

Macedonia the Land of Legends

My First Trip to Macedonia



By
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Published by:

Risto Stefov Publications
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Toronto, Canada

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Going to Macedonia

I had always thought about going to Macedonia but had not considered it seriously, that is until recently. I had no passport but only used that as an excuse to delay going. One day I was invited to visit Steve Pliakas, a friend of mine, when the subject came up and he urged me to get a passport. That was about a year ago and yes Steve and I had decided we were going to go to Macedonia together but that plan did not pan out. This prompted me however to get going on getting a passport. Nothing was said after that until my book “History of the Macedonian People” was translated into Macedonian and published in Macedonia. After a few promotions in Bitola, Shtip and other places, Iskra, the publishing house, thought it would be a good idea if I, the author of the book, was present at the Skopje promotion. So through my friend John Givens here in Toronto I was contacted to see if I was willing to go. My first reaction was “no” but after some arm twisting I said “yes”. Now it was only a matter of when. But after finding out that the Detsa Begaltsi (Macedonian Refugee Children from Greece) were having their 4th International gathering after 60 years in Skopje, I decided it was now time to go.

This may be hard to believe but for a “Skopjan Spy”, as some Greeks love to call me, I had never been to Skopje or to the Republic of Macedonia for that matter.

As soon as I decided it was time to go, I contacted Dragitsa Belchevska from Win Travel and had my flight reservations made. Without any expectations, I decided two weeks would be enough for me to do the book promotion, attend the Begaltsi gathering and visit my relatives whom I had never seen before. I made sure I was on the same plane with my friends John and his wife Tsena who were also going to Macedonia for similar reasons. Dragitsa booked me on the same Malev Airline flight which was to depart from Terminal 3 in Toronto on Thursday July 10th at 9:05 PM.

I just want to mention here that I am grateful to my friend John not just for taking me under his wing and making my trip to Macedonia easier but also for his role in convincing me to have my book translated into Macedonian, raising the necessary funds through sponsored donations for the translation and publication and for making the necessary arrangements to bring this project to fruition. I am also

grateful to Tsena for worrying over me and making sure I got to my destination safely.

When it was time to go I took a cab from my parents place and arrived at Pearson International in Toronto around 6:30 PM. I met up with John and Tsena and a few of the Begaltsi from Toronto who were also headed for Macedonia and by 10:00 PM we were on the plane on our way to Skopje via Budapest. Going through security was a bit harsh especially when we were asked to take our belts and shoes off. No one laughed at my joke when I said, "I can't take my belt off, my pants will fall off." I guess they have heard it so many times it has lost its effect.

By now it was dark and we couldn't see the terrain as we flew for over nine hours at 600 miles per hour at a height of 35,000 feet.

I was told not to expect to be fed on the plane and if I wanted food I would have to pay for it. However I was grossly misinformed. We were given food and drinks several times through the flight that included a meal of spinach noodles, chocolate wafers, pretzels, coffee, water, a grain salad, cake, juice and several times we were served juice and alcoholic beverages at no extra cost. We arrived in Budapest at 12:25 PM, Budapest time the next day.

As the plane came to a halt at Budapest airport there was a general panic among passengers who had connecting flights because the plane was 50 minutes late and for us there was only 40 minutes to depart this plane, go through security again and board our connecting flight to Skopje. The crew was understanding and asked everyone to be seated while those who had connecting flights left first. We grabbed our carry on bags and out we went in a hurry navigating the labyrinth of corridors and ascending and descending stairs until we reached the security area and again had to take our belts and shoes off. No one at security seemed to care that we were in a hurry. We managed to get through with seconds to spare only to find out there was no plane at the designated gate. What happened? No one seemed to know. After many attempts at enquiries in various different languages I thought I would try my luck. I approached one of the ladies at the airline counter and asked if anyone there spoke English. The lady in the middle said she did so I asked what had happened to our plane. To my surprise she said, "I am sorry sir but we don't have a plane destined for Skopje." This was not only unexpected, it was a total surprise for me that Malev would not have a plane for us who had prepaid for the flight. As I returned to my group and gave them the grave news we all had a

chuckle and were not at all surprised as to how the West treats Macedonians. Everyone took the news rather lightly and settled back for a rest while waiting to see how this situation was going to unfold.

By now three hours had passed and still no available plane, but again no one seemed to be overly concerned. One person said one time he was told to find an alternate method because they were not going to send a plane for just a dozen passengers so he took a taxi at his own expense. They told him they couldn't refund his fare or pay for his taxi. For that he would have to go through "proper airline channels".

The airport was busy, bustling with people and there were shops and restaurants everywhere so we thought at least we weren't going to starve. John was the first to make his move and went to purchase some water. He came back with a single 500 ml bottle and said it cost him two and a half Euros. Worse they would not take Canadian dollars. I only had Canadian dollars so was out of luck for purchasing any food.

Four hours later our airplane arrived and we were on our way to Skopje. There were a lot of stressed out and disgruntled passengers but we were happy to finally get going.

The trip to Skopje was short, only an hour and twenty minutes. It was during the day so we were able to observe the terrain as we flew over.

I knew we were in Macedonia when after an hour or so of flying over flat land we began to encounter mountains. As the plane began to descend we could see clusters of villages huddled on the side of mountains that looked similar to the villages I had left behind in Greek occupied Macedonia some forty-two years ago.

I often imagined what Macedonia would look like and now after so many years I was finally able to see it.

First Impressions

It was as though God had leveled middle Europe and deposited the soil to create the mountains in Macedonia! Or was it a glacier?

The plane landed smoothly in Skopje airport at 6:30 PM and we were let off on the tarmac some ways away from the airport building. I picked up my carry on bag and headed for the back door when I was first struck by the light and heat of the late afternoon sun. It was a scorcher as I began to descend the staircase facing the imposing mountain in the backdrop. The sight seemed strange yet familiar. It felt like I was facing an old friend whom I had not seen for ages. My feet were finally firmly planted on the tarmac, on Macedonian soil, a dream which I had dreamt of for as long as I can remember and finally I was here. As we made our way to the building we could see a large sign which read “Alexander the Great Airport”. I had seen this sign before in news stories and articles and was now happy to see it for real. “We are in Macedonia and what better way to be greeted than by Alexander the Great,” I said to my friend John with a smile on my face.

It was refreshing to get out of the sun as we entered the building, which I noticed was still under construction. “It’s going to be a great airport after the new wing is added,” John said as we lined up to go through customs. We inched our way to the front and, having gone through security in Toronto and Budapest, I wondered what kind of reception we were going to receive here in Macedonia. When we reached the front we let Tsena go first, followed by John and then it was my turn. I smiled at the lady inside the booth as she took my passport, looked at me, stamped it without asking me a single question and handed it back to me. I again smiled and said “Blagodaram” (thank you) and proceeded to the luggage pickup area.

We quickly found our luggage at the carousel and proceeded to go through customs. I was expecting the customs people to go through my luggage but that didn’t happen. The customs officer waved me through and I was out among onlookers and greeters.

We had heard on the news that the Mir and his wife (King and Queen) from Hunza as well as Ljube Boshkovski were arriving that same day here in Skopje but we did not know what time so we figured the crowds were there to greet them. But as we later found out the Mir and his wife, as well as Ljube Boshkovski, had already arrived and the awaiting crowds were mostly relatives of the arriving Detsa Begaltsi.

As we made our way past the airport front gates I saw a man holding up a hand written sign that read “Risto Stefov”. I went towards him and said, “I am Risto Stefov you must be my cousin Vasil?” I could see a bit of disappointment in his face as he answered, “No I am your cousin Goche and the lady next to me is your cousin Lena.” I quickly apologized and said, “Vasil is your brother, you two look alike.” I felt intense emotion as we hugged for the first time ever but I managed to compose myself before it became obvious. I introduced my cousins to John and Tsena. Also with them was Alexander, one of Lena’s grandchildren who gave them a ride to the airport. I apologized for our delay and for having them wait for nearly five hours in 38 degrees C. heat.

As I was greeting my cousins just behind me stood our host, tour guide and publicist of my book *Slave Nikolovski Katin* who patiently waited for me to finish with my cousins and with a loud voice welcomed us to Macedonia.

We loaded our luggage into Slave’s car and began our trek to Skopje to our respective apartments where we were going to spend the rest of our vacation. During the car ride Slave informed us of local events that were taking place in Skopje and gave us a rundown of our itinerary for the next few days. He also informed me that my cousin Spiro from Bitola was in Skopje and was looking forward to seeing me.

As we drove, winding our way to Skopje, I could not get enough of the mountainous scenery in Macedonia. Slave took advantage of my curiosity and began to tell me things about the various places we were going by. The most memorable ones were the mountains surrounding Skopje, the haze and the village Arachinovo. I recognized that name of course because of the 2001 conflict of which I had written articles and had made mention in my books.

We reached John and Tsena’s destination first and were greeted by Makedonka, John’s cousin. After that Slave took me to my residence which was kindly loaned to me by my travel agent, Dragitsa Belchevska of Win Travel.

As we pulled into the parking lot in front of the building I could hear a familiar sound which I had not heard for over forty-two years. It was the sound of a bird I know as “galitsa”. It’s a crow-like black bird with dark gray wings but a bit smaller. I made a point of telling Slave about it and he concurred it was indeed a galitsa.

When we arrived at my place he gave me my keys and showed me around. He knew I had no Macedonian money so he also loaned me a couple of thousand denars for the evening. He also asked what my impression of Macedonia was and without thinking I said, "I am so happy to hear so many people all around me speak Macedonian." Why I said that I don't know but where I live in Canada Macedonians are spread apart and one cannot help but perk up their ears when people speak Macedonian.

By now I was exhausted and ready to go to bed. I couldn't sleep at all on the plane and had barely slept the night before. I had a shower and was watching television when I heard a knock on my door. It was my cousin Spiro. After we had our greeting he asked me if I had eaten. It was now Friday 8:00 PM and I had not eaten since Thursday noon, except for the little food they gave us on the plane. Spiro insisted we go out and took me to a restaurant nearby. He asked me what I wanted to eat to which I replied with a laugh, because I had no idea what to order, so I said, "Everything is new to me so please order what you think would be good to eat." He insisted I also try out the "Skopsko" a local reputable beer. To my surprise the waiter brought a large cucumber and tomato salad layered with grated feta cheese and a huge plate of grilled pork, enough to feed four people. "It is all for you," Spiro said "I have already eaten and besides I am fasting at the moment and can't eat meat." I looked at him in amazement and said, "There is no way that I can eat all that!" "Try it," he said as he continued to talk to me telling me things about himself and his family. As I listened I continued to eat not realizing that I ate everything. I can't recall ever having eaten food so fresh and delicious. I had never seen food prepared this way before. Fried slices of cheese (kashkaval) dipped in egg and bread batter. Feta prepared the same way. Cylinders of pork injected with cheese and grilled to perfection. I will never forget that meal.

After eating all that food my cousin insisted I have something to drink so I decided to try Turkish coffee, Macedonian style. I said to the waiter, "I will have Turkish coffee without sugar." The waiter looked puzzled for a moment as my cousin explained that a Turkish coffee automatically comes with four teaspoons of sugar and that I meant Macedonian coffee without sugar.

Spiro stayed with me at my place that night and the next morning took me for a breakfast I will never forget.

My first day in Macedonia

It was about 9:00 PM when Spiro and I left the restaurant, went to his car to pick up some items and returned to my apartment. By now neither one of us could sleep so I decided to show Spiro my books. Fearing the wrath of customs I decided to bring only one set of books for the promotion. Spiro flipped through them and decided he wanted a copy of my dialectal dictionary for himself, which I promised I would give him after the book promo.

By now I was really tired but I could not sleep. Spiro insisted I go to bed anyway while he watched television for a while. There were two vacant rooms in the apartment and another one occupied by a student. The student at the moment was away on vacation so the entire place was basically ours for the night.

I noticed it was midnight and still I was not able to sleep while I heard Spiro snoring loudly in the next room. I don't remember anything past that but I was fully awake by 4:00 AM and no matter how hard I tried I could not go back to asleep again.

The place was quiet except for the birds which were up and stirring at first light. I could hear the sound of galitsi accompanied by the sound of the familiar "strachka" (magpie), which I had not heard since I had left my village Oshchima in Greek occupied Macedonia. I also heard another sound, the song of a wild pigeon. I was not sure about it though because I did not know that wild pigeons could live in a city. Slave later told me that it was a wild pigeon and that they do have wild pigeons in Skopje.

