

# Bulgaria ran brutal camps for prisoners

By Andrew Alexander

Cox News Service

**SOFIA, Bulgaria** — When Georgi Dekin had finished telling his story he broke down and cried.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, "but it was so cruel. I'm afraid no one will believe us."

During his 11 years in prison, Dekin was never once permitted to bathe.

He and scores of other inmates slept on foot-wide wooden planks stacked atop each other — like sardines in a can — in garage-sized holes in the ground.

They worked from dawn to dusk six days a week digging canals or building dams. On the seventh day they were made to stand beside their cells and forbidden to speak.

They were fed hot water with peppers and white beans.

"We were all starving," recalled Dekin, now 57. "We were forced to eat frogs, snakes, cats."

"Sometimes we were able to steal the mush that they fed the pigs," he continued. "It was delicious compared to what we had otherwise."

His crime? He had criticized his government.

Dekin is among thousands of aging Bulgarians who, emboldened by an emerging era of openness, now dare to lift the veil on an unspeakably brutal secret. What they are revealing — often in painful detail — is that for nearly 20 years following World War II, Bulgaria's repressive communist regime ran a network of more than 80 labor and concentration camps for "political prisoners."

Some were imprisoned for advocating the overthrow of the government. Others say they did nothing more than speak critically of a local communist leader.

All told, it is believed that from 1944 to 1963 more than 200,000 Bulgarians passed through the camps and that perhaps as many as 20,000 died there.

Yet the camps remained a secret from the outside world and even most Bulgarians, and those who did know were afraid to speak out.

"Nobody dared say anything," said Ilya Karadimov, a journalist with Bulgaria's state-run news agency. "Even people in the camps who were released said nothing. If they said something, they surely would become disappeared."

In recent months, local newspapers have reported that thousands of bodies had been transported from camps to uninhabited islands in the Danube River where they were eaten by wild boars. Unmarked mass graves also have been discovered near some of the camps, which the government shut down in the early 1960s. It is not clear what prompted the closings, but there is speculation that government leaders feared knowledge of the conditions could bring international condemnation.

A government-appointed special commission has been investigating. Its preliminary report issued in April described camps where "politically inconvenient" prisoners were subjected to forced labor, malnutrition, poor medical care, "regular beatings, and the humiliation of personality and dignity."

Whether anyone will be prosecuted is a matter of intense debate in Bulgaria. There is a widespread belief that the communists, who ruled since 1944 and retained power in the recent election after renaming themselves the Bulgarian Socialist Party, will try to conceal disclosures or head off trials that could prove embarrassing.

"As long as they are in power, nothing will happen," Dekin said.

Requests for interviews with government investigators and prosecutors for this story went unanswered.

But interviews with camp survivors reveal a degree of barbarity not unlike some World War II Nazi concentration camps.

Todor Kavaldjiev, 57, said soldiers at the camps sometimes shot prisoners "just for fun" by hiding in bushes and opening fire.

The camps and work areas were posted with "Shooting on sight" signs, he recalled, which meant that militia could fire without warning on any prisoner suspected of trying to escape.