

## **Longevity in the Exhibition „Codes of Identity“ of the National Anthropological Museum at the Institute of Experimental Morphology, Pathology and Anthropology with Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences**

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Longevity is a topic that has always fascinated humankind. Throughout the stages of civilization's development, the average human lifespan has varied. Undoubtedly, the living conditions, environment, food, and advancement of medicine influence life expectancy. Yet, there have always been centenarians, and there is still no definitive answer to the key to reaching a record-breaking age. This study aimed to collect, summarize, and analyze material related to specific Bulgarian families concerning longevity in order to identify the factors that influence it. The exhibition "Codes of Identity" presents Bulgarian longevity via specific settlements and families. A rich photographic archive reflecting the anthropological characteristics of the population has been collected and analyzed. The genealogy of selected families is also presented. In conclusion, the „Human“ is placed at the center of the exhibition. He is the element that Anthropology and Genealogy, and the exhibition shows that the symbiosis between the two disciplines is beneficial and promising.

*Key words:* National Anthropological Museum, anthropology, genealogy, longevity, centenarian

### **Introduction**

Longevity is a topic that has always intrigued people. In different stages of civilization's development, average life expectancy has varied. Many factors determine these values. Living conditions, environment, nutrition, and the emergence of medicine undeniably influence life expectancy. Yet, the fact remains that centenarians have always existed, and the key to extreme longevity still remains elusive.

The exhibition "Codes of Identity" presents the longevity of Bulgarians through the lens of specific villages and families.

The aim of this study is to collect, summarize, and analyze materials related to specific Bulgarian families and their experiences with longevity, to present the environment in which these families have lived over the years, and to attempt to identify the factors influencing their longevity.

## Materials and Methods

A field study was conducted in selected communities and villages: Lik and Kameno Pole, Dzhurovo village, and the town of Ugarchin. A rich photographic archive reflecting the anthropological traits of the population was collected. The genealogy of the selected families was recorded and described.

## Results and Discussion

In November 2024, the author's exhibition "*Codes of Identity*" was opened in the temporary exhibition halls of the National Anthropological Museum at the Institute of Experimental Morphology, Pathology, and Anthropology with Museum of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The focus of this exhibition is Bulgarian longevity, supported by specific examples. The exhibition is a result of the author's longstanding interest in the topic of longevity and genealogical connections. During the research process, one focal point of the exhibition emerged quite naturally – the discovery of a tombstone containing information about a man who lived to be 130 years old.

This case came to light after reports from the village of Lik, Mezdra municipality, Vratsa region, that a person of biblical age had died there at the end of the 20th century. In the summer of 2024, a field study was organized in the mentioned area. Indeed, a tombstone was found in the local cemetery near the village of Lik. The inscription reads:

*„Here rest father Yoncho – 130 years, son Ivan – 103 years, son Krastyo – 106 years. Their father died in 1906. Erected / Exalted by Geno Krastev.“ (Fig. 1).*

An inquiry was made at the Lik village hall, which provided an official document – a death certificate from 1907, known at the time as an “Act of Dying” (**Fig. 2**). This document confirms the age of Yoncho Tsolov as 130 years. He belonged to the Pelovski family. It became evident that Yoncho outlived both of his centenarian sons and died of illness rather than natural causes. Key contributions to uncovering this story came from his relatives in the Pelovski family: Georgi Pelovski, Diana Pelovska, Georgi Dimitrov, Gergana Nikolova, and Yoncho Pelovski, along with Valentina Misheva, the mayor of Lik. Stone crosses are considered a valuable source of information [2].

The tombstone also reveals that both sons, aged 103 and 106, passed away before their father. Yoncho had another son who also died before him, aged over 90. Interestingly, the tombstone notes who exalted it – Geno Krastev, born in 1873, the great-great-grandson of Yoncho. He was old enough to care for the centenarian. The tombstone is small and was nearly buried, which helped preserve it. It was discovered during excavation for a new grave. The family always knew there was a man who lived to 130.



