

HAIDE
Prologue: Everyone here speaks Italian

Female Voice

Everything will work out.
We will return the land to the people.
We will have enough meat and bread.
Eggs and vegetables.
We will make the industry modern and ecological.
We will have as many as we want
refrigerators, preserves, washing machines and televisions.
We will dominate inflation.
We will have the convertible currency.
We will not beg for a few dollars
like abandoned children in front of the doors
of Europe.
Stefan Tsanev, "Apocalypse" 1992

Title

Haide - Journey to Sotirya

Narrator

This story begins on February 19th 2016 in a small village in eastern Bulgaria.

All around us there were mountains, forests, and other mountains.
I ended up there by chance, while with my colleagues from Amisnet, the radio for which I was working at that time, I was doing research on the flows of migrants coming from Syria, and from Afghanistan to Europe through Bulgaria.

We were in the country for a week, we were traveling in the east looking for travel and migration stories and we were almost returning to Sofia from where we had the flight to Rome when, for a series of coincidences and fortuitous encounters, we parked our car in front of a small village primary school.
We descend and while we chat in English with our interpreter, who followed us from the remote border villages to the reception centers for migrants of ancient Soviet appearance, a little girl, who had been keeping an eye on us for a while from the other part of the school gate calls us and says: "Are you Italian? Welcome! Here Sotirya, everyone here speaks Italian".

Everyone - here - speaks - Italian!

Now, in my mind, I was asking myself this question: how could it be that in a village 1500 kilometers away from Italy, surrounded by the mountains of Eastern Bulgaria and swept by a cold wind and a tint rain, everyone can speak Italian.

As far as I knew, I only had an explanation and it was linked to those songs by Tozzi and Cutugno that for days Dacia's car radio transmitted shamelessly in every moment of the day and even in the most remote areas of the country.

I was expected a sort of Albania at the end of the last century, at the turn of the 80's and 90's, when Telenorba and RAI had been ambassadors of the Italian language years before that tens of thousands of Albanians flowed unstoppable into the ports of Brindisi and Bari.
Tozzi and Cutugno in tails ambassadors of Italy in Bulgaria. This was what I thought.

... of course I was wrong

Rocco

Here in ten days we all go to Italy to work. Only grandparents are waiting here.
Let's go to collect tomatoes, artichokes, asparagus (sic)

Narrator

Asparagus, difficult word of which over the years I have heard variants of all types invented by Bulgarians, Malians, Nigerians, Senegalese: there are those who call them sparangi, those spraghi, those who wander, who recognizes the initial vowel and adds it to the correctness become aspraghi, and then there are those who love English, who call them more simply "sprite". "Today I work sprite", they tell you, and you can be sure that if you have never come across one of these neologisms before, you will never discover the arcane: the person of "today I work sprite" has not spent the day in supervise some mechanized system for bottling sparkling drinks but, more likely, he would have been all day with his back bent to work for a hypothetical Mr. Francesco Gramazio, known as Ciccio, in an asparagus field near Foggia.

And so, speaking with the inhabitants of Sotirya, we realized how Umberto Tozzi and Toto Cutugno have nothing to do with their Italian knowledges. It is not by listening to our local pop that the people here learned Italian, but thanks, or due, to the job.

A job that, every spring, pushes these people to leave for a journey of 1500 kilometers that from their small village surrounded by mountains will take them in the boundless plain of Foggia in a small agricultural village called: Borgo Mezzanone.

We did not discover many more things in our quick and unexpected journey in the village of Sotirya.

We had little time, Sofia and our plane were waiting for us, but especially every time I pressed the rec button on the recorder... immediately... hordes of kids and teenagers started running back and forth through the muddy country roads of the village with leather belts on which they had hung dozens of cow bells.

These guys, wearing monstrous masks and traditional clothes, with pants and jackets in goatskin that made them look like the Yeti, the snow demon, were the Kukeri.

Every year, between January and February, for two whole days the Kukeri run and dance on the streets of this and many other villages in Bulgaria with their iron and brass bells whose noise, according to local tradition, should drive away the evil spirits and propitiate for the village a year of peace and good harvests. This, at least, at the time when the lands around here were still cultivated.

So, while on the horizon the red sun of the sunset came out below the gray rain clouds and the "clan clan" of the Kukeri's bells still rumbles through the narrow alleys of the village we took the car and leaved Sotirya full of questions.

Who are these Bulgarians who come to Italy every year for job? What are their stories? What happens in a village that is completely abandoned for 9 months? And what happens when people come back? Why do these people come to Italy and not going to England, France, Spain? And between all the Italian cities why Borgo Mezzanone and not Trezzano sul Naviglio or Ficulle? Are they coming to steal our job? Our women? The fields of white cotton and the cobs opened in the sun? How has their life changed after coming to Italy? And their village? Have they managed to improve their living conditions?

... We understood each other, the questions were many, and they continued to buzz in my head for several weeks after our return to Rome.

That journey had left me something, stimulating synapses whose connections still remained obscure to me.

Like when on the street we are suddenly attracted by an odor that we strive to decipher, digging into our memory, and trying to situate it in a specific place and time.

But as much as we endeavor, in the end, defeated, we desist.

This is what happened this time when the chaos of the metropolis and the daily routine slowly dominated the rest; the memory of those faces became less clear and the harassing bells of the Kureki have also become a distant echo.

It was July 20th, 2017. It was more than a year since our trip to the east of Bulgaria, and I was completely immersed in the usual routine listening I do not know what with the fan fired on me to

resist the heat of the Roman July. I was going up and down, absently, on the website of a famous national newspaper, one of those that puts you in the foreground another video of Melania who refuses to give her hand to Trump as they descend from their mega jumbo presidential jet... who really cares about that?... When, right next to the video of Ms. Trump, I am struck by a photo: in the foreground the carcass of an old charred car and in the distance, in the background, some shacks.