While Spiro slept I used the opportunity to plan out what to do for the day. This would be the only day I would have free because the next day I was invited to spend with John and Tsena at the Slave Nikolovski family home and cottage and Monday we would be starting our long tour of Macedonia.

I decided my first priority would be to go to the bank and get some of my Canadian money converted to denars. Perhaps later we could deliver some of the gifts I was given by friends to take to their relatives in Macedonia.

Spiro was up by 7:00 AM and decided that our first priority should be eating breakfast. I did not feel much like eating but like my mother he insisted we go and eat anyway. I was his guest and could not refuse.

The night before, the streets were bustling with people but now everything was quiet. Spiro remarked that people usually stay up late at night because it's too hot to sleep. The vast majority have no "klima" (air conditioning) so they sleep in the morning when it is cooler.

The small bakery opened at 8:00 AM and the shelves were full of fresh hot pastries, kinds I had never seen before. Spiro said, "Today we will have 'Burek', cheese or meat which would you prefer?" I hesitated so he asked the baker to cut a quarter of each and put it on plates so we could eat it there. It was enough food to feed four people.

We sat down at a table in front of the bakery and Spiro again went in and came out with a bottle of "jugurt"; what I would describe as a cross between yogurt and buttermilk. "You know I can't eat this stuff because I am still fasting," Spiro said "so dig in and eat." "Would you like a knife and fork?" he asked. I said I preferred eating pastry with my fingers as I began to devour the stuff. Full as I was and ashamed of making a pig of myself I could not stop eating until both pieces of burek were eaten. Spiro was serious when he asked me if I wanted more but I said there is always tomorrow and it would be a good idea if I didn't eat any more. Spiro agreed and did not press the issue anymore.

The burek as I found out was freshly made and baked minutes before I ate it by the very same baker who served us. It only cost 45 denars a piece, equivalent to \$ 1.10 Canadian. It was the most delicious pastry I had ever tasted and I would later make visits again and again to this bakery at every opportunity. I enjoyed the jugurt too, it reminded me of the kind of "bientsa" (buttermilk) my mother used to make a long time ago back in the village Oshchima. Having finished my breakfast, it was now time to head for the bank.

It was Saturday so we expected most banks would be closed but that was not the case in Skopje. Most banks are open on Saturdays. The first bank we went to was a local bank in "Aerodrom" on the opposite side of "Vero" in ulitsa "Jane Sandanski" but that bank unfortunately was closed. We went to another bank nearby but they told us that they did not cash traveler's cheques and we should go to the central bank in the city center.

We drove around the scenic route as Spiro showed me the sites including the Macedonian Parliament Building where he served four years as a VMRO member of parliament. The security guard at the Parliament Building knew Spiro and allowed him to park there as we continued to tour the center of Skopje on foot.

Having gone past several shops and cafes we finally reached the bank where again we were told they could only cash a couple of cheques and we should go to the central bank on the other side of the Vardar River. Here we crossed the stone bridge about which I had written in my history books where Karposh was impaled by Tatar darts in December 1689 and thrown into the Vardar. The bridge had been restored several times since the 1600's but has still maintained its original style. There is a lot of history there.

By now it was eleven o'clock and Skopje was baking under the hot sun as we entered the non-air-conditioned bank, perspiring profusely. The bank was empty and we were first in line as we approached one of the tellers. Not being confident that I would be understood properly, because my poor Macedonian, I asked Spiro to explain what I wanted done. After a bit of hesitation on the bank clerk's part she finally asked me to show her my traveler's cheques. She told me she would have to verify them and took them away to another office out of sight. I asked Spiro what's going on but he shrugged his shoulders in confusion. A few minutes later the lady came back and asked me where I got the travelers cheques. I said I purchased them at my bank in Canada. "So you are Canadian?" she asked. No I said, "I am Macedonian but live in Canada and I am here on vacation." I had to explain that my inability to speak Macedonian was due to the fact that I came from Greece and that I was not educated in Macedonia. I realize this was unnecessary information but what else could we do but answer her silly little questions as both Spiro and I were drenched in sweat. The next question she asked was, "How do I know you didn't steal these cheques?" At this point I gave her my passport and said there was no way I could prove that except that my signature in the passport matched that on the cheques. By now Spiro was so frustrated he left and took a seat in the center of the lobby. The teller now consulted with another teller and began to take the information from my passport. "You realize," she said "we had to ask you these questions because there is so much fraud committed nowadays." I agreed but felt I was unnecessarily treated like a criminal and wondered what foreigner would again set foot in this country if he or she were treated this way? How could Macedonia expect more tourism if it continued to treat its tourists like criminals. Yes, it's true much fraud is committed this way but must we treat everyone like a criminal? I did not need to know or hear the clerk's private thoughts or the bank's internal policies on how to

conduct its business while I had my cheques cashed. Believe me, the next time I am converting my money elsewhere, I would never again go through that humiliating experience. But it was not over yet!

I had not had much sleep over two nights, was hot and a nervous wreck when she asked me to countersign the cheques. I did my best but the counter I used was flat polished granite and the pen was thin and slippery, so naturally I could not make my signature to perfection. I gave her the first three cheques and she said, “Clearly that’s not you, your signature does not match.” At this point I took offense and said, “Look at the signature and photo on my passport and the original signature on the cheques. It is clearly me except I am having difficulty with the pen and counter.” She gave me a pad and another pen with which I signed another cheque. This time the signature was a match and she agreed to cash only those cheques that perfectly matched my signature. I did my best and had the rest of the cheques properly signed for which she charged me a rate of 37.8 denars per Canadian dollar and charged me a fee of about 2% for the conversion. “Now that we have established it’s me,” I asked “can you cash the first three cheques?” She said she would have to consult the manager.

A few minutes later an older woman came. My situation was explained in every detail to her but after looking at the cheques for a while she said, “This is impossible, how could you have done this?” “We will have to get all your information and you will have to refund us if the cheques are rejected.” I agreed but someone said I lived in Canada to which she again said, “Impossible.” At this point I said, “Give me back my three cheques and don’t worry about it!” I tipped the clerk \$5 Canadian just to show her there were no hard feelings and we left.

I later told my story to a Macedonian businessman from Los Angeles who is an investor in Macedonia. He said, “They should have been kissing your hand for bringing them business instead of treating you the way they did.” It’s ironic isn’t it?

The experience did not bother me in the least but it frustrated me because like many of us here in the Diaspora I too am concerned about Macedonia and want to help the Macedonian economy in any way I can. I decided to write about it not to negatively criticize the bank but to bring awareness that things need to change in Macedonia before foreigners are invited to spend their money there. Don’t expect people to be sympathetic if you treat them this way.

I don't know what Spiro thought of the experience, I never asked but I did apologize to him for dragging him into my mess.

We returned to Skopje center again via the bridge and headed for the nearest bookstore.

First exchange of opinions

As we were crossing the Skopje Bridge I told Spiro I needed a good Macedonian English dictionary and asked if he knew of any bookstores nearby. As we crossed the bridge Spiro pointed to some more important landmarks such as MANU and the sprawling café's near the banks of the Vardar River. We found a small bookstore opposite Fufo's café where I found what I was looking for. My ability to translate Macedonian to English rests mostly on the quality of my dictionary. I needed a good dictionary and found one. It cost 3,150 denars (\$80 Canadian) but it was worth it. There were various dictionaries sold but the one I bought is by Zoze Murgovski and is called "Macedonian English Dictionary" the unabridged edition.

Noticing how I spoke Macedonian the bookstore attendant wanted to know where I was from. I told her I was from Aegean Macedonia and she immediately told me her family was also from Aegean Macedonia, from Kostur region, from a village called Tiolishta. I said I have an uncle from Tiolishta and when I mentioned his last name she looked at me in disbelief. She said she was a relative of my uncle's brother and as it turned out her sister was currently visiting him in Tiolishta. Small world!

Spiro bought some books for himself too, as he remarked that books were really expensive in Macedonia and not too many people could afford them.

It was past noon when we made it to our next destination to deliver a package I had been carrying from Canada for an Oshchimian family; relatives of my friend Lou.

The place was difficult to find but after several phone calls Spiro got me there where we met Atanas and his mother. Atanas immediately recognized Spiro and made a point of letting him know that he knew him and that he had been at his rallies. Atanas however did not know that Spiro was from Zhelevo, a stones throw away from Oshchima and that he was related to me. Lou had warned me to watch out for "controversial" Atanas but I had no idea how passionate he felt about Macedonia and how strongly he supported the Macedonian cause. We had a lively three way conversation as Spiro too opened up and gave us his views from the inside. My views were naturally from the outside and a bit academic according to Atanas.

What transpired during that conversation could fill books but one thing that left a lasting impression on me was one of Atanas's experiences with a foreign diplomat. Atanas speaks English very well and for a while drove a taxi. As it happened, because of his ability to speak English, Atanas was given a job to chauffeur this foreign diplomat whose name he did not divulge. For a foreigner Skopje was a difficult place to navigate and this diplomat became dependent on Atanas for everything. As Atanas put it, one night he took him out to the bar scene, got him topped up with Skopsko and got him talking. To make a long story short, this guy was in Macedonia to write a report about Macedonia and Macedonia's future plans. And, as Atanas put it, this guy told him that Macedonians had no plans. Unlike the Albanians who have a plan to create a "Greater Albania" the Macedonians had no plans and just existed carrying on with their day to day lives. Naturally Atanas was stunned by the remark and to think that he aided this guy and did everything he wanted.

After patiently listening to Atanas, I had no words of my own to describe my emotions at the kind of crap foreigners come up with. Albanians, whose country was created and given to them no more than one hundred years ago, have a plan but Macedonians who have been struggling since Roman times and have amassed more than thirty major insurrections including the 1093 Ilinden Uprising have no plans! What crap!

If I, who live in Canada, can find out so many things about Macedonia in no time at all so can a foreigner who is paid to do his job. But clearly this guy's job wasn't to seek the truth but to fabricate lies about the Macedonian people. For what purpose and for whom this guy worked is unknown. Men who seek their fortune in propagating lies at the expense of poor, law abiding and decent people are small men indeed.

Just for the record here is how I see the Macedonian peoples' plan, which by the way is instinctive and in their nature, a plan which has not been written in any books for foreigners to understand.

I have studied our history and am witness to a restless people who know who they are and know what they want; who over the years have risen to fight for their rights and for self determination. For those who have doubts, here is a list of the uprisings Macedonians have fought over the centuries:

(Roman Era), First Macedonian-Roman War, Second Macedonian-Roman War, Third Macedonian-Roman War.

(Middle Ages), the Establishment of Samoil's Macedonian State.

(Uprisings Against the Byzantines), Petar Deljan, Nikolitsa of Larisa, Giorgi Vojteh, Dobromir Hrs, Dobromir Strez, Dragonitsa, Pelagonia (Uprisings against the Ottomans), Sanjuk of Ohrid, Nahi of Debar, Mariovo-Prilep, Gjavoto, Mariovo, Musa Chelebi, Skendrbeg, Karposh, Negush, Stojan Vezenkov,

Razlovtsi, Kumanovo-Kriva Palanka, Pijanets, Kreshna, and the greatest uprisings of them all "Ilinden" at Melnik, Gorna Dzhumaja, District of Bitola, Smilevo, Krushevo, Kichevo, Karbunitsa, Dushegubitsa, Gjavato, Demir Hisar, Prilep, Ohrid, Resen, Kostur, Klisura, Lerin, Neveska, Skopje, Strumitsa, Solun and Seres.

(Young Turk uprising) Tikvesh, Ohrid-Debar. And this is only before Macedonia's partition. So show me a people who have struggled for so long and who have fought so many fights and tell me they had no plan!

Just for the record, every Macedonian I know eats, drinks, sleeps and dreams of a united, free and independent Macedonia and if that's not a plan I don't know what is!

Macedonians have always fought against foreign occupation and as I have indicated above rose to the task of liberating themselves many times. Unlike our neighbours whose countries were liberated and handed to them by the Great Powers, the Macedonians had to struggle by themselves for themselves and what glorious struggles they were. No one came to their rescue when they rose as a single nation and revolted against the mighty Ottoman Empire, as one author put it, in one of the greatest revolutions Europe had witnessed. Much as they wanted to liberate themselves and recover their own country, greater forces were hard at work fighting against them. Now one hundred years later they have again risen as a single people from a single nation, created their own state and look forward to again recovering all of their Macedonia.

