



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

# ROAD TO EMMAUS

---

Help support  
*Road to Emmaus*  
Journal.

The *Road to Emmaus* staff hopes that you find our journal inspiring and useful. While we offer our past articles on-line free of charge, we would warmly appreciate your help in covering the costs of producing this non-profit journal, so that we may continue to bring you quality articles on Orthodox Christianity, past and present, around the world. Thank you for your support.

*Please consider a donation to Road to Emmaus by visiting the Donate page on our website.*



# NADEZHDA SAVOVA'S BREAD HOUSES:

## Bread-Making as Food, Art, Healing, Prayer, and International Community

When 29-year-old Orthodox anthropologist Nadezhda Savova inherited her great-grandmother's crumbling house in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, she brought together local volunteers to rebuild it into a community-owned Bread House and Cultural Center where neighbors of diverse backgrounds could come to bake bread and form friendships. Since then she has established Bread Houses in a dozen countries, from Russia to Israel, Brazil, England, South Korea, and the United States. Milestones for 2012 included a Ph.D. in anthropology from Princeton and Dr. Savova's being named *National Geographic's* "Traveler of the Year". *Road to Emmaus* is pleased to count her among our widening circle of friends.

RTE: Nadezhda, will you describe the Bread Houses and how you came up with such a novel idea for community growth?

NADEZHDA: The idea of the Bread Houses first came about when I was a pilgrim in the Holy Land. When we went to Bethlehem our tour guide said, "By the way, do you know that Bethlehem means "House of Bread"? At that moment an image appeared in front of my eyes: a house with everyone making bread together, a place where people gathered to share in the creative effort. At the time, the focus of my Ph.D. was how to start living community cultural centers to catalyze social transformation. I'd been working on community organizing with mixed results, and now I realized, "This is it: a combination of a bakery and cultural center, animated by the aroma of hot bread!" Per-

*Opposite: Liturgical baking with bread stamps, Nadezhda Savova, New York, 2012*

sonally, I've always been drawn to bakeries—special places of warmth and aroma that feel like anchors of home and hope.

Some years earlier while working on my B.A. in International Relations, I'd realized that global issues can only truly be solved through local changes that then combine with other local initiatives to form a powerful network, so I decided to shift my focus to anthropology. I was drawn to its understanding of humanity as a multitude of unique persons, rather than masses of numbers and statistics. So, when I was accepted into the Ph.D. program at Princeton, I dedicated myself to researching how the arts can be an engine for local social change, particularly in poor and violent neighborhoods where one would least expect beauty, but in fact, where creativity is one of the most powerful motivations for change. So, I began thinking about bread-making as an art form that could be collectively created, experienced, and shared to unite people across boundaries.

In 2008 I founded the International Council for Cultural Centers (I3C), a non-profit organization that unites community cultural centers across the globe. The Bread Houses Network is one of our programs, and it establishes community gatherings where bread-making can be linked to other art forms like poetry, music, and theater. I envisioned a warm, comfortable place that welcomes people of all ages, economic levels, colors, and cultures, where all would be united around one hearth, one table. There are now Bread House initiatives in twelve countries on five continents.

### Hearth and Home

RTE: Wonderful. Did you have this interest in baking as a child?

NADEZHDA: My fondest childhood memories are connected to food. Growing up, I was blessed to have four generations of amazing women nurture me with food, both physically and spiritually: my mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and great-great-grandmother. I remember my great-grandmother, Baba Raina, frying dough dumplings called *buhtichki*—the aroma of her cooking attracted children from the entire neighborhood. My mother's mother, Mina, whom I call Mama Minni, was an opera singer, and I remember her singing Italian arias while concocting all kinds of amazing desserts like *praskovki* ("peaches")—small pieces of dough formed to look like a plump peach. The most formative person in my life, though, is my

mother Darina. My favorite memories are of Christmas celebrations when I would help her prepare the nine traditional Bulgarian Christmas Eve fasting dishes. My favorite of the nine was the *sodena pitka*, a round soda bread. I will never forget the bread's aroma filling the house, mixed with the incense that is burnt as a prayer of thanksgiving to God. Bread was a key ingredient to our daily life in Bulgaria, and its religious significance puts it at the core of Bulgarian culture and other Orthodox Christian cultures. I had that rich culinary background, but believe it or not, I had never actually made bread myself! This was God's grace in Bethlehem—that I was fascinated by something I had never touched. With that vision in my head, I thought, "I have to try this to see if it will work."

Soon after I returned to Bulgaria from the Holy Land, the roof of my great-grandmother's house collapsed completely, leaving only the four walls, because no one had taken care of it for over a century. The municipality of Gabrovo wanted to demolish the house, and I said, "Ok, God wants me to act. This is it, now I have to." I accepted the whole thing as a blessing, and a priest helped me find volunteers who, in the depth of a freezing winter in Bulgaria, helped me fix the roof in -20 C. [-4 F.] weather. Literally, the first snow began to fall as we were placing the last beam on the roof, so we were able to put tarps over the rafters just in time to save the walls and floor.

Once we got the roof back on, I put out announcements in the neighborhood inviting people to come make bread. The very first night of bread-making brought in sixty people, none of whom had met each other or knew me! And this is a country that after communism has low trust levels, very low social capital.

RTE: What kinds of people came?

NADEZHDA: It was God's mystery. I didn't connect the bread-making explicitly with Orthodoxy, although I did say that we were celebrating Christmas and St. Stephen's Day, the 27th of December, but most of these people were just secular neighbors—parents, grandmothers, children, teachers, working people, a few gypsies, a few homeless. When I saw this, I thought, "Ok, this is it. If this is how it works on the very first day..." After that first night people asked for more, and we began doing it twice a week. I lived in the family house writing my Ph.D., and opening it up twice a week for bread-making. We liked to make the bread without artificial light, just by candlelight, and cooked it in our wood-fired oven.



The wood-stove is another great story. My great-grandmother's house didn't have an oven, and as we were fixing the roof, a man passing by on the street stopped and said, "Are you crazy?—it's 20 degrees below zero!" We said, "We have to do this. Our roof just collapsed, but we are starting a Bread House and we'll also have to build an oven." He asked what a bread house was and after listening smiled and said, "You know, I'm the best oven maker in Bulgaria. I often go to Serbia to build them for 3,000 euros each, but I am going to build it free for you." The next day he came and within a week we had a beautiful big wood-fired clay oven. He liked that we didn't care about money and were just doing something for people, and he was fascinated as he had never thought of an oven as something that could create community. He loved the idea and said, "I've been making these for commercial restaurants or private homes, but I like this because it's not commercial, nor is it private."

