

## **The Countess de Charny: The Story of Our Acquaintance**

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When I was little, I didn't know the "scene" and I didn't know there was such a grand-souled person as the Countess, as they used to call her.

I first heard this name when I was still young – young according to the yardstick of the gay/mix scene at the time (another scene out there wasn't) – so, I think I was in the George Bar, on Lavelle Street, for the second or third time – anyhow, well, there people were talking that she were to have a performance elsewhere, and might come by that night.

At the time, I had no idea what this was about, let alone how important a person she was to everyone.

I don't know if she came that night, but I had to hurry like Cinderella, being the student and minor that I was, to get home before midnight and catch the last bus.

Our first real meeting was very strange, and it didn't quite start with her in person.

For yet another week and evening I was sitting at the bar, having soft drinks (because this is what I could afford with my student income), and I was approached by the notorious Persephone, another big name in the world of Bulgarian drag before the arrival of Ru Paul's Drag Race. She had noticed me and said that she saw I keep my looks and asked if I would like to join her and her entourage, and that she would teach me how to be a classy transvestite. I agreed because the hormones were raging inside me, I wanted a change and to separate myself from where I lived, and everything different was like a Hollywood movie; and before that, one night I had seen Persephone dancing all white-clad along a song by Dana International on the

stage of Spartacus. This is why her offer seemed quite tempting to me, plus she could offer clothes, and did promise to find me shoes – my eternal problem.

That same evening she ran to me and, as a test, told me to do a prank on someone called the Countess, and that I should tell her that I don't speak Bulgarian, but only Russian, which was not a lie (I am from Moscow/mixed marriage).

In less than ten minutes, the whole staircase was peopled – she was coming! Oh, let me clarify: George Bar was a super small underground establishment where just two people could already jam the stairs, the toilets, etc. So, when the Countess came first with her retinue, I didn't know who she was, but Persephone “helpfully” brought the lady in question to me. She turned out to be more than what I expected, she literally reached the ceiling without Persephone's huge platform shoes – she was a woman with a capital W.

She only asked me if I was really from Russia, in Russian, and I answered, we spoke briefly, I didn't even tell her my name; then, much later, she learned it, and somehow she didn't forget me.

Persephone's “joke” didn't work, because I told the Countess in Russian that I also know Bulgarian.

Then she quickly left the bar – she never liked it, she loved the “people's” establishments such as Why Not, Adonis, etc.

Then came the days and weeks when I was literally part of her retinue, helping Persephone carry her luggage; she sometimes dressed and made me up as she pleased. At a time when the Indigo Club, which we regularly attended, was no longer open, a restaurant called The Three Bitches opened inside the premises of the Salza i smyah Theater. It was a small two-roomed restaurant, with a bar and a DJ, where there were only transvestites and their worshipers.

It was frequented by wrestlers, women, drunkards, etc. One night there was a pageant for the best transvestite artist, and I don't recall whose initiative it was, mine or Persephone's, but I was included in the pageant. I still had no experience with make-up, I already knew what to wear, I had a song and a number ready, but there was no one to do my make-up, and in such moments everyone is everyone's enemy. That's why Persephone turned to the Countess, who wasn't in the pageant, to do my make-up. Then, for the first time, we "calmly" communicated. It turned out that the Countess had interesting juvenile years like me, that she traveled by train to entertainment venues even before the fall of socialism, and that she was one of the first to create a whole troupe of drag artists - Elza Parini, she herself, Persephone, Ursula, and more, and together in the early 1990s they toured all over Bulgaria and danced in front of audiences in hotels, bars, and restaurants.

After the pageant I failed to corner the Countess by herself, and I didn't win back then.

A few more weeks and months passed, and one summer evening – I think it was 2000 – I had stayed too late with Persephone, she wanted to go to a party, but without me, and there was no money for taxis. There was no public transport and she had to shelter me somewhere. We walked along Todor Alexandrov Boulevard, where the hotels near what was then the last/first metro station were still being in construction. We were passing a diner place, and Persephone said that transvestites used to gather there sometimes. We went in, and she was right – the Countess and a taxi-driving transvestite (I still couldn't remember her name), plus a group of many men of all ages and a cis woman, were sitting across several tables, discussing things noisily.