Mr. foreign diplomat, for three thousand years we are a Macedonian people, one nation fighting to recover one Macedonia which is rightfully ours. Against all odds, we came together as a people of a single nation when we rose against the Ottomans in 1903 with the purpose of liberating ourselves and recovering our state but unfortunately we failed. It was "you" Mr. foreign diplomat, the outsiders who at our weakest moment ambushed us and divided us with

the purpose of permanently eradicating us. But let me tell you we are back on our feet now, risen from the ashes like the fabled phoenix and are ready to recover what is rightfully ours. We have recovered one part of our Macedonia and in time we aim to recover it all. And that Mr. foreign diplomat is our plan for our future!

Like every conversation between passionate Macedonians this conversation too had to come to a close for the sake of time. Spiro was overdue in returning to Bitola and anxious to get going. Next stop lunch.

This time Spiro took me to an indoor/outdoor restaurant which I would visit again and again throughout my stay in Skopje. By now it was no surprise how much food we were about to receive and I had no doubt about my ability to eat it all. Also by now Spiro had resigned to the fact that I could not order for myself but I wanted to experience different food so he ordered a platter of mixed meats with vegetables, French fries, a Macedonian salad and a large skopsko for me. He ordered a plate of vegetables and French fries (kompiri) for himself as he was still fasting. All of the meat was cooked with cheese, including the huge hamburger. One piece of meat was woven like a woman's braided hair and injected with cheese. I tried the vegetables first just to see what they would taste like in comparison to those we eat in Canada. The corn, peas and even the mushrooms were delicious so instead of pushing them to the side of my plate as I usually do, I ate them down to the last one. The meat too was delicious and so was the tomato-cucumber salad sprinkled with heaps of grated feta cheese. By the time I was done I was completely stuffed. Amazingly I felt no over eating discomfort as I usually do back home.

I said my goodbyes to Spiro and was back in my apartment when I received a phone call from my cousin Lena wanting to know when I could visit. I said I was available now and she came with her daughter-in-law Diana to pick me up. My visit lasted until 11 PM. I had a good visit and we were able to discuss many things. I also got to talk to the rest of my cousins in Skopje on the phone. Lena was a bit more understanding about pushing the food and let me off with just coffee and water.

The tap water in Skopje by the way comes from a spring and is excellent for drinking but most people in Skopje drink bottled water. The best carbonated bottled water, I was told, comes from Bitola. The

Skopje tap water has too much calcium and people avoid drinking it as much as possible, so I was told.

It was hot that night as Diana and Lena dropped me off at my apartment. It was well past 2:00 AM when the noise outside subsided and people went to bed. For the life of me I could not sleep at all that night.

Visiting with Slave

As usual I was up at 4am Sunday morning and surprisingly not very tired. The most I could have slept that night would have been a couple of hours. I spent most of my morning trying to get organized and figure out how and when I was going to visit the twenty or so friends who had asked me to see them. Besides my relatives, the army officers I knew from Toronto and a couple of academics; most were internet acquaintances whom I had never met before.

By 8am I received my customary wake up call from Slave who asked me if he woke me up. I had to laugh. I was ready to go but that was not going to happen for another couple of hours during which time I watched some television. I was surprised at the number of channels they got in Skopje. Unfortunately only three or four were in Macedonian; the rest were mostly in English, French, German, Serbian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Albanian and other languages I could not recognize. Early in the morning there were cartoons on nearly half the channels. I watched one of Tom and Jerry and one of Bugs Bunny, my old favourites.

By 10am Slave had arrived, picked me up, then John and Tsena and we were on our way to their home in the center of Skopje. Again we took the scenic route and Slave wasted no opportunity in showing us the sights. John and Tsena had been to Skopje several times before so Slave was actually showing me the sights. That included the museum which had been a railway station before it was destroyed by the earthquake, the new Sveti Kliment church, government buildings, etc. We even went through a thriving open market in the middle of Skopje where one could buy fresh fruits, vegetables of all sorts and an assortment of items from fresh baked bread to all kinds of sweets and even clothing for a small cost. Who says Macedonia does not have a thriving economy? Slave was quick to point out that Macedonians are resourceful and hard working and that as long as there are people who are willing to work with the earth no one is going to go hungry. And because of the hot weather and lack of refrigeration, the food was picked fresh in the morning and sold the same day. I later continued to inquire at every place we went if their food had been purchased fresh locally and prepared the same day. From what I was told, almost all of the food grown in Macedonia is organic. Because of the high cost of fertilizers and pesticides, which most small farmers can't afford, food is

still grown in the traditional way. I hope Macedonians continue to grow their food this way because I am sure they will not enjoy eating food grown in mineral depleted soil, saturated with pesticides.

Another thing I noticed in Skopje was that there were no homeless people (other than those protesting in Skopje center). With such high unemployment and such low wages how could there be no homeless people? I wonder how many of those unemployed will become homeless if Macedonia enters the European Union or how many will go hungry when the multinationals put the small farmers out of business? I also wonder what Macedonians will think when their food, especially meat loaded with preservatives, is delivered to them in refrigerators from France or Germany and is sold to them at a high price in huge grocery stores.

By the way, of all the people I spoke to, no one was eager to see Macedonia join the European Union nor under the illusion that things were going to improve after they joined it. As one person put it, "We are doing fine here the way we are; we are seeing gradual improvement by the day. We have what we need and the only thing we don't have is extra money to shop for extravagant things and to go out more often."

Slave and his wife Nada live in the same building where they work so we got to visit both their home and office. Nada is one of those rare people who loves to cook and do extravagant things for her guests as she slaved away in the heat preparing very delicious pastries and treats for us. Besides Nada, we also met their son and granddaughter. I was thoroughly impressed with their son's knowledge of Macedonian issues and listened to him as he meticulously explained things from his perspective. He believes that if Macedonia joins the EU most of the criminal element in Macedonia will move on to greener pastures and Macedonia may experience some peace.

Slave and Nada's granddaughter was a jewel. At her preschool age she spoke like a little philosopher, a similar kind of talk I had heard from John and Tsena's grandson Christopher. We were fortunate to have the little girl's company throughout the day as her father had to leave right after breakfast.

Slave later took us to his office and gave us the grand tour. Both he and his wife are authors and have been in the publishing business for a while and have amassed a fair number of books. Slave gave me more books than I could carry. These were not just his books but those of

many authors whom he had published. I was more than happy to receive them and will use them as sources in future projects.

After that we were headed to Slave and Nada's cottage up on the mountain hillside facing Skopje. On the way we did some more sightseeing and purchased a big watermelon. As we climbed the mountain we took a detour to visit a very old monastery, I believe it was 11th century. There outside I saw a swallow's nest made of dried mud, the kind of nests we used to have in our homes back in Oshchima. The monastery was very old with frescoes painted on the walls and bars to hold on to when standing for liturgy. There were no seats. In fact all the churches and monasteries I subsequently visited had no seats or pews, as they are called, not even in the main and modern Church in Skopje. Outside the monastery at the roadside we found wild plum trees loaded with ripe plums ready for picking. Wild plums are very common in Macedonia and we would see them again and again on the roadside all throughout Macedonia. At my mention, Slave reached out and picked a few for us in the manner we used to pick them back in Oshchima. Even though they are ripe these wild delights pack a sour punch that would send shivers down your spine but for me it was a novelty as I had not tasted any for a long time.

Slave drove up and down dirt roads no wider than his car with cliffs hanging at the side that would frighten the bravest, but we trusted Slave to get us there safely. When we arrived it was a sight to see as we could see half of Skopje and its beautiful surrounding mountainside. Although it was a scorcher outside it was cool inside the cottage so we decided to stay indoors for a while until we cooled off. There was not much running water in the surrounding area so each cottage had its own supply of well water. I was curious to see what it tasted like so Nada poured me a big glass. It was as good as the Skopje spring water but much cooler.

Here as we relaxed in the calm and relatively cool cottage Slave and I had a few drinks of his favorite "yellow" whisky or simply "yellow" as we subsequently called it. Nada objected to Slave's drinking because of his health but I enjoyed his company as well as his homemade drink which a friend of his had given him.

The drinks and relaxation had made me feel drowsy but not enough to put me to sleep as I confessed I hadn't much sleep the night before. Everyone insisted that I sleep some but I was not able to.

The day ended with a big dinner which Nada again slaved to cook for us; but as she said cooking was one thing she truly enjoyed doing. Thank you Nada.

By now the watermelon was cool as it sat under a dripping tap of cool well water. When it was cut it was a dark red colour which I had not seen in a long time. Nada remarked that it was not one of the best watermelons she had seen but for me it was and had a delicious sweet taste which we don't get from our imported "ripen as they travel watermelons" here in Canada.

Slave drove downhill unusually fast in the dark that night as we headed back for the city and for some rest before our long trip the next day.

On the road to Stobi

As soon as we arrived from the cottage I had a quick, cool shower and immediately went to bed. The next thing I remember is being fully awake a little before 6 am. I got my wakeup call at 7 am and Slave told me to dress in formal attire. He was coming by to pick me up at 8 am and we were going to the Sitel television station for a live interview at 9 am.

I didn't bring a jacket but did bring a shirt and tie to go with my long pants. Slave approved and we were off to the Sitel studio in Gradski Stadion in Skopje. Slave tried to instruct me on what to say but I am not very good at following instructions so the only question I had for him was, "Will there be a translator to translate for me from English to Macedonian?" I had asked for a translator before I left Canada and Slave had agreed to get one. Unfortunately the only thing Slave said was, "No, but don't worry about it, you will do well speaking in your dialect. People here love to listen to you speak in your dialect." I remember Spiro remarking several times a couple of days before about how he loved to listen to me speak in his departed father's dialect.

"If that's the case then we will have to explain to the interviewers," I said to Slave "to speak slowly and ask me questions in simple words so that I can understand what they are asking."

We made it to the studio early and were told to wait a while outside in the lobby where we watched the previous live program. When our turn came they quickly escorted us inside where we met Anita, the morning show hostess. She asked a number of questions both personal and about my books and assured me she would make sure I understood her questions while conducting the live interview.

The interview which was scheduled to take five minutes actually took twenty minutes. I guess they found what Slave and I had to say interesting which led to more and more questions. Most of the questions were about my books but she did ask important questions about Macedonian issues especially ones relating to Greek occupied Macedonia, the place where I come from. The show I was told was aired worldwide and was seen in Australia, the USA and Canada. I did receive feedback from one person from Australia who said he saw us on Sitel and wanted to purchase one of each of my books.

By 10 am we were finished and back to my apartment where I changed to cooler clothing. Slave also went home to change and, after

picking up John and Tsena, we were on the road to see Macedonia. We took the highway “autopat” from Skopje following the Vardar River to Veles. It was a clear, scorching hot day as Slave kept speeding to make up for lost time but John and Tsena would not approve, not because they did not have confidence in Slave’s ability to navigate treacherous curves, but because being from Canada they didn’t like to break traffic laws. Slave agreed to keep to the speed limit and if he didn’t he heard about it from the back seat. I couldn’t help but remark to Slave the way Macedonians drive and break traffic laws at every opportunity. Just the other day I had seen two cars go through a red light. Pedestrians too disobey signals and cross the roads on red. Almost everyone owns a cell phone and is talking on it while driving even though it’s against the law. The roads in Macedonia are narrow and there is no parking anywhere so everyone parks wherever they can find a spot even in no parking zones; yet they don’t seem to get fined. But one thing I need to mention is that drivers in Macedonia are much more skillful and calmer than those in Canada. The way they drive it would seem like everything is synchronized. Cars just miss one another without hitting. Pedestrians seem to slide by without being hit. Bicycles zoom in and out of traffic without causing slowdowns, cars cut in and out of lanes and no one seems to get upset. I never witnessed a single act of road rage. Worst about the roads is that there are no guardrails even at the most dangerous places yet there are less traffic accidents there than there are here in Toronto. The cars in Macedonia seem to be a lot more stable and balanced because it is scary how fast drivers navigate treacherous curves without sliding off the road or overturning. All cars in Macedonia are small and standard with manual shifts. I have watched both Slave and Spiro zoom through traffic shifting gears and steering with one hand while holding the cell phone with the other, something I couldn’t do even if I wanted to.

After passing by the city of Veles we reached our first destination, Stobi. Today Stobi is just an archeological site but years ago it was one of the largest ancient cities in the region. According to Roman historian Titus Livy, Stobi is located on the Erigon River (Tsrna River) near the Axios River (Vardar River) and is an old city dating back to the 3rd century BC. Livy mentioned this city in his 2nd century BC historical accounts in his references to king Philip V’s battle with the Dardanians. He mentions that the battle, which by the way Philip V won, took place in Paeonia in the vicinity of Stobi. Livy also mentions Stobi in his

historical accounts that refer to Macedonia's division and loss of independence in the year 167 BC when Stobi became part of the 4th meris.