The headline says "Foggia, seized the ghetto of migrants: 20 year old died in the burning of the shacks"

"Preventive seizure of the so-called 'Ghetto of Bulgarians' near Foggia ..."

The one so-called "Ghetto of Bulgarians" was the same ghetto described by the inhabitants of Sotirya a year and a half earlier. Those who had evacuated that morning on July 20th were their shacks.

Where had they gone now? Were they back in Bulgaria? Impossible, the tomato season was coming, it was a stupid idea to leave now that there was more job.

The Bulgarians of Borgo Mezzanone, the Bulgarians of Sotirya, were still there, somewhere in the plain of Foggia.

And an idea came to my mind: to find them and follow them to Bulgaria, trying to give a response to those questions that had been harassed and then abandoned me for a year and a half, until that morning in July.

In Bulgarian I knew only one single word "Haide" "Let's go", and while I was preparing the backpack stuffing microphones, headphones, sd cards and some pants, I did repeated it into my mind: "Haide, let's go, first stop Borgo Mezzanone".

Chapter 1: A Bulgarian Roma Singer Worker

Female Voice

With regard to land workers, we can say that their history could not be sadder, here in Italy. Slaves mostly, during the Roman Empire, then villain, then freedmen, but submitted to any kind of harassment, abuse, tyranny of the landlords until today".

Stefano Jacini "The results of the inquiry on agriculture" 1884

Title

Haide - Journey to Sotirya

Demir

[Singing...]

Narrator

Summer 2017, me and Demir sit in the shadow of a small family of pine trees on a peeling bench of the public garden of Borgo Mezzanone, twenty miles south of Foggia.

Demir is a Bulgarian singer or, to decline all his titles, we should say: a Bulgarian Roma singer worker.

He, Demir, is the first Bulgarian I met here in Puglia at the beginning of this trip, by chance, as by chance proceeds my research of Bulgarian workers willing to take me with them on their journey back home at the end of the summer, once the tomato harvest ended.

However, to understand how I arrived on this bench, we have to take a small step back at the end of the summer of 2017, when the tomatoes were just ripe on the fields and the harvest season was almost over, I had just arrived in Borgo Mezzanone to look for the Ghetto of Bulgarians of Sotirya vacated a few weeks before .

I do not know how many of the listeners of this travel story will know this small agricultural village lost in the countryside of Foggia, I imagine only few of you, therefore, here is a brief and essential description: the provincial road number 75, which from Foggia proceeds south east towards the Adriatic Sea, size Borgo Mezzanone in two parts: on this side the square with the church, the bell tower, the offices of the town hall of Manfredonia and the clock tower, all pulled up with the typical red bricks and the rationalist style of the Fascist era, the same that you can find in the cities of the Pontina area near Rome.

Across the street a public garden and a fountain. The only commercial activities of the village are a small supermarket and two bars, one of which proudly decorated with fascist pennants.

A few houses, a tennis court and a football field both abandoned and a single traffic light that turns red every time a car approaches.

The inhabitants in all the village are half a thousand.

All around the countryside.

In May 2017, the Forza Nuova's fascists during a demonstration managed to give to the village a more contemporary appearance that even today you can admire: Nazi swastikas on the road signs, other swastikas with the words DVCE on the fountain of the main square and then, on the asphalt in red spray letters a classic: "Shitty Nigger" with attached a swastika and a Celtic cross.

Understanding the why of all these high-culture quotes sprayed on urban furnitures is simple.

If you cross Borgo Mezzanone by car, and without counting the obligatory break at the perpetual-red traffic light, you leave the village behind you in less than 6 seconds.

"1,2,3,4,5,6... Done!"

The landscape that follows is an infinite plate of cultivated fields and sometimes to the right and to the left rare country houses, also in red brick and mostly collapsed. The ones that remained in balance are inhabited by big families of Romanians or Bulgarians, who here seasonally employed in many different agricultural works.

Continuing further, 800 meters beyond the village, on the right appears a sign "Multi-purpose center for immigrants".

Nothing more than a mega reception center housed in the buildings of an old military airport, which today hosted about 800 asylum seekers.

The multi-purposing here is nothing more than a shower, a cot and a meal, sometimes hot.

Whereas, outside the center fence, over the years, a large shantytown inhabited by Afghans, Pakistanis, and a majority of sub-Saharan Africans has risen over the old military airstrip: another 1000 people without electricity or running water.

To summarize: a few hundred Eastern Europeans living in abandoned farmhouses, 800 asylum seekers in the official reception center and another 1,000 people in the shacks of the annexed ghetto.

Now, do you understand why, Roberto Fiore, with his entourage of fascist skin heads, had bothered to reach this lost corner of Puglia.?

After the entrance of the old military airport, on the left there are two more old farmhouses surrounded by tall indefinable heaps.

I turned in that direction.

This is the place where the old ghetto of the Bulgarians of Sotirya stood, or how they call it, the ghetto of the Bulgarians of Borgo Mezzanone.

A pack of dogs surrounds the car, they get angry.

There is no-one here around, people left on July 20 2017 when the bulldozers, supervised by municipal police officers, destroyed the barracks and amassed the rubble and rubbish in long heaps of heaps up to two meters high.

Among the heaps there were plastic bags, rags, clothes, unpaired shoes, a boxing glove, a straddling of Italy, a book with the red leather cover of an encyclopedia on the universe.

Here I will not find anything else.

Then I drive again through the provincial road continuing to move away from Borgo Mezzanone and Foggia and, two minutes later, appear on the left another structure different from all previous ones: a sort of big hangar in concrete, gray and bare, which rises in the middle of a field of tall and dry weeds.

I turned in that direction.

This time there're no dogs but at a quick look the place seems inhabited: clothes hanging out to dry, wooden boards leaning against each other as to form a latrine, and then the inevitable rubbish spread everywhere.

I walk around the building, there is silence, two small shacks have been built on one of the outer walls of the great Hangar.

The first is empty, half-destroyed, in the second, in semi-darkness, on a bed apparently comfortable, a tall, big size man, with a beard of a few days old, lying down, resting happily.

