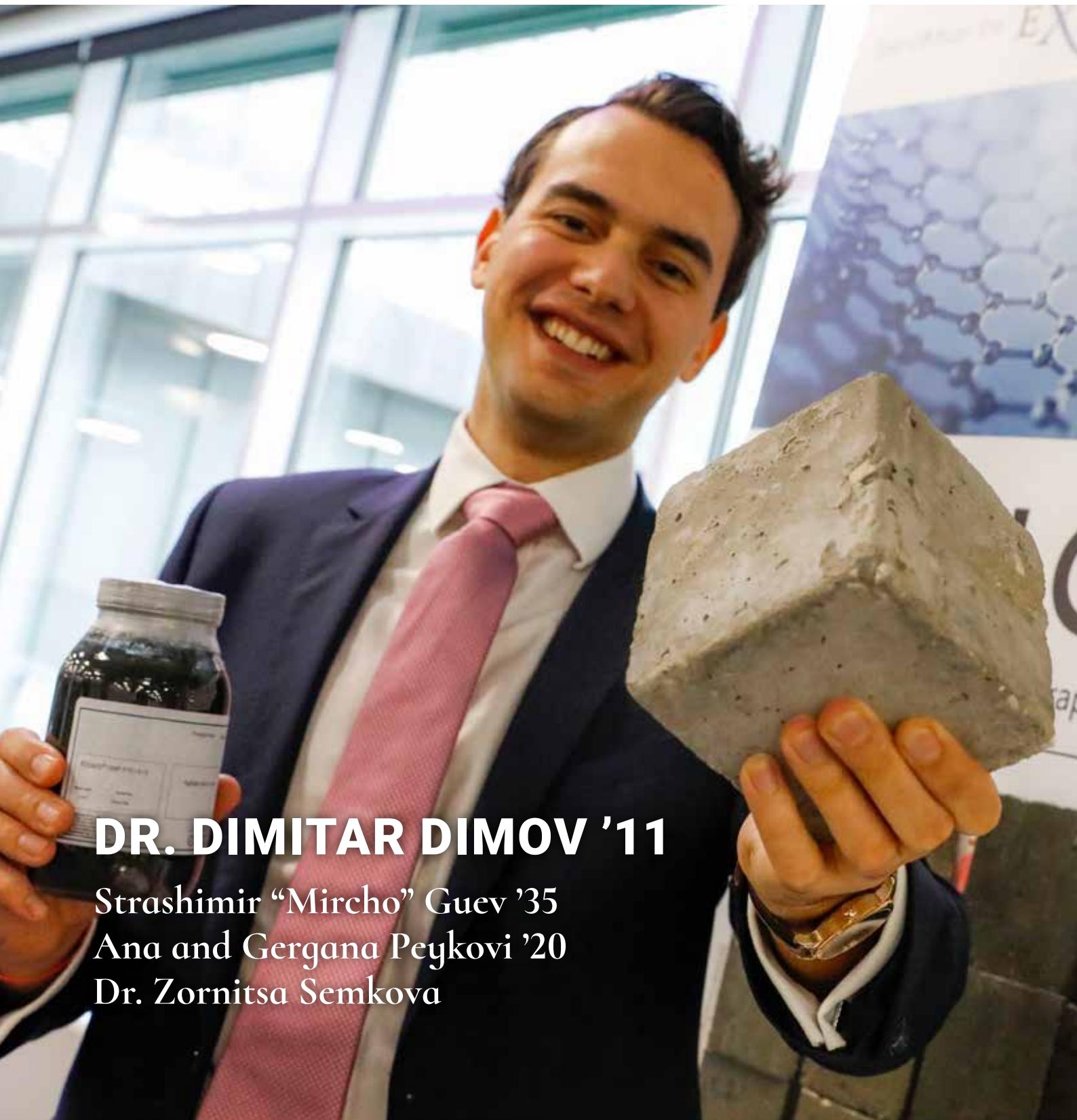




# ACS ALUMNI MAGAZINE

ACCREDITED BY  
 

*Issue 23, June 2022*



**DR. DIMITAR DIMOV '11**

Strashimir “Mircho” Guev '35  
Ana and Gergana Peykovi '20  
Dr. Zornitsa Semkova



The American College of Sofia

# ACS ALUMNI MAGAZINE

*Issue 23, June 2022*

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# FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear Alumni and Friends,

What an experience it has been for my wife, Jane, and I since arriving in July 2015, to be fellow travelers with the extraordinary people that make up the ACS community. As in the famous Robert Frost poem, roads diverge. In many respects, all of us within this community have taken a road less traveled, and this has made such a difference in who we are and who we are becoming. It has been my great privilege to be on this path with all of you for these seven years. Thank you!

A wise person once noted that you do not find a happy life, you make one. As those who are dedicated to what is often called the American Idea – the essential, inalienable rights of all to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – understand, ultimately personal and public happiness is best sought through the love and spread of learning and through the celebration and continuing development of that which is good and great in the human experience. These are the ideas that lie at the heart of ACS.

We are blessed with a historic and beautiful campus in which to pursue teaching and learning, a campus that needs our continuing care and investment and that needs to be secured for the long-term future. The enduring legacy of this school, though, is in the hearts and minds of the ACS community that

stretches across time and across the globe: faculty, staff, students, parents, friends, trustees, and the proud, distinctive, and spirited group that the Class of 2022 has just joined: the alumni of the American College of Sofia. It is that spirit that inspired those who founded this school in 1860, moved it to Sofia in the 1920s, built this beautiful campus in the 1930s, reopened the school after 50 years of exile, and then reestablished it as one of the great schools in Europe. And it is that spirit that will live on in ACS graduates; ACS faculty, staff, and trustees; and ACS families and friends.

My humble thanks go to all members of our community for their essential and faithful support in helping to continue to advance the mission and work of the College. As I step down as President, I look forward to new ways to continue to support the life-transforming work going on at ACS. I urge all of you to do the same.

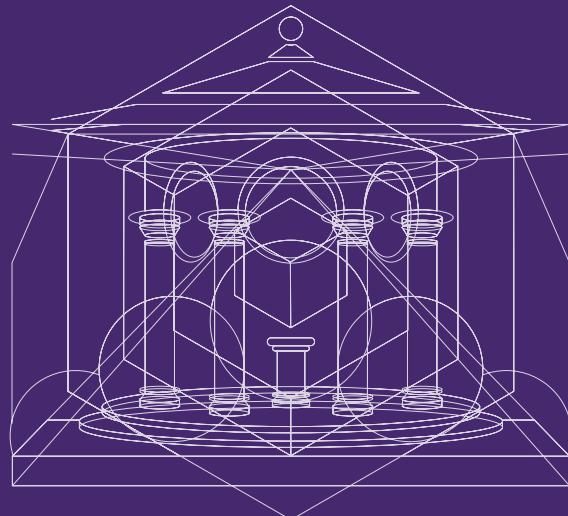
With best wishes,

**Richard T. Ewing, Jr.**

President

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Issue 23, June 2022



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Letters may be edited for publication.  
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Petia Ivanova '97 and Alexander J. Tomov '04

Dear Alumni,

Issue 23 of the ACS Alumni Magazine is special for many reasons. Having been supposed to be published in the summer of 2020, it was marked by several beginnings, reboots and relaunches. When Sasho Tomov '04 was tasked with caring for the alumni magazine by Petia Ivanova '97 during her leave of absence, he had the genuine intention to keep up the pace and continue to tell stories for and about ACS alumni. And Sasho did continue to collect moving stories, though it took Petia's return two years later for the ACS Alumni Magazine 23 to return in the shape of this paperback you are now holding in your hands.