It was particularly hot and dry when we were visiting Stobi that Monday July 14th. July is not a good month to be visiting Stobi especially by people from Canada who enjoy the cool weather and can't stand the heat.

At the site we were met by resident archeologist and tour guide Metodija who, patiently in the grueling sun, took us for a tour first at the lower and more recent Roman ruins and later up higher at the older ruins. The Romans tended to build their settlements lower in the valley where it was possible to deliver flowing water to their homes and baths via their famous viaducts. We saw many sights in the ruins including the theater, casino, prison, basilica, the Thodosian Palace, the House of Parthenius, the large bath, the Synagogue and of course the Baptistery with its beautiful floor mosaics.

The Stobi archeological site covers a vast area which is currently being excavated and which will take years and an army of archeologists before it is all dug up. According to Metodija, Stobi is much larger than the current archeological site. Some of the old city extends beyond the current limits where today it is covered with the houses of nearby urban settlements.

Unable to take too much more of the 40 degree centigrade heat, we left the ruins and retreated back to the nearby café and gift store where we had some rest and a cool drink of mineral water. There we were joined by our tour guide and archeologist Metodija for a long discussion not only about archeology but also about general issues concerning Macedonia. At one point during the tour he mentioned he was hated by some Greeks because of his work, after which John looked at me and smiled for I too fall into the same category.

Macedonia will need a lot of help to excavate all its archeological sites which now number over one-hundred and fifty. One way to do that is to create a new international archeological department at one of the Universities and enroll foreign archeology students by offering them practical education with hands on experience. Courses could be taught in English and Macedonian could be offered as an elective for those who want to learn Macedonian. The students would not have to know Macedonian in order to take archeology courses and naturally would be paying for their own education which would make the

department self sufficient. I am sure that every student will also invite friends and relatives for a visit, bringing more tourists to Macedonia. Plus at the end of their education, Macedonia would have many young friends who I am sure would serve as cultural ambassadors for that country. The idea for an archeology department for foreign students in Macedonia is Pete Kondoff's brain child. Before leaving Canada, Pete had asked me to discuss his idea with various people in Macedonia, which I did.

Just as we were having a long discussion about Macedonia with Metodija we were joined by a couple of gentlemen who had learned from our morning television interview that we would be in Stobi that day. One of those gentlemen was Nikola who knew about my work from the internet and was interested in advertising my books on his website www.macedonium.org. Nikola, or Nikolche as he is known to his friends, is doing a fantastic job of promoting Macedonia's heritage, history and culture on his website.

Resident archeologist Metodija had a lot to say about Stobi, not only about the ruins but also about this grand city's historic greatness about which very few people know. Macedonia's history has not yet been written and what has been written has been written by Macedonia's neighbours and enemies. Macedonians must now use the tools of archeology and excavate archeological sites like Stobi, Heraclea and countless others and finally write their own history. Macedonia has the greatest number and richest archeological sites in the world; the vast majority of them still unexplored. For a place to have amassed such archeological treasures it must have had a very rich history, which I have no doubt will surface in time and prove to the world that one of the oldest and greatest civilizations Europe has ever witnessed once lived on those lands. Such a place cannot and should not be allowed to exist as a satellite of others. It needs its own place in history and I believe archeology will aid in finding it.

I look forward to visiting Stobi again in the future but not in the summer, perhaps in the spring or better yet in the fall when the grapes are ripe, picked and wine flows like water.

On the road to Berovo

After about an hours rest at Stobi, I visited the gift shop and purchased a few books, one about Stobi. In front of the building at the entrance we met a group of students and had a short discussion with their professors, one of whom happened to be a daughter of parents born in Tsena's village in Greek occupied Macedonia. Unfortunately we forgot to tell Tsena until we were in the car on the road. She was so disappointed.

Headed downhill, south on the "autopat", we entered a long tunnel through the center of a mountain and as we traveled through the tunnel we came to an opening where John asked Slave to stop the car. It was an unbelievable sight. There was an elongated rock crevice in the center of the mountain no wider than 20 meters and stood vertical as high as the mountain. It seemed as though some giant had used an axe to split the rocky mountain in half. There was a stream running through the crevice and John asked me to follow him as he rushed downhill following the water until we reached the mighty Vardar at the bottom. There we took pictures in hopes of capturing the height of the sheer cliff. But no photograph can do the cliff justice; one has to be there to appreciate its majestic height. I can picture rock climbers trying to conquer and tame it.

It was a treacherous rush down the hill having to navigate our way down on sharp and slippery rocks but it was breathtaking to see the rock from the bottom. Then came the hard work of having to walk back uphill on the rocky creek. But it was worth it.

Out of breath we hopped in the car where Slave and Tsena waited and we sped off through the second part of the tunnel. It was a vigorous uphill walk and I appreciated the exercise even in the boiling heat. I don't know how John felt; I did not want to ask.

Back in the car we resumed our tour as we passed by Volandovo and Marventsi. It is rumoured that Alexander the Great may be buried under the manmade hill (tumba) near Marventsi but unfortunately that archeological site has not yet been excavated so, given how hot it was that day, we decided not to visit it.

Our next destination was the museum in Gevgelija where we saw all kinds of small, ancient statuettes; some original some reproductions. It was a small museum and did not take us too long to see everything before we were out again and on our way to Bogdantsi to visit the

printing house “Sofija” (www.sofijaprint.com.mk) where my book was printed. There we met Dragi the owner and several of his employees. Dragi gave us a tour of his facilities and later took us to lunch in a cafeteria on the main floor of the same building.

Dragi’s office was a treasure house adorned with a variety of books and artifacts from ancient times. One could spend hours looking at his stuff and probably years trying to read the books he has amassed. Before going to lunch Dragi showed us a flyer with a map, of which he had only one copy, made in Italy showing the Apostle Paul’s travels. What was really interesting about this map is that the town Bogdantsi was on it. I asked Dragi to make copies and send me one here in Canada. Hopefully he has not forgotten. I will ask Slave, who by the way also reads these articles, to remind him.

In spite of our offer to pay for lunch, we were treated to one fine meal by Dragi. We were Dragi’s guests that day and he would have it no other way. Thank you Dragi and Slave for buying lunch. We ate course after course of assortments of meats and locally grown vegetables including very hot baked peppers. Hot peppers came on the side so you could choose to add them to your meal or eat them as they were on their own; that is if you were brave because these peppers were not for the timid. Tsena and I decided to try them first. We certainly were not going to be intimidated by these tiny elongated vegetables. The first bite was a surprise, after that it became easier to eat them as beads of sweat rolled down our faces. I ate a couple of hot peppers and left the rest. I didn’t want to be impolite and eat them all.

As usual the meats consisting mainly of freshly prepared pork and sausages were delicious but the most memorable choice of food was dessert. We were served plain vanilla ice cream with tiny wild figs. It was the most delicious ice cream I have tasted in a long time. The tiny black wild figs were soft and broke apart in my mouth releasing a sweet aromatic flavour that made my taste buds dance with joy.

Before we were finished eating Dragi’s son came for a short visit. Soon we said our goodbye’s and left to continue on our tour.

On our way out of Bogdantsi we passed by Lake Paliortsi, now a dam where the Apostle Paul was shown to have passed by on the Italian Flyer with the map about which I mentioned earlier. Two Italians, a brother and sister, are currently building a monastery there in honour of St. Paul.

We continued traveling south until we reached Lake Dojran where Slave played a joke on me pretending he was going to cross the Macedonian-Greek border and enter Greece. As much as I wanted to go into Greece and visit my birthplace I had promised my parents I wouldn't. I didn't want to break that promise no matter how tempting it was. It broke my heart to be so close yet so far.

Just as Slave entered the border on the Macedonian side he made a "u" turn and we were back on the road on our way to Strumitsa. It was mid-afternoon by now and scorching hot even with the klima (air conditioning) in the car going at full blast. Strumitsa is a very old city with many new buildings. It has gone through a transition and is becoming a beautiful modern city. Unfortunately with the hot scorching weather it was almost impossible to stay too long so we continued on our way north and uphill looking for cooler weather, our destination; Berovo.

As we traversed the difficult winding incline we were constantly reminded by the road signs that this was a steep and treacherous winding road. On our way up we could see behind us the Strumitsa valley dotted with villages almost touching one another. This indeed was an agriculturally rich land but it was very dry and burning hot in the mid-summer sun. As we began to near the peak of the mountain range we saw herds of cattle roaming the roadside. After crossing the mountain peak we could still see cattle descending the hill on the other side but the weather had changed from hot and dry to cool and moist as if we had changed climate. Everything on the other side was green and alive and cool enough to finally open the car windows.

By now it was past 7 pm when Slave declared that we were nearing the revolutionary village Berovo. I can see why our revolutionary forefathers made this region their stronghold. It was a struggle getting up the mountain by car; imagine what a struggle it would have been to climb the mountain on foot? That is why our Ottoman occupiers never bothered to unless necessary.

Slave had made reservations the day before in a local hotel for us and as soon as we arrived we went to check in. I was not accustomed to local practices so I felt a bit anxious when the hotel clerk took my passport and would not give it back. Slave reassured me that that's the way things were done there and that I would get my passport back when we checked out. Slave too had to surrender his identification card.

The place we stayed at is called “Hotel Manastir” (www.hotelmanastir.com.mk). It was a nice, small and clean place. Each room had a tiny kitchen with a small fridge stocked with liquor, pop and bottled water. It had a television with more channels than I would have had time to flip through. The bathroom had a shower but no bath and no hot water. The hot water tank had a switch outside the bathroom and had to be manually turned on. After having cold showers a couple of times at my apartment in Skopje, I discovered the hot water tank switch which I needed to turn on in order to have hot water. Back home in Canada we have our water heaters on all the time even when we don’t use the hot water.

As soon as I had my shower and washed my sandals, because they were literally caked with mud from the dust and from my sweating feet, I joined Slave at the hotel’s restaurant. John and Tsena joined us later but by then we had had a couple of “yellows” (yellow is what Slave calls whiskey because of its colour) and some snacks of fresh baked bread, cheese (kaskcaval) dipped in flour and egg batter, fried and some plain fried feta cheese. The “yellow” sure went down smooth with the tasty snacks. We had eaten so much for lunch no one wanted to order supper. Slave and I however continued to order more “yellows” and nibbled on the snacks as Slave was in the mood for telling stories.

Slave told me a lot of stories that night but darn if I could remember any of them. I did remember hearing him mention the name “Miss Stone” at one point referring to the time just before the Ilinden Uprising in 1903 when Jane Sandanski’s Cheta captured an American missionary named Miss Stone and held her for ransom. I also remembered seeing a movie about her in my younger days and writing about her in my history books. But what Slave was really talking about is how some Macedonian villages in the general area where we were staying converted to different denominations of the Christian religion. Slave’s point was that the Macedonians here were very poor and no one cared about them, certainly not their Ottoman overlords. These missionaries were the only people that genuinely showed interest in them and gave them what they needed, including money to open churches and schools and teach their children in the Macedonian language. I am told that this practice continued well into the 1920’s when in 1924 the Methodists opened a Macedonian school in Strumitsa. I also found out why the Catholic Church does not allow priests to wed. According to this version, an unwed priest would have

no reason to amass wealth because he would have no one to inherit it so he was most likely to care more for his parish than for himself, whereas a priest who had a family, especially many children, would care more for them and less for his parish or his bishops.

On the road back to Skopje

Having changed beds again I found it difficult to sleep in Berovo in spite of the cooler weather. I stayed up and watched television for a while but it was late that night before I was able to fall asleep. Surprisingly I slept in until 7 am and again watched some of my favourite Bugs Bunny classic cartoons on TV before I came out for breakfast. On my way down I had noticed that Slave was waiting for us. I ordered “ham and eggs” for breakfast out of curiosity to see what it was and sure enough it was ham and eggs. I found it curious that it would be called “Ham and eggs” in Macedonia, but why not? As usual the food was plentiful and delicious. John and Tsena joined us a bit later.

As soon as we had breakfast we checked out of the hotel and were ready to go. For those interested, the price of every item available in the little fridge was listed on a sheet of paper found in the desk drawer in the room. The hotel bill for me for the night was 1,565 denars (about \$ 40 Canadian). I did not drink anything from the fridge.

When we finished stowing our luggage in the car we went back up the hill behind the hotel and visited an old monastery called Sveta Bogoroditsa. Slave knew the priest there and was hoping to say hello but he was not there. On our way out of Berovo we visited Berovo Lake. Slave drove us to the top of a hill near a private resort and from there we could see the steep faces of the mountainside and the winding lake at the bottom of the valley. It was a beautiful sight and I could see myself spending a few days there.