One of the best parts of the story is that his name was Stefan! That was how God was working through this whole thing. Also, Stephana was the name of my great-great grandmother who built the house! God's hand is in everything. So St. Stephen is obviously one of the protectors of the house, although the saints after whom we named the first Bread House and the guardians of the Bread Houses Network are St. Christopher and St. Nicholas, who are celebrated together on May 9th. May 9, 2009 was the day I had the clear vision of what the Bread House would look and feel like, and so I decided to dedicate the cause to the saints of the day. As protectors of travelers, St. Nicholas and St. Christopher have brought many traveling souls to the Bread House over the years, and they have certainly looked after me in my travels around the world.

### Bread Houses and a Stational Liturgy

RTE: After turning your own home into a community bread house, how did you branch out?

NADEZHDA: A week before we opened in Bulgaria I went to a United Nations conference in Copenhagen on climate change, healthy lifestyles, and green economies, representing the International Council for Cultural Centers, and I shared my vision of the Bread Houses. People were fascinated, and many came to talk to me about their childhood memories of bread. These were

*Opposite: Baking Orthodox liturgical breads in the first Bread House. Gabrovo, Bulgaria, 2011.*

politicians and diplomats—people you wouldn't expect to be excited about anything, who came to talk about their native breads. I thought, "That just shows you. If you touch people's hearts it doesn't matter what class or position they are in, they respond." At that conference, I launched this as "The BREAD Movement"; using "BREAD" as an acronym to mean "Bridging Resources for Ecological and Art-Based Development".

A few people at the conference said, "We want to do this in our countries. Come to us and do this." I said, "Alright, we'll see. I don't have money, just a Ph.D. fellowship, but maybe I can fly somehow." So I was invited to country after country, and often I was able to combine it with an academic conference at which I presented papers, so that my school paid my transportation. I would take my Ph.D. volunteer time and stay up to a month after the conference, sleeping on people's couches and working in local community centers as well as in churches, libraries, old people's homes, hospitals, orphanages, centers for people with mental disabilities, and so on. Since then I've started Bread House programs in twelve countries.

Beginning the initiatives is simple. I ask, "Do you want to have a bread-making workshop?" They say, "That sounds easy, let's try," and everyone is amazed at how it works.

For instance in Capetown, South Africa, we were in an orphanage of black children that had had no interaction with the surrounding white community. We didn't have an oven at the orphanage, but the priest at a nearby Greek Church offered to let us bake there. We mixed dough and formed it in the orphanage and then processed through the streets to the church. Local people spontaneously joined our procession. I felt like we were in one of St. John Chrysostom's stational liturgies moving through Constantinople, but with trays of bread.

The beauty is that although this was after apartheid, there are still very clear boundaries and blacks and whites really don't communicate—yet, here we had black and white neighbors baking bread. Later, some of the older people said, "I can't believe that I was just making bread with black orphans." It was the Holy Spirit. As the bread was baking, I took them to the church and explained the frescoes and the icons. Everyone who had come with us was in awe, they were speechless. Some said that they hadn't ever seen such beauty, ever. These were Protestant Christians whose churches are usually whitewashed rooms with a cross.

During their visit, the older white South African ladies from the neighborhood began to connect with the Greek grandmothers from the church, and after the bread was baked we processed back to the orphanage. The whole neighborhood could smell the hot bread in the street and many more people came back with us. We ate the bread at the orphanage with people from a nearby home for white elderly, whom I had especially invited. They hadn't even known that this orphanage existed just two blocks from their retirement home! The children and the elderly had such good interactions. They loved each other, told stories, and made friends. This is when I came up with the idea of building orphanages and elderly people's homes next to each other.

RTE: Did you know that the Byzantines also did this? There are accounts of them linking church homes for the elderly with orphanages so that the children would have grandparents and the elderly, extra helping hands. Where have you done this?

NADEZHDA: At Danilov Monastery in Moscow, my friend Dimitri, the youth coordinator, suggested that I train volunteers and that we try bread-making as therapy at a hospital. I thought this was a fantastic idea as I'd already tested it at a hospital in Peru—my first Bread House

outside of Bulgaria—with Patch Adams, the doctor who does humor therapy. Dimitri took us to the RDKB, the largest children's hospital in southwest Moscow, where we had a bread-making workshop with doctors and their young patients. It was amazing to see them working together. The children loved it. They usually associate the doctors with pain and for the first time they were not afraid of their doctors; the parents who were there could not believe their eyes. People were coming down from upper floors to join us as they smelled the bread!



*Elderly man teaching Nadezhda how to make naan in the Gobi Desert, India, January 2008.*

## Rhythms of Life, Bread and Prayer

Once I completed my Ph.D. at Princeton, I looked for new avenues for our work, mostly in Bulgaria and the U.S. In cooperation with psychologists and therapists, I did bread-making with people with various physical and mental disabilities: Down Syndrome, autism, depression, schizophrenia, as well as people with serious trauma (women victims of domestic violence or trafficking; children victims of various forms of physical abuse; elderly people who have suffered stroke and have speaking difficulties; and so on). Bread-making helps in all of these conditions, because its core benefit is that it slows and calms people, and helps them shift their gears to rethink their attitude to others and to themselves. One Greek Orthodox priest at the Syndesmos youth conference on Orthodox psychotherapy held in Crete in 2012, called what we do “psycha-therapy”, from the Greek word *psycha*, which means the soft inner part of the bread. *Psycha* reminds us of the word *psyche*, for soul.

Currently there is an intriguing local initiative to build a Bread House in the Pamir mountains of Tajikistan. The Tajik were inspired by a Bulgarian volunteer working in Tajikistan who told them about the Bread House model, and local people in the village got together and started building their own bread house with their hands out of local stones. They envisioned filling it with traditional ovens from different parts of Tajikistan, and see the activity as a way to bring joy and hope to a village torn by poverty and isolation.