I knock the door, he wakes up, in spite of the corpulent and discharged appearance, you can immediately understand that he is a good man. This man is Demir the Bulgarian Roma singer worker.

Demir likes to talk so, before his friends return from the fields, we leave for Borgo Mezzanone's public garden.

He tells me he is not from Sotirya but from the big city closed by, Sliven.

Demir

We are from Sliven and we went here, to Foggia.

Narrator

Since he was little and until a few years ago, when he was still living in Bulgaria, Demir was not rich but he was happy, he worked as a singer.

Demir

I used to sing when I went to work, always, like a fool, I just sang.
When I grew up, a person who had a big orchestra asked me to go and sing for him. I told him ok and he made me sing once or twice.
The people loved me and he started calling me to sing. Always.
I used to sing for 100 euros per day.
Now things are going badly because there is no money in Bulgaria. And all the Bulgarians came here. And for this reason I came, I wanted to see what is there.
Here in Italy I came for work. Not to sing. I like working, I want to work.

Narrator

The "antes", to which Demir refers are the times of Todor Zivkov the communist dictator who, until the end of 1989, had the reins of Bulgaria in his hands and whose years many Bulgarians remember with nostalgia as years of wellness, work and tranquility.
Today, says Demir, the job market doesn't work well and in Sliven, as in much of Bulgaria, if, for example, there's someone who's working in the construction, he works for a pittance.

Demir

20 leva, 10 euros. 10 euros for 8 hours of work.

Narrator

So many people start looking for work far and wide for all the countries of old Europe, not only in Italy.
The first where Demir went, and here you can understand why he speaks Spanish better than Italian, was Spain.

Demir

First I was in Spain, Murcia. Working in the collection of lemons, olives...

Narrator

And then, since two years, he started coming to Italy, in Puglia, where he continues to work in the countryside.
In Italy, he argues, work is more frequent than in Spain. There if you are gonna work today, you risk to wait fifteen days before working again. But the wages here in Italy, although if they are higher than in Bulgaria, are still bad.

Demir

In these two years I've been here in Italy I've seen that there is a lot of work. A lot.
Here we work with tomatoes, with the olives, and now we wait 10 days for the fennel to start.
Now we wait for the fennel. For fennels and tomatoes they pay 4 or 5 euros per hour. 4 or 5 euros.

Narrator

4 euros and a half per hour, without a contract, for 8, 9, 10 hours of work. This is what Italian entrepreneurs pay to the Bulgarian workers who employ in the tomatoes harvest.
In some cases the payment is not per hour but per piece. It means: more production more money: 3 euros and a half to fill a box of 300 kilos of tomatoes; 80 cents to collect a kilo of clean chestnuts; 2 euro cents per clean an artichoke for preserves.
One artichoke, two cents!
This is the fantastic world of agribusiness. And for those who think that these are unlucky cases, I'm sorry to disappoint you but in this world stories like this are the rule, not the exception.
Anyway, returning to Demir, the main problem for him is not the pay, after all in three hours on the Italian field he earns more than in a full day of construction in Sliven or in Sofia.
No, the problem for Demir here in Italy is another one.

Demir

There is only one problem: people do not know where to sleep.
All people live in a kind of big field. A field where there are shacks.
Right now there we are 55 or 60 people. And we lived there... we do not live very well but we're here for work. Because there is no money in Bulgaria.
There are many Bulgarians, thousands of Bulgarians in all the countries: Spain, Italy, France, Germany.

All Bulgarians go to other countries... they do not stay in Bulgaria.

Narrator

Now, we need to be clear: the image of the shack that we probably have in mind, as Europeans living in a full optional city apartment, will be very similar to a sort of warehouse for tools with scraped wooden walls and a red-hot plate roof.

And actually, ignoring the important details, such as the rainproof plastic cover or a wooden plinth on the door to protect the cabin from flooding, the image of the warehouse is closed to reality.

What we have no perception of, are not in fact the external features of the shack, but its interior furnishings.

The shack itself naturally connotes the social level of those who live in there and, of course, the social group to which they belong, because shack only exists as a unit of a more complex system: the shantytown.

The interior of a shack is, instead, its most interesting part because it is an expression of the of those who live in.

So, the shack where girls live, nephews and neighbors of Demir, is full of puppets, mirrors, mascara, lipsticks and nail polish.

While, Demir' shack has soft double bed with a pile of warm multicolored blankets on it, used by Demir and by his partner and, at the foot of the bed, there's an old fashion stereo that Demir uses to sing and play music.

Eventually, all the shacks have fabrics on the walls to hide the rotten wood they are made of, and carpets and wickers on the floor to avoid shackmates and guests walking on the bare ground.

So, in all the shacks I visited, beyond the precarious living condition, the lack of electricity, gas or water, what impressed me most is this intimate, familiar, atmosphere.

Because also in conditions of extreme marginality and precariousness, we find a component of human vitality that develops adapting itself to the new reality.

These shacks that we despise and fear, until 30, 40, 50 years ago, were the most widespread kind of homes in many neighborhoods of many Italian cities.

Now, dear listeners forgive me for this little deviation from the main road, but in my research I found a text that is interesting to read at this regard. This is a letter to the mayor of Rome written, in 1970, by the students of the school n. 725 founded by Don Roberto Sardelli among the shacks of the Felice's Roman Aqueduct in the Capital.

Children 1

We send this letter to the mayor because he is the head of the city. He has the right and duty to know that thousands of his citizens live in ghettos. It took us ten months to write it. Every evening a little thought was added, they were corrected and typed; there was work for everyone. In the letter we wanted to say only one idea: politic must be made by the people

Children 2

Dear Mayor you never came her here at the Aqueduct. And every day that passes, here the ghetto grow up. You will surely know the meaning of the word Ghetto, just because you will have read it on the dictionary. We know this meaning because we live there since we were born.