As we made our way back we visited Pehchevo and passed by Razlovtsi, the old revolutionary town where the Razlovtsi and Pancharevo uprisings took place in 1876. We then visited Delchevo and met Ljupcho, an old fashioned iconographer who was painting an icon of a saint for Slave.

As we continued to descend the mountain range Slave rhymed off village after village as we passed them. We then continued to wind down following the edge of a man made lake until we reached the Kalimantsi electric generating station. After that we passed the village Istibanja famous for its folklore festivals and its unique Shopski Igr (dances) which are danced to the beat of the drum.

At the bottom of the mountain range there was a beautiful green valley dotted with villages like the ones one would find in Greek

occupied Macedonia. Water was plentiful there as ditches were built to carry it across hillsides. Everything below the water line was lush and green and everything above it was dry, roasting in the hot summer sun.

As we continued traveling through the valley we took a small detour to visit Vinitsa, Nada's (Slave's wife) hometown. Nada has a sister living there. The name Vinitsa comes from the word vino, meaning wine. From what Slave told us, during old times when there were bad droughts and the river water was used up people had to use wine to wash and clean themselves. There were times when there was more wine in the village than water. This is how, I was told, the village got its name Vinitsa.

It was about 11 am when we arrived at Risto and Vera's (Nada's sister) house and it was burning hot outside. Inside it was relatively cool. Vera served us all sorts of homemade pastries, fruits and drinks as Risto dazzled us with his private coin collection of ancient coins and other artifacts which he has accumulated by purchasing them from the local farmers who have unearthed them while working their fields. It was a pleasure visiting with Risto as we both share a love for ancient things. Risto showed me a number of his books he had collected over the years and gave me a couple of his prized possessions; a magazine and a calendar both with photographs of artifacts found in the nearby Vinichko Kale archeological site. I only agreed to take these items after he assured me that he could replace them. The Magazine called "Vineam" was published on March 2008 and the calendar is from 2007. The calendar has a different terracotta (baked clay) tablet for every month of the various artifacts found at the Vinichko Kale archeological site. January has a fully intact terracotta of St. Christopher and St. George, February has a broken up and pieced together terracotta of the Miracle of Prophet Elyseum, etc. December has a beautifully intact and preserved terracotta of the Archangel Michael. The magazine, which has a full front page of the Vinichko Kale archeological site, is about recent, local archeological findings, events, traditions, old skills, etc. Thank you Risto I will treasure them both.

As much as we wanted to stay and chat, we had a lot to cover and were running out of time so we said our goodbyes to Vera and took Risto with us to give us a tour of the Vinichko Kale archeological site. Slave drove up the hill on a winding, single lane dirt road that resembled a footpath more than a road, with barely enough space for the car to fit. I thought Slave to be very brave taking chances like that

with his car and his passengers but I figured he knew what he was doing. I just asked what would happen if a vehicle came down the other way? Slave laughed and said one of us would have to back up but hopefully it would not be him. We traveled about half a kilometer before we found ourselves at the top of the hill. There was not much to see there except remnants of walls being excavated and preserved but the surrounding sites were breathtaking. Risto took us through the archeological site in the hot sun and showed us the various dugouts, fortifications and tactics used by our ancient, Middle Ages and more recent forefathers to defend their homeland.

On the way back we saw Giorgi's (the iconographer and artist who has painted the frescoes at Sv. Kliment in Toronto and those at Sv. Dimitrija in Markham) house at the entrance to the road to Vinichko Kale. We took Risto back to town and passed through Orizari, Kochani and entered the city of Shtip or Astobo as it was known in ancient times. For me Shtip is synonymous with Aleksandar Donski, a historian and one of my favorite authors of Macedonian history who over the years inspired me to follow in his footsteps. When I heard we were headed for Shtip I immediately asked Slave to make contact with Aleksandar. When we arrived in Shtip Slave made the phone call but Aleksandar's wife told us he was out of the country at the time visiting the United States. I was so disappointed. I am sure he too will be disappointed when he finds out we were in his hometown and we did not meet. I should have e-mailed him before I left Canada but I had no idea we were going to visit his hometown. This being my first time ever visiting Macedonia I had no expectations of the kind of reception I was going to receive. My personal plans were to visit my relatives, participate in my book promotion and attend the various events put together by the Detsa Begalsti (Macedonian refugee children from the Greek Civil War), all to take place in Skopje. I had no idea of the plans Slave and my cousin Spiro would have for me, the places they would take me and the number of people they would have me meet.

We had a late lunch in Shtip at the "New Village" restaurant and as usual they delivered big on the food. I wanted to try different things at every meal in hopes of sampling a wider part of Macedonian cuisine so Slave ordered a pastry resembling a pizza but oval in shape and loaded with various meats. I found it quite tasty but Tsena did not find it that remarkable because the bottom of the pastry was tough. We had a few Skopski (beers) and I decided to have some ice cream in hopes of

recapturing the taste I had acquired the day before. Unfortunately that was not to be. The ice cream here too was exquisite but could not top the taste of the one I had had the day before.

After finishing lunch we continued on our way back to Skopje passing by various towns including a town called “Tri Cheshmi”, an Aegean village where Macedonian refugee’s fleeing the Greek Civil War were settled. We passed by Ofche Pole and went through Sveti Nikole and Kumanovo before arriving in Skopje at around 6:30 pm.

The plan for Monday July 15th and Tuesday July 16th was to start out with a tour of Stobi and continue with visits in Gevgeliski Rit, Marvinci (ancient localities), Valandovo (church), Strumitsa (churches, localities and other places in Strumitsa region) stay overnight in Berovo, visit Vinitsa (Vinichko Kale), Bargala, Shtip (localities) and return to Skopje. On Wednesday July 16th the plan was to visit Kavardarsi (locality), Prilep, Markovi Kuli, Stibera (Aminta’s grave), Krushevo, Bitola and Heraklea. Then on Thursday July 17th the plan was to visit Prespa, Ohrid (localities, churches), Struga, Kichevo, Gostivar, Leshok in Tetovo and return to Skopje. Unfortunately due to other activities we could not cover all the ground we had set out to cover for Monday and Tuesday. Then Tuesday afternoon as we were headed back for Skopje, Slave received a phone call from Bishop Kiril’s office and was invited to attend a very important meeting with the Mir and his Wife (King and Queen of Hunza) so our plan for Wednesday and Thursday was put on hold. I was invited to go with Slave but I declined the offer (I know my friend Steve Pliakas will never forgive me for this. Steve called me when I returned from Macedonia and told me how disappointed he was that no one had told him that the Hunza King was coming to Macedonia. He wanted to see him again). I regretted not going later but it was too late.

As soon as I found out that we were not going on a tour for the next two days I began to plan visits with my family and friends. The first person I contacted was Tomche, a friend I had met through the internet who wanted to meet me in person. He said he would not be available for the next couple of days because he was working and told me he would call me back later. The next person I contacted was Kiro, also a friend I had met through the internet who agreed to meet with me the next day. He had company that night and could not meet me right away. I made several more phone calls but was unable to make any

more arrangements so I decided to go and spend the evening with my friends John and Tsena at Makedonka's (John's cousin) place.

I got back to my place around 11 pm and had a long deserved rest.

Visiting with Kiro

I spent the morning of Wednesday July 16th reading and viewing some of the material I had accumulated the days before and at 9:30 am I contacted Kiro and told him where to find me. He came by at 10 am sharp with his brand new Mercedes and we were off towards the city center. I had never met Kiro before in person and had no idea what he looked like or what business he was in. I assumed he wanted to meet and talk probably about politics and history but Kiro had different ideas. As it turned out he is a young Macedonian businessman currently living in Los Angeles who has invested in Macedonia and goes there every year in hopes of making more investments. Kiro for me was a godsend because he gave me a totally different perspective on Macedonia. Kiro made it clear from the start that I was his guest that morning and he was going to show me every aspect of Skopje but we had to have breakfast first. Even though Kiro does not live in Skopje he has been there enough times to know the city well. We drove right into the city center and parked in a private guarded parking lot. We then walked a short distance to Fufo's café for breakfast. I told him I wanted to sample different things from the Macedonian cuisine so he gave me a couple of options. I chose pancakes. I was expecting to get flat thick pancakes sprinkled with maple syrup but instead I received two thin, foot wide large crepe pancakes; one smothered in chocolate sauce and the other in marmalade. I enjoyed them very much as I listened to Kiro talk telling me stories of his experiences in Macedonia. Just as he was talking we could hear conversations at the table next to us getting louder and louder. Then another table was added to the three tables already joined. Then there was a roar as another person joined the group. When things got quiet I decided to look, out of curiosity, to see what was going on. I looked at all the people at the table but was able to recognize only one face. It was Lube Boshkovski, the former defense minister who was released from the Hague, who arrived in Macedonia the same day I did. "Is that Boshkovski?" I asked Kiro. He confirmed and asked me if I wanted to meet him and have my picture taken with him. I declined, not wanting to disturb the reunion with his friends.

When we were finished breakfast Kiro took me on a walking tour of the city center. As we walked block after block he pointed at buildings, cafés, businesses that are owned by the families of party members who basically took possession of the properties for

themselves when the Yugoslav Federation and system fell apart. It was not a pretty picture but as Kiro put it today's crooks in a generation or so will become tomorrow's legitimate businessmen. It seems that this happens everywhere when a transition takes place. About sixty years or so ago Kiro's family owned a business in Yugoslavia before Yugoslavia turned communist. For owning businesses members of Kiro's family at the time were jailed. Ironically the same people who jailed businessmen about half a century or so ago are now the new businessmen.

Kiro seemed to know the plans for every building being constructed and the owners of the businesses in the area. He took me to a mall at the bottom of the city center near the museum that was once a railroad before the earthquake. This particular mall, which looked like an ordinary Canadian or American mall, is owned by a Turkish businessman. It is fully air-conditioned and attractive to shoppers. Inside it has an assortment of shops with brand names like Nike and Reebok, a huge grocery store and a cafeteria. There were also escalators joining the two levels. The mall was packed with people, "But how many do you see carrying packages?" asked Kiro. Not many because they have no money to spend.

Kiro was very clear about what he said to me and as much as I didn't like the situation he described we had to agree that it was the "status of current affairs". He said he wanted to invest a lot of money in Macedonia because it was the right thing to do but not under the conditions that currently exist. There are many Macedonian businessmen in the United States who are carefully watching the situation and would not invest under conditions where they have to buy their way in. Kiro said he was tired of having to bribe people to get the job done and this time he wanted to do it the right way. If he succeeds in investing without having to bribe someone then many others will follow. "I can buy a business today just like that if I want to but I have to bribe someone. I am tired of doing business that way and want to legitimately invest without having to pay under the table. It is not the money I am concerned about, I have plenty of that, it's the welfare of this country and people who I love very much that I am worried about," he said. "There are at least a dozen Macedonian businessmen in the USA who are watching me right now to see how I do and if I succeed in doing business legitimately then they will all follow suit," Kiro said.

I spoke to other people about this and many agree that Macedonia has a long way to go before things are sorted out. They also agree that things are changing, especially in the private sector where the customer is treated with respect. It's the leftover institutions from the Yugoslav era that still need to be shaken down.

“We in the Diaspora are very much concerned with what goes on inside Macedonia, particularly in the business and tourist sectors, and will not invest if we are not given attention and treated right” seems to be the message I am getting from our Diaspora compatriots. Too many times I heard the words, “I called them and left a message and they never called back.” Or “my call was returned a week later” or “I sent them an e-mail with a business proposition and they never got back to me.” “Perhaps this is how they do business in Macedonia but we in the USA don't tolerate that.”

I joked around with my friends there by saying that Macedonia has reached a bottom low but the reality is once something reaches a bottom low the only direction is up. For an optimistic investor today's Macedonia is a haven for development and progress. It has all the right elements to become a great country and an economic power. It has an educated labour force willing to work hard and all it needs is to be given the opportunity to prove itself. The problems Macedonia experiences today are solvable simply by enforcing the law which the Macedonian citizens and voters can demand from their government.

