future will be.

The voices of the dead live on:

http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/01_fjodor.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/04_nikifor.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/07_karp.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/06_kulina.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/08_maura.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/09_toma.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/10_zena.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/11_maria.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/19_evdokia.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/20_erimej.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/24_marco.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/26_anna.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/39_nadja.mp3
http://www.breiling.org/timemaps/livingvoices/41_lazer.mp3

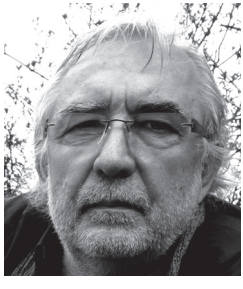
A Funeral Feast in Sfiştofca

Tales from the Danube Delta

Sfiştofca is a Lipovan village at the eastern end of the Danube Delta. Lipovans are Russian Old Believers who fled from religious persecution in the tsardom in the late 18th century and settled in the isolation of the Danube Delta where they could live their religion freely. The life stories of fourteen dead villagers were told at a funeral feast. Their individual biographies give an impression of everyday life in Sfiştofca during the Second World War and in the period of Socialism in Romania. The funeral feast takes place against the background of the living conditions in this village today.

Author

Camillo Breiling (*1988) is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Eastern European History at the University of Vienna and is supported by a stipend from the Austrian Academy of Sciences. He focuses on the living situation, language, religion, history, culture and identity of the Lipovans in the Danube Delta.



Illustrator

Robert Petschinka (*1956) is a freelance artist from Obermallebarn in Lower Austria. He imparts his way of thinking and creativity in courses, exhibitions, seminars, workshops, studio visits and mediation programmes. His most recent interest lies in bringing artists from the Danube countries together. He heads the GrenzArt Gallery in Hollabrunn.

The two men were founding members of the Sfiştofca Art Association in Romania and are noted for their special knowledge about the Danube Delta. The illustrations in this book were first shown in a vernissage held in Sfiştofca on 11 February 2016 and can now be seen in the newly-built art hall in Sulina.