Children 3

On the history book of the third grade we read that in 3000 BC. the Egyptians built their houses with mud mixed with straw. Today, 5000 years later, we went to the moon, but here we live in the ghetto, like the Egyptians.

Children 4

We would like to give you an idea: since you and the masters say that you love us, we want to help you, because this good does not remain suspended in the air, but descends on the earth like Jesus did, in the mud of the Felice Aqueduct. Come and live here with us. Join our fight. We are made of the same flesh and the same bones. Rheumatism to us, rheumatism to you.

Children 5

They will tell us that the people who live in the ghetto are coming to Rome from the South, without skills or trade. Even knowing what they will find in Rome, they are moving in search of who knows what kind of prosperity. So with this idea they believe to blame us but remain blamed. Money is only found in the North. And we have been commanded to go and earn them there.

Instead they had to divide well. Unfortunately, those who govern us are afraid to touch the owners who own them.

Narrator

The problem of shanty towns, whatever mayors and Prefects say, are not the barracks themselves, but the policies, that mayors and Prefects do.

Failed political philosophies that does not implement real changes.

And this was also understood by the Roman rude boys of 50 years ago.

Demir

A special greeting for my friends and for all Bulgarians who are in Bulgaria. From myself Dj Demir "the tiger".

[Song in Bulgarian language.]

I sang this song for all my friends.

Only the Bulgarians understand the meaning of this song.

The song says "before there was so much money and so many friends, but now there is no money and there are no friends.

Narrator

While I bring back Demir at home, I ask him if he wants to bring me with him to Bulgaria when he will return.

He would like to, he says, but he will go back home for Christmas time.

This has been a poor summer and there is no money left. He hopes to earn some money working on the olive and grape harvests in the coming weeks...

Perhaps there's another way to leave before: talk with the Bulgarians of the old ghetto, those of Sotirya. Some of them will surely be back soon.

For sure, but the problem is: where can I find them?

At home, Demir knows someone who can help us.

It's evening outside, the countryside around us is silent but, when we arrived at the large concrete hangar where we met Demir few hours before, the atmosphere is very different.

Women and men, the friends of Demir, coming back from work, set up a frugal table with bread, cheese, sausages from Eastern Europe, and dozens of discount store's beers.

They eat, drink, and enjoy.

There we find Rubertina, she knows the place where the Bulgarians of Sotirya are.

Rubertina

Where's the Penny Market! That is the road!

You do not have to turn left or right, just go straight.

Narrator

In the meantime, as happens every evening when they return from the fields, the party has exploded around us.

Angelo, a barely thirty-year-old boy with a Slim Shady style, hugs everyone kissing and involving us in a facebook live, probably targeted to his friends in Bulgaria.

I wonder if this is the image of Italy in Bulgaria, among the youth without work.

Angelo didn't care.

After an half liter of beer, and without being able to speak too much with Demir's friends because almost no one can speak Italian, I leave the party and go home.

The day before, thanks to Demir, I discovered an aspect of the tomato harvest that I did not know. I knew, from the news and from the chats with different African workers, that during the harvesting season the tomato were just... harvested, that's it: € 3.50 for a box of 300 kg.

The thing, however brutal for me, was an axiom, something that did not need further evidence, nor could it be different from what I had been told by dozens of people, young and old laborers coming from countries around the world and finding themselves all here in the middle of the tomato fields of Foggia.

Instead, speaking with Demir, I discovered that for many Bulgarians in August the working day is divided into two moments: from 5 am to noon, the tomato harvest, then, in the afternoon between 2 and 5 o'clock, the "split", a series of actions: cut the tomato in half with a knife, put it on a net in full sun and finally salt it, which must be done to produce the typical sun-dried tomatoes.

And, also in this case, as for the harvest, the payment can be hourly, 3 and a half maximum 4 euros per hour, or piecework: 50/60 cents per meter of split tomatoes.
So, when the sun starts falling on the horizon and the time when the workers finally return from the field arrive, I leave in search of the new ghetto of Bulgarians.
Our destination is Stornara, a large agricultural village halfway between Borgo Mezzanone and Cerignola.
Find the Ghetto was easier said than done.

Woman passes

To go to Stornara you have to take the route 16Bis again!

Marco at the phone

Halo Rubertina?

I am in Stornara. Right in front at the Penny Market.

But, what's the road from the Penny Market?

Bulgarian in the street

This road! Get out of there and then continue straight on.

Is there a crossroad? You do not have to turn, just go straight.

And, after a while, turn right.

Narrator

At the end, in front of a discount of another agricultural village scattered somewhere on the map of the Capitanata Plain, someone help me.

Bulgarian at the discount store parking

Mmmm... maybe I know where these Bulgarians live.

Do you see behind that wall? There is a road there. Turn left, then left again.

And then go straight, straight, straight. After 3 or 4 kilometers there is a wall, on the left, and then an iron gate you enter inside, and you will find them there.

Narrator

The road runs along the steles of a Way of the Cross leading from the village to the cemetery: Jesus is condemned, Jesus takes the cross, Jesus falls the first, the second, the third time, Jesus is crucified, and dies on the cross.

However, as an atheist, I can not fail to see a symbolism in this way through the passion of Christ, that leads me, hopefully, towards the new ghetto of the Bulgarians.

After 3 or 4 kilometers, just as the man at the discount store said, on the left side of the road a brick wall appears and, after a while, a big iron gate.

It looks like a private property... it's a private property ... nothing more than a large concrete square with a prefabricated house. But, on the right, where the concrete ends there are the same buildings of wood, sheet and cardboard, dozens of shacks.

That's the new ghetto of the Bulgarians from Sotirya.

Same shacks, same women, same men, same children, only 15 kilometers far away from where they stood before, in a private and fenced property: this is the great result of the evacuation of July 20th.

Mauro, who introduces himself as the owner of the all area, immediately asks if I am a journalist. Am I? Absolutely not. So, for him, I must be a missionary, one of those who goes around helping the poor people.

I try to explain to him why I'm here: the first journey to Sotirya, the attempt to return and bla bla bla.