I also had discussions with Kiro about Greek occupied Macedonia and the current state of affairs with regard to the Macedonian refugees from the Greek Civil War and their properties. I had heard sometime ago that Greece was asked by the European Union to set aside a budget to settle these property disputes. I also said that Greece has completely ignored that recommendation and continues to insist that Macedonians don't exist. Ownership of property however has nothing to do with ethnic affiliation so I was wondering why Greece is playing such games? To my surprise Kiro had an easy answer to my question. “Greece is broke!” he said. But how can Greece be broke when we constantly hear from various Greeks how rich Greece is and how “out of the goodness of its heart” is economically helping Macedonia? Perhaps the Greek businessmen who work for themselves are rich but the Greek government is broke, flat broke and not only that but it has accumulated such a deficit that it has put the Greek taxpayer in debt for generations. Greece is now counting on the European Union to pay for

its mistakes and settle its property problem with the Macedonian refugees. Naturally the European Union does not want to do that and why should it? That is precisely why Europe is ignoring the Macedonian minority in Greece and would like to see its problem with the Macedonian people disappear! It's always about money!

Looking at the problem from this perspective, all of a sudden it begins to make sense. Europe refusing to recognize the Macedonian minority in Greece is simply a measure of avoiding having to pay them for the damages Greece has caused them. If the problem is ignored long enough, maybe it will disappear! Imagine how happy Europe would be if we Macedonians disappear from the face of the Earth. I have always wondered why Europe didn't want to deal with the Macedonian question, now at least I have some idea. Perhaps this is a cynical and simplistic approach to understanding a complex problem but to me this makes sense.

I had a great time with Kiro and am thankful to him for giving me the grand tour of Skopje, which by the way included a visit to the new US Embassy, and for the productive discussions we had.

The new US Embassy by the way is not just a building, it's a series of buildings designed to house over one hundred families. Some of you may not agree with this but I see the US Embassy as a positive factor in Macedonia both economically and in terms of security. Besides the direct jobs that the Embassy will provide to Macedonians, the one hundred or so families living there will also need food, clothing, entertainment, etc., which will be provided by the local businesses. In terms of security, the US is not investing a great deal of money in a country it does not intend to support. Also, who would dare attack Skopje with such a large US civilian presence there?

Before our tour was over, Kiro took me to the Skopje commercial center and to the old Turkish Pazar where old mixes with new and one gets to meet people from all ethnic groups both rich and poor living in Macedonia.

I was back in my apartment by 1 pm and got busy on the phone trying to make arrangements to meet with more people. I contacted my soldier friends Aleksandar and Dean but they were both working. Unfortunately it was a working day and I couldn't make any arrangements on such short notice so I decided to call my cousin Vasil and went to visit him. His son Zoran was kind enough to pick me up and take me there. Zoran is a software developer and works from his

home so he was available on short notice any time I needed a ride. I took advantage of him several times to chauffeur me to various places. My cousin Goche joined us a while later and I spent the rest of the day visiting with them. Zoran took me back to my apartment at 11 pm.

Unexpected encounters

I did not sleep well that night not only because it was very hot but also because of the many things going through my mind. It was a long day and I had had many discussions that day first with Kiro then with my cousins. I am usually unable to sleep if I don't give my brain some rest before going to bed.

Again I was up at 4 am listening to the birds chatter at first light. I hadn't slept well in the last six nights yet I didn't seem to be tired. I got my wakeup call around 7 am and Slave told me we were going for an interview at a radio program that morning but first he had some business to attend to at the Sveti Kliment main Church and wanted me to go with him. He picked me up around 8 am and soon afterwards we were at the church. We walked up the cobblestones and entered the church but it was practically empty so we left and went to a building next door to do the interview with Stojan for "Makedonsko Radio". It was a recorded interview which lasted about one hour with twenty minutes or so of recording time. Stojan asked a variety of questions including some about my birthplace but the one that stumped me and caused me some emotion was about how I saw Macedonia. I have always imagined Macedonia to be legendary and a great land with everything being big but considering that the entire country could be traversed in a couple of days by car, I found it in reality to be very small. The program aired two days later on Sunday morning at 9 am. I would be seeing Stojan again the next week.

By the time we came back to the church there was a huge gathering in the yard. In the middle of the gathering was a procession escorting the Mir and his wife (Hunza King and Queen) into the church. Slave left and as I waited for the procession to go by I was met by several Oshchimians who had seen me on television and wanted to know who I was. They had heard that I had written a book about Oshchima and were looking for it in the bookstores. They were disappointed to find out when I told them it was written in English and was not sold in Macedonia. There I also met Stojan the old General from Oshchima. I gave him greetings from my father, who insisted that I visit him.

Just as more Oshchimians began to gather, Slave showed up and asked me to go with him to meet some people inside the church. On our way there I ran into Professor Angelina Markus whom I had met before in Canada. It was as much a surprise to her as it was to me to meet so

unexpectedly. It was indeed a pleasure to see her again. She invited me to go to her home but I didn't have time.

As soon as I walked into the church I ran into two more academics who I had always wanted to meet. I had met Professor Vasil Iliov a long time ago but it was nice to see him again especially since I have written about his work in my history book. The second unexpected surprise was meeting Professor Tashko Belchevski, another academic whose work I admire and have also written about in my books. Slave introduced me to several people including the Bishop Kiril who invited us to be his guests at Leshok. I also met Dragi, a priest who a long time ago was serving in Canada.

I met a lot of people outside the church including many Detsa Begaltsi (refugee children) who I knew from Toronto and Judge Kole Mangov with whom I correspond over the internet and Marko who has a radio program and once in a while collaborates with Dragitsa's local Toronto radio program "Voice of Macedonia". While in Canada I had been a guest at Marko's radio program in Macedonia over the telephone a few times in the past.

I was lucky that so many people came to the church to see the King and Queen and was fortunate to have met them even if it was just for a moment.

By noon I was back in my apartment and busy on the phone making arrangements to meet with more of my friends. I had contacted Robert, a professor at the Kiril and Metodi University in Skopje who I knew from the internet but he was out of the country at the moment. I then took a chance contacting Aleksandar my soldier friend in hopes of meeting with him in the evening because I knew he was working during the day. But as it turned out Aleksandar was off that day and agreed to meet me for lunch. I had another appointment at 4 pm which I could not miss so our meeting was going to be brief.

Aleksandar arrived by taxi and took me to his favourite restaurant "Makedonska Kukja". I also wanted to meet with Dean, my other soldier friend, a mutual friend of Aleksandar's and a friend of my friend Lou from Toronto. Dean unfortunately was sleeping during the day because he was working the night before. In spite of that however, Aleksandar kept calling him until he finally woke him up.

In the meantime, Aleksandar ordered us a few skopski (beer) and a large lunch consisting of a salad and a variety of meats including sausages, broiled pork and hamburgers. While we ate Aleksandar,

whom I knew from Toronto while he was on tour at CFB Borden, told me what happened to him when he returned to Macedonia. Aleksandar is a tall, proud and sensitive young man whose only wish in life was to become a high ranking officer in the Macedonian military. He was already an officer when he and six other officers came to Canada to train and was expected to be promoted to a higher rank upon his return. But as it turned out instead of being promoted, he was dismissed, given the boot unceremoniously as he put it. The explanation was that the military had to make room for Albanian officers to meet a certain quota as agreed upon by the interim agreement. Naturally Aleksandar was devastated; he just lost his job which ended his military career. There is some logic in what the government of the time did but it leaves a lot to be desired in the way it did it. I later found out that Aleksandar was not the only one dismissed. Practically four out of five officers from that time were dismissed, including Dean who had fought in that terrible war and was wounded. "I expected a medal to be pinned on my chest," he said "but instead I was given the boot and not even acknowledged for my sacrifice." I was dumbfounded as I sat there listening to story after story. I didn't know what to say! For obvious reasons I will not be making any personal comments about how I felt but I will say that my heart goes out to these brave men and women soldiers who put their lives on the line for the defense of our country and our identity.

It was 2:30 pm when Dean arrived at the restaurant and I finally got to meet, face to face, with the soldier I had heard so much about from my friend Lou. Soon afterwards another former soldier, a mutual colleague of Aleksander and Dean's, also joined us and as the three exchanged "army buddy" stories I listened intently. A little later Aleksandar's wife Snezhana came and joined us too. Aleksandar met Snezhana in Canada while she was studying here.

Aleksandar also told us an interesting story about his tour in Greece. Yes it's true, Macedonian officers were sent to NATO bases in Greece. This particular place was in central Greek occupied Macedonia and the project was run by a non Greek commanding officer from Western Europe. Knowing the situation between Macedonians and Greeks this officer made sure Aleksandar was not bullied by his Greek counterparts and frequently asked Aleksandar if everything was okay. He shouldn't have worried about Aleksandar because he is an impressively fearless big man. "The thing that intimidated the Greeks the most was my name 'Aleksandar'," said Aleksandar. "I wore my

flag and symbols on my sleeves openly and with pride inside the base and out on the streets,” said Aleksandar. One day he went to this restaurant by himself and was approached by the oldest of the three owners and brothers and asked in English where he was from. Aleksandar naturally told him that he was from the Republic of Macedonia and that he was Macedonian and spoke the Macedonian language. The next time Aleksandar came to the same restaurant with his colleagues from all over Europe he was always served first, which they found odd considering how Greeks treat Macedonians. Aleksandar brushed it off by saying that he was a regular customer there. Another time when Aleksandar was alone at a table and there were no others nearby, the same owner came to Aleksandar’s table and spoke to him in Macedonian, which was no surprise to Aleksandar because he knew many Macedonians lived in that city. What was surprising however was how quickly this man changed to speaking English when another person approached the table.

It was getting near my time to leave but in order to spend some more time with my soldier friends, I contacted Slave, told him where I was and asked him to come and pick me up from there.

By 4 pm we were in Slave’s office at “Makedonska Iskra” waiting for reporter Fidenka from Ohrid Radio to do a recorded interview with us. The interview took about an hour and Fidenka recorded thirty-six minutes.

While the interview was conducted Slave received a phone call from Zoran, a friend of his and Macedonian Consul to Perth, Australia. Zoran wanted to meet with Slave and asked me to tag along. Zoran was at the Irish Pub café and said he was going to wait for us.

As soon as we finished the interview, Slave contacted his wife Nada to let her know we were going out. But Nada insisted that we come upstairs to their home and eat supper before we left. Considering the good cook she is, I didn’t need much convincing to stay. I had the most delicious rich soup, cheeses, fresh bread for supper and cake for dessert. Thank you Nada.

While we were having dinner I received a phone call from Robert, my professor friend, who told me he had arrived in Skopje so I asked him to join us at the Irish Pub café.

Despite our tardiness, Zoran waited for us and we had a pint as we shared stories. Robert arrived also and we finally met person to person after so many years of correspondence over the internet. Being a

professor I pictured Robert as being much older, but compared to us old folks he was much younger.

Zoran had to go on a long trip out of town so he left fairly early. Slave, who had a long day, was getting tired and he too left early. Robert and I stayed and shared pints and stories until much later. Robert is very knowledgeable in many aspects of life and wants to hear stories as much as he wants to tell them so it was a real pleasure meeting him, getting to know him in person and sharing conversations of the many things we cherish and have in common about Macedonia.

We left the Irish Pub café around 11 pm; Robert was kind enough to drive me home in his car.

The Begaltsi Gathering and book promo

It was Friday morning July 18th when I received my wakeup call from Slave reminding me that we had an appointment to meet Katerina, a radio program host, for an early morning interview. Katerina wanted to interview me for a while and had asked Dragitsa Belchevska from “Voice of Macedonia”, a Toronto based Macedonian radio program, to let me know that she was looking for me. While in Macedonia I had asked Slave to do all the coordinating since I depended on him for his assistance with the media and for transportation.

It was a hot day so I decided to wear short pants and a t-shirt knowing full well that we were not going to be filmed. But just as we arrived at the secure area, a security guard stopped me and informed me that I could not enter the facilities dressed like that. It took some intervention from Katerina to convince the guard to let me in but just this one time. Just as we passed that barrier Slave also informed me that I could not go inside the church like that either. “This is Macedonia not Canada,” Slave said jokingly, “we follow certain etiquette here with regards to dress code.” The interview went well, Katerina recorded about half an hour of our discussions before we left for the Begaltsi gathering at the “Boris Trajkiovski” Sports Stadium. We intentionally arrived early so that we could meet incoming guests as well as find space in the parking lot. A huge crowd had already gathered and was heading inside the stadium. The first person we met was my friend Odie Belchevski from Toronto. Odie had left Canada a few days before me and I expected that he would be in Bitola so it was a surprise to see him in Skopje. But as he put it, “I wasn’t going to miss an important gathering like this for anything.” The next person I recognized was Nase Parisi, my activist friend from Solun. It was nice seeing him again.