**Fig. 1.** Tombstone from the village of Lik, Vratsa Province

Съдържанието на актовете	Забѣлѣжка
<p>№ 1</p> <p><b>АКТЪ ЗА УМИРАНЕ</b></p> <p>на <u>Умира</u></p> <p>На умирането деноуието и <u>Родна</u> година, мѣсецъ <u>Августъ</u> день <u>десетъ</u> на <u>септември</u></p> <p>частъ <u>Бургасъ</u> община <u>Бургасъ</u> съставя настоящия актъ за умирането на <u>Умира</u></p> <p>по вѣра <u>православенъ</u> по народностъ <u>Българинъ</u> поданскъ <u>Българинъ</u> по занаетъ <u>земледѣлецъ</u> да възраст <u>сто и тридесетъ</u> години, родомъ отъ <u>село Мико</u> община <u>Мико</u> съ постоянно мѣстожителство въ <u>село Мико</u> община <u>Мико</u> по семейно положение починалъ е <u>Вдовецъ</u> на <u>Умира</u></p> <p>по народностъ <u>Българинъ</u> поданскъ <u>Българинъ</u> по занаетъ <u>земледѣлецъ</u> на възраст <u>десетъ</u> години, родомъ отъ <u>село Мико</u> община <u>Мико</u> съ постоянно мѣстожителство въ <u>село Мико</u> община <u>Мико</u></p> <p>на който бракъ е починалъ <u>Умира</u> година <u>десетъ</u></p> <p>Починалъ е <u>село Мико</u> на <u>Умира</u> и е умрялъ отъ болестъта <u>Туберкулоза</u> на <u>Умира</u> частъ <u>Бургасъ</u> община <u>Бургасъ</u> на <u>Умира</u> день отъ мѣсецъ <u>Августъ</u></p> <p>Умирането деноуието и <u>Родна</u> година въ <u>десетъ</u> на <u>септември</u> на <u>Умира</u></p> <p>Свидѣтели са били: <u>Умира</u></p> <p>по вѣра <u>православенъ</u> по занаетъ <u>земледѣлецъ</u> на възраст <u>десетъ</u> години, жителъ отъ <u>село Мико</u> община <u>Мико</u> по вѣра <u>православенъ</u> по занаетъ <u>земледѣлецъ</u> да възраст <u>десетъ</u> години, жителъ отъ <u>село Мико</u></p> <p>Настоящия актъ се подписа, както съ свидѣтелствъ тъй едно и отъ мене съставъ, съдѣ като се прочете и като се удостовери за съдѣтелствата на починалия.</p> <p>Свидѣтели: <u>Умира</u></p> <p>Кметъ: <u>Умира</u></p>	

**Fig. 2** Death certificate from 1907, known at the time as an “Act of Dying”



According to records, Yoncho Tsolov was a farmer. Documents list his death in 1907, though the tombstone says 1906 – a common discrepancy in that era due to delays in burial for holidays or weather conditions. It is believed that one of the reasons for Yoncho Tsolov's longevity may be the healing properties of the water in the village of Lik, which is currently under investigation. The cult of water holds an important place in Bulgarian culture [5].

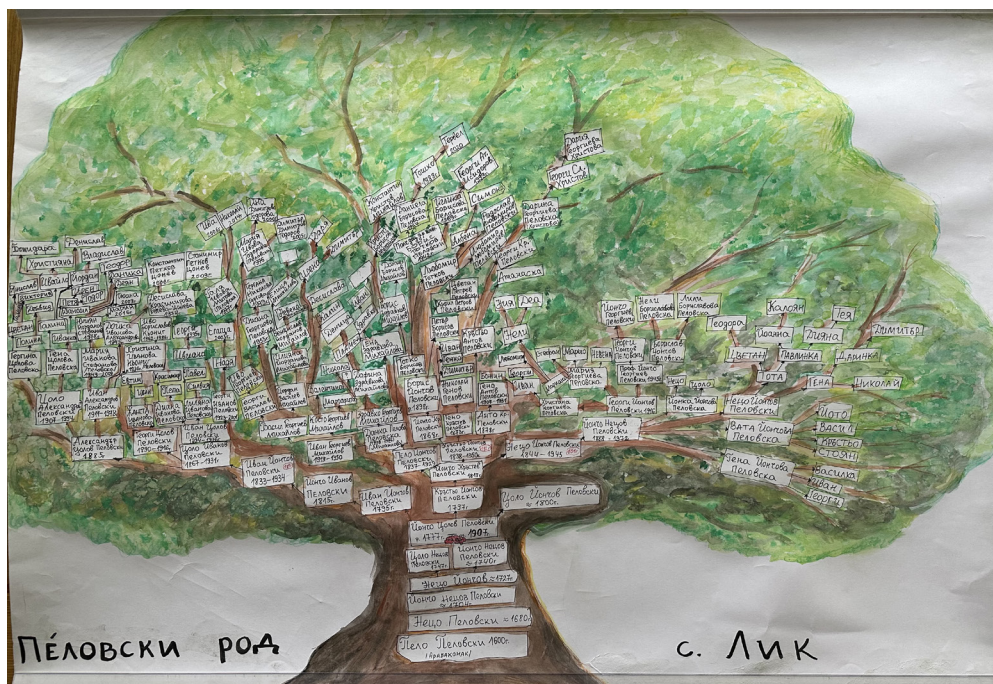
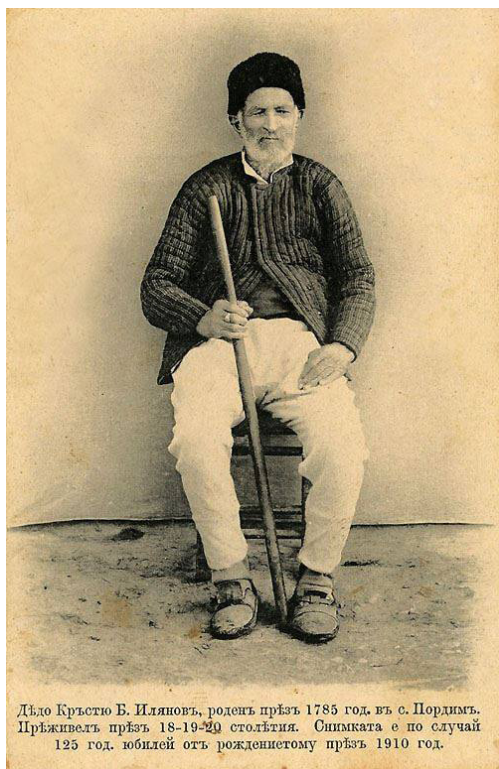


