

The neighbourhood turf wars in Zaharna Fabrika are no saga

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It is common to celebrate on the eve of 24 May, the day of Bulgarian learning and culture. If you don't have a relative or neighbour to hand who is graduating from secondary school, you can at least share your recognition of the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius, who did so much good for you, with your truest friends. Besides saying it out loud, you could also write it like this: "N A Z D R A V E!" ["To your health!"]. If you're not feeling particularly literate, you are allowed one birthday with which to make due.

Viewed from this standpoint, these things appear so natural that even if you get into a fight on such a night, somehow it doesn't seem to be such a mega-crime.

But as one American psycho had said, "Owls are not that which they seem" - and they are also not that which I am going to tell you about.

On the evening of 23 May, between seven and eight o'clock, a group of celebrating Roma from the Zaharna Fabrika neighbourhood attacked a group of celebrating Bulgarians from the same neighbourhood. The outcome was several certified medical cases of fractures and serious injuries, as well as one person in a coma, with uncertain chances of survival.

THE VERSIONS:

On the evening in question, the Roma N.N. was celebrating his son's 16th birthday together with friends and relatives. One of the guests got drunk, and the host's cousin A. offered to drive him home. This is how A. describes his return to the party:

"I passed by apartment block 29, saw the people drinking in the restaurant and decided to get a beer. I wasn't going to stay there, I just wanted a beer. I went over to K.P. (the proprietor) and he grabbed me by the arm and said 'Now I'm gonna give you a nice beer,' and pulled me outside. Once in the side street, he began to hit me. I got away from him, but down the road he and his friends caught up with me and they all began beating me. Finally, K. took out a gun and hit me on the head with it and said 'Hey, Gypsy, you're gonna die here.' Then a guy from the neighbourhood saw me lying there unconscious and went to call for help. My friends went over and asked why they had beaten me, but when they saw them, the guys from the restaurant



took out pistols and started throwing bottles at them. What could our guys do?"

People from the neighbourhood reported that most of the neighbourhood's residents went to the same school and got along fine, but said that K., the restaurant owner, was a skinhead and tried to stir people up against them. He never allowed Roma into his restaurant and would hit their wives and children for no reason.

K.P., who unlike A.'s stitches on the head, had a puffy, blackened eye, told another story: "The incident happened on the night of my son's high-school graduation party. I had invited my friends over, and my son had invited his. The restaurant was closed to the public. We saw my son off to his graduation dance and the rest of us stayed on. All of a sudden a Gypsy showed up out of nowhere, came along past the tables and hit one kid on the back of the neck. He came up to me, stood one inch away from my face and asked me whether I was the top wise guy and said he wanted to drink beer. I



Photos:
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explained that the restaurant was closed and that he should leave, sent him to the corner of the building to go home. Cursing and threats toward us accompanied this. Three or four minutes later we were attacked by a horde of 50-60 people. I don't even want to tell you about the beating that followed, it was terrible. In the name of everybody from the neighbourhood, I would like to address all of those who have embassies on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, to ask them to help us to achieve our number one task: to resettle all the Gypsies from our neighbourhood, so that we may live in peace."

The people sitting in K.P.'s restaurant said that there had been almost nobody in the past seven years who had not suffered from the Roma incursions. They don't want this incident to be treated as an ethnic one; according to them, it's a social problem.

The deputy mayor of the Ilinden district, Magdalena Ivanova, explained that conflicts like this occurred periodically in the neighbourhood, but they were resolved with the help of the police and the mayor. This was a random fight, she said.

At the moment, the municipality is constructing a common bath for the neighbourhood Roma, and running water had been provided a while back.

In fact, the Roma settled in this neighbourhood 25 years ago, and according to local residents, the situation had always been calm. But six or seven years ago people from other towns and villages started moving in the ghetto... This is happening in all the ghettos in Bulgaria, since nobody bothers to supervise illegal construction.

Then come the problems, which we have to condemn as ethnic or social. But what's social about a person who got running water a couple of months ago?! How can the social and the asocial intersect, sharing the same territory, breathing the same air, and unable to stand each other?

After yet another beer... it's easy to become a "hero". With the good wishes of your own kind, it's easy... because you'll have someone to back you up.

But right now nobody is giving any guarantees for one man's chances of survival. And if he makes it, he'll never be the same. People have threatened that there will be a vengeance.■

ATTENTION TO ALL INSTITUTIONS

AND RESPONSIBLE OFFICIALS:

**THERE WILL BE A CONTINUATION
AND IT WON'T BE A SAGA!**

On May 27, the BHC received the appeal "Wake up, Bulgaria!", which reads as follows:

"If you feel yourselves to be Bulgarians. If you are living in fear. If your children are captives of stagnation in a free country. If your wives are being beaten and degraded. If you feel that a stop must be put to this. If you feel that the unrestrained behaviour of the Roma has crossed every line. COME."

The flyer announced the date and time of the protest, at 6 p.m. in front of the Ilinden municipal building. The "authors" of the appeal end it thus: "Let us unite! Let us live a calm and peaceful life of love and understanding! We are not racists! We are BULGARIANS and we will defend that which our grandfathers fought for! ORDER, CALM, CLEANLINESS AND JUSTICE ARE OUR GOALS!"

The BHC sent this "appeal" along with a letter to the chief of the Third Regional Police Station, where we wrote: "The flyer uses an element of our nation's symbols, the Bulgarian flag, which is enveloped by a hand clenched into a fist. Inasmuch as the text of the appeal falls within the scope of Article 162 of the Penal Code, we request that you take the necessary actions to prevent incitement towards racial or national enmity or hatred, or racial discrimination."

