

**SCOUTS-L**

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**BULGARIA**

**From:** "Turba, Thomas N RV" <tnt1@PO11.RV.unisys.com>  
**To:** "Michael F. Bowman" <mfbowman@CapAccess.org>  
**Subject:** Re: Report on Scout Trip to Bulgaria (long)  
**Date:** Wed, 13 Dec 95 10:01:00 CST

Michael,

This copy should not have the extra line feeds in it. However, it may have an extra space in front of a sentence in the middle of a paragraph that begins on a new line. I'm finally beginning to figure out all the nuances of the new (Microsoft) mail system I am using.

YiS

T. N. T.

Thomas N. Turba  
International Representative  
Indianhead Council, BSA

E-mail: tnt1@po11.rv.unisys.com (primary) -or-  
E-mail: turba@rsvl.unisys.com (secondary)

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### **Report on Scout Trip to Bulgaria**

Although the country is steeped in history from Thracian, Grecian, Roman, and Medieval times, the history of Bulgarian Scouting is not so rich.

Scouting flourished in Bulgaria during the 20s and 30s. But, it was almost completely wiped out in the 40s by the Fascist then Communist regimes that were in power until recently. One Scout leader told me how they came house-to-house looking for Scout material, which they would then confiscate and destroy.

He hid his and now proudly shows his camp pictures and other materials. He is one of the few experienced Scouts that are left in the country. They are all in their 60s and 70s. In Varna and many other cities, these

septuagenarian Scouters are the nucleus for restarting Scouting in Bulgaria. Most of them are trying to restart the program so that their grandchildren can experience the same kind of program they knew as children.

In 1994 they held their first National Jamboree in 54 years!

The Bulgarian Scout Organization (BSO) is currently in the process of getting accredited by the World Organization of Scouting. It has approximately 2,800 Scouts and leaders nation-wide. This is in a country of approximately 9 million people. It is still a very small organization, with units mainly in the major cities. The whole organization is volunteer run. There is not one paid person in the country. The BSO is open to both males and females.

In general, Scouting is having a hard time being restarted in Bulgaria. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of understanding by the general population as to what Scouting is. In general, they see uniforms and associate them with the Fascist and Communist youth organizations that existed until recently.

On our first trip to Bulgaria, two years ago, we brought over general Scouting literature, Scout handbooks, merit badge books, compasses, craft materials, and many other items. The current trip was centered around camping and doing activities with Scouts in Varna, the 3rd largest city in Bulgaria, with a population of about 1/4 million people.

Varna is located on the Black Sea, has a temperate climate, and has the most Scouts of any city in the country. Because of its location and a long history of sea activity, a large number of the Scouts in Varna are Sea Scouts. Its Sea Scout program is for all children starting at about age 5.

Before Scouting was outlawed, Varna had the largest and most active Scout organization in the country. This was both for regular Scouts and Sea Scouts.

Our three-week trip began in Sofia, the capital, which is nestled in the Balkan mountains in the western part of the country. There, we had homestays with Scout families and did sightseeing in the city.

One of the most interesting sights was the "Land and People" museum. Its

title does not really tell you much. It is the best "rock" (mineralogy) museum in the world! It far outclasses equivalent museums in Washington,

DC, New York, London, Munich, Amsterdam, ... I am sure you have all seen geodes; those stone balls with crystals inside. You can hold them in your hand - at least most you can. The geodes at this museum are HUGE - the size

of cars. OK, Tribants, those small East German cars. There are many of them in Sofia too.

The Natural History museum was also very interesting. It contains some of the world's oldest gold artifacts dating from about 5,000 B.C.

The museums were in sharp contrast to the Sofia Scout office, basically a bare room with only a map of the country showing the cities where Scout units exist, a few books, some boat models, and a few pictures. It is in a building that is shared by other non-profit groups. The group next to them is called the "Green Patrols". It is an environmental protection group.