While outlining the contents of Issue 23, we realized that, to our great regret, there were no more alumni from the pre-war years around to paint us a picture of what the College used to be like back in the 1930s and early 1940s. Luckily, the legacy of ACS lives on and, as it turns out, there are many people whose parents and grandparents attended and recorded their experiences, passing on their memories from their College years to future generations. We are delighted that Yassen Guev agreed to share the recollections of his grandfather, Strashimir "Mircho" Guev of the Class of 1935. We know for a fact that there are people among you whose grandparents or great-grandparents went to the College and told you stories about it later, so much so that in some cases it was even part of the reason why you went to ACS. By all means, get in touch and let us share those fascinating tales with the world.

Fastforwarding to the present day, we were able to speak to Dimitar Dimov '11 who recently patented his Concrene concept, and is on the road to revolutionizing modern construction. His story, as recorded in February of 2021, is available on pages 8-10.

As is tradition, we spoke to some of the most recent notable ACS graduates, as well. Energetic and positive, not to mention extremely fascinating, sisters Ana and Gergana Peykovi of the Class of 2020 shared their experience and lifted the curtain on what the College is like nowadays from a student's point of view. You can find these recollections on pages 11-15.

Last, but not least, we walked down memory lane and talked about life, education and ACS with beloved and long-time ACS History teacher Dr. Zornitsa Semkova. Her interview is waiting for you on pages 16-19.

We hope you enjoy this edition of the ACS Alumni Magazine even more so following a two-year hiatus. We also hope that the upcoming Issue 24 will mesmerize you with a special something we are planning to help mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the College's reopening. Until then, stay cool and keep ACS in your heart. Here is to many more returns!

Sasho Tomov '04  
and  
Petia Ivanova '97



# **STRASHIMIR “MIRCHO” GUEV '35:**

## *Education as a Value*

*I originally met Yassen Guev<sup>1</sup> in 2010 in a corporate environment heavy with telecommunications, governmental affairs and public relations. It wasn't until a few years had passed that a discerning conversation about education, values and the cost of upholding them revealed that Yassen's grandfather Strashimir Guev was, in fact, a graduate of the American College of Sofia's Class of 1935. This feature is dedicated to his memory and legacy.*

According to his grandson, Strashimir's fondest memories from his time at the American College of Sofia revolved around the Debates Club. He used to describe at length his recollections of preparing for and participating in competitive debates. Incidentally, speakers were rarely given a choice which position they would defend in an argument: they were assigned into either proposition or opposition. Thus it would often be the case that one would end up defending a thesis they would not necessarily personally agree with or believe in. Rhetoric skills took meticulous and determined preparation to master and Strashimir developed them into his passion. After all, he was not known among classmates and friends as an athlete, despite the College's well developed sports program and facilities at the time.

Instead, he was known as the person with an intimate knowledge of and flair for politics. A testament to his reputation is the motto below his photo in the ACS Class of 1935 Yearbook *Pinetree*: "Vox Populi, Vox Dei."

In *Rila Whisper's Book 7* in year 14, dedicated to the ACS Class of 1935, we read about him:

*You would most often see him where a dispute about international politics is taking place. A big defender of the wronged, in a contention he always sides with those who are weaker, and often, with his clear thoughts, he manages to prove his theory. On the podium we have seen him numerous times, with zeal and conviction, to talk to us about the plight of defenseless Austria, or to showcase for us the ideas of Roosevelt. Mircho can be a true friend, ready to support you when you need him, at the risk of sacrifices.*

Strashimir Guev, known to his College classmates colloquially as Mircho, was born in 1917 in what was then Gyumyurdjina in the Aegean Thrace region of the Bulgarian state, to Stefan, a tax clerk, and Andonika, a French teacher. Strashimir's family was originally from Kotel, but following the great fire of 1894, relocated to Aegean Thrace. Once the region was handed over to Greece at the end of World War I and renamed Komotini, the family moved again, just on the other side of the (then) Bulgarian border, to a village in the vicinity of Krumovgrad, and then to the town itself.

Upholding education as a value, Strashimir's family was enlightened but not too well-off financially. His father Stefan sold some land in order to be able to afford tuition. After graduating from the American College of Sofia in 1935, Strashimir was accepted and enrolled at Sofia University as a student of Law. It was then that he declared himself against Fascism. However, after commencement, he elected not to work in his area of expertise but instead joined the army and saw combat in World War II as a lieutenant, leading a machine-gun detachment of over 100 people all the way to Hungary and earning a bravery medal in the process in 1940.

After the victory of the Soviet Union and its strong political influence on Bulgaria after WWII, Strashimir and his father Stefan, aware of the consequences, convinced the Fatherland Front supporters in Krumovgrad to join the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union - Nikola Petkov, which was at the time on the verge of being declared illegal governmental opposition. As a result, one cold morning the whole



Strashimir in 1940

family was dragged out of their home and to the town square and declared "enemies of the state" for the whole town to see. A couple of days later, the Guevs, except for Strashimir's parents, were loaded onto a horse-drawn carriage and sent away. They didn't know where they were being taken until they were unloaded in the village of Golyam Izvor near Razgrad. Having remained in Krumovgrad, Stefan was later sent to the Kutsian forced labor camp in Pernik where he spent 9 months in the outdoor coal mines, without a trial or a sentence.

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*"One cold morning the whole family was dragged out of their home and to the town square and declared "enemies of the state" for the whole town to see."*

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With his family interned, it was impossible for Strashimir Guev to find a job, despite his military decorations and training in law. The Rousse Bar Association denied him practice in law on the grounds that he was an enemy of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Bulgarian Communist Party, and was a spy for Britain and the United States. He was frequently summoned, interrogated and accused by the People's Militia of having a brother who had defected to the United States (Strashimir had a sister who was in Bulgaria at the time). On numerous occasions, Strashimir was forced to admit that he had been attempting to run away and join his defected brother.

<sup>1</sup> Yassen Guev was born in Razgrad in 1972. He holds a Master's degree in Hungarian Philology from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and an MBA. He is a former TV host and journalist, experienced senior manager and an entrepreneur, author, an avid basketball player and a promising pianist.

Even though stories of Strashimir's father's forced labor camp days were never openly shared within the family prior to 1989, the actual events retained their influence over Strashimir's son (Yassen's father). During the compulsory military service of Stefan, his unit was visited by party officials. On the soldiers' roster they carried, Stefan's (and only his) name was highlighted and scribbled over in red. On another occasion, as he was expecting confirmation or rejection of his application to pursue higher education in Moscow, he ran into the son of a high-ranking Razgrad party official who casually informed Stefan to not wait up as his studying in the Soviet Union was not happening. It was only then that Stefan learned more details about his father's "unfit" past.

When Strashimir's grandson Yassen turned 6 in 1978, his parents decided that he needed to learn English. As this was quite a risky endeavor in rural Bulgaria at the time, the family council gathered and reached consensus. Yassen's grandfather Strashimir was to teach the youngster English in secrecy. As learning materials in English were scarce, the tutor and his student utilized meticulously preserved language textbooks from the American College of Sofia, the same ones Strashimir had learned from as a student almost 50 years earlier. Needless to say, Yassen was sworn to keep quiet and not tell anyone about his English tutoring, with which he diligently complied.

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*"Prior to 1989 Strashimir never believed life would change and democracy would have a chance in the country."*

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His listening skills were further enhanced while Yassen's grandfather Strashimir would illegally tune in and try to listen to the Voice of America radio station. Although the broadcast was jammed by the Bulgarian authorities, it could still be received in moderate clarity, usually early in the morning. The "I'm John Trimble, and this is the Voice of America" opening line of the newscast is a bright memory that Yassen keeps even today.

Strashimir Guev was not permitted to practice law, given that his past was politically inconvenient and borderline criminal in the eyes of the communist regime in Bulgaria throughout the Cold War. Instead, he settled on working as a chief accountant for a Razgrad-based pharmaceutical company. In his grandson Yassen's words, prior to 1989 Strashimir never believed life would change and democracy would have a chance in the country. He was pleased with the changes in November of that year.