It seems friendly and authorizes me to take a walk through the shacks.

The ghetto is full of people: there are those who wash the clothes of the work, who cut the wood to make a fire to cook and heat the water for a shower, people hammering the nails that protrude from the shack, or changes a rotten wooden board.

In their looks there is suspicion and I think about how crazy I was to believe that in this ghetto I could find someone who will bring with him in his journey back to Sotirya.

I try to explain my intent to one of the first people I meet, and he, ingenuously:

Ali

Tomorrow or the day after, a friend of mine leaves.
Come, talk to him and go with him.

Narrator

So, without any question, just because this big man in his thirty has memory of me walking, a year and a half before, through the streets of his village, he brings me to his friend

Rocco

The day after tomorrow. At 2.30 or 3 pm.

Narrator

Did you recognize the voice?

Rocco

Here in ten days we all go to Italy to work. Only grandparents are waiting here.

Narrator

Rocco, the man with which I talked about asparagus in a tavern in Sotirya.
He will be our Charon in this journey.

Rocco

...then we will pass from Greece, and then Bulgaria.
What kind of car do you have?
The white one?
It's ok!

Narrator

Now I'm in! In 72 hours I will be back to Sotirya.

Chapter 2: Home

Female Voice

You see, there's a gulf between top and bottom, bigger
than between Mount Himalaya and the sea [...]
But those who are below are kept below
so that those above may stay above
and the vileness of those above is measureless
and even if they get better that would be
no help, because the system
they have built is peerless:
exploitation and disorder, beastly and therefore past understanding.
Bertolt Brecht, "Saint Joan of the Stockyards" 1930

Title

Haide - Journey to Sotirya

Narrator

The heavy breathing that you hear it's me, I fell asleep with the recorder on while all around me the alcoholic chattered continued.

In the ferry from Bari to Igoumentisa, Greece, at the end of the summer the Italian tourist who desperated search for a cheap holiday on the Ionian islands, leave their places to the workers.

The passengers of the ferry, tonight, are largely Bulgarians.

They return from Puglia, Campania, from Calabria, where they have spent the last few months picking asparagus, tomatoes, onions, broccoli, grapes, olives, oranges.

They return home in remote mountain villages or in ghetto neighborhoods on the outskirts of the larger cities. They return to their families: from the young children and from the elderly parents who left at home nine months ago.

This is also the story of my traveling companions: Rocco, Giorgio, Sali and his relative Maria.

You already know the first one: Rocco. I met him almost two years earlier in Sotirya and then again in Puglia, by chance, a few days ago, when he allowed me to join him on the journey back home where a wife and a daughter are waiting for him. Tall and skinny, Rocco drinks a lot and smokes even more: for one coffee, two cigarettes.

Giorgio, the second person of the group, is a relative of Rocco and is his exact opposite: short and massive he has the strength and the musculature of a tiny bull.

Giorgio is the person who, without even knowing me, will host me for the days I will decide to spend in Sotirya. Rocco at the beginning wanted to send me to some pension in the nearby town, Sliven, but when he Giorgio told him that he will travel with us, Rocco immediately sent me to his home.

I didn't understand why... yet.

Finally there are Sali with Maria, a relative of him.

Since the forced emigration in search of a slave labor and the life in shacks without water or bath were not dramatic enough for this story, Sali thought well of breaking both his legs... just one month after his arrival in Italy.

While he was going to work at 5 in the morning with a friend's car, another van loaded with laborers hit them.

So Sali has gained two crumbled legs, and it is still doesn't known whenever he will manage to walk again, and also a long summer of rest, and returns home without a euro saved.

Maybe because his bad luck, but Sali immediately appears to me a pure person!

A forty years old man, kindly and friendly, always with his smile sweet and sad at the same time.

This is the fellowship of the journey.

Loudspeaker

Attention please. All the truck and lorry drivers with final destination Igoumenitsa. Are allowed to disembark.

Narrator

Once in Igoumenitsa, we descend from the ferry in a foggy dawn and take the highway towards Thessaloniki.

We deviate towards Bulgaria and, once in the country, we head East towards Sliven, the large city closed by the village of Sotirya.

This time we leave the highway to take a state road that runs along imposing Soviet-era industrial plants, today rusty and abandoned, and uncontaminated natural landscapes that have now become holiday resorts for the wealthy Bulgarians.

After another 5 hours of travel we begin to venture through dark country roads to accompany home, one by one, the members of the fellowship.

To welcome Sali and his wheelchair, in a village near Sotirya, there are dozens of people who have poured into the street, his wife, his relatives, his neighbors, many children and teenagers.

They are close to him and many of them cry his misfortune.

Finally, after another hour of travel, we cross a road sign in Cyrillic and Latin characters both say "Sotirya".

Rocco turns right and climbs up the slope that I had already done a year and a half before to reach the center of the village.

Giorgio and I, in the car following, unexpectedly turn left and, after a few minutes, we arrived at home.

Everything around us is dark, cold, the air blowing from the mountains is already freezing in this beginning of autumn, but the atmosphere at home is warm and welcoming with a good smell of fried meat coming out of the kitchen door. To welcome us there are Givka, Giorgio's wife, Ivanka and Stephan his daughter and his son.

While we eat with Giorgio, we talk about Italy. He now says he is fine: he has a fairly stable job and this allows him not to have to wander through the countryside asking for job every day to a different master

Now life is easier than the early years, before there were too many problems, first of all the language one.

Giorgio

So, the bad thing was that I did not know the language. First thing.

And it's hard!

For example, if you go to get something to eat, you do not know how to say "I would like that product". So you need to indicate with your finger: this one! This one! This one!

Narrator

Today, among the shacks, when anyone does not understand something, there is always someone ready to take the smartphone and ask for help to the translation app which, indeed, is almost always useful for the purpose.

But in 2005 things were quite different: gestures, simple words, maybe in your own language, hoping that the other ones will understand you, this was the base of the communication.

