

THE DETROIT CONNECTIONS

BULGARIA

Brothers who parted feel pains of the past

Last in a Free Press series

More than 1.6 million people in southeastern Michigan can trace their roots to Eastern Europe, where political reform is reshaping the once repressive communist regimes. Free Press staff writer Peter Gavrilovich drove more than 3,000 miles through Europe in two weeks this month to interview relatives of Detroit-area residents.

BY PETER GAVRILOVICH
Free Press Staff Writer

SOFIA, Bulgaria — Zdravko Gadjev, star tenor with the Bulgarian State Opera, hurriedly jammed 60 packs of chewing gum into his large tan handbag and asked me to thank his brother for the gift.

The brother, Ivan Gadjev, 52, fled Bulgaria 20 years ago by swimming the Mesta River and squeezing under a barbed wire barricade to freedom. Now a veterinarian living in Farmington Hills, he has collected 14,000 books on communism and Balkan history and turned a large room above his garage into a library on Bulgaria.

Before I left Detroit, Ivan Gadjev warned me that even in

Gadjev gets on a bus after shopping for fruit at a Sofia store. His status as a successful musical artist does not insulate his family from the ordinary hardships of life in Bulgaria. His salary is "a little above average."



PAULINE LUBENS/Detroit Free Press

Emigre Ivan Gadjev of Farmington Hills stands on the staircase to his

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these more progressive times, I would probably be followed by Bulgarian agents, but to ignore them. He gave me some suggestions on what to ask his brother.

"Ask him how much he makes a week," Ivan suggested. "Ask him about travel, about how they wouldn't let him perform in the West because they were afraid he would defect."

Zdravko Gadjev, 47, who has been lauded for his portrayal of Pinkerton in "Madame Butterfly" and his robust solo performance in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, tells me he earns the equivalent of \$50 a week. He lives in a cramped apartment in a chilly, cement-gray building with his four family members, takes the tram to work, has to shop daily just to make sure there's enough milk and bread at home.

"It's not a high salary, but it's a little above average," Zdravko Gadjev said. He had been a chemist in a small factory in a city about 100 miles from Sofia when he joined an amateur opera society in late 1969. There was a competition one evening and the judge from Sofia lauded Zdravko and made arrangements for him to shift careers at age 27.

"It was a way to show what I could achieve," Zdravko said. "In this country, people are appreciated by their talent, their capabilities."

But for nearly a decade after his brother fled Bulgaria in 1969, Zdravko Gadjev was denied exit visas to perform with his opera company in the West because the government feared he would defect.

"I had no desire to flee," Zdravko Gadjev said. "There were times when the big cheeses said I could go West, but some small clerk at the airport would deny it."

But in the past two months, since the Bulgarian Communist Party agreed to share power with non-Communists in this country of nine million people, Zdravko Gadjev said his life has



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seemed much better.

"I feel a burden lifted. I have felt exhausted, too. This nervous way of life we've led, this strain on people, it was very tiresome after so many years.

"It's hard for you to understand the strain. If there are difficulties in transportation, you may be late for work and you're afraid whether your director will fire you. Every day you must go shopping for food, and there's a lack of products, of bread and milk."

In Farmington Hills, Ivan Gadjev's family room is lined with pictures, including publicity photos of Zdravko made-up for various stage roles. There are snapshots of his family working in tobacco fields in Bulgaria and of he and brother Zdravko standing side by side.

And there are cherished photos of their father, a high school teacher, years before the Communists executed him for unspecified crimes against the state in September, 1944.

Ivan Gadjev has repeatedly demanded that the Communist government explain why they executed his father and confiscated their property.

Authorities met with the Gadjev brothers in the spring of 1969, both recalled, and told them to forget the past. Ivan Gadjev could not.

On a night in late June 1969, he and

Zdravko saw each other for the last time during a dinner at a hotel in a small town near Sofia.

Ivan kept secret his plan to escape. "You cannot leave that burden with your brother, that you will secretly defect," he said. If authorities there found out Zdravko had known of his brother's plan, he would have been harmed, perhaps jailed as an accomplice, Ivan Gadjev said.

Political reforms in Bulgaria may someday lead to the truth about his father's death, said Zdravko Gadjev.

But the brothers are not planning a reunion soon.

Even when they do get together, Ivan Gadjev said their eventual reunion will be subdued. "Believe me, the murder of my father took a lot of human feelings from me," he said.

Zdravko Gadjev ended our interview so he could rush to a rehearsal before the Bulgarian State Opera departed for a pre-Christmas engagement in Egypt, but spoke of the day he will see his brother again.

"Because of the memories of how we worked together in those tobacco fields, of how we were students together, of how we were so poor," he said wistfully as he unwrapped the small luxury his brother had sent, a stick of spearmint gum.