In his grandson's words, Strashimir "Mircho" Guev '35 was a man of exceptional sternness, impeccable order and extreme principle. Throughout his life he made decisions based on his own, well-argumented and profoundly analyzed viewpoints, firmly rooted in his values. Surprisingly enough, even though he was upset with the way the political system in Bulgaria turned out, he didn't hold a grudge against those with

opposing views. He would comprehend that position, knowing that some people are simply incapable of or unmotivated to have a position at all. It was also plain to him that others would switch their position once an opportunity for personal or professional gain would present itself in an effort to emerge on the winning side. Apparently, it was what many people at the time would do. In contrast, Strashimir would not compromise on his beliefs, very well aware of the consequences for him and his offspring, even though it was much easier to uphold one's stance when it happened to be on the winning side. If it were to boil down to the choice between winning but destroying one's value system, and losing but continuing to believe and stand up for

## Strashimir Guev Vox populi, vox Dei



Strashimir Guev as a Junior in the Bor Yearbook, 1934

what is true, Strashimir Guev was the kind of man who would elect to side with the losing side when it meant he would remain true to his values. In his case, freedom and democracy were a price to pay and his is the story of a man who paid the price.

After the fall of the communist regime, Strashimir Guev was asked to serve on the Municipal Council in Razgrad in the so-called interim administration, representing, yet again, the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union - Nikola Petkov. He was able to enjoy the dawn of democratic reform in Bulgaria for only 3 years, until his passing in 1992.

Strashimir's passion for politics and rhetorics did not allow him to remain idle when a public concern article in the ACS Literary Magazine *Rila Whisper* caught his attention. It is only natural that in 1935, a central topic of public interest would be the rise of the German Third



Strashimir in 1988

Reich. One of Strashimir's College peers had published an article in *Rila Whisper* in support of the fascist youth movement in Germany, arguing its potential prospects and benefits for the Bulgarian youth as well. In Strashimir's response, facsimile below, we find arguments and ideas that resonate with us even today, 85 years later.

While the rise of Nationalism is a well-documented, widely discussed and explored historical phenomenon, certain segments of society, country-wise and internationally have always been more susceptible to extreme views and attitudes. Even today, extremism is a global risk for stability, development and security. As inequalities become more obvious, groups and individuals, especially those personally affected, are more prone to shifting blame over to a real or imaginary threat and finding comfort in eliminating, or drastically diminishing that threat's well-being, when a distinguishable group of people is involved. While this kind of attitude is known by many names, it is treatable

with education. It is believed that education as a value is also the key to reducing inequalities, peace, development, freedom, equality and brotherhood.

When I asked Yassen for a well-wish towards the current ACS community, here's what he told me:

*In my opinion, when a person makes a low-return far-future investment, it is a choice of cause. Education is the decision that, once taken, spurs the battle of every teacher for the development and success of every student. The return is not in the form of more expensive shares in 20-30 years, but in seeing all these people find their way in life, find their personal and professional vocations, and watch as they blossom; observe how, when faced with the choice to earn a material benefit over what is measured by satisfaction, fulfillment and the success of others, they would choose the latter. It all comes down to what each person's values are, which are formed at this age, in this case here at the American College of Sofia. I can say that my family has had a prolific influence on how my values formed, and I'm humbled to say that I don't think I've moved from where my grandfather stood. I stand where he stood back in 1935. That's why these types of stories are an anchor for the future. I wish to the people who study here that they find similar anchors for their future, that they believe and follow what they believe.*

**"Strashimir Guev was the kind of man who would elect to support the losing side when it meant he would remain true to his values."**

## What the Bulgarian Youth Organization Should Be

By Strashimir Guev '35

In the second issue of the *Rilski Shepot* appeared an article under the title "The Youth Organization of Contemporary Germany." The amazement of the author at the contemporary organization of the German youth and the desire that it should be the example and the aim of Bulgarian youth is clear and obvious. But should it be? Is it worthy to promote that idea?

Nowadays a great deal is spoken about national education. But when treating and solving this problem, it appears that the notion of national education which is expressed in "organization of youth" is very often wrongly and not clearly enough understood, and for that reason almost the worst ways of educating youth in the spirit of nationalism are chosen. In order that this should not happen, it is necessary that some basic notions and terms whose

meaning solve the question be made clearer. It is true, the necessity for a youth organization is felt today more than ever because the problem of nationalism is imposed on every youth who is trying to accommodate himself to the reality in which he lives.

But what indeed may serve as an example and something to be proud of in the German youth? Is it that the "individual" is effaced and does not exist? Is it that the individual reason, vote, and will are brought to their "vitae minima"? Is it possible that the grand parades, marches, and fiery speeches of able demagogues, the great ceremonies of thousands of young men permeated by one single feeling, of one inhuman idea concealed in the word "militarism," enveloped in a pernicious chauvinism, may be things which a wise and intelligent human being may

accept and practise? Was it not this same German war-spirit which started the World War and buried millions, leaving the whole world in misery? Nobody denies that the German youth are full of energy and ability. They even excel many other nations in these respects. But the pitiful thing is to see how this energy and ability are spent. Doubtless, in a wrong, destructive way, which should not be recommended to Bulgaria, least of all by Bulgarians.

The high qualities and values, such as peace and brotherhood, understanding between the nations and giving the younger powers a way toward united, valuable creative work, toward an understanding that here on earth there is a *Mankind* composed of human beings and not animals, whose standard and position depend on the united effort of all,—this is the way in which the Bulgarian youth should be organized and educated.

The world is sinking into misery and need, corruption, robbery, richness and poverty, malice and envy — fields on which the youth of the whole world should lead a noble fight! This is true nationalism. This is the purpose of a youth organization. But the great mistake is that many consider marching and singing and wasting your time without doing any creative work which will truly help one's country as "nationalism." That is chauvinism — a useless idea or notion which exhausts the power of thousands of young men, self-deceives the individual, and thus willingly or unwillingly decreases the moral level of the individual and through it of the whole nation. Nationalism, pure nationalism, which includes itself in a useful cultural activity, bringing Humanity to a high pitch, should be the framework in which the organization of Bulgarian youth should be included.

Chauvinism is, moreover, simply another name for egotism, which hinders the normal development of public life. For egotism is at the basis of every action deserving of accusation. As a typical phenomenon of social egotism, chauvinism does not have anything to do with nationalism, which should be in the heart of every Bulgarian. Although the interests of the nations are so intricately interwoven, every nation may live and develop without hindering the other nations. The way toward this is mutual recognition and help.

The cultural and economic interests of every nation may be assured only when an international understanding and help is attained. You may call this Internationalism. It is Internationalism, but it is nationalism as well. It is true that no one who feels the spirit of the time can help seeing the evil which comes as a result of trying to make nationalism just the opposite of internationalism. And until people find the basis of their likeness, the present crisis in our cultural and social life cannot be overcome. The way toward this is the forming of the nations as living spiritual societies which will rise above egoistic interests in order to found their inter-relations on the basis of mutual recognition and honor. This is the only right way and always the deeply thinking men have been against that "nationalism" which is an expression of national egotism, better described as "chauvinism."

Dostoevski, with his philosophic mind, clearly understood the essence of the question when he said: "If the nations do not begin a life with higher aims and purposes in service of mankind, but continue only to serve their egotistic interests, they are going to freeze and to expire."