On the afternoon of the third day, we went to the Green Patrols mountain base. It is located a short distance outside the city in a wooded area on mount Vitosha overlooking Sofia. We were driven there in the Green Patrols'

Russian-made 4-wheel drive "jeep".

With nine people, all the food, and a few extra tents, I thought we were going to break the springs. It was a good thing we had the jeep, a car would have bottomed out on the last few kilometers of rutted trail leading up to the base. We had to be careful not to be knocked out of the jeep by the branches that were rubbing along the sides.

Once at the mountain base, we put our gear away in the bunkroom above the kitchen and dining hall. Then, we hiked to a waterfall, about two kilometers away (down hill). One of the Bulgarian Scouts that was with us decided to stand under the falling water, but not for long. The water was coming from a cold mountain stream and it was falling far enough to give it

considerable force. The walk back (up hill) was not nearly as fast. But, we made it back well before nightfall, which was our aim.

That evening we enjoyed a traditional Bulgarian meal of soup, bread, cheese,

salad, a delicious barley pudding, and herbal tea. Afterward we had a campfire, sang songs, and talked late into the night about Scouting, the environment, and many other things.

The only thing anyone objected to was that some of the Scouts said someone was snoring. But, I never heard a thing :-)

>From the Green Patrols mountain base, we headed south to the Rila mountains.

There we visited the 500-year old Rila Monastery, the largest and most decorative of the Bulgarian Orthodox monasteries. During the Turkish occupation, it was one of the main places where Bulgarian culture and religion were preserved. Today, it is a museum as well as an active monastery. It is also one of the main tourist attractions in the country.

After spending the night with our Scout families in Sofia, we headed overland for a 3-day, 2-night, trip through the Balkan mountains that took us through many historic and scenic areas of the country.

The highlights of the first day were: Pleven, where we saw the diorama (a circular, three-dimensional artistic representation of the countryside during the war for liberation which blended into to two-dimensional background painting); Lovech, where we walked through a historic covered bridge (now full of shops), had lunch, than climbed a hill overlooking the city to explore an old fortress; Veliko Turnovo, a scenic river valley with houses studding the hills and a large fortress at the top, which the boys, of course, explored.

The next day we visited the village of Arbanasi and some local monasteries before stopping at the Etara Ethnographic Complex for lunch. There, artisans practiced age old crafts. Many of the Scouts seemed more interested in the blacksmith and knife shop than the water-powered lathes, the hydro rug-washing tub, and many other unique pieces of machinery.

Afterward, we headed south through the Shipka pass with its Freedom Monument from the Russo-Turkish War. Next we visited a very ornate Russian Orthodox church. It is one of many built by Russians who had settled there after they had helped the Bulgarians win their war of independence.

Traveling further south, we arrived at Kasanlak, our stop for the night. We arrived just in time to visit the site of a 5,000-year old Thracian tomb that was discovered only 50 years ago. The tomb was a large pot-like, underground chamber with a circular opening at the top. It was through the top that the last workers had deposited the body and burial goods. Wearing slippers, we entered through a side opening underground from the museum. It was kind of a spooky feeling. But, we were not in the real tomb. The real tomb is just a hundred meters away. It is closed to the public to help preserve it. We were just in a replica.

Kasanlak is in the Valley of the Roses, the largest center for the production of rose scent in the world. Early the next morning we visited the Museum of Rose Industry. The museum showed the history of the rose scent production and had many artifacts, such as the copper stills that they used to extract the rose scent.

It was still early morning when we headed east towards the Black Sea. The flat grain fields had recently been harvested, leaving rows of dry straw. Occasionally we would see patches where farmers had burned the fields (a practice now "forbidden").

On the horizon we could see a large cloud of smoke, as we approached we could see the blazing fields. Soon, we were right up next to the fire. We could feel the heat coming right through the closed van. Then, we were engulfed in smoke. We could only see a couple feet in front of us. I wondered if the driver would run into the car in front of us. Then, in a flash, we were out of the smoke as we continued to drive past the now burnt fields.