We are also trying bread-making in drug addiction centers and in prisons. Through Slow Food, a movement that promotes the natural growing and cooking of food, I’m working with an organization that has started organic gardens inside Turkish prisons and is now pushing for a whole-grain bakery. If it works in one of Turkey’s biggest prisons, it will work anywhere. I recently saw a documentary about Bulgarian prisons interviewing a prisoner who shared how making bread helped him to organize his time, his life, his values, and brought about a willingness to structure his routine. He said that the rhythm of bread-making, of kneading bread, changes the way you think. It helps you focus and you become calm. It changes your rhythm of life and physically changes the rhythm of your heart.

RTE: For Orthodox Christians, bread-making mixed with the Jesus Prayer is an unbeatable combination.

*Opposite: Daily bread. Ethiopian injera, 2009.*

NADEZHDA: It really is. I've talked to many nuns who make prosphora, and they always say that this is a powerful combination and one of the activities that helps them the most spiritually. You are working with God's elements of wheat, water, and yeast and you are making the substance of what will become His Body.

In Bulgaria we have many baking metaphors that use the image of a baby. We say that to know when the dough is ready, it has to have "the softness of a baby's bottom". The wooden trough (big bowl) where we put the dough to rise overnight when we are making sourdough, is called *noshtvi*, which comes from the word *nosht* for night, and it reminds us of a cradle where a baby would sleep through the night. The trough looks like a cradle and it is covered with a special cloth used only for the bread called *mesal*. Women even talk about dough as if it were a baby: "The baby's going to sleep; let it be clean and warm."

So, we will see how the programs in Russia and Turkey proceed. I don't live in these places, I only go for a few days to a few weeks to organize events, train people, and plant the seed, so the projects depend on local volunteer initiative. Besides Moscow, I've also trained people at a church in St. Petersburg to use the bread-making as catechesis, which I will explain a bit later. During a conference in South Korea, I made bread with the multi-ethnic St. Nicholas Orthodox Church and Monastery in Seoul, and the abbot and bishop liked it as a means to connect the parish's diverse ethnic groups. In Venice, we built a clay wood-fired oven in an old hospital that has been given over as a cultural center. This is an amazing multi-functional space and Moldovan immigrants are hoping to also use it for their Orthodox chapel. In Barcelona, Spain, we work with the National Association for the Blind. This was a year-long project on tactile art, including bread as an art, and has been very successful. I am going to Romania soon where we have connections with the Palamaris Cultural Center in Brashov, which assists orphans and has its own Orthodox chapel. I've done an event in Crete and would like to start bread-making in Athens where I have the use of a church kitchen in a parish that I love, the Church of the Archangels.

Currently, my focus is on my homeland of Bulgaria. Here, the Bread Houses are growing quickly. In 2011 we worked in five cities, and now there are ten. People hear by word of mouth or see us mentioned in the media and contact me, asking help to start a Bread House in their town. In Bulgaria we work also to help the gypsies (Roma) integrate into Bulgarian society. I first tried

this approach in Budapest, Hungary, where we held a bread-making event in the largest gypsy ghetto. They have a cultural center, formerly a glove factory, funded by the government that is called appropriately, the Glove Factory Cultural Center. The center hopes that through the arts different people in the city will get involved and make connections with the gypsies. It is working already. At the bread-making event we had both white secular and Christian Hungarians, and Roma from the nearby apartment blocks.

### Cross-Cultural Bread Therapy: From Russia to Jerusalem

RTE: Why is there such a response?

NADEZHDA: People come together if they have the proper conditions, and that is what I try to create. The Bread Houses have introduced people that would never have met otherwise, forming a dialogue between generations, classes, and even religions. Elderly people have made bread with so-called "anti-social" youth, such as gang members in Harlem and urban youth in Brighton Beach, New York, and end up forming relationships reminiscent of grandparent and grandchild. The program provides a therapeutic experience for people who have endured trauma or who live in terrible conditions. For example, in cooperation with the Orthodox Emmaus House in Harlem, New York, we've made bread with poor, and even with homeless people, who've said that the process awakened childhood and family memories that helped them rediscover sources of gentleness and goodness within themselves. This helped one mother recently released from prison to reconnect with her daughter after years of absence.

Another Bread House program we have in America is run by a professor and his students at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where we visited a shelter for homeless women veterans whose war trauma had left them unable to create a home. For them, bread-making awakened memories of home or longing for home that allowed them to begin to imagine the possibility of a new life.

Bread-making is one of the most leveling experiences ever because this is the food of both the rich and the poor. It's something that anyone can do. You don't have to have skills or tools, you don't need to be able to speak or see or hear, you don't need anything but a few basic ingredients. It is so basic that it speaks to everyone, and that is why people come.



In Bulgaria we have a very successful Bread House that is an example of peace-building and inter-religious tolerance in a community where there are not only Bulgarian Christians, but also Bulgarian Muslims (Pomak), gypsies (Roma) both Muslim and Christian, Turkish Muslims, and Romanian Vlach Orthodox who speak Romanian. All of this in a town of two thousand people. These groups were divided by language, culture, religion and neighborhood, but there was one schoolteacher who was trying to get the kids together to grow a garden. When she heard about the Bread House model she said, “Maybe for the bread, the parents would come too.” And they did come, and not only came, but began talking to each other. They joked, exchanged recipes—Gypsy, Turkish, Bulgarian, Romanian, Muslim, Christian interchange. So, it does work. You only have to create the right atmosphere, because it doesn’t just happen out of nothing. You have to set it up, but the aroma of bread is simply disarming.

RTE: Even street parties or neighborhood celebrations don’t always work that well.

NADEZHDA: Of course, people can rejoice in the street together. They come together to drink and dance and listen to music, but they probably won’t learn each other’s names. In this case they do. I don’t exactly know how and why, but it works.

I recently had an interesting experience in London. I held a bread workshop at a non-profit called South Bank Mosaics, where juvenile delinquents and newly-released prisoners make beautiful mosaic murals to decorate the city. One young African orphan boy from Uganda began to cry, remembering his grandmother making bread and later he told me, “I want to change my life. I want to earn money and go back to Uganda. I’m going to start an orphanage in Uganda one day, and I want the orphans to make bread so that they will feel at home.” Such a new perspective, simply from reconnecting with his childhood and grandmother through the touch of dough.