# DR. DIMITAR DIMOV '11:

## *Thinking Big*

*Dimitar Dimov of the ACS Class of 2011 holds a Bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering and is a Doctor of Philosophy in Nanoscience Engineering from the University of Exeter. I first heard about him from his sister who is a member of the ACS Class of 2022 and whom he, while smiling, describes as a "much better ACS student than [he] was." What his sister did was bring the Advancement Office a copy of the Bulgarian edition of Forbes Magazine where Dimitar was featured in the "30 under 30" people to change the world in the beginning of 2020. One year later, Dimitar and Concrene Limited announced that the first precast Concrene products will be available on the US market in late 2021, which is an important milestone in their mission to modernize, decarbonise and advocate for change in the construction industry. It is only natural that I invited Dr. Dimov for an ACS Alumni Magazine interview and I am grateful that he agreed.*

*Interview by Alexander Tomov '04*



Dimitar Dimov at TEDxTruro, 2020

### **How did you come to attend ACS?**

One of my best childhood friends, Lachezar Stoynov (ACS Class of 2008), told me and my parents about ACS and helped me prepare for the entrance exam. I also owe much to my parents who did their research and took the right steps to allow me to get ready for the exam and feel confident on the day.

### **How would you describe your College years?**

Eye-opening, uplifting, positive, empowering and fun. My favorite subjects were German Language, Mathematics, History and Chemistry. Our teachers at the time taught us long-term life lessons which I came to realize much later in my life and I'm grateful to all.

During my ACS years I met my best friends whom I still love much and keep a close relationship with. It was also great fun – from playing various sports, going out on Fridays, playing cards during lunch break avoiding the eyes of the dean, to going skiing in the winter holidays – the ACS community was, and still is, amazing.

### **What extracurricular activities were you interested in during your time at ACS?**

I completed all of my CAS hours through volleyball! I was part of the team for 4 consecutive years and had great times with my teammates and with coaches Mr. Tellis and Mr. Sollohub.

### **Which teachers made an impact on your current pursuits?**

There were many teachers who inspired me to be a better person and led by a positive example. I am very grateful to Ms. Tsveti Popova, Ms. Nevena Kalpakova, Ms. Desi Yordanova, Mr. Derek Tellis, Mr. Steve Sollohub, Ms. Jess White and others – the entire ACS faculty was very dedicated to their work and students. Teachers provided us with an excellent skill set and vision that helped us excel at university and later in our early careers.

### **What have you been up to since you graduated in 2011?**

I spent 7 years at the University of Exeter doing BEng and PhD degrees and then moved to London in 2018 to work in the Real Estate industry.

### **How did the idea for Concrene come to be?**

In the winter of 2014 I was chatting with my flatmate in Exeter about his PhD research in theoretical physics and the first 2-dimensional material discovered, called graphene, when the idea lightbulb lit. Graphene is the strongest material ever discovered, so I thought: "What if we combine this unique discovery with concrete, make it super strong and hence reduce the volume required in buildings?" This would have resulted in a significant reduction in pollution and CO<sub>2</sub>. (I can reassure you that back then, this idea was totally not commercially driven.)

### **Would you describe the concept and the benefits over traditional concrete?**

Current concrete reinforcement technologies such as steel rebars, microfibers and glass fibers are all great advancements in the industry, but none change the chemistry of concrete at nanoscale level, hence can't reduce the overall volume.

Our revolutionary nanotechnology has a huge positive impact on the early stages of concrete chemistry, resulting in increased strength and durability. This gives us the opportunity to reduce the volume of concrete by up to 10%, potentially saving millions of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions globally.

The nanotechnology is protected by a worldwide patent-application and can be licensed to any concrete manufacturer globally.

*"ACS teachers provided us with an excellent skill set and vision that helped us excel at university and later in our early careers."*

### **What is new about Concrene Limited?**

We licensed the nanotechnology to our first client in the US who will start manufacturing Concrene precast products in April this year. This will be the first concrete product with nanotechnology entering the US market.

### **What is your biggest challenge?**

The construction and concrete industries are unbelievably conservative and old-school. This industry is the most resistant one to change (we still design concrete buildings in the same way as in the 1920s) unlike the financial, automotive and TMT industries which embrace and implement change daily. Our biggest challenge is a behavioral one – to convince concrete manufacturers to adopt a technology of the future and try something new.

### **How are your business developments coming along?**

Our company has a licensing business model, underpinned by a family of patent applications. We work with stakeholders across the construction industry - real estate developers, investors, precast manufacturers - to introduce our nanotechnology and unlock the benefits for the end customer. Things are moving in a very positive direction.



Concrene Blocks

**In an interview with Forbes Bulgaria in 2019 you are quoted as saying that your big goal is Africa. How far along are you towards achieving it?**

Africa and the Middle East are two places to focus on from a construction perspective in the next two decades. There's not much space left in Europe, UK and US to pour concrete at scale; however, Africa is a massive continent and an emerging market which is set to revolutionize. Concrete structures underpin economic development and provide housing for the growing population, so hopefully you'd see a lot of Concrene used there in the coming 10-15 years!

*“Our revolutionary nanotechnology has a huge positive impact on the early stages of concrete chemistry, resulting in increased strength and durability.”*

**When can we expect to see the first building constructed using your technology?**

This is a process and it takes time – the first Concrene products which will hit the market this year will be precast concrete with non-structural load-bearing liability. The first residential/commercial building made of Concrene will hopefully become reality in 2022-2023.

**When can we hope to have buildings in Bulgaria constructed using Concrene?**

Are there any Bulgarian concrete manufacturers who are open to innovation and want to try a new technology which decarbonizes concrete? Get in touch! This will determine the answer to your question. :)

**What are the next steps for Concrene Limited?**

We have a well-defined strategy to attract institutional investment and scale up the business model globally. Watch this space.

**When and how did you know engineering was your vocation?**

The passion for construction and structural engineering was inspired by my grandfather who was a professor in Concrete Structures in Sofia's Architecture and Engineering University and my godfather who heads one of the leading structural engineering consultancies in Bulgaria – Beta Consult 1.

**What are the next steps for you?**

To get married! Covid postponed my 2020 wedding and I can't wait for things to cool down and for us to be able to dance again indoors!

**What inspires you?**

Change, positive thinking, being proactive and looking into the future. I draw my motivation from analyzing the opportunities ahead and spending time with my family and loved ones.

**What makes you happy these days?**

I am grateful and happy that my family and friends are all healthy and well during these turbulent times. Everything else can wait.

**Do you have a message for other alumni?**

The ACS community and alumni are special in the sense that we are very close and have high respect for every other ACSer, despite the age difference. I come across many stories about people hiring juniors or seniors in their companies because they read ACS on their CV. My message is, keep this strong bond alive and schedule more meetings, alumni events, dinners to ensure that our community is in touch. We can bring a positive change to the future of Bulgaria.

**What about your message to the ACS community as a whole?**

I would like to express my gratitude and immense respect to all teachers, administrative staff, support staff, and everyone else who dedicate their efforts to keep the school alive and keep up the high level of education. Without their dedication and efforts we wouldn't have had all the opportunities to get university education and advance our careers.

Secondly, I would like to also send a message to the young ACS alumni and current students – stay positive, stay healthy and inspired to achieve great things despite the pandemic. Sooner or later this will all be over and you will have the opportunity to travel around the world again and chase your dreams.



Concrene Firebowl



# ANA AND GERGANA PEYKOVI '20

*On Doing What  
You Enjoy and  
Enjoying What  
You Do*

Ana Peykova and Gergana Peykova are ACS graduates of the Class of 2020. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, their class was up against an exceptionally challenging senior year, quite different from what most seniors had experienced in the past. Nevertheless, Gergana (or Geri) and Ana made it into esteemed higher education institutions and, at the time of the interview, in February 2021, were well off onto the paths to their futures.

I first caught wind of their talents when Ana was on the student board organizing the ACS International Science Fair and Competition FISSION in 2019 and in 2020 Geri was on team “Little (later – Big) Bang,” winning the International Young Physicist Competition in early 2020.

Geri is someone with tremendous grit – she has resilience and perseverance in getting things done, and is constantly learning and attending to details. Ana shared that in her traditional New Year’s Resolutions, she always includes “to be happy,” and I also found out that making a positive impact on the people she connects with is something very close to her heart. Talking with them, I was struck by their passion, outlook on life and future aspirations, not to mention positively impacted and uplifted by our interaction. So, in the spirit of presenting notable ACS seniors and new alumni in the Alumni Magazine, I offer you their insight.