As we continued to push inside we met many Begaltsi from Canada who I recognized. Then as we climbed up the stairs looking for a seat, we ran into John and Tsena who were sitting together with Vasil and Dotsa Bogov from Australia. I met Vasil and Dotsa in person last year when they were visiting Canada but I had known them over the internet for a long time.

As we sat in the bleachers watching the crowds flow in, I kept watch for my cousins Spiro and his brother Vasko. Vasko and his wife Marina had come from Bulgaria to Bitola just to visit with me but with

our change of plans a couple of days before I missed my trip to Bitola so they decided to come to Skopje to visit me. Slave suggested I stand up as I was looking so when they arrived they could see me. As soon as I stood up I got a phone call. The person on the other side asked me to turn around. Low and behold it was Spiro with Vasko and Marina. They were sitting behind and just above us.

By noon the incoming crowds had subsided and the program was about to begin. As I looked down at the main level I recognized Liljana Ristova, Editor of the newspaper “Canadian-Macedonian News” and Pobeda Piskacheva Producer of the Toronto based television program “Macedonian Edition” both from Toronto getting ready to photograph the event. The first to speak was Lefter Mantze, a Begalets living in Ottawa, Canada and famous plastic surgeon. The sound system unfortunately was very loud and caused much echo in the large stadium making it difficult to distinguish what was said. From counting the number of people in one square pattern and counting the number of patterns in the stadium, I estimated there to be around five-thousand people. The next day I heard in the news that six-thousand people had attended the gathering.

Among the officials and dignitaries that were guests of the Begaltsi were Branko Tsrvenkovski, the President of the Republic of Macedonia, the Parliament Speaker, Bishop Kiril and others. The person to get the most attention from the crowds was Lube Boshkovski, the former Defense Minister who had just returned from The Hague. In the crowds I saw Edmond Temelkov the Macedonian activist and now Mayor of the town of Pustets in Mala Prespa, Albania. Edmond was also a speaker at the event.

People that I recognized who gave speeches included our very own Risto Chachkirovski representing the Begaltsi from Canada and Petse Vasiliadis representing Vinozhito.

When Petse Vasiliadis finished his speech he returned to his seat where he was sitting with several other people. At the same time Liljana Ristova happened to be standing right next to him so I motioned to her to get Petse’s attention so I could speak with him but Petse waved me to follow him into the lobby where it was quieter. My cousins followed and so did Liljana, Nase and Slave. Later we were joined by Ireneusz from Poland whom I had met before in Toronto several years ago and who was at the gathering representing the Begaltsi from Poland. There I was introduced to two more Macedonian

activists from Greece, Petse Dimchev and Krste Ashlekov of whom I had heard great things but I had never met them before. It was a wonderful sight to see as everyone smiled with excitement being glad and thankful for the occasion that brought us all together in one place at the same time and able to meet. Spiro too was well known to the activists from Greece. He later told me that while he was a member of parliament he had fought for the rights of the Begaltsi as well as the rights of the Macedonians in Greece.

It was getting late in the day by now and Spiro and Vasko were getting anxious about returning to Bitola the same day because they were planning to cross the Greek border and go to the gathering in Ofchareny, Lerin the next day. I got my things from Slave's car and we were off to a late lunch. As usual Spiro was buying so he took us to the "Kaj Zlate" restaurant, a place he had taken me before. Spiro was well known to the restaurant staff as we were all greeted with smiles when we arrived. It was too hot to sit outdoors so Spiro suggested we go inside where the place was somewhat cooler. Seeing how we were all shy, Spiro ordered for all of us which included a Skopsko (beer), Macedonian salad, something new for me that I hadn't tried before and the grilled pork injected with cheese for Vasko, Marina and himself. Spiro also wanted to order three of something in a large size but the waiter was suggesting a small size so it was finally agreed it would be the small size. When the food arrived I discovered the three small items he ordered were spiced hamburgers injected with cheese which were about six inches in diameter and about three-quarters of an inch thick. Being amazed by the size they call "small" I asked Spiro what was a "large" like? He motioned with his hands making a circle which would measure about eight inches in diameter. We also had a plate full of compiri (French fries) as well. It was a meal to remember. Thank you Spiro, you sure know how to look after your guests.

After our late lunch the four of us returned to my apartment where we got to know each other a little better. Spiro decided to have a short nap before the long drive to Bitola, leaving me to spend some more time with my first cousin Vasko and his wife Marina.

No sooner had my cousins left than it was time to go to the book promotion which was scheduled for 8 pm at the Skopje main library. Slave came by at about 7:40 pm and after picking up John and Tsena we were there by 8 pm.

The library was packed with people and it was at least several degrees hotter inside than outside. We pushed our way in and Slave told us to wait while he figured out what we were expected to do. Usually during a book promotion the author is required to say a few words so I had prepared a speech. But as it turned out most of the ceremony was in tribute to the Detsa Begaltsi and so were the two books being promoted. They especially selected authors who had roots in Aegean Macedonia (Greek occupied Macedonia). At the end of the tribute my book (“Istoriata na Makedonskiot Narod od Anichkite Veminja do Denes” translated from “History of the Macedonian People from Ancient Times to the Present”) was promoted first and I was referred to as an author with roots from Aegean Macedonia, which for me was an honour. Neither author was asked to speak.

After the ceremony we were visited by guests who wanted to know if I was one of the authors and to congratulate me. There were also more requests for interviews but I directed them to Slave. Both John and Tsena stayed with me throughout the entire event and gave me their full support. I also had the pleasure of meeting Sonja Prus that evening. Sonja is the lady who translated my book from English to Macedonian.

Boiling hot but satisfied with the way the book promotion went we left the library and Slave took us home.

Since I didn't get the chance to read my speech at the book promotion, I decided to include it in this article and pay tribute to those who made this project a reality:

Speech: Book promotion in Skopje

Thank you everyone for coming here tonight and for giving us your support.

First I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the people who contributed to the realization and success of this project.

I would like to begin with John Givens who not only gave birth to the idea of translating my History book but who also believed in my work and did everything possible to raise funds, organize and distribute this publication.

I would like to thank Makedonska Iskra, Slave Nikolovski Katin and his team for accepting and carrying out the task of translating and publishing, distributing and promoting this book. I would like to especially thank Sonja Prus for her meticulous and tireless effort in translating 500 pages of the text and for her technical contribution in putting the book together. I would also like to thank all those who contributed to the editing and verification of the material which includes Dobrina Sejmenova Bozhinova, chief editor, Fidanka Tanaskova, Snezhana Velkova and Sofia Semenpeeva, editors, Elena Tosheva, editor and reviewer, Denis Tenev, technical artistic editor and others.

I would also especially like to thank our sponsors for their personal and financial contributions without which this project would have not been possible and they are; John Bitove, Peter Bassil Tupurkovski, Angelo Argiro, Benefit Society Oshchima, Pete and Mary Kondoff, Dr. Dragi Denkovski, Peter Alousis, Dr. Alexander Georgievski, John Kuzev, John Givens, Zess Pedias, the Chachorovski Family and all others who financially contributed to the realization of this project.

Now I want to say a few words about how all this started.

For me this has been a journey of personal discovery which began about thirty years ago when I became interested not just in the stories my parents and friends told me about us, the Macedonians, but in the greater sense of who the Macedonians are and what it meant and means to be Macedonian.

My journey of discovery took me to books which showed me that we are an extraordinary people with a great past and with a lot to offer.

My interest in the Macedonian cause and our struggle as people was heightened with the Republic of Macedonia's independence in the early 1990's and lead me to many debates and controversies which in time gave me a voice in my community, which eventually manifested itself in writing.

As I began to write, mostly for the internet, I discovered that there were many young Macedonians out there hungry for information about Macedonia and about our struggle as Macedonians. As more questions surfaced I became more involved and more obliged to help out. This naturally lead me to publish more and more articles and eventually to publishing books.

I believe it is very important for every Macedonian to first learn who we are as a people and then engage in the struggle to achieve our place in the world. But we must only learn from those who have our best interest at heart and not from those who work against us. The Macedonians in the Republic of Macedonia who speak the Macedonian language and can attend Macedonian schools have a place to learn. But what about the people who live outside of the Republic of Macedonia who strongly feel Macedonian but don't speak the Macedonian language? Who is going to help them?

This is a question I considered very carefully given that in my community in Canada there are second, third and fourth generation Macedonians who strongly feel Macedonian but can't read Macedonian. I estimate that 75% of Macedonians in the Diaspora who are well educated and prepared to defend their rights as Macedonians cannot read or speak Macedonian. I estimate there are close to one million Macedonians worldwide who fit this category. This is a strength that cannot and must not be ignored. Such people have the skills and resources and are economically and politically unrestricted to act on behalf of Macedonia and the Macedonian peoples' interests. That is why I have made it my mission to be in contact with such people through articles, books and other publications. They need to know about our struggle and they can only learn in the language they understand.

Today for the world there is a Republic of Macedonia and a geographical Macedonia but for us there is only one Macedonia and one Macedonian identity. Only through the unity of our people can we win this struggle which will not only strengthen us for the next step, the realization of our rights in the occupied parts of Macedonia, but will

shape our children's future. Let us do the best we can and let history judge us as the generation which struggled and succeeded.

Thank you.

Titles Published By Risto Stefov

- Oshchima The Story of a Small Village in Western Macedonia
- History of the Macedonian People from Ancient Times to the Present
- Macedonia An Illustrated History with Maps, Photographs and Biographies
- Recovering Macedonia Expiration of the Treaty of Bucharest 1913
- The Little Book of BIG GREEK LIES
- English – Macedonian Dialectal Dictionary Based on the Lerin-Kostur Dialects As Spoken by Oshchimians
- Short History of the Macedonian People
- This Land We Do Not Give a history of Macedonian resistance to foreign occupation By Michael Seraphinoff and Chris Stefov (Published by Nettle Hollow)
- Short History of Macedonia (Published by Macedonian Literary Association of Australia “Grigor Prlichev”)
- Istoriata na Makedonskiot Narod od Anichkite Veminja do Denes (Published by Iskra)

Titles in the works

- Macedonian Struggle for Independence
- Macedonians in Greece 1939 – 1949

Begaltsi Activities day two

I don't remember exactly what time I went to bed the night before but I discovered that if watched some television before going to bed I would fall asleep easier. Besides, there were many programs being presented on TV about the Begaltsi which were of interest to me. In fact almost every night there was something on the TV about the plight of the Begaltsi. One night there was an open discussion in which Begaltsi leaders from various countries of the Diaspora, including Ireneusz from Poland, had participated. I was very impressed with what was said and the level of knowledge these people had regarding the Macedonian question, particularly regarding Macedonian issues with Greece.

I got my wakeup call as usual and by 9 am we were on the grounds of the Sveti Kliment main church. Just as we arrived we were followed by a procession of priests lead by Bishop Kiril who waved us to join them. I walked with the procession right up to the door of the church but decided not to go in, not because I wasn't wearing proper attire but because people outside waved me to join them. The church was packed, mostly with Begaltsi from the Diaspora. After the liturgy (in honour of the Begaltsi) the people came out to the yard and busied themselves greeting one another and carrying on conversations. John and Tsena were also there and so were many Begaltsi from Canada and Australia. There I met Ivan from the Macedonian Literary Association of Australia "Grigor Prlichev", Todor Petrov, president of the World Macedonian Congress, Kole editor of the magazine Loza from Solun (I was introduced to him by Liljana Ristova), Lefter Mantze from Ottawa and others. Another person I kept running into again and again was Gotche, son of a famous musician from Oshchima. Included among the Begaltsi were also reporters from Macedonia as well as from the Diaspora. I saw Liljana Ristova and Pobeda Piskacheva from Canada and Marko and Stojan (the reporter who interviewed us a few days earlier) from Skopje. I also saw the Karapanchev family from Toronto with young Alexander, long time reader and fan. I met the Karapanchevs the night before at the book promotion. Among the people in the crowd were a number of students who were doing research on the Begaltsi and used this opportunity to do some interviews. I was approached by several asking for interviews but had to tell them that I was not a Begalets. One particular young lady, whose

name I later found out was Emilia, asked me what my name was and seemed to show interest in who I was. I later found out that her husband reads my articles which I regularly publish on the internet.

In the churchyard I was briefly interviewed by Pobeda and by Marko after which we departed for another Begaltsy event at MANU. This event was a symposium and by far the best event I attended in the Begaltsy program. As soon as we arrived Slave had to go so he left me there to enjoy speech after speech delivered by professors, academics, scholars and relatives of the Begaltsy. All speeches were about the plight of the Begaltsy and concentrated on events surrounding the lives of those who lived and died through the war years. Some speeches were detailed and informative while others were very sad and full of emotion. I just hope that MANU will put the speeches together in a book (zbornik), publish it and make them available to the general public. I sure would like to have a copy for myself.