With another local organization in London, there are plans for a second Bread House program in London, in the multi-ethnic area of Brixton, where there was a lot of looting a few years ago. They have an old mill that the community wants to revive as a cultural center. I planted the seeds and now the bread-making is in their hands.

*Opposite: Arab Orthodox Pascha breads, Jerusalem, Pascha Day, 2010.*

In New York, as I mentioned, we've done bread-making at Emmaus House, the Orthodox homeless shelter that feeds the poor in Harlem. Also in Brighton Beach, with Fr. Vadim Arefiev, an Orthodox priest of Jewish background who founded the Church of the Inexhaustible Cup and the Mercy House of St. John of Kronstadt, a homeless shelter and a carpentry workshop employing homeless men. With Fr. Vadim and local volunteers we built an oven-on-wheels, on a little trailer, so that we can pull it to the boardwalk at Brighton Beach to attract the homeless. Homeless people are often distrustful of those trying to help, particularly of Christians because they think they will try to convert them. So Fr. Vadim thought, "Maybe bread will break the trust barrier," and it did. We even had a Muslim man named Mohammed who came, touched by his memories of pita bread from his childhood. Because of the bread, he eventually came to church and went through a program to stop drinking.

In Jerusalem we are planning to start a Bread House run by Arab Orthodox Christians at the Wujoud Museum and Cultural Center. *Wujoud* means "life" in Arabic. This beautiful building, next to the Holy Sepulchre, was given to them by the Jerusalem Patriarchate. They opened it in March of 2010, and Nora Kort, the director, was delighted with the idea of making bread because she had been looking for a way to include Jews, native Muslims and Orthodox Christians to build community ties. The Arab Orthodox Christians are now the smallest minority in Jerusalem and suffer great discrimination. I haven't yet done a workshop at the center, but I am hoping to go next Pascha to help them. Once you do an event people see how simple it is and how well it works; this is why people can do it so easily on their own. In each place it works a little differently, and that is how it should be because each location has its own culture and spirit.

### Economia: Continuing the Work

RTE: What do you need to continue the work?

NADEZHDA: At the moment I need strategic and financial support to develop the Bread Houses into self-sustaining social enterprises so that they can operate as community cultural centers and bakeries that train and employ people with disabilities as bakers. I am now trying to raise funds to open such Bread Houses in Sofia and Stara Zagora, Bulgaria. The Sofia Bread House will be built right next to my parish, Holy Transfiguration Orthodox Church, and the Stara Zagora Bread House will be housed in another old

family house, that of my other grandmother. After building a chapel onto it dedicated to St. Menas and St. Nicholas, two protecting saints of our family, we plan to donate the house as a community center.

I'm interested in models of social enterprise that correspond to the current hunger for alternative economies. I am also in the process of learning Greek because there are many of these alternative economies arising now in Athens. I call it the revival of *economia* because it is not only the theological understanding of *economia* as God's plan for the salvation of man, but it's also a Christian understanding of economics. The word economics comes from the Orthodox worldview, but no one knows this and it's time to revive *economia* in its true sense. I have a whole chapter in my dissertation called "Home Economia vs. House Economics" because in economics they call the banks, "Houses"—"House of Morgan" and so on. But the Orthodox vision is to call all of these institutions "homes" and part of God's plan for humanity is to live on earth as if it was one's home. Indeed, the Bread Houses are homes, we don't want to just have empty buildings. I think that now is the time when these alternative economies are springing up around churches and communities and I'm involved with this because it works so much better and is so much more real than the anonymous and anti-human mainstream economics.

RTE: Will these Bread Houses also be part of a larger cooperative?

NADEZHDA: I hope that the Bread Houses, the actual physical spaces, will grow into unique bakeries; each part of a social franchise network that will eventually employ underprivileged people. I crafted this term, social franchise network, because I don't want it to be like a McDonald's or a Starbucks, but each unique Bread House will be part of an international mother network that will guide and unite. The spaces would be like a wonderful bakery/coffee shop, with one or two quiet homey rooms designated for the collective bread-making activities and lectures. They would each have a wood-fired oven to create the ambiance of a home. As I said, in Bulgaria, we are fundraising to open the two Bread Houses that will be part of this network, employing people with disabilities and selling bread, sandwiches and soups, while also using the space as a community center for workshops and other events. We will also be selling books about bread, both recipe books on breads from around the world and Orthodox books on the Eucharist and the Liturgy. Within a decade we could have twenty fully functioning self-sufficient Bread Houses around the world.



In every single Bread House, you will go and make the local bread of that country. So, this network won't be uniform enterprises; each one will have a completely unique local character. In Bulgaria we'll have *purlenka*; in Russia, Borodino rye bread; in Israel and Palestine *pita*; and in China we will have rice wrappers and steamed rice buns. In India we'd be making *roti* and *naan* and *chapatti*, and in Ethiopia, *injera*. In Brazil you'll make *pão de queijo*; in Peru it will be a potato bread from a recipe I was given by an Incan woman, and in Mexico you will make corn tortillas. As an anthropologist, I like to talk to people about how bread is made all over the world—of wheat, rice, corn, potatoes, but even more than its ingredients, I am fascinated by how almost everywhere bread is a special food that holds important place in ritual and ceremony marking key stages of human existence.

RTE: Are you able to include people who are gluten intolerant?

NADEZHDA: Peter Reinhardt, an amazing east coast American baker and teacher of bakers, is my best resource for this. He just came out with a wonderful book, *The Joy of Gluten-Free, Sugar-Free Baking*.<sup>2</sup> All of these corn-based, potato-based, and rice-based breads are perfect, and even *injera* is not made from flour, but from Ethiopian teff grass. I have an English Orthodox friend, a professor of nutrition, who is now researching all the varieties of grains that are gluten free and is helping me develop recipes.

Also, it's good for people to know that gluten is not bad; what is bad are the genetically modified grains. It's the deformed monsters that man makes, not the beauty that God has created that harms us. The gluten is the muscle of the bread, it's the beauty and the strength of the bread. This modern sensitivity to gluten is not to the simple natural breads we've always eaten, but to the transformed wheat of the past fifty years.

RTE: Do you have a business plan, or is that just up to the individual cultural centers?

NADEZHDA: Any plan would have to fit local circumstances, but I've developed a very good general business plan with the help of Princeton students from a social entrepreneurship class. Now we are adapting the business plan

<sup>2</sup> Peter Reinhardt, *The Joy of Gluten-Free, Sugar-Free Baking: 80 Low-Carb Recipes that Offer Solutions for Celiac Disease, Diabetes, and Weight Loss*, Random House, 2012.