The language till today is a central topic, and not only if we talk about asking the baker about the quantity of bread we want, but also to negotiate with the employer, the master as Giorgio says, to claim your rights, to succeed in to draft a story to the police in case you were stopped in the street.

Understanding and being understood are two aspects of a same deep and essential necessity. And when it is possible to satisfy this necessity autonomously, you become proud of yourself. It happens with Giorgio, with Givka, and even with Ivanka and Stephan excited to be able to have short conversations with me in Italian.

Before going to sleep Giorgio accompanies me all around the house, showing me what he has built over the past years.

Giorgio

Here we have a bath. Not too big but...

This is a room for my son. There's a chair, a bed, and a computer also.

This is a second room, for my daughter: she has a big bed, she has a table, some mirrors... a lady's room.

Then we have the kitchen: stove, water heater, television... a big one. A sofa for seating, a beautiful glass table.

And this is the room where I sleep with my wife: there is a bed... very big...

Narrator

The music you hear comes from the speaker of a strange LED chandelier hanging from the ceiling of the room.

Each room that Giorgio shows me has the walls of a different color: pink for his daughter Ivanka, green for the little Stephan, yellow for the master bedroom and fuchsia for the kitchen. Below us there is still a under construction floor that in the plans of Givka and Giorgio once finished it will host the children.

We go outside. A garden runs all around the house, guarded by two restless puppies.

To build all this, Giorgio says he has spent almost 200.000 euros.

It's a nonsense considering that in Bulgaria everything costs the exact half that in the rest of Europe and, also, considering that we are not 10 kilometers far from the center of Sofia but in a remote village in one of the poorest area of Bulgaria.

I keep this observation for myself and point out a small concrete construction no bigger than a warehouse for tools.

Giorgio

There is also a bathroom inside. We lived there.

Narrator

It is the house where Rocco and Givka lived before they had Stephan and Ivanka, while they waited patiently to build the new house.

With this anecdote our tour ends.

We returned back inside. For this night I will steal the Stephan's room.

The next morning I woke up and a warm sun illuminates the room, from the half-open window countryside noises come: chirps, the bleating of some goats, the song of a rooster, but also, in the distance, the echoes of Bulgarian pop music played maximum power from some 1000 watt subwoofer.

With Giorgio and Stephan we decide to spend the morning in Sotirya or, rather, in Upper Sotirya, since technically we are also in Sotirya.

What I discover in this early morning is that the country is divided into two halves: the lower part develops on the banks of a narrow stream between chestnut trees and weeping willows, in houses similar to the Giorgio's one... one or two floors houses with a garden around with blossom daisies, wildflowers bloom, cabbage, broccoli and other vegetables. Wealthy villas with vine pergolas and barbecues in the garden.

This Lower Sotirya was developed only in the last thirty years, after the fall of Zivkov.

From this lower part start steeply paved roads that go up to the other half of the village: the center, Upper Sotirya.

Today with Giorgio and his son Stephan we are climbing one of this roads.

A rule applies to Sotirya: more up you live more poor your family is.

We stop in the central square of the village, nothing more than a crossroads of 3 or 4 roads that come from different cardinal points to the core of the village.

The kids are so many, they play on the street, freely, without parents in the way, they surround us curious.

Everyone knows everyone here, Sotirya is a small country where everyone knows the fortunes and misfortunes of the other ones, and me, with an hairy microphone in my hand, are evident as an elephant in a daisies' field.

Some men and women who watched us from the doors of their houses on the square come out to meet us.

Men from Upper Sotirya

Here there is no money and there is no work. There, in Italy, there is more work.

But here there is no work.

See that everyone fixes the houses. it's because they work.

This is why we have to leave.

To fix the houses and for our children.

That's it.

Narrator

What this man tries to explain to me is what many people will say in these days here in Sotirya: houses and children are the primary and perhaps unique good in this poor village and going to Italy for the tomato harvest means being able to guarantee goods growth and improvement both to their houses and to their children, thus building up their social redemption.

To make me understand more about the old Sotirya and this recent migration flows Giorgio decided to take me to meet his father, one of the greatest person here in the village. The first one in Sotirya to have built a two floors house already 30 years ago, during the Zivkov's Era. Walking to reach the home of Giorgio's father we pass right in front of the house of one of the village DJs.

Annoyed, Giorgio explains to me that in Sotirya there is music all day long: every event is a good reason to push the woofer up and make the nearby house shaken: baptisms, birthdays, marriages, the return of a parent or a child from abroad and so on.

Sometimes some exasperated neighbor calls the police.

Police come from the city, from Sliven, makes his routine threats and, as soon as it goes away, everything comes back as before.

Talking, we arrive at the house of Giorgio's father, a two floors building with a pergola on the front door.

Here in Upper Sotirya no one has a real garden.

The name of Giorgio's father, is Giorgio too, or rather Guiorgui because he never went to Italy for work and did not need to "Italianize" his name, he is locked in his laboratory to work a long branch of rough wood.

Giorgio's Father

I was doing a handle for an axe. I sell them here in the village. For an handle I earn 5 leva, 2 euros.

Narrator

Ghiorghi accompanies us at home. Gives some prunes to his nephew Stephan and makes us sit in a living room full of knick-knacks and sacred images.

These, he explains, indicating the decors, is because Guiorgui is the Protestant pastor of the village and on Sunday he celebrates the Mass in an improvised church, his sons and grandchildren help him with the sacred songs, and he with his guitar is the director.

His first words about Sotirya are about music.

Giorgio's Father

The years before, with music, it was not like that. Now everyone puts loud music all day long... but on the other hand if there is no work, what they can do. But you should see when people leave the village to come in Italy, there is not music all and everything is quiet here.

Narrator

Guiorgui plays with his heavy Stalin style mustache, he is tall and skinny, the opposite of his son Giorgio, he has always lived in Sotirya and also if he thinks that emigration saved his country from the nightmare of black misery, he never leaved. Although today at 60 years old and after a life of hard work he his unemployed and forced to do only little jobs.