**Would you please introduce yourselves?**

**Ana:** I'll start. I'm Ana. I graduated from the College in 2020. I'm currently in San Francisco, at the Minerva School at KGI, which is a very new school, not as well-known as my sister's school perhaps, and takes you around the world: in four years, you live in 7 different countries. My major is still undecided, but I have until March 5 to decide what I want to do with life and with school, university and everything else.

**Geri:** I'm Geri and I graduated with Ana last year. Now I'm studying Natural Sciences at the University of Cambridge.

**How did you both come to attend ACS in the first place?**

**Geri:** In 7<sup>th</sup> Grade, both of us had very different ideas of what we wanted to do. I wanted to study math, probably at the Sofia Math School, and I'm not sure what Ana's plan was, but it wasn't the College. Our mother suggested that we attend an Open House Day and I really liked the College, because it had a proper campus, not just a building like most other schools, and you had to walk from one to another for different classes. It was the first time I had seen something like that and I thought it was really cool. Then we decided to just try, we got accepted and we ended up studying at the College.

**Ana:** I remember Geri was super excited about the College, but what really got me, not the exam, I passed that, was a visit to Arts Fest in June and that was amazing. I remember just lying on the grass in front of Sanders and it was really nice, with all the performers, and all the current students and all that made me feel that it was a cool school. And I thought to myself: I got in anyway, so I might as well enroll. :) That's what did it for me.

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*"Maybe that's the best thing about the College, the different clubs, because everyone gets the chance to do something they like."*

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**I'm so happy you mentioned Arts Fest, it truly is something that we miss dearly and hope to be able to hold again, rather sooner than later. What is your "beyond the classroom" story?**

**Geri:** Maybe that's the best thing about the College, the different clubs, because everyone gets the chance to do something they like. I did a lot of Physics and Math at school and I wanted to go to competitions. I think one of my favorite clubs was actually Ana's club - the Hiking Club. It was a very nice, diverse group of students. Every weekend we went hiking to places I'd been to or places I'd never seen before. It was really cool, because it wasn't academic, and it was a chance to socialize with other people outside the classroom.

**Ana:** Yeah, I adore that club. It was really cool that you could take something that you love and make it "serve" you in a somewhat academic way with the CAS program. And then, the other big thing, and I went through all of the TEDx events, debates and stuff, but what I really liked in the last two years and what I ended up focusing on a lot was FISSION. And

when I think about it, it turns out that both the Hiking Club and FISSION are about organizing events. With hiking, you have to select the route, organize the teachers, then coordinate with the administration etc. FISSION is a different thing, but in essence, it's again about coordinating people, choosing dates, venues, scheduling, figuring out logistics and all that. And I think, at the College, I just started organizing stuff, which is something super useful for me right now and I absolutely loved it, because I was getting CAS credits and, at the same time, I was just doing something that I really enjoyed.

**What is the one most important thing that people learn at ACS?**

**Geri:** I think you just find something that you really like and get involved with it. Try doing something, and the College will support you, as long as you can justify what you want to do. This is how we came to enjoy many student-organized events: the TED talks, FISSION, a fashion show, things like that. It was great, because the College would support you if you wanted to do something cool.

**Ana:** I would say it is the College community. At ACS, there are all those people who are all trying to achieve something. This creates a very supportive and healthy competitive environment, in which you want to succeed, but it's not like "I want to be bigger than everyone else in achieving something," but rather: "Everyone around me is achieving something, so I might as well do something, too," and you end up creating something amazing.

**What was your senior year like?**

**Ana:** I think it was definitely overwhelming to stay at home for months on end. I feel we missed out on those last weeks before graduation: not just the studying but talking to everyone you've been going to classes with in the past years, mostly talking to teachers. Actually having a Graduation Ceremony was absolutely amazing on the College's side. But again, it was a situation where the school would do anything for its students and I really appreciated that event.

**Geri:** I have to agree. The thing is, right now I only remember the good parts about my senior year. It was sad, because now we're in university and it's still a pandemic, so we can't do a lot of things that we actually want to do. But it's not that bad. I think we'll just have to learn to live with it and at some point it will be over, and we'll go back to normal.



The FISSION team in 2019 - Ana is first from left

**What was your proudest moment?**

**Ana:** My proudest moment was definitely FISSION 2019, and it was actually a very specific point in time during this event. Everyone had arrived, the grand opening

ceremony had taken place, all the projects were arranged and on display and I just reflected internally on how cool all of it was. (In my mind, I was like OMG, this is so cool, I can't believe we did this!)

The moment when I felt exceptionally proud of myself was when two boys from Varna came to me and asked me if FISSION was taking place the following year, as well. I realized that not only was the event great, people were actually anticipating its following edition. This was what really motivated me to work hard my senior year. Alas, the circumstances were not permitting the event taking place in its originally intended form. However, just knowing that people I barely knew felt the impact of this event was very humbling.

**Geri:** I think one of my proudest moments was in senior year, right before the pandemic. We worked on the International Young Physicist Tournament, where we had to solve physics problems that also included a little bit of experimentation. While school was out on a flu break, we were working in the lab, preparing. We actually did very well and we won first place at the tournament. What I most enjoyed was being able to work in that lab and prepare for the competition itself.

#### **Are you talking about “Team Little Bang”?**

**Geri:** Yeah. And after the competition we renamed it to “Big Bang.” We were that confident, I guess.

#### **Well, I guess you earned it! Congratulations again! What is your true passion?**

**Ana:** That's a little off-topic, but I have this one professor who always starts class by asking people what their purpose in life is. This class starts at 7 AM, so everyone is asleep, and there is hardly a way for anyone to provide a somewhat valuable response. One time I answered this question early in the morning, before having had my coffee and still mentally asleep. My purpose in life is, I told him, connecting people and having a positive impact on them in whatever way I could. It could be through teaching somebody something. Ultimately, it's about them walking away from our interaction feeling like they earned something out of it and they are happy about it.

**Geri:** I don't think I have such a good answer. I enjoy learning and I get easily excited about new stuff, whether in science or not.

**Ana:** I remember when we were talking about university, and we discussed how you were going to get your bachelor's degree, then a PhD, then another bachelor's degree and you were probably going to stay in academia well into your 80s. You are very excited about learning new things.

#### **What makes you truly happy?**

**Geri:** I enjoy working on a project, something challenging I'm really interested in.

**Ana:** I love spending time outdoors, traveling, going to the mountain, those kinds of things.

#### **If you could change one thing about ACS, what would that be?**

**Geri:** This will be a very specific one, but because I had a lot of tardies, and I had to do a lot of campus work, I'd just remove that system. It was really bugging me all the time. I'm always late, so when someone holds me accountable for it, I feel bad.

**Ana:** If you'd asked me my senior year, I'd probably have a list of things, but looking back at it now, it all kind of makes sense. I only remember the positives.



Gergana at Science Fair 2018

#### **How does one succeed at ACS nowadays?**

**Ana:** Well, the College gives you all these opportunities and it's up to you to take them. Just taking initiative, going for it, having the work ethic and the enthusiasm needed, you'll succeed. You just need to start somewhere and take the opportunity.

**Geri:** That pretty much sums it all. It requires some work, but once you start working on something, I find that I actually enjoy this thing and I continue with it.

#### **You make it sound like it's not hard at all!**

**Geri:** Again, you only remember the good stuff. You don't remember, I guess, struggling a lot and things like that.

**Ana:** I also think that it's really good that at the College you focus both on academic and extracurriculars, so you end up having to do both and, if you invest your time right, you can do lots of stuff outside of school which is where you really evolve as a person and you can develop your interests. So, focusing only on school kind of helps you succeed, and you only have to do one extra step and decide to put your effort and time into something else that you really like.