Opposite: Baking program for low-income youth in a Rio de Janeiro favela, Brazil, 2008.

to Bulgaria for the two locations in Sofia and Stara Zagora. It will work in God's time, I'm sure of this.

Small examples of daily life help us understand that we are above all humans, homo, not *homo economicus*, or profit-maximizing consumers, as classical economists try to convince us. For example, a U.K. journal recently published an article on how the smell of fresh-baked bread makes our altruism surge and simply helps us be better people. The test was with a wallet that a person kept dropping at two different locations: in front of a regular store and a couple of blocks away, in front of a bakery. When the wallet was dropped in front of the bakery, 30% more people were picking up the wallet and chasing the person to give it back. It was impossible that this was just coincidence. For myself, I know that I go into bakeries around the world and feel at home. This is a kind of therapy that helps me nurture meekness and a desire to give. My whole life I have wanted to create the experience of home for people. In God's *economia* the whole world is our home and everything we do should reflect that.

### Bread Catechesis

RTE: Can you tell us now about your Bread Catechesis?

NADEZHDA: Yes. When I was in Bethlehem and understood that we could start these Bread Houses, I also understood that they would make not only regular bread, but also *prospora* bread for the Divine Liturgy. In Bulgaria we used to have the tradition of making *prospora* at home, as they still do in Greece, where women take it to church on Sunday. Currently in America and Bulgaria, there are usually just one or two designated people in each parish who bake it, and in Bulgaria many priests even have to buy it from a bakery because parishioners no longer have time to make it. It's so sad because it is so impersonal! I thought, "This could be a great movement to start collective *prospora* making." In the past it was done in people's homes, individually. Perhaps now we can start doing it together, and this would motivate people to set time aside for it.

So, in Gabrovo we began making *prospora* together for the local church with the blessing of the priest. Then we did it in another parish, and another. Now it is being done collectively in at least fifteen parishes around Bulgaria and neighboring countries, and more and more parishes and priests are calling to ask me for a workshop. I am now writing a book called *Bread Cateche-*

*sis*, which describes the simple steps of organizing the *prospora* events and lists different readings from the Bible to accompany the bread-making. Such a parish activity doesn't cost much—perhaps \$3.00 for flour, some water, yeast, and a pinch of salt. All you need is a table and an oven. The book has twelve chapters, one for each month of the year, and each includes a parable from the Bible that talks about bread or yeast or salt. This could also be making bread for the blessing of the five loaves. Some priests only bless elderly women to make the *prospora*, so making bread for the blessing of the five loaves might be a way to include younger women. It depends on the priest, but the principle is the same—bread as the vehicle and occasion for catechesis and Christian unity and love.

We recently had such an event at the Greek Archdiocesan Holy Trinity Cathedral in New York City. We made the *prospora* and then Fr. Anastasios Gounaris gave a talk about the liturgy—showing us what he does with the *prospora* in the altar and explaining the theology behind each action and prayer. I've found over and over that this kind of thing brings the whole parish together and it very easily brings non-Orthodox people to the parish. I've also organized Bread Catechesis



*Bread Catechesis*, Nadezhda Savova, New York, 2012.

workshops for clergy and parishioners from across the U.S. at the Bulgarian Archdiocesan Assembly for North America, including American convert and ethnic Bulgarian churches, as a tool to unite their parishes.

One church in Varna, Bulgaria has already been inspired to build a wood-fired oven in its yard, and to use it as a social community kitchen to serve hot bread and engage people making it.

I always tell people in the parish, "Invite your non-Orthodox friends, because it's going to be a great way for them to understand what Orthodoxy is all about: bread-making embodies love and sharing", and people come who otherwise wouldn't. In Gabrovo, five or six visitors have decided to be



baptized, and two children coming to the events were informally adopted by other participants. The children's parents had had to leave Bulgaria to work in Greece and they were living with their ill grandmother; basically abandoned and begging in the street because she was so poor. After they met at the bread-baking, a young man and woman started taking care of them, making sure that they and their granny have food and clothes and that they can study. They had the children baptized, and became their godparents. The godfather of the young boy was not Orthodox before either, but he also became Orthodox through the bread events and lectures.

So this is how it happens, and it's just so simple and non-intrusive. No one feels that anything is imposed on them because we talk through the metaphors of bread, very similar to poetry. This is why Christ used parables—He knew that they would speak to different people in different ways and never impose upon anyone's heart.

RTE: Can you take us through a catechesis session?

NADEZHDA: While we are kneading the dough, we read a passage from the Gospel referring to bread, yeast or salt. For example, when the Lord speaks of the kingdom of heaven, He describes the woman mixing flour and the leaven that is God's love, transforming each individual and all of society. But the lesson isn't one-way. People in the workshop have very different ideas about what the leaven in the parable is in their own lives, and they enjoy sharing their stories. It's wonderful, like poetry. As the bread is baking we continue talking, or sometimes we paint or sing, it depends on the talents in the group. Other times we do theatre with puppets made out of bread, called "Theater of Crumbs".

For each of the twelve chapters in the Bread Catechesis book I put together a passage from both the Old and the New Testament, so that people can sense the transmission between the two, and that the New doesn't replace the Old, but builds on it. Then we talk about the life of a saint who has had something to do with bread, such as St. Genevieve of Paris. In church imagery, she is always depicted holding a loaf of bread because by her prayers, God sent ships of grain to Paris during a famine. I also have an icon of St. Naomi, from the Old Testament, bearing wheat while she was working in the fields. Of course, there are the famous *prosphora* bakers from the Kiev caves, St. Spiridon and St. Nikodim. We also have the Old Testament Prophet Eli-

*Opposite: Bread Catechesis, Nadezhda Savova, 2012.*

jah, who was fed by ravens bringing him bread. Can you imagine where a raven found a loaf of bread? Similarly, our own Bulgarian St. John of Rila was fed by an angel bringing him bread. Or, the story of St. Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch who wrote to his fellow Christians, after being sentenced to death in the Roman coliseum, "I am God's wheat and I shall be ground by the teeth of beasts, that I may become the pure bread of Christ." Tradition says that after his death in the Roman coliseum, the saint's body was burnt and it gave off the aroma of baked bread.