Giorgio's Father

The years before I was a teacher and a mason, but since Democracy has come I do not have a job anymore.

Before there was a lot of job, it was all right, we worked in the country, we hoed, we gathered grapes, and the whole village lived with this. In the days of communism, if someone need people for work in the fields, a bus arrived at the village, take the number needed, and bring them to work where needed, then in the evening they returned to the village. It was a better life.

But if someone did not want to work then the police took him and brought him to forced labor for 10 and 15 days. No problem!

The real problem was that the salary was not enough ... if we have to make a comparison with today we can say that at that time for a month of work I earned more or less 150 euros.

Narrator

Guiorgui with his words reminds us that Bulgaria until November 10th 1989, just one day after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was faithfully communist, the greatest ally of the USSR in Europe and the country's motto was: " Work for everyone money for no one".

If we look at the estimates of the number of people employed in Bulgaria in the last thirty years, we see that the peak was reached at the end of the 1980s, in the last years of the communist regime, whit the record number of four and a half million of Bulgarians employed. In 1993, only 5 years later, this number fallen to 3 million and 200 thousand.

Over one million people had lost their jobs and the situation remained the same until the early 2000s. A catastrophe.

Of course those 4 and a half million workers employed were the result of state doping that created job places even where they were not needed but, in any case, those last years of communism remained in the memory of all the Bulgarians as golden years, open quotes, "Better years".

Historic Video of Bulgaria during Communism Regime

Where are we?

Someone near the sunny coasts to the Mediterranean certainly.

Or is this an Italian opera out in the open air?

It's roses roses all the way.

This, wherever it is, is a land of happiness.

This is Bulgaria a country on the Black Sea the size of Ireland.

Narrator

1989 changed everything and in the following fifteen years, Bulgaria realized its transition from the state economy to a market economy.

It was this transformation and the way in which it was completed to throw the country into the abyss of the economical and social crisis. And it is during this time that something also in Sotirya began to change

Giorgio's Father

Migration began about 20 years ago when democracy arrived.

Most people started to leave for Italy, and some even went to Greece.

So Sotirya has changed.

The houses here in the village were very small, made up of a single room... and there are still houses like this!

There are people who live in the same houses 100 years ago. Those who left instead, and come back with money, make big and beautiful buildings.

The people go to Italy, they see what kind of life there is, they work, then they come back and fix their houses.

Now Sotirya has improved, look at the roads: first the roads were not paved and when it rained the mud arrived. Now it's not like that.

But at the same time, before we had a lot of job! Today there is no one works anymore!

Narrator

We leave the house of Guiorgui and proceed with Giorgio towards the highest part of the village. More we climb, more we understand how well-being here has not indiscriminately reached everyone.

There are several families who by choice or for economic hardship have never left the village to come in Italy and, as Guiorgui announced, they still live in the same houses of 100 years ago.

And this is the moment in which I realize that the greatest architectural progress of the last 100 years here in Sotirya, has not been the expansion of the houses with the separation of the man-space by the animals-space and the animal who stop living under the same roof as their owners. No, the most interesting consequence of the enrichment of Sotirya is the introduction of new and modern building materials: the concrete and terracotta tiles.

As we climb towards the highest part of Sotirya, time seems to go back to an indefinite age, both the asphalt and the concrete give way to the bare earth: rocks instead of cement to build houses, soil in place of bitumen on the roads that become steep and narrow.

And this is why the cars here are replaced by horses.

The traditional houses of Sotirya are short buildings ingeniously constituted by branches and reeds woven like wicker on which are laid out several layers of mud then covered on the outside by a thin coating of lime. The roof is made up of pressed wooden sheets or tar sheets. There are poor houses built with what the nature of these areas offers spontaneously ... Living there are numerous proletarians families with 5, 6 even 8 children each.

Someone of them play in the street, others, older, sit in the shadow of a house betting in poker hands coins of 10 stotinki, 5 euro cents.

While we descend back to the central square and the civilization we hear someone calling us. It is Rocco, sitting in a small tavern on the street. He's cheerful because today he bought a sofa bed for his 5-year-old daughter, the first bed his daughter ever had.

However, what Rocco has noticed, tells me smiling, is that once the sofa arrives at home there will not be enough space to open it, because the only room of the house is already occupied by: a double bed, a wardrobe, a stove also used as a kitchen and a television.

He does not seem to care about it.

This year he managed to put aside some money and if things go as they should, he plans to expand his tiny house.

In the meantime, I finally understood why when we were in Italy, Rocco wanted to send me to a hostel instead of proposing a cot in his living room. Objectively, at Rocco's house there is no space for a cot, nor for a living room.

The fact is that in the situation of Rocco in Sotirya there are many, many, families, and even those who left the village for Italy sometimes didn't reach to put together enough money to build a house with more than two rooms.

Those who reached it almost certainly fall into one of the following three categories:

-they are *Caporali*, or an intermediary between the Bulgarian labor force and the Italian employer.

A figure that earns by accompanying every day in the fields dozens and dozens of laborers to which it retains, most of the time, a percentage of the miserable salary. This figure is not too widespread here in Sotirya where the work is organized on a family basis and no one would steal money on the salary of their relatives.

But the few *Caporali* existing here in Sotirya have bought houses of 2 or 300,000 euros and you can recognize them because they drive big expensive cars.

- the second category is formed by people like Giorgio who, despite coming to Italy, have recently managed to obtain the trust of an employer. Today, these people in Italy live in a caravan or in a small house close to their master's home and have, let's say, a guaranteed job. Relationships like these, however, are not always healthy: because a false friendship, often hidden a mechanism of submission and exploitation.

It is Rocco who explains this aspect to me while we sit facing each other with a cup of hot coffee in our hands.

Rocco

My master asked me to live with him. There's home, there's a caravan with the television, there's everything.

Now he's fixing another house and he asked me to go there and live there with him with my wife and with my daughter.