It was not long afterward when we arrived at Nessebar, a once fortified peninsular village on the Black Sea. It is now a well-visited tourist area. This was our lunch stop, but also a place to explore the sea walls and local scenery. After lunch we headed north for a late afternoon arrival in Varna.

In Varna we were greeted with roses by the local Scouts and leaders. The rose is not only their national flower, but also a symbol of friendship they give arriving guests. We were introduced to our host families and got to

see many of the Scouts that had visited us the year before in the United States.

We stayed in Varna with Scout families for two days. During this time the Scouts showed us around the city, taking us to the Roman baths, planetarium on the Naval base, Sea Museum, Sea Garden, and other attractions.

On the second day we met with the Scout leaders in Varna. I had been awaiting this time. We had brought with us Merit Badge books, Boy's Life magazines, posters, dictionaries, and many other things; even a computer printer that could print the Cyrillic letters of their alphabet. My luggage would finally be several hundred pounds lighter.

We met with the leaders in the Varna Scout office, which is much more decorated than the one in Sofia. The Varna leaders jokingly said that most of their decorations were posters and other things we had sent them or had brought on the previous visit. Like the office in Sofia, the space is in a building shared with other non-profit organizations that is given to them by the city.

After our short stay with the host families, we went to the camp they had arranged for us. This would be our home for most of the time we spent on the trip. The camp was located on the grounds of the Journalist "Rest Home" about 12 km. north of Varna on the Black Sea. The camping area was situated in a clump of tall pine trees about 60 meters from one of the white sand beaches Varna is noted for.

One of our first activities was the flag raising. I thought I had seen all the ways a flag could be raised, but I had not. The flags, both Bulgarian and U.S., were first attached to sticks along the short end - with nails - then rolled up. The flags were then raised on the flag poles by a rope attached to the sticks so that the flags were always unfurled - downward.

I saw flags being displayed in this manner at other places. I am still not sure of the origin of this practice. Every time I saw it, it was something to do with a sea activity.

Each morning, after breakfast and cleaning up camp, we would have swimming, sailing, rowing, and other beach activities (and sometimes do it again in the afternoon). The boats we used had all been made by the Sea Scouts as projects. They were the design of Vasil Popov, a large barrel-chested man who is a marine architect by trade and one of the main leaders of the Sea Scouts in Varna. He is also quite a singer, as we found out later at his apartment when he rattled the windows and walls while singing Pavarotti.

It was his son-in-law, the secretary for the national Scout organization, and his daughter that my wife and I had stayed with in Sofia. Their son, Borko, has the Scout Regatta named after him.

Our second morning at camp was spent on a service project. We cleaned up the relief map of the Black Sea in the Sea Garden in front of the aquarium in Varna. This was a joint project with Scouts from Teteven who met us there. They were staying at the Varna Bay Scout Camp.

That afternoon we had a meeting with the mayor of Varna, Christo Kirchev, a supporter of democracy, free enterprise, and the Scout movement. Reporters from at least three papers were there to talk with us and take pictures. We were featured on the front page of the local paper - foreign Scouts shaking hands with the mayor and having a meeting with him.

The next day, after spending the morning swimming and boating at camp in preparation for the regatta, we went to visit the Scouts from Teteven at the Bulgarian Scout Camp on Varna Bay. We walked around camp, went to the nearby pier, chatted with them over cookies and coffee, and had a campfire with songs, skits, and dances.

The camp is actually a small public campground that the Scouts get to use because the owner is friendly with them. It is a very small place. The tents were so close that it was hard to walk between them.

Before Scouting was outlawed, the Scouts used to have a camp by the Sea Garden in the main part of Varna. This land was built on and they do not

expect to get it back. The City has offered them a piece of land next to the camp they are now using. The land is full of concrete and other rubble. Nonetheless, it looks like the Scouts will accept it. It will be a good service project to clean it up and it will give them something to build for the future.