I'm currently collecting these stories and traditions, and anyone who knows of one can send it along to be included in the book. I've found that everyone enjoys stories of saints' lives, even people who are not Orthodox. I've also found that baking bread together on the church premises is a much more successful way of including people, than say, a church festival. Festivals are much like street fairs or carnivals—people come and eat and drink and may even take a tour of your church, but then usually they leave until the next year. Bread-making is quite different. Here we are doing something together that develops over months. People invest something of themselves and want to truly get to know the people and place that surround them.

### Prosphora Seals and Bread Stamps

RTE: You mentioned earlier that you collect bread stamps. What are bread stamps and how are they used?

NADEZHDA: In the Orthodox tradition, a wood-carved stamp called a *prospora* is pressed into the liturgical bread (also called *prospora*) which in the Divine Liturgy is transformed into the Body of Christ that we partake of in Holy Communion. There is one basic type of prosphora stamp for all Orthodox people, whether Arab, Greek, Bulgarian, Russian, and so on, that beautifully embodies our unity in Christ. The stamp has a big cross with the letters IC XC NI KA in the middle, meaning Jesus Christ, Victory—pointing to the Lord's victory over death and evil. There is also a part on the seal for the Mother of God, for all saints, and for commemoration of the living and the departed. In general, the Balkans make one large prosphora with one stamp, while the Russian tradition makes five smaller prosphoras with the parts for Christ, the Mother of God, all saints, and the living and the departed on separate breads, with many smaller versions of the same for commemorating individuals. The meaning is the same.

I also collect prosphora stamps that have images of saints carved on them, which are used for the particular feast of that saint or at a monastery named after him or her. I have such stamps with images of the Mother of God, St. Basil the Great, St. Seraphim of Sarov and St. Sergei of Radonezh. I like to call these breads "edible icons" because the elaborate images are iconic. Theologically they are a tangible witness to the most amazing event in human history—God's Incarnation—and our greatest hope, man's deification following the lives of the saints.

RTE: I like what you've described as your favorite quote, a spiritual analogy of prosphora-stamping from St. Ephraim the Syrian: "Let chastity be portrayed in your eyes and in your ears the sound of truth. Imprint your tongue with the word of life and upon your hands [imprint] all alms. Stamp your footsteps with visiting the sick, and let the image of your Lord be portrayed in your heart."

Another thing you've said is, "Love is the most important ingredient, both in bread and in life. It is not a simple metaphor but a tangible reality." You link that quote with St. Prochor of Kiev. Is he a spiritual protector of your work?



Making bread at an orphanage, Plevna, Bulgaria, 2011.

NADEZHDA: St. Prochor of the Kiev Caves was a monk who was so humble that he felt that he was unworthy to eat the normal bread that the other monks ate. So, he took flour and added a very bitter herb called "*loboda*" (now called for him—St. Prochor's *lobodnik*) and instead of salt he added ashes. The bread had a miraculous nature: when St. Prochor gave it with a blessing to others, it was white and sweet like honey, but when someone stole it from him, the bread was black, hard, and bitter. A similar miracle occurred with the ashes he was giving away—when given with his blessing, the ashes turned to salt. Saint Prochor died in the eleventh century and his incorrupt body is kept in the Kiev caves. You can still see the veins on his perfectly



preserved hands with which he baked all of his life. Lying next to him are two other saints: St. Nikodim and St. Spiridon, the proshpora bakers. I have icons of them all, and St. Nikodim and St. Spiridon are my protectors for our proshpora baking, while St. Prochor watches over our daily bread.

Along with St. Genevieve in Paris, there is another early French saint from the sixth century, St. Honore, the bishop of Amiens, who is the patron saint of French bakers. During his episcopacy, there were miracles ascribed to his intercession that saved farmers, millers, and bakers. We also have the Greek New Martyr Michael, a baker, and the Bulgarian New Martyr and baker Dimiter of Sliven, both of whom were martyred for their faith under the Ottomans. Also, St. Juliana of Murom used to bake kilos of bread during the famine to save the people of her town.

RTE: We also have the Russian Optina Monastery icon of the Mother of God called, “She Who Ripens the Grain” or sometimes “Bountiful Harvest,” painted by a nun as a gift for Elder Ambrose of Optina, who had many copies made to give away. It portrays the Mother of God sitting on clouds above the earth and blessing a field of newly-gathered rye sheaves.

NADEZHDA: Yes, and that reminds me that on St. Stephen’s Day, before we gathered to bless my grandmother’s house as the new Bread House, I went to the monastery above the town. There was an old icon in a corner of the church covered with dust, and I thought, “What is this icon?” I looked at it closely and it said in Bulgarian, “The Multiplier of Bread”. Can you imagine? The nun said that she had forgotten about this icon—it had lain there unnoticed for years until we found it on the very day we were blessing the Bread House! This icon is now above our oven, and I give a copy of this icon to every Bread House that opens. She is our protectress, and we make the *bogovitsa* bread to honor her.

RTE: What is *bogovitsa* bread?

NADEZHDA: In Bulgaria, the *bogovitsa* bread (literally, the bread for God, “Bog”) is made for Easter. It is an egg bread, and the first piece is always symbolically put aside for Christ and the Virgin Mary to share with us at the festive table.

Interestingly, the bread that we use now for Easter that looks like the Italian *pannetone* with dried fruit only came to the Balkans from Italy at the

*Opposite: Bread workshop, New York City, Spring 2013.*

turn of the century. The festive *tsoureki* that the Greeks now eat (which the Bulgarians call *kozunak*, the Romanians, *cozonac* and the Russians *kulich*) was originally a sweet egg bread (*bogovitsa* in Bulgaria), made in certain shapes or covered with geometric designs, but without the dried fruit. Today Orthodox people have adopted the Western European custom of adding fruit, which is not traditional for the Balkans or Eastern Europe.

RTE: But we love it! In Russia the symbolism of using golden raisins and orange and yellow dried fruits reminds us of the Resurrection. Can't traditions sometimes change for the better?