But I don't like it.

He has sheep, cows, goats, he has horses.

And he always tells me: "Rocco go and feed the horses! Rocco go and feed the sheep! Rocco go and turn this! Rocco go and do that!"

Ooohh! I just want to work, that's it.

How many hours do I do per day? 5 hours? 6 hours? 10 hours? You write down and I leave.

This is what I want.

Do you Understand why he asks me to go and live with him even without paying a rent, or water or power?

But I do not want to do it.

Narrator

Then there is a third category of people that reached to build a new home in Sotirya.

This category is formed by people who have been in Italy for so long that as ants saved money for years and years to realize their dreams.

Not many are willing to talk because basically, despite the exploitation that these people suffer, forced to work in the fields without contracts and for a miserable salary, Italy remains the country that give them an opportunity and they don't want to denigrate it.

A year and a half ago, on that rainy February afternoon when I came for the first time to Sotirya, not far from Rocco's house I met a gentleman in his sixties Vassil Iordanof Cristof.

He brought me up to the first floor of his house still under construction and there, among the kukeri's bells, he started telling me his story. Vassil belonged to this third category of people: he had been among the first of Sotirya to leave the village and come to Italy, in 2002 when Bulgaria had not yet entered in the European Union and to travel abroad you need the passport.

Vassil

The first year I went to Italy it was 2002, I was one of the first people to leave, together with other 4 or 5 persons. I went with my passport, because in those days at the border they did not let us pass with the ID card, as they do now, but you needed the red passport. I pretended to travel for tourism and when I arrived in Italy I remained. I worked for two or three months until the police stopped me. When they took me in 2002, the Italian police put a black stamp on my passport. With that I could no longer enter in Italy for 5 years until 2007. But since 2007, since I began to move freely, and until today, I have always come to Italy for work. Every year!

Narrator

2002 was one of the darkest years of the post-communist era in Bulgaria. In the previous years the government accelerated the commitment to a transition of the country to the market economy and many state factories closed. For hundreds of thousands of Bulgarians it was the the fall of their hopes, and searching for luck elsewhere seemed then the only right thing to do. The reality, however, that they found in the emigration countries was unimagined, full of dangers, difficulties, deprivations.

Vassil

The situation has changed over the years. Today, we go to Italy, we build our shacks, we live there, we work, we can return to Bulgaria freely, whenever we want, and everyone spend the money they earns in the way they want.

But in 2002, the situation was very different.

If we talk about the salaries it was much better: the Italians paid me 5 euros per hour to work in the fields, but today we do not earn more than 3 euros or 3 euros fifty.

But when I came to Italy for the first time in 2002, we did not have a house, we did not build shacks, we lived in the train cars stopped at Foggia train station, and when the trains left we jumped out.

But the past years were not good at all.

Narrator

Today for many inhabitants of Sotirya, especially for those of the Vassil's generation, the shacks seem to be an acceptable solution to solve the housing problem.

After all, shacks are better than the trains cars in which they had been forced to sleep.

"Do you see those train cars and cold storage rooms?" says one of the railway workers of the Foggia train station in a morning of July 2006 to the journalist of L'Unità Gianni Lannes, who is interviewing him, "these train cars and these cold rooms where so many people live are full of asbestos".

Among those people there were also the Bulgarians of Sotirya and after twelve years nothing seems to have changed, if the reason why the mayor of Foggia sin July 2017 ordered the evacuation of the Ghetto of the Bulgarians of Borgo Mezzanone was the existence, in the slum, of asbestos fiber materials.

Meanwhile, Vassil continues to travel back and forth from Italy to Bulgaria.

His goal remains to fix is home and to do so he will have to work for a few more years.

Vassil

In the last 5 years we saved the money and this year when we came back from Italy we started to build this house.

I have 5 boys and 1 lady and I have built a house for each of them in the village. They are not big houses but all of them have two or three rooms. The house where we are right now has only two rooms: one for me and one for my daughter. I decided to build this second floor because she is growing up, she needs her spaces, and in this way there are more rooms for both.

Narrator

Ensure the family, build a house for the children, see them married and, maybe, graduates. This is everyone's dream here in Sotirya. This is why they are willing to do 3,000 kilometers each year to come and go from Bulgaria to Italy looking for job.

But reality does not proceed with the same speed of the desires, and when a year and a half after our first meeting I go back to the house of Vassil Iordanof Cristof to see how the works for the

daughter's house are going, I realize that everything remained like I remember, the upper floor where we recorded our interview in February 2016 is still a simple succession of rough brick walls without doors or windows.

As I walk away from Vassil's house I think back to all the stories heard on this first day here in Sotirya, and the violent image of the mechanism that involves all that I can see, it is revealed to me.

A balance: on a plate are the needs and the duties of the people of Sotirya. Simple and shareable needs: home, education, work.

On the second plate instead the requests of a master class with local production centers and global distribution networks. Need of a huge amount of low-cost arms, able to work hard, without raising their voice, able to thank their master for 2 euro cents earned by cleaning an artichoke. And, depending on how you look at this society, there will be for sure people, not me, who also consider these needs, legitimate.

The balance, however, has no ethical pretensions, it is an objective instrument that tends to unbalance.

The two needs, are complementary but disproportionate, in other words the masters ask too much... unless other factors influence the equation, and therefore, the migratory choices of thousands of people.

Factors such as: poverty, unemployment, democracy, which weigh on the people of Sotirya forcing the balance to a perverse equilibrium generating dreams of success and illusions of wealth for the ones, and profits and dividends for the others.

The world I described you till now is based on this balance... a brutal and daily world... from which I hidden an element that plays a central role in this game.

Discrimination, or, to be more precise, xenophobia.

That generic aversion, of varying intensity, towards foreigners and what is foreign, or what we perceived as foreign. Quoting Wikipedia.

And the people of this village know very well this "generic aversion", for sure, because Sotirya is not just a village of emigrants and laborers, but also of Roma, of Gypsies.