Persephone explained the situation to the Countess and asked her to watch over me at least until the first transport resumes. She went away and left me with them, I leaned over to the

Countess, because of all of them I knew only her, and not that close at that. At first they didn't pay attention to me, then they said they had to go somewhere. And I went with them. We crossed the boulevard, which was as deserted as the desert in both directions is, at least at that moment. We entered a fenced area, which is now the grounds of the Anel Hotel. Everything there was mud, rubbish from the construction that had begun, beams instead of a path, and a few caravans to which we were headed for, as I helped the Countess not to fall into the mud. Finally, we got into the caravan and in one of its ends some of the men, the other transvestite and the woman undressed and started having sex, and the Countess and I sat on a sofa in the middle room and talked for a long time; she asked me which of the guys I liked, if I wanted to be included... At that moment I was shy, somewhat untypical for me, but I had liked one young man, and she did call him. He came and it was she who told him that I liked him, and I asked her not to do it.

She just told him there was nothing going on, and he went away. And just like that, talking about life, about what I wanted to be, about what's going on at home and at school, the night was almost over. When the group had finished their sexual activities, me, the Countess and the other transvestite left the people in their caravans and went to a bakery next to the McDonald's nearby Serdica Metro Station. We sat there waiting for dawn, and only then did they let me go home.

But this was not my last meeting with the Countess. She knew very well that I wasn't a drag/transvestite, but a trans woman.

When I began appearing in the media, Persephone quarreled with me about it and about other things, and I was left without clothes, shoes, wigs, etc. I decided to try and pretend to be an ordinary cis gay man... Because I had finished school and was starting a new page in my life, and

I didn't want anyone at the university to know, I wanted to find a job easier, to find a nice and smart man. I thought a lie would give me all of this... Well, I failed.

But from all the people in the drag scene, the Countess first contacted me on Facebook to add me to her friends, and so on to this day.

Then one night I decided to show the gay scene in Sofia to my high school bestie, and I took her to several gay clubs, and finally we got to ID Club. There, on the second floor, dancing to a fashionable song at the time, while my bestie was in the bathroom, the Countess approached me. She said nothing, leaned at me (not an easy thing to do) and asked where did I hit the road lately? I told her, she smiled and didn't comment – she always knew that everyone's path is his/her path, with all the mistakes and victories. I introduced her to my girlfriend, then we left earlier and I couldn't say goodbye. Somehow this became very typical for both of us – one of us was always in a hurry going somewhere.

I never asked the Countess personally (because I thought that was quite rude and inappropriate) how she defined herself, but I never saw her in a male image, nor did I ever hear her speak in the masculine. That's why I always considered her a trans woman, although due to her financial situation (an artist really doesn't feed a house, especially a dear queen in Bulgaria), she couldn't afford a full transition.

But she was always a Grand. She was always beyond the little gossip, even though she knew everyone. She didn't loathe any job, as long as she had one.

But when I offered her money to help back in 2016 – as rumors once again had it that she was still unemployed and in debt, and barely surviving with her mother – she definitely, but meaning no evil, said: "I'll make my own money."

I never again raised the money issue, although we still had several discussions online about how difficult the path and life of trans people in Bulgaria is, and that according to her we have no future. And I, as never before, was an incorrigible optimist and told her: no, there is work for us, and we have to fight for it.

I don't know if she was right, and she will hardly ever know, because literally the last time I saw her was when we last had to bid her adieu in August 2020. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to see her alive before that and little did I know she was terminally ill. And a month or two before her passing, her mother was gone too, and they were always at war, but also always supported each other.

If, other than the connection with her mother and the fact that we are both trans women, there is something else that brought us together, it was that we are both under the sign of Cancer, and that we both love to help the people around us, regardless of how they repay us (or don't).

I learned about the Countess's life and its details from various side sources. And what I know briefly is this:

- was born less than 50 years ago in Sofia;
- studied at a hairdressing college;
- then began participating in many variety programs in the 1980s;
- in the 1990s, with the advent of democracy, a boom in gay establishments happened, and she found her new realization on the stages of Spartacus and many other clubs;
- with the onset of the 1990s, however, her repertoire of favorites – Alla Pugacheva, Amanda Lear, etc. – went out of fashion, and she occupied the sidelines of the scene – as face control, backstage assistant, seamstress, etc;

- she always participated in all the pageants she was invited to, but with the advent of the Ru Paul Drag Race era, the young stars became more and more greedy and gradually forgot her, or used her as a background prop;
- she did not worry or complain – she was not such a person;
- I remember her participating as a dancer in one of Azis' shows when he was the host;
- everyone knew the Countess, and not only in the community, which is why it was a big shock to me that those who had their drinks with her every night, borrowed money and things from her, didn't show up at her funeral.

Finally, I would like to say that LGBTI+ people in Bulgaria make many mistakes that often hinder the development of the scene and its activities. And when we as a community make mistakes, we risk being guilty of forgetting people like the Countess – as well as other drag queens and trans women whose stories have not yet been recorded and remembered. I hope that this personal story of mine and my memories of the Countess will contribute to creating the memory of those who leave us.