

By APRIL KORAL

The night express from Bucharest to Sofia. Before we reached the Bulgarian border my husband, Richard, had developed severe stomach cramps and a high fever.

When we reached Sofia, I left Richard on the platform and went to look for help. There was no tourist office, no information desk, no taxi stand. There were, however, signs—all written in what I remembered, with a flash of horror, was the Bulgarian alphabet: Cyrillic.

It was early morning, and people were on their way to work. I appealed for aid in English, French and Italian, but no one stopped. Finally, I planted myself in front of a tall, gaunt elderly woman and asked, "Hotel?"

She looked at Richard, who was by then sagging visibly, took my hand and ordered in German "Komm mit mir!"

She led us to an apartment building a few blocks away. "Komm!" she said again, and we followed her up four

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## ENCOUNTER

# A Good Samaritan In Bulgaria

*This is one of a series of occasional articles describing uncommon moments in travel—those encounters with the unexpected that are, for better or worse, the most memorable adventure of any journey.*

flights of stairs to her apartment. At the door of the flat, she paused to introduce herself, pointing to the name neatly printed on a card tacked to the door. We were to call her by her first name, Zlata.

The apartment consisted of two tiny rooms. Zlata lived in one; the other, we later discovered, was rented out to a university student, a young girl who was deathly shy of us but summoned up her courage to speak to me once—to ask in halting English if she could buy my Levi dungarees.

Zlata's room was cramped, though only minimally furnished with a huge armoire and two cot-sized beds. There were no pictures or ornaments to relieve the drabness. As she briskly began to make up a bed on a couch in the hall, I realized that we were to occupy her room, and became nervous. We had been warned that it was illegal to stay in any except a Government-approved home or hotel. But Richard was ill, and it was important that he have a place to rest.

As the day progressed, Zlata and I became better acquainted, although we had no common language. "Komm mit mir!" was her entire stock of foreign words. She showed me a picture of herself as a young girl, wearing a World War I nurse's uniform. We had fallen into good hands.

That night, Zlata and I stayed up

while Richard suffered through violent bouts of diarrhea. In the early hours of the morning, Zlata rolled up her sleeves and washed Richard, who was drenched in sweat and too weak to move his lips to speak or eat. The bathing mixture was either her own creation or an ancient Bulgarian re-

having our illegal accommodations known.

Zlata must have read my thoughts. She took me by the arm and again commanded, "Komm mit mir!" I followed her unhesitatingly.

We walked about a mile, eventually arriving at a squat, dilapidated build-

her white coat billowing out behind her; me, hunched in my Army surplus jacket; and Zlata, wearing my trench coat, turned inside out so that the fake fur lining showed.

When we reached Zlata's, the doctor examined Richard, then rolled him over and pumped him full of penicillin. As she began to pack up her equipment, I reached for my pocketbook. She looked at me haughtily and, raising herself up to her full five feet, said in clipped English, "In socialist countries, doctors do not take money." I cringed and thanked her effusively.

Forty-eight hours later, Richard could walk again, and we were ready to leave Bulgaria. By signs, I asked Zlata how we could pay her for her hospitality. She drew me aside to show me a faded copy of a German woman's magazine. Her gestures made it clear that there was something she wanted very much, something that they didn't have in Bulgaria. She carefully wrote out her address on a slip of paper.

As soon as I got back to New York, I sent her just what she wanted: the nicest pink toilet seat cover and matching rug that money could buy.

**"She rolled up her sleeves and washed Richard with a mixture that was either her own or an old Bulgarian recipe: chopped raw onions, eau de cologne and soapy water."**

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The bathing cure was repeated over the next two days and nights, but Richard showed no sign of improvement. I passed the time pacing the room, or looking out the window at the cheerless buildings across the street. By the morning of the third day, I was resolved to seek more professional help, even at the risk of

ing—a hospital. Zlata marched across the waiting room, past crying children, nursing mothers and listless old people, and buttonholed the first doctor she saw, a short, stocky woman in her early 40's.

After a whispered consultation, the doctor picked up her bag, and the three of us set off. We must have looked quite a sight, striding through the streets of Sofia: the doctor, with

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