Our next outing was a clean-up trip down the Kamchiya river to the south of Varna. This also was done with some of the Scouts from Teteven and Varna accompany us. It was not the kind of river clean-up trip I am used. Here, in the States, when I go on a river clean-up trip I expect to get wet and mucky, getting bottles, cans and other debris from all the nooks and crannies of a river. I guess they really didn't want us to get that into it; although, afterward, we were able to swim in the Black Sea at the mouth of the river.

For lunch we visited a hunter's and fishermen's lodge nestled in a scenic wooded area. There we had a fine fish stew with bread. Because the lodge was small, we took turns eating lunch while the others enjoyed the surroundings.

Adjacent to the lodge, accessed over a wooden foot bridge, was a good-sized fishing lake. Around the lake was a walking path and blinds for duck hunting. The whole area was contained in a large wooded reserve for hunting. During Communist times only party members could visit this place.

The next day was a free day with swimming, boating, and laying in the sun.

That evening we were taken to a folklore concert in Varna. The groups of performers were from all over Europe, but there was also a group from the U.S., from Minneapolis, no less. One of the performers it turned out lives only a few blocks from my house - such a small world it is.

All the performers were exceptional. The ones that stand out in my mind though were from France. Their whole performance was on tall, wooden stilts while wearing heavy fur-like coats. The coats, it turned out, were a good thing. The stage was in the open and was made of wood. There was a rain just before the performance making it slippery. Several of the performers fell (some more than once). But, this did not stop their performance. They

just picked themselves up and kept on performing. They received a well-deserved standing ovation.

The U.S. group also received a standing ovation. They had performed several square-dances, which were well received; but what brought the crowd to their feet was when they did a typical Bulgarian folk dance, with Bulgarian costumes, and Bulgarian singing. It was so well done, both in the choreography and singing, that everyone had a hard time to believe that it was not a Bulgarian group, but a group from Minneapolis. They had been practicing it for years. They had one such performance for each country on their tour.

It was a couple of days before our next outing away from camp. For this one, the Sea Scouts had arranged a trip on a "Coast Guard" patrol boat in Varna Bay. Once clear of the harbor, we each got to take the helm as we cruised through the bay looking at the dozens of ships waiting their turn to come into port.

Normally we had meals on the patio of the restaurant next to our camp. This evening, however, we would eat at the summer home of one of the Scouts that had come to the U.S. the year before to train at our Scout camp. The summer home was a three-story building built into the hillside almost like steps. Trees and grape vines hid it from view. But, from inside, there was a beautiful a view overlooking the Black Sea.

The next day we were to find out what a "wild beach" was. Kenny, one of the leaders that had come to the U.S. the year before, had kept telling us that we should get away to a "wild beach". That morning he and another leader took us to a beach on the far side of Varna bay, a beach where no one was at. While we went swimming Kenny put on his mask and snorkel and headed for deep water. We were wondering what he was doing until he returned with a bag full of mussels.

We gathered dead branches and drift wood for a campfire, then roasted the mussels over the coals. They were the most delicious mussels I ever had. But, they were just the hors d'oeuvres. Next we made shish kebabs with fresh peppers, onions, tomatoes, and meat. And, if this was not enough, there were even sandwiches. Dessert was watermelon, which turned into a watermelon-seed-spitting contest for the leaders. The Scouts had their own fun. They were playing bury the Scout in the sand. They even put up a cross over the mound. It was a fun day.

That evening we had dinner with the mother of one of the Bulgarian Girl Scouts that had come to the U.S. the year before. This year, her daughter was on staff at our summer camp. A school friend of her daughter's was there to help translate, but even without her, we could all tell how grateful the mother was that her daughter was able to come to the States.

She had prepared a Bulgarian feast for us. After about the fourth course, we were all starting to get full. Little did we know. The main courses (yes, plural) were yet to come. The food was so good, and she had spent the whole day preparing it, that we just couldn't turn it down, especially the dessert.