*“Taking initiative, going for it, having the work ethic and the enthusiasm needed, you'll succeed. You just need to start somewhere and take the opportunity.”*

#### **Do you remember your best day at ACS?**

**Ana:** Maybe it was a series of days, but every fall, somewhere in September, when the weather was still good, our group would just sit somewhere around the park for lunch, enjoying the sunshine. It must be early enough in the semester, so you don't have that much work to do. I think those are my favorite memories from ACS, it's not a specific date, but more of a series of dates.

**Geri:** I don't think I have a specific day in mind, but I really enjoyed sitting outside on campus during the breaks. It is something that I truly miss right now.

**What was your worst day at ACS?**

**Geri:** I don't have a worst day at ACS. At least, I can't remember it.

**Ana:** Mine break be one of those days right before Christmas Break, when everyone is just working on assignments, everyone is super busy and at some point you stop talking to your friends as much and it's when the stress gets to you. But again, not a specific day, I don't think I have a day when I went home and thought to myself that ACS was not for me.

**What is one thing from ACS you are definitely going to take with you going forward?**

**Ana:** I keep all the yearbooks, I have all five of them in a little stack, and I intend to bring them along whenever I move, either to a new home, or just around the world.

**Geri:** I want to keep the friends I made at school. These are some of the closest people I have. All of them are doing amazing stuff, just killing it. I really want to be talking to them still in 10 years.

**What about one thing you are leaving or have left behind?**

**Geri:** Getting up early. That's not for me.

**Ana:** Same. My brain is not working this early in the morning.

**Is there anything you would have done differently in your ACS career?**

**Ana:** I would have been less stressed about the whole thing. Some things were just not worth the time and effort I put in them. Not being nicer to my friends while stressed is something that I would definitely change.

**Geri:** If it wasn't the pandemic, I would have taken a gap year. That's something I regret not doing, but maybe after university, I'll get the chance to travel some more.

**Which teacher from ACS left the brightest memories for you?**

**Geri:** Dr. Chakarova for sure. She spent a lot of time with us in the lab, preparing us for competitions. She always tried to challenge us in a way, even in class. Her classes were simply amazing, it was really interesting to listen to her. It was obvious that she was passionate about what she was teaching, which is not a given in teachers.

**Ana:** Do we get to pick three maybe?

**Of course.**

**Ana:** In fact, I had classes with only one of them, so I would mention Mr. Davis first. He taught me English and is a very interesting person, hard grader too. I remember in tenth grade I had a bit of a struggle with his class, but at some point I realized that, even though he was subtle about it, he had lots of great stories to tell. And then the other two teachers, who were not really my teachers, I would go with Ms. Oulette and Mr. Plass.

**I take it you had a chance to meet and get to know them outside of the class, in extracurriculars maybe?**

**Ana:** Yes, I was tutoring Ms. Oulette Bulgarian, which, at some point convinced me I wanted to be a teacher for life, while the experience showed me I'm not great at it. I remember, for one of our tutoring sessions, she taught me how to cut mangos, so this should tell you how much Bulgarian she learned out of the whole thing. Mr. Plass was very involved with the Hiking Club, and he was also my adviser, so it was really cool checking up with him and the rest of the people in my group, who were also pretty cool.

**What would you say is your most marked characteristic?**

**Ana:** Can I answer about Geri?



**Sure, let's switch it up!**

**Ana:** I think she's really good at... how do I phrase this... Well, she can pick the most boring thing ever, at least in my view, and then get really passionate about it and work on it. She can put so much effort and time into something and eventually she gets really good at it. But just this willingness to put this much effort and to invest all her time into the tiniest detail, I think it's incredible.

**Geri** (in shock): You said "the most boring thing"! I don't know what you are referencing, but, OK, I'll take it. One thing that my friends and I always discuss about Ana is how much she travels. I don't know how she makes it happen, but when she sets her mind to something, she just does it. Last year, during a pandemic, she went to Slovakia and she worked as a summer camp counselor for a month, before traveling to Vienna! It was two years ago when she completed the Kom-Emine trail with Niya, also from the College. No one thought that she was actually going to do it. So one day she said she was leaving and two weeks later she called from the beach. That was really inspiring, because not many people are able to complete it. Even when everything seems to be against her, she still manages to achieve what she set out to achieve.

**Ana:** This was really nice, thank you!

**Geri:** It's true and we really do talk about this with everyone. Over Christmas you went to the Grand Canyon. While all of us were stuck at home, Ana was out there doing stuff. It was amazing.

**What is one piece of advice you would offer current or incoming 8<sup>th</sup> graders at ACS?**

**Geri:** Just enjoy your time and do as much as possible. Find something that you really like and stay with it.

**Ana:** As an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, just don't stress about it, your year. Not that it doesn't matter, but this is the year when you start some really good friendships, and you can try out different things without having that much of an impact on your record and your university applications. It is the beginning of your journey at ACS, so just enjoy it and then, the following year is when you can start stressing.

**But not just stressing, do your work, too, right?**

**Ana and Geri:** Yeah.

**How did your university application process go?**

**Ana:** I think mine was very straightforward. I knew where I wanted to go, I applied and I got my results in the beginning of December. My friends were super happy about it, because I had been talking about it since 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I too was excited for them when they started receiving their letters in January. I felt a little bit excluded from everyone's excitement in the spring semester, but at the same time, I already knew where I was going to go.

**Geri:** I think, in your case, you had to first convince our parents that you were actually going to university and not on vacation.

**Ana:** The thing is, my university is very new, so there literally are only two classes that ever graduated from it. Also, the school does sound a little bit like a scam, because you travel to seven countries, with people from all over the world, and you take classes online. One of the countries is India. Just telling my parents that I was going to an online university in India was very difficult, and I am very proud of my persuasion skills.

My parents would tell everyone that one of their daughters was going to one of the oldest institutions in the world, a very well-known school, while the other one - to an online university in India. That was their favorite phrase ever. :)

**Geri:** I was really excited when Ana got into Minerva because my plan was to visit her in all the countries she studies. Apparently, this is not going to happen this year, but maybe next year I'll be very excited to go to India or Seoul. I don't remember much of the application process, because at the time I was also kind of busy with competitions. It wasn't my main focus, because I knew I was going to get into some university. At the time, I really wanted to go to Singapore. However, traveling to the UK for my interview, which was also my first visit to the country, and spending the first day in London, I found it just awesome. It was right before Christmas, we had a super busy schedule, we had to turn in all the essays, assignments, projects that teachers love to cram in the last week. And I just had these 3 days in the UK and one of them was in London and it was super fun.

**Ana:** Everybody was very encouraging towards your application, saying that if anybody got into Cambridge, it would be you. I was the annoying realist: "Well, the chances are very low, I don't want you to boost your self-esteem too much and end up disappointed." And then, when you got in, all our friends were happy to tell me I had been wrong. Geri, I was trying to be realistic, so you wouldn't get disappointed. And then you got in. That's why you have sisters, to keep you on the ground.

**Geri:** That's true, that's true!

*"Getting up obnoxiously early to get to the College and stare at the stars was a great opportunity that I only now get to appreciate."*

**Would you like to tell the alumni anything?**

**Geri:** We're the newest alumni of the College, so I think we can learn more from those before us than they can learn from us. I think they should be the people giving us advice, not the other way around.

**Ana:** Yeah, we made it, we went through this and now we are connected and we're probably going to stay in this really cool community for a lot of years to come.

**You more than made it. Congratulations again! Do you have anything else you would like to share, talk or complain about, anything to praise perhaps?**

**Ana:** Something really cool. One night during that camping trip to the Grand Canyon we mentioned, we just drove to the middle of nowhere and we laid on the ground, looking at the stars. This is something you don't get to do in San Francisco, because of the light pollution here. And at that time I just remembered Mr. Youngs' Morning Stargazing and I texted him about it. Getting up obnoxiously early to get to the College and stare at the stars was a great opportunity that I only now get to appreciate. Laying down and stargazing, looking at all those constellations brought about all these positive memories from the College.



