

## MY RETURN TO BULGARIA

My return to Bulgaria was a surprising and heartwarming experience. After more than nine (9) years of being back in the United States, I received an e-mail requesting my presence at an International Conference celebrating “10 Years of Roma Desegregation of Education in Central and Eastern Europe.” This Conference was held in Vidin, Bulgaria starting with a reception on Thursday, October 21 and ending on Saturday, October 23, 2009, with a video presentation.

The Conference was sponsored by Organization DROM, a Roma Human Rights Organization that I was privileged to have worked with during my two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Vidin. My invitation came from Donka Panayotova, Chairperson of Organization Drom, who remembered my work with her Agency as the project was being planned and implemented. I was there when preparation was underway. I recall the work done in meetings with school staff and teachers in both Bulgarian and Roma Schools and with parents who had many concerns about having their children attend a different school, or to attend school with Roma students. Because of the successful planning, including listening to and addressing concerns from all sides, the Roma Desegregation of Education Project has been successful in Vidin, and has spread to other cities in Bulgaria and throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

Open Society Institute (financial supporter), headquartered in Budapest, Hungary was represented at the Conference, as well as the World Bank, UNICEF, European Parliament, and many local and state education and human rights organizations. Agencies such as the Center for Public Policy and Advocacy, Board of the Roma Education Fund, and America for Bulgaria Foundation were all represented, providing a historical perspective of education in Bulgaria, the progress of the Desegregation Project, and prospects for future progress.

There is still much work to be done in integrating Roma students into Bulgarian schools. The difficult work being done by Organization Drom and other organizations in cities where this project has spread is evidence of the need for and success of this effort. This work continues without full support of the government and educational institutions. Yet students are being helped, and education is improving for those who have the courage to take the challenge, to trust the system that has been set in place, and to move into a new environment. We met many students that were witnesses to this success.

Mary H. Smarr  
Bulgaria 8 (1998-2000)