NADEZHDA: Of course they can, they do, and, in fact, they should! They should, because people and cultures change. In anthropology, we research cultural change all the time, and we are always fascinated to discover how traditions change and what new meanings evolve. The pedantic approach of old-school ethnography from the turn of the twentieth century was to freeze everything in time and keep it the way it was. Nowadays what matters is not whether traditions change but how they change and if this change allows moral values to continue thriving or if they disappear. Particularly in the case of Orthodoxy, Tradition with capital "T" does not and should not change. It has been given to us as revelation by God Himself and through the saints, yet at the same time traditions do vary across cultures in terms of church architecture, music, bread recipes and customs, dress, dance, ways of communicating, forming communities, etc. Having visited and observed Orthodox parishes across five continents, I can certainly say that cultural diversity is a beautiful thing, for it teaches us to be as tolerant with each other as Christ is with all of our little idiosyncrasies.

RTE: Earlier you said you would speak about the element of love in the bread workshops.

NADEZHDA: Yes. When I say that love is made tangible through bread, I mean it literally because when the bread comes out of the oven it is different for different people. Interestingly, the childrens' breads always come out best. They come out soft and gorgeous, and they don't even know how to knead; their bread is usually just a bunch of dough lumps all clumped together, often with too much added flour. According to any baker's standard for technique this bread should not turn out right, but the kids' breads are always the softest and the sweetest. I've had some adults who kneaded their



*Gabrovo, Bulgaria. Friday community bread-making that allows orphans to build friendships with local families, 2010.*

bread perfectly, but it came out soggy inside and burnt on the outside. This is with the same dough in the same ingredients, on the same tray, in the same oven, baked together for the same amount of time. Can you imagine? That it comes out with so many different textures and tastes is the work of the Holy Spirit! People are amazed, they can't believe it when they see it. Only the pure heart is the one that can stand the fire of God, and bread makes our hearts tangibly visible.

There's a wonderful Communion prayer to the Mother of God that says, "The Divine Bread of life was baked in Thy womb, O Theotokos, while preserving it unburnt and immaculate." This is like the Burning Bush in the Old Testament, which Moses saw as an image pointing to the future divine incarnation in the womb of the Virgin. I explain this to people and this is why I always put the icon of the Mother of God on top of the oven. She is the oven and He is the Bread.

## Theatre of Crumbs

RTE: Can we talk now about bread therapy?

NADEZHDA: Yes. I believe that bread-making should one day become an official part of the other forms of art therapy because you have the key component of creating with your fingers something beautiful that expresses your inner state, with the added value that you can taste and share with others what you create, which doesn't exist in any of the other art forms. Generally, the idea of expressive therapy is that you take the problem outside of yourself. Once you see it from a different perspective, you can distance yourself from it and imagine a way to cope with it or live without it. You can reenact the trauma or you can create an art piece, like a piece of pottery, a painting, a piece of writing or music that materializes the issue outside of you.

In bread-making, we also have the rhythmic and musical element: the kneading itself has its own soothing and calming rhythm, and people easily open up to singing while they are kneading, for kneading creates a collective rhythm. When we make prosphora we sing to the Mother of God or to the Lord. In the events where we make daily bread, we often sing traditional songs or even children's songs that we all know from childhood. In international groups, I ask each nationality to sing their children's songs, because it gets everyone to the same level. We all have to become like children, simple and sincere. Bread-making is a uniquely perfect vehicle to unite all of the senses and it awakens memories that can empower and transform us. It incorporates so much of what it is to be a human being.

Humans are creative, but people are depressed now because they don't think that they can create beauty or that they don't have the time, but when the poorest, the uneducated or disabled person sees that he or she can make something beautiful, that they can feed another human being, they sense their own worth and dignity, the gift of being co-creators with God. There is great joy in feeding someone else.

RTE: So, you have to nourish someone with your creation?

NADEZHDA: Exactly, and when the breads come out of the oven, everyone jumps up and says, "Where is my bread, where is my bread?" I take the tray and say, "No. Even if you discover your bread—because often it doesn't at all look like what you'd expect—everyone is actually going to share it with

*Opposite: Theatre of Crumbs, Emmaus House, Harlem, December 2012.*



someone else. When you give your bread, you give yourself to someone else.” At first the kids sometimes cry and say, “No, no, I want my own bread,” but as soon as a child gives a piece of it to someone else, who says, “What a great bread you’ve made!” it makes them twice as happy. They immediately understand what joy sharing brings. At home children are used to passively having their parents feed them, but now they are the cooks who are feeding their parents and other people. It is the same for orphans, or people with disabilities, or people in depression, etc. There is no other therapeutic activity that works like this because here you’ve literally fed another human being. Also, when we do a Theatre of Crumbs and each participant makes a bread puppet to enact a problem and solve it, we literally eat the problem and it’s gone—only the creative story remains as a solution.

RTE: But do you really want to take the problem into yourself?

NADEZHDA: It depends, but most people who do eat it think it’s really cool. “We’ve eaten the president, we’ve eaten the mayor...” (*laughter*) I think this is therapeutic and empowering because it’s passing through your system and only the nutritious aspect is going to stay in, the nasty stuff will come out. The play of theatre helps people to imagine an alternative reality, which is already one step closer to the change we want to see in ourselves or our community or country.

In the Theater of Crumbs, people come up with their own plays. For example, I give them a parable from the Bible or a social problem and ask them to solve it. They come up with their own characters and their own solutions, the adults and children together. The puppets are the bread figures and the table is our stage. It is all played out on the table. We script it first, because you have to know what kind of a dough figure you are going to make. While they are baking, we improve the script, and then when they come out of the oven, we play it out. There is a lot of improvisation and very creative solutions to serious issues, especially on the part of the children.

RTE: Have your solutions ever played out in real life?

NADEZHDA: That is what I hope to do as more Bread Houses get established. If bread-making is a weekly program, you can begin to consistently address pressing local issues, as I’ve learned from Augusto Boal, the Brazilian who created the amazing “Theatre of the Oppressed”. Such spontaneous theatre is now enacted in almost every country in the world, where groups of people

in poor areas enact the change they most want to see. Gandhi said, “You have to be the change you want to see in the world,” and this is true. When you do it regularly, the role empowers you because now you can see yourself standing up in front of the mayor, sending letters, protesting or fundraising for a cause, planting a tree. I want to try this in Harlem where we could work with Julia Demeree of Emmaus House, who is an artist and street theatre person herself.