# DR. ZORNITSA SEMKOVA:

*I Expect the Best  
of My Students.  
And They Usually  
Deliver.*

Many alumni who have been in iconic ACS teacher Dr. Semkova's class can testify with affection to her high expectations of students. The list of her roles at ACS is long: History Teacher, Liberal and Fine Arts Department Chair, IB Program Coordinator, Advisor to the Model United Nations Club, to only name the current ones. We all know Dr. Semkova as a fountain of knowledge, an inspiration and a solid rock to lean on, for colleagues and students alike. With more than 25 years of teaching experience, she continues to embrace change and enjoys being in the classroom. Ladies and gentleman, it is an utmost honor and pleasure to offer you this interview with Dr. Zornitsa Semkova.

*Interview by Petia Ivanova '97*

### You came to ACS back in 2005, is that right?

To a certain extent it is. In 2005, I came back as a full-time teacher, but I started teaching Profile History part-time in 1998. I still have friends now among the alumni of the Class of 2000, who spent two years with me in one of their History profile classes. Next, I stopped teaching in order to work on my PhD as it would have been too much with the teaching, plus my son was 7, in first grade, and constantly sick. I returned to ACS after completing my PhD, this time as a regular teacher.

**So that was 17 years ago, your return. What was ACS like and what were ACS students like back then? Of course, I'm going to ask you to compare those to ACS and the students today, as well.**

I know the tradition is to say: "Oh, the olden, golden times!" I would say though, that my students are amazing and they have been so ever since I first met those first ones in 1999. This is why I keep on working at the College. In terms of the overall feeling, of course, it was a much smaller community. The feeling of community, a family almost within the College, was much more well-expressed. And I miss this. There were fewer teachers and fewer students, so we knew each other much better, and of course, we were younger - the staff parties were absolutely sensational in those days. Maybe there are still parties like this, it's just that I'm this old Department Chair who does not get invited now, so that's different. This warm fuzzy feeling of coziness, of being among friends and family, this was what the College felt like and now I try everything possible to maintain this feeling within the Department, within the Model United Nations Club, and within my History Profile classes but, yes, it's a challenge with a bigger community.

### Do you have a favorite class?

No, I love all my classes. I know some colleagues do; for example, Ivo<sup>1</sup> was particularly fond of the Class of 2001. He loved all of his classes, but it was always 2001. I don't have anything like it, I like them all. Generally, I don't have a class which I don't like or get along with either, no such thing. I would rather say I have students within each class who were so outstanding that I would forever remember them clearly, but it's not to say that I'm particularly attached to any class. Of course, there are classes where I taught the majority of the class, hence I know them better or I know most of them. These are my first classes here, because I used to teach some of them in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Grade, and then half of them in the 12<sup>th</sup> Grade, like the Classes of 2007 and 2008, for example. Later on, when classes started growing, I knew fewer students, but again, those I was teaching were all great.

**I was going to ask you if classes have a common image that a teacher keeps (like rebels, comedians, over-achievers, etc.) or is it more remembering individual students, but I think you sort of answered that.**

Yeah, no, on the contrary. I've always seen them as a very motley picture of colorful individuals. I hate sweeping generalizations. This is one of the lines that I would write again and again in my comments on their History essays: "Please, beware of sweeping generalizations!" When they tell me that Germans supported Hitler, for example. All of them, really? More likely, I've always

been willing to support the individuality of my students and they have always managed to surprise me positively, well, at least most of the time. Also, as I say at the beginning of each school year, I usually expect the best of my students. And they usually deliver. It is a kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy because you tell them: "Guys, I want you to be your best." And then most of them do it most of the time which is perfect.

**What do you value or like the most in your work at ACS and in your work as a teacher, if there is a difference between the two?**

There is a difference. I've been a teacher everywhere. I've taught at Sofia University as an Assistant Professor, I have taught at another private school, and I started my teaching career at a regular school where the children of Kremikovtsi workers studied, so I've seen it all: the whole spectrum of Bulgarian educational institutions. And I stayed at the College exactly because of the amazing students here.

*"Brexit and the 2016 elections in the United States are some of the proofs that social sciences education has been failing significantly worldwide."*

At some point, I was teaching History Profile classes here and at the same time I had classes at Sofia University with 4th- and 5th-year students. Back then, the Bachelor's program didn't exist at Sofia University, so all History students there graduated with a Master's of Art degree. All of them had the mandatory 5 years, the socialist-inherited education model was still valid. So I worked with 4th- and 5th-year students at Sofia University and they had to write a research paper. The moaning about the fact that I was requiring them to write a research paper could be heard beyond the premises of the university. And there was this 5th-year student who claimed that nobody had ever made them write a research paper. Of course, I didn't buy



Dr. Semkova at the 2014 Day of Silence ACS event aiming to raise awareness about bullying, intolerance, and discrimination

<sup>1</sup>Ivailo Dimitrov was ACS History teacher and Dr. Semkova's husband who passed away in 2017.

this, because I knew very well that there were other colleagues who were doing it. I used to say in response: "Higher education is not mandatory. You are here by your own desire, and if you don't like it, you don't have to stay." At the same time, my ACS students would be writing two research papers per year in the 11<sup>th</sup> Grade and they would do it with a minimum of complaints, considering the situation. How could I not prefer that!

Given the level of administrative work that I do, generally, I enter classes here as if I'm going for a recess. Being in class is the time when I have a rest, when I enjoy my day. It's not that I dislike my administrative work, it's just that with students it is fun, it is interesting and enjoyable, and with all the opportunities provided by new technology it gets so interactive, we do so many interesting things. Classes are the time to have fun.

My goal is for my students to feel, at least to a certain extent, as historians. To be in historians' shoes, to get them detached from and destroy the stigma of History being the memorization of facts and dates. Not to say that I'm not fond of dates and facts. The whole point is that I want my students to go beyond this, to be discovering things on their own, to be evaluating perspectives, to be questioning towards the trends we are discussing, to work with a vast array of sources and evaluate them considering their values and limitations. After all, they are going to need this in everyday life, in society. If they forget all the facts, that would be awful, because they need those facts, particularly, the more contemporary history but not only. If they have the ability for critical thinking and critical evaluation however, this would be the best outcome. So this is exactly what History is in 2022. To be able to see beyond the simplistic explanations and to understand the current events on the basis of the historical development of the world. So, contemporary relevance and global awareness are extremely important. I've always said that Brexit and the 2016 elections in the United States are some of the proofs that social sciences education has been failing significantly worldwide.

#### If you could change one thing about schools,



Dr. Semkova delivering the Liberal and Fine Arts Department Award to Vladislav Vassilev at the 2008 Commencement Ceremonies

**education and ACS, what would you change? Or, maybe in starting the process of change, what should be the first step, in your opinion? What would be the thing that would have the biggest positive impact?**

I would go with having enthusiastic teachers. Enthusiastic teachers who are up to date, who have all the necessary professional development,

encouragement, and support available out there. And this is not to say that we don't have it at ACS, just that in the end we, teachers, set the tone of the school and in the classroom, and to a very high extent what's going on there depends on us, so having kind, enthusiastic, and happy teachers goes a long way to ensure successful education and best outcomes.

#### Is that what they have in Finland?

I think so. You know that in Finland they don't rate their schools; the concept is that all schools are equal and equally good. And it comes from this constant encouragement for teachers to develop and invest in themselves; they have everything that they need to actually maintain this school environment. And then it doesn't matter whether children are coming from one social background or another, because when at school, all of those children get the opportunity to be their best version and get an individualized approach.