Fig. 3. The Pelovski Family Tree

Research indicates the Pelovski family migrated from today's Republic of North Macedonia in the early 16th century (Fig. 3). They traveled through the Sofia Valley, likely passing through the Arabakonak (Botevgrad) or Etropole Pass. The reasons for the migration are unknown. They eventually settled in the Etropole region. Their main livelihoods were livestock farming and crafts. Later, they spread into the Vratsa region – villages like Lik, Dolna Beshovitsa, and Kunino – and from Oreshak in the Troyan Balkan to towns like Troyan, Lovech, Debnevo, Shipkovo, Teteven, Glozhene, Golyam Izvor, Dzhurovo, and Vidrare.

The exhibition “Codes of Identity” also features a photo of a Bulgarian believed to have lived 128 years – Krastyo Ilyanov from Pordim. A 1910 postcard reads: „Grandfather Krastyo B. Ilyanov, born in 1785 in Pordim. Lived through the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. This photo commemorates his 125th birthday in 1910.“ His story was researched by Lyubomir Bukovski and published in his book “Pleven – Meeting with the Past 1877–1944.” Due to a postcard printed in Germany, we have a photo of this remarkable man (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** A photo of Krastyo Ilyanov from Pordim that commemorates his 125th birthday in 1910

Krastyo Beshev Ilyanov is believed to be the longest-living Bulgarian, born in 1785 in Pordim, Pleven region. A farmer, known for his work ethic and kind nature, he lived through epidemics, wars, and famine, never leaving his birthplace until his death in 1913 [1].

Another interesting case is Vasilka Bangieva from Pavelsko, who reportedly lived to 125. Later records show that she was born in 1790 and died in 1909, aged 119. She was photographed with her son, over 100 himself, by photographer Krum Savov. The photo was exhibited in Liège in 1905 (**Fig. 5**).

Reaching old age brings a special status and respect [6]. The thread of longevity in the exhibition is also traced through genealogy, the science of family history. From Greek “*genos*” (family) and “*logos*” (science) [10]. Genealogy explores bloodline and kinship terminology. It contributes to understanding biological ancestry using traditional research methods and, when needed, genetic genealogy. The types of kinship in Bulgaria are presented in detail in the book “Brachnik” by Ivan Genadiev from 1887 [3]. The renowned Bulgarian scholar Dimitar Marinov, Director of the Ethnographic Museum, explored the topic of longevity in great detail as early as the late 19th century [7-9]. The beliefs about the human body in the traditional culture of Bulgarians are examined in a very interesting and detailed manner in *Mythology of the Human Body – Anthropological Dictionary* [4].

Greek philosopher Theophrastus (372–287 BC) wrote: „*You ask me about him, since you are interested, let me proceed as genealogists do – I will begin with his parents.*“

**Fig. 5.** A photo of Vasilka Bangieva from Pavelsko, who lived to 125.



Genealogy reveals detailed family histories and relationships, often uncovering important data missed by traditional sources. An example is the teacher Yordan Hvirlev from the National Revival period. Notes in his personal Bible, preserved to this day, describe valuable contributions to Bulgarian history. Born in 1864 in Elena, he studied at a seminary, taught in Varna, and died in Sofia in 1936, buried in Sofia Central Cemetery.

Several families are presented in the exhibition. The research attempts to trace hereditary diseases, skills, and a genealogical chronology. One example is the family of Eustati Martinov, mayor of Veliko Tarnovo in the early 20th century (**Fig. 6**). Born on March 20, 1857, Martinov descended from several notable families – Priest Stoyko of Elena, Priest Martin of Razpopovtsi, the Aprilov family from Gabrovo, and Hadzhidaskalov from Tryavna. Eustati Martinov was a teacher, lawyer, public figure, and friend of Stefan Stambolov and Aleko Konstantinov.

He became mayor of Tarnovo in 1902. Stambolov once asked him to become a monk to be appointed bishop, but he refused, wanting a family. Lawyer Nikolay Martinov recalls his father was named after Vasyl Aprilov's father – Eustati.

The *Codes of Identity* exhibition raised important societal topics, increased attendance at the National Anthropological Museum, and sparked a tradition of genealogy workshops well-received by the public. These are open to all ages and help participants begin personal genealogical research.

The „*Human*“ is placed at the exhibition's center – the unifying element between Anthropology and Genealogy. The results demonstrate that this coalition is both beneficial and full of potential.





**Fig. 6.** Photo of Family of Eustati Martinov. From left to right: wife Zhivka (holding grandson Dimitar Abadjiev), Eustati Martinov, daughter Venka, and standing: sons Nikolay and Georgi, and son-in-law Petar Abadjiev

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