The other thing about bread therapy is that every single human being can make bread. You can be in a wheelchair, you can be blind, deaf, unable to speak. We’ve even had people without hands, who knead with their elbows. Or you can be a foreigner who can’t speak the local language. Someone might say, “Well, community cooking is just as therapeutic,” but the problem is that if you have knives, you can’t invite the kids or the disabled to do it. You need something gentle and secure. In fact, someone in a workshop commented that bread dough is the most pleasant material in the world. Indeed, clay isn’t quite as good because clay is wet and cold.

RTE: Bread dough is warm, soft, and as you work it, it improves.

NADEZHDA: Yes, I love that it teaches you how to react. It develops muscle and resilience and rises even better. There are so many bread metaphors that teach people how to live better. For example, salt is the difficulty we need if we want to have a tasty life, meaning a life full of wisdom. For us to have savor, we must have salt in our lives. Also, the mystery of seeing bread rise from a lump of thick dough is a metaphor of hope. In fact, our Bread House children’s program is called “HedgeHope”: with hope anyone can hop over the difficult hedges of life. Working with symbols is what we anthropologists are good at: we see what is meaningful.

Our mascot is a hedgehog, and I think it is a great animal to remind us of Christian values, because it is the one animal, at least in Bulgaria, that kills snakes. These animals are also a lesson for the children on how we should never judge anyone by their appearance. A hedgehog with his needles looks so scary and ugly, but he is actually soft and gentle, and among the most musical of all animals. When you play a rhythm to hedgehogs, they stand on their back feet and dance. At my grandmother’s Bread House we have a living hedgehog and we put him in the middle of the table when we make bread, and people of all ages love him. And he loves us back and teaches us how to not be prickly in our words and deeds.

## Mobile Bread Houses

RTE: So what is next in your life and the Bread Houses?

NADEZHDA: I hope to start making bread with my children! However, I first need to meet the right husband, so I am eager to see what God has planned for me.

Now that my Ph.D. is finished, my current work is focused in Bulgaria, although I still visit and coordinate activities in other countries. I would love to continue working with Orthodox parishes in the U.S. to structure a non-religious community outreach program in the New Jersey and New York areas with what we call the Mobile Bread House. It is literally a small house on wheels: a trailer with table, benches and a wood-fired oven on board, built by Princeton students with Princeton funding and a designer from Pratt Institute. The diversity of Princeton drew many different people to the events, including professors, students, elderly, poor Ugandan immigrants, and a man from the Caribbean with his mentally-retarded child who made bread with Princeton's mayor. The Mobile Bread House can be taken to any community to do bread-making events in low-income areas, schools, churches, community centers, libraries, elderly homes, hospices, and so on. It is built in the shape of a bee-hive cell, representing the hive's harmonious organization. Currently, the Mobile Bread House is kept a block from Princeton's campus next to the Terra Moma bakery, and is open for community use. I welcome proposals from any organization or community who would like to use it, or from people who would like to volunteer their time and donate to its mission.

## Help for Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, as I already mentioned, we have Bread House programs running in ten cities, made possible by a two-year grant awarded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Since the grant does not provide any funding for infrastructure, we are now fundraising for the Sofia Bread House to be built next to Holy Transfiguration Church (my parish), for which we need \$20,000 more. At the Stara Zagora Bread House (my grandmother Mina's house), we need \$70,000 to renovate the house and build a chapel dedicated to St. Menas and St. Nicholas, which will then be given to the community. I am asking parishes to adopt our Bread Houses and support us, in particular

*Opposite: The Mobile Bread House at its home next to the Terra Moma Bakery, Princeton, New Jersey, 2012.*



if they share the same name: Holy Transfiguration, St. Nicholas or St. Menas. Both of these Bread Houses will also organize non-religious programs for orphans, people with disabilities, and victims of domestic violence, while offering our Bread Catechesis programs in conjunction with the Church.

Bulgaria after Communism is still an extremely poor country—the poorest in Europe after Albania, and it is virtually impossible to fund raise these sums of money at home. We've already exhausted all possible grant sources and we truly need and would appreciate your help!

The last thing I am working on is an Orthodox Cultural Tour to take place in September 2014. This will be based on the itinerary of the trip I helped organize in 2012. My plan is to share the amazing natural, architectural, artistic and spiritual richness of Bulgaria with all of its stunning monasteries (some of which are UNESCO Heritage sites) and the grace from the holy relics that still remain widely unknown to the Western Orthodox world. If you would like to learn more about the itinerary, please feel free to write me.

I also welcome requests from parishes and individuals who would like to organize a Bread Catechesis program in their parish or to start a non-religious bread therapy program. I am currently searching for funding to issue and print the Bread Catechesis book, so if people are interested in ordering it, they can pre-order it now.

As a final note, I would like to invite parishes in America, Russia, and anywhere else to establish an exchange program with parishes that we are working with around Bulgaria. Bulgaria after Communism suffers from a very weak and slow revival of the Orthodox faith. It is beneficial for Bulgarians to meet and interact with other Orthodox people, particularly from the West, which is highly regarded and taken as an example to be followed. We hope to find parishes interested in some form of cooperation, even something as simple as an online platform. A thriving Bread House social network in Bulgaria can be a model for other places in the world.

RTE: The grace of your effort is that you are beginning with your own country and culture, in the very childhood homes in which you learned to cook, and that you are now giving to the community. This is not only generosity: it's a gift of art, healing, home and love. Spiritually it feels very right. What you like to say in closing to our readers?

NADEZHDA: I thank you in advance from the bottom of my heart for your support. May God multiply the yeast of love in your hearts and homes. ✝

To learn more about Dr. Nadezhda Savova's work, you can write her at: [nadezhda.savova@gmail.com](mailto:nadezhda.savova@gmail.com) or visit: [www.breadhousesnetwork.org](http://www.breadhousesnetwork.org)

The book "Bread Catechesis" may be preordered at: <http://www.breadhousesnetwork.org/book/>



Help us renovate the  
**Bulgarian Bread Houses**  
in Sofia and Stara Zagora!

Donate online at: [www.breadhousesnetwork.org](http://www.breadhousesnetwork.org). Checks or money orders can be made out to: Valaam Society of America (earmarked "Bulgarian Bread Houses") and sent to: Valaam Society of America, c/o Kate McCaffery, Secretary, 1547 Rose Ave., Santa Rosa, CA 95407.