The next day we went on a sightseeing outing with the Bulgarian Scouts and leaders. Our first stop was the Aladzha Monastery. The monastery had been built during the Turkish occupation. Like most monasteries build at the time, it was hidden. The monks had made caves into the sandstone cliffs. They build a chapel, kitchen, sleeping rooms, corridors, and much more, all hidden within the cliff and only accessible by a retractable wooden ladder.

A couple of centuries ago, the area was struck by a large earthquake. The face of the cliff collapsed exposing the ant-like maze of tunnels and rooms. Today, the monastery and the crypts that adjoin it are a tourist attraction.

Our next stop was the Balchik Botanical Gardens, where there were plants from all over the world. Most surprising was the cactus garden, which

looked like it was transplanted from New Mexico, but here it was overlooking the Black Sea. These were once royal gardens built by a Romanian princess.

On the grounds were both a chapel and a mosque. As legend has it, she fell in love with a Moslem sailor who saved her life and she built the mosque for him.

We saved our bag lunch for Kaliakra, a long slender cape stretching out into the Black Sea with a large uprising rock cliff at its end. During medieval times, the end of the cape was a fortress enclosed by a double wall with a drawbridge separating it from the landward side. The seaward side had the cliff for natural protection.

Although the walls and drawbridge still remain, today they just guard a naval radio station, a restaurant, a museum, and a monument.

The next day we went to Varna to participate in the Regatta Borko. Every year the Sea Scouts in Varna have a regatta. It is for all ages, even those still in diapers. The youngest Sea Scouts get to ride in small boats that their parents push toward shore in a race. Older Scouts get to participate in rowing, sailing and other events.

Although it is a competition, everyone is awarded a prize. Our Scouts almost came in first in the sailing competition until they broke the tiller for the rudder. They finished the race by having one of them lean over the back of the boat and turn the rudder with his hands.

That evening we had our farewell campfire. Joining us for the first time were Scouts from Yambol. They had replaced the Scouts from Teteven at the Varna Bay Scout Camp. Like the group from Teteven, this was a coed group.

The leaders, however, were all female. One of their Scouts knew English, and it was through him that most of the conversation was done.

At the campfire, we were each given Varna Sea Scout T-shirts, Sea Scout tote

bags, and official papers for our participation in the regatta and joint campout. We presented them with a commemorative plaque and received one in return. The end of the trip was drawing near. The three weeks had gone all too quickly.

The next morning was camp take down. We still had time for a morning swim in the Black Sea, but it was not the same as before. We knew it would be our last swim. We had an afternoon departure from Varna airport.

Little did we know, after packing everything up, saying our good-bye's, and getting to the airport, we would not be leaving. Somehow, there was a mix-up in flights. There was not room for us on the plane. We would have to wait until the morning flight.

We were each put up by Scout host families for another night. My wife and I stayed with the leader of the Scouts in Varna, at his apartment by the Sea Garden. Although he and his wife knew only a few words of English, they both knew German. Together we knew enough German, Bulgarian, and English to have a very enjoyable evening. The conversation was topped off with an excellent meal and the viewing of fireworks in the Bay of Varna from the rooftop of their apartment building.

Morning came all too early. We were off to the airport before the sun would rise. After saying our good-bye's one more time, this time we did depart. It was in an old Russian propeller plane. It was not made for comfort, elegance, or quiet, but it would get us to Sofia.

Just after take off, I looked out the window. We were a little southwest of Varna. Below us was the Stone Forest - natural pillars of stone several meters tall sticking out of the ground. We had visited them on the last trip. They were probably made by lava filling volcanic vents, but they also look like tree trunks. Their true origin is unknown.

The farmers were still burning wheat fields as we flew over them. The mountains looked different from this view, but just the same as we had seen

before. It was hard to believe that it had been three weeks and we were now going home.