However, it all goes back to what the teacher can do: what they are willing to do and what they have the abilities to do. And it won't happen just because we want to be great teachers. We need to know how to do it and we shouldn't need to invent the wheel. It's just to be able to find and share the necessary knowledge and know-how, which has already been there, which has been applied; and it doesn't happen individually. One needs to be a part of the bigger learning community of teachers. But in order to do this, one needs the time to invest in this, besides everything else that one does; the teacher needs to have the strength and stamina to do it. If teachers are overworked and underpaid, and there is no stimulus coming from outside to do this, why would they? The first thing I'd like to see is enthusiastic and happy teachers, with access to all this know-how.

#### Back in the day, did you know that you were going to be a teacher? How did you become one?

No, I did not know I would become a teacher. At the same time, I come from a family of educators. So, I didn't know, but it's like when you are a child, you don't think of yourself as blonde, right? But you are. So, this was me. I knew that I was going to be a historian. Again, family kind of verdict with seven of us in the family in total. But the teaching part – I didn't mind it, and when I started doing it part-time, just in order to kind of do something while I was on maternity leave, you know, in order to get out of the house. So, when my son was about one year old, I felt this urge in the streets, to inform strangers of the presence of a cat or a dog and it made me realize it really was about time that I started doing something beyond taking care of him. So, I started this part-time teaching gig because the local school needed a part-time historian, I liked it, and I stayed.

**So, you were talking about happy, enthusiastic teachers. In your opinion, is that something that can come about with the right training and motivation or is it, above all, a question of personality?**

Everything together.

#### Did you have pedagogical training as part of your university studies?

Of course I had, we all had. I wouldn't say that this kind of socialist-ideology-based courses in psychology, which were totally formal, and pedagogy, which was also totally formal, that they actually brought anything to me as a teacher. It was more the doing of the great teachers that I used to have at school, because the



Dr. Semkova and colleagues at the 2015 Commencement Ceremonies

thing is, I did have really great teachers. And all the bad teachers that I also had, who definitely taught me the lesson of what I shouldn't be doing, unquestionably. I do think that there are good teachers and people who shouldn't be teachers. Generally, if you don't love what you do, what would you do in a classroom? You better not stay here. So, a combination. But back to your question, had I had the proper pedagogical education, this would have saved me lots of trouble.

#### **Proper from your point of view today?**

Yes. From the perspective of what I know now, it could have been given to me the easy way by a formal, well-organized education, which I didn't have, instead of me having to discover it for myself one way or another through the opportunities that ACS provided to me, through all the opportunities to travel abroad and see what is happening outside of this bubble of ours within the Bulgarian educational system. This could have been easily delivered to me at the university, had anyone really wanted to, had anyone planned on this in those days. But you have to keep in mind that I studied a long, long time ago.

#### **What would your favorite day as an ACS teacher look like: a day with a lot of classes, one at the end of the school year or perhaps that time when you meet a class for the first time?**

I am always quite impatient for classes to begin in the fall. So I love the beginning of the school year. I love the 15<sup>th</sup>, better yet the 16<sup>th</sup> of September. It's a relief to get back to class, after all the administration at the beginning of the school year, and to be with students and to see who they are and what we can mold them into.

Also, any day at the College when it's warm. Outside and also inside the classroom. You are speaking to a person who has been surviving in Abbott for many years and for extended periods without heating. The experience of teaching while literally freezing is not a pleasant experience. No, I would correct myself. It is pleasant to be teaching because when you are teaching, the students are there and they are like little stoves, little furnaces, and the temperature in the classroom quickly rises. When you stay in the office at 15-16 degrees Celsius though, within 30 minutes, you've turned into an icicle.

So, my favorite day is any day when I have a reasonable amount of classes and it's warm. But the beginning of school is always my favorite. It's the anticipation of something new, a new challenge, new opportunities, new people to meet and like.

#### **Do you have a favorite era/time period to teach?**

Yes, the 20th century. At the same time, I love everything. I don't have anything that I don't like. Not at all. For example, the History Profile brought me back to prehistoric times and ancient civilizations, which I haven't taught for something like 20 years or so. And it's fun and I love it. But I really, really love teaching 20<sup>th</sup> century history. And I chose it for my PhD, so that should tell you.

#### **If Deyan<sup>2</sup> would have come to you and said that he wanted to study History...**

He did say that he wanted to study some History. And we did try asking, "Don't you want to go into IT?"

#### **Or Finance, right?**

No, nobody asked him about Finance, because we knew that he was not interested, while he was very much into computers. But when he threatened, "Shut up, or I'm going to enroll in a History major," we knew we should keep our mouths closed. He did International Relations and Politics. And he works with that now, it was not in vain. But I kid you not, this was a real conversation, "Shut up, or I'm doing History."

#### **What's your favorite funny moment from your ACS teaching experience?**

Oh, let me tell you about my favorite funny moment, perpetuated in the chronicles of the *College Life* student newspaper. The year was 2007 and I hadn't been to Paris yet. History class with the Class of 2008, they were in 11th Grade, "Miss, have you been to Versailles?" they asked and I replied, "No, unfortunately not, and I have always wanted to go, it's one of my dreams." And the whole class burst into laughter and giggled away. And then it got published as a howler (бисеп) in *College Life*.

It was only later that I found out they had meant a then new and fashionable chalga club... called Versailles.

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*"The beginning of school is always my favorite time of year. It's the anticipation of something new, a new challenge, new opportunities, new people to meet and like."*

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#### **Do you have a message to our readers, mostly alumni?**

Yes, don't forget about ACS! We love you here, we remember you, we are always happy to see you. We wish you good luck, and the better you have it, the more we hope you will be supporting us here at the College, so we can keep up our work with students.

#### **So we can have warm classrooms and even happier and more enthusiastic teachers?**

Exactly. I'm so fond of seeing alumni. At Arts Fest again, there was the usual cohort and it was full of strollers, so I got to meet new babies, even such with both parents ACS alumni. The second wave of production by the same ACS alum couples, actually. Two of my son's best friends are getting married very soon, too. Exciting times.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Semkova's son, Deyan Dimitrov, is an ACS alum from the Class of 2012.

# TURNING PREPS INTO ALUMNI



The Class of 1997 in 2017 holding their 1992 prep photo

When addressing the incoming 8<sup>th</sup> graders at ACS on 15 September, we make it a point to outline what being an alumnus or alumna of the American College of Sofia is. It is both a goal for them to strive for through Graduation and a reminder to us why ACS exists – to help turn the talented young minds not just into good students with excellent grades, but also into accomplished, well-rounded and good people; people who are strong leaders with a sense of civic duty. In one word – alumni.

We also highlight for these wide-eyed preps in the Whitaker Auditorium that many of them are able to afford to be there thanks to those that came before them – you. In addition to explaining how you stay in touch with the school and keep ACS close at heart, we underline how you also invest considerable amounts of money and creative energy to support the College. These help to improve the gorgeous and historic campus, attract and retain the best faculty, and better still, help to relieve the financial burden of tuition for those talented students whose families wouldn't be able to afford an ACS education – financial aid that also enabled many of you to attend back in your day.

As it is our fervent wish that you will keep finding yourselves in better and more affluent positions in life, it is also our hope that you will continue to keep ACS in mind in your budgeting and even more alumni will join the ranks of those who give back, be it small or big amounts. And, on behalf of those wide-eyed 8<sup>th</sup> graders, we thank you for your commitment to the College.

2022 is the first year in the College's recent history that witnesses anniversary reunions of five classes: 1997, 2002, 2007, 2012, and 2017 (and the make-up gatherings as well). It is also the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary since ACS reopened in 1992. That alone could be a swell occasion for you to consider a gift this year, dedicated to that favorite facet of your College. That way, we will know that we can convey the same message to the preps of 2022/2023, but with more fervor, conviction and pride.

Thank you for giving back!

The ACS Advancement Office





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