While sitting in the auditorium listening to the speeches, Liljana asked me if I had met a certain gentleman sitting in the front row. I did not recognize the gentleman so Liljana took us both outside to the lobby and I met Jordan a Macedonian activist from Bulgaria. I spent some time listening to Jordan as he described the situation in Bulgaria. From what he said the Macedonians in Bulgaria are in a desperate situation, more desperate than that of the Macedonians in Greece. Most Macedonians living in Bulgaria are very poor and can't afford computers or access to the internet. They don't even have enough funds to maintain circulation of a newspaper. Liljana was in agreement with what Jordan told me and said that she had heard similar stories from other activists. Slave too later told me a similar story of when he and Steve Pliakas paid a visit to the Macedonian activists in Bulgaria and were asked to visit their office. He said, "They took us to a poorly lit room that resembled a dungeon more than an office." Both Steve and Slave donated all the money they had with them at the time, feeling sorry for the condition under which these people had to work. Unfortunately a one time donation did not solve their problem, as these people need a continuous injection of funds, training, equipment and access to the internet and to other mediums in order to make progress. Liljana suggested that this would be a task for human rights organizations to undertake to ensure that our compatriots in Bulgaria receive the help they need.

While talking with Jordan, Pobeda and Ireneusz and a couple of young ladies joined us. One of the young ladies was a student from Poland studying in Macedonia. The second young lady was also a student from Skopje. They were working on a project about the Begaltsi and wanted to ask some questions. Liljana introduced us to the young ladies pointing out to them that Ireneusz too was from Poland.

We agreed to answer their questions but it would have to be over lunch. We decided to meet at Fufo's café. While Ireneusz drove the students to the restaurant, Liljana paid for a taxi cab and took Pobeda and myself there. When we arrived we met Todor Petrov, Lefter Mantze and a couple of their friends. Lefter offered to buy us lunch and since the ladies accepted so did I. The main dish we ordered was Italian pizza but I did not find it as good tasting as what I was accustomed to here in Canada. Thank you Lefter.

Soon after we ordered our food Ireneusz and the students arrived but they had to pay for their own food because by then Lefter and one his friends had left the café. Liljana and Pobeda also had to go after eating lunch, to run some errands leaving me and Ireneusz to answer all the questions, which took us a couple of hours to do. After we were finished the students left and Ireneusz took me to another café where we had the best fresh fruit juice and ice cream in Skopje. We spent another hour talking and exchanging ideas about Macedonia and its problems with Greece.

After parting company with Ireneusz I headed down Skopje center looking for a taxi. There unexpectedly I ran into John and Tsena and their friends who were sitting in an outdoor café. With them were Vasil and Dotsa Bogov from Australia, Vangel Stojkovski and his wife from Canada and Risto from Skopje. They were waiting to go to another Begaltsi event at 9 pm, the "60 Years of Exodus 1948-2008" presented at a nearby art gallery.

Instead of going back home and coming back, I decided to stay with the group until it was time to go to the gallery. I had a great time talking with Risto who turned out to be quite feisty and a bit argumentative at times but it was all in good fun.

On the way to the art gallery we passed by the bronze monument dedicated to the Detsa Begaltsi where we were approached by a man asking for money for his wife's expensive cancer surgery. I had heard the same story from a different man at a different location earlier that day. I asked the man if the money collected by the other person was

also for his wife to which he replied he had no idea what I was talking about and that his plea was genuine and he had the papers to prove it. When I asked him to prove that this was not a scam he blessed me with many kind words and left.

Speaking of begging, while Ireneusz and I were eating our ice cream earlier at the café a young Roma girl came to our table begging for money. I gave her 10 denars. This was not the only time I had seen young Roma children begging. They often did it on the street at intersections where cars stop for traffic lights. My cousin Spiro keeps a dish of coins in his car for such occasions. I asked him why does he encourage children to do this by giving them money and why aren't they in school? He had no answers; he said he felt sorry for them. I had also seen Roma boys on custom made three wheel bicycles pulling trailers loaded with flattened out cardboard boxes. I had seen Roma adults rummaging through dumpsters collecting bag loads of plastic bottles. From what I had heard from travelers I expected Skopje to be a lot dirtier but that was not the case. Every day on my way out from my apartment I saw a woman cleaning the parking lot, street and collecting loose trash. Outside the city, especially on the highway however it's a different story. I saw truck loads of trash, mostly plastic bottles, ditched in ravines at some places on the highway. I recently heard that the Macedonian parliament passed a law against polluting which should help keep the country clean but will the law be enforced? Only time will tell!

As the crowds amassed in the parking lot in front of the art gallery we again ran into people we had met before. I saw Goche my Oshchimian friend, this time in the company of several other Oshchimians who I introduced to my friend John. Goche promised to give me a CD with some of his songs so we agreed to meet the next day at the Leshok Monastery where the Begaltsi picnic was to be held.

The gallery was air-conditioned so it was not as hot inside as it was outside in the parking lot. When the doors opened we were drawn by the push of the crowd waiting to get in. Once in we followed the crowd circling through the gallery, occasionally stopping to look at the abstract paintings and sculptures. All of the artwork was dedicated to the Begaltsi of the Greek Civil War. As we moved along there were people handing out magazines. I took one and leafed through it. It had colour photographs of the sculptures and paintings displayed in the art

gallery and the text was printed in Macedonian, English and French. Here are a couple of verses I borrowed from the magazine:

“Between the artist and his work there is a long road, often impassible. It can be named Sisyphus’ road, and Orpheus’ as well. Since, at the end of that arduous journey, life defeats death, by means of the art.” (Ivan Capovski)

“The expulsion from one’s homeland is a tragic event which imminently leaves a permanent mark on the entire life of a person.” (Menka Karapasovska)

The gallery tour was concluded by speeches given by the organizers of the Begaltsi Association.

I believe Saturday July 19th was also the day that many Begaltsi were expected to board buses to cross over the Greek border and attend the celebration in Ofchareni. But from what I was told the organizers decided to cancel the buses because of threats from Greeks who were secretly planning to attack the visitors. The organizers did not want to put their guests at risk so they told them if they wanted to go to Ofchareni they would have to find their own means of transportation and go at their own risk. Unfortunately because most of the Begaltsi were from the Diaspora they were not prepared to make such a journey on short notice so many did not go. According to my cousin Spiro who did go, the Ofchareni event has the lowest turnout in years. I later found out that some neo-Nazis had infiltrated the Ofchareni celebration but did not cause any trouble.

Begaltsi Picnic at Leshok

When we left the art gallery John and Tsena asked me to go with them. John offered me a ride in the taxi he hired and took me home first.

As I sat watching television I suddenly remembered two nights ago asking Gjorgji Donevski if he had seen Vera Foteva, a lady I wanted to meet. Vera had sent me a copy of her book (with Liljana) entitled “To Hell and Back” (a monograph of her life’s experience in the Siberian prisons) as a gift a couple of years ago and I wanted to thank her in person but so far I am unable to find her. Traian, a friend of mine from Toronto, had also asked me to get him Vera’s book which gave me twice the reason to find her. Gjorgji had told me that Vera’s book was only available from Vera and was not sold in any bookstores so I made sure not to forget to look for her at the picnic in Leshok.

The next morning Slave came by bright and early, picked me up first and then picked up John and Tsena. Slave had to drive his son’s car because he son Aleksandar had borrowed his to go on vacation.

On the way to Leshok Slave again took the opportunity to give us a tour of the land and talked about the region’s local history. He showed us the borders where some people were thinking of dividing Macedonia and giving the western part to the Albanians. He also showed us Karpalak an area where eight Macedonian soldiers died in 2001. As we traveled west on the right side of the road we saw a couple of ostrich farms.

As we passed a valley between two tall mountains we could see, about half way up the mountain on the opposite side in the distance, machinery surface mining the land and loading the material on trucks. According to Slave they were mining sand and loose gravel. How could they be mining sand half way up the mountain? Sand is a bi-product of water; it belongs in the valleys and beaches. What was it doing way up there; half way up the mountain? I asked Slave if anyone had studied how these mountains were formed but he didn’t know. Could these mountains have been made by sand and gravel deposits from a retreating glacier? I made sure I observed the terrain on my flight back and noticed that most of the area we flew over was fairly flat, only Macedonia had sharp mountains all grouped together. In fact as we passed over Britain I could see the glacier scrapes on large rocks. So the Macedonian mountains could be the result of the melting glaciers

from the last ice age. I would be interested to hear what geologists have to say.

Before going off the highway to climb up to Leshok, Slave took us on a tour of Tetovo. Although there are some Macedonians (about 20%) living in the city, the villages are predominantly settled with Albanians. Because of the tall mountains in the background (Shar Planina) water is plentiful and the fields are green and lush. In fact the entire area on the south-east side of Shar Planina was dotted with villages and higher up the mountains were hotels and resorts. How could the mountain support so many villages and where do they get their water? According to Slave, most of the water comes from springs higher up the mountain. Shar Planina is so tall that a great deal of snow accumulates on its peak over the cold seasons and melts throughout the warm seasons, providing a constant flow of water year round.

As we passed through the center of Tetovo we could see new developments springing up everywhere. Tetovo is growing rapidly and is probably now the second largest city in Macedonia.

The road to Leshok was steep, winding and narrow but Slave used his good driving skills to get us there safely. On the way up we noticed many wild plum trees loaded with ripe plums ready for picking but we did not stop for any.

Judging from the small crowd we found there, we had arrived at Leshok early. Then while I busied myself looking at the surrounding mountains, the others went inside Sveti Atanasi, the larger church in the Leshok Monastery. I did not want to go inside since I was not wearing the proper attire; I was wearing short pants and a T-shirt.

As soon as the others came out of the monastery we were invited to go inside a building and join Bishop Kiril for a cup of tea. One of the priests took us upstairs to the second level and showed us into a conference room. Among the guests included there were distinguished members from various Macedonian Church communities in the Diaspora. Bishop Kiril offered us snacks and drinks and informed us of the various projects he was working on. I was very impressed with the Bishop's knowledge of the Diaspora particularly the names of people he knew including those of our own Macedonian community in Canada. He seemed to know a lot more people in my community than I did. He knew John and Tsena from way back in the days when the St. Clement of Ohrid Macedonian Orthodox Church was built. John at the

time was President of the Church. This was the first Macedonian church built in Canada and probably in the entire Diaspora.

I had known of Bishop Kiril from before and I had seen him at the church and at picnics but I had never met him in person. He is an impressively tall man with a very deep commanding voice that can be both gentle and overpowering which always commands respect and attention.

Just as we got comfortable exchanging stories with the Bishop he was summoned to perform the liturgy at the Sveti Anastasi Church. On our way out Bishop Kiril pointed to the bullet holes in the window inside the lobby above the door. A lot of damage was done to the churches by the opposing faction during the 2001 conflict which was already repaired but some still remained as a reminder of the violence that was acted out against this Christian holy place.

Again I could not go inside the monastery so I decided to look around. Below the monastery there was another older and smaller church. It is called Sveta Bogoroditsa and was built in the 16th century. Just above it was an enclosure with a marble covered grave and headstone of a priest named Kiril Pejchinovitch about whom Slave had spoken to me earlier. As I was reading the inscription “Kiril Pejchinovich Tetoets (1771 1845)” I noticed Emilia, a young lady who I had met before, coming towards me. She had a gift for me. It was a perfect reproduction of a coin from Philip II’s time. The coin was enclosed in a small hand crafted wooden box, an inch and a half cube. Inside the lid of the box were inscribed the words “Philip II of Macedon 359 to 336 BC” in Macedonian and English. On top of the box a sixteen ray Macedonian sun was engraved. It was an impressive gift, I was touched by her generosity especially since it came from a person who I had just met a couple of days ago. Thank you very much Emilia. (Emilia has her own business where she makes and sells reproductions of ancient coins. She can be reached via her e-mail at turnipfish_2612@yahoo.com). Good luck Emilia.

Just as I finished talking to Emilia I was met by another man passing by who asked me what my interest was with Kiril Pejchinovich. He introduced himself as Professor Momirovski who was born in Leshok and was familiar with its history. When I introduced myself he seemed to know me which made me curious so I asked how he knew me. He said he had just heard me talking on the radio. I remembered the radio interview we recorded with Stojan a couple of

days before had just aired that morning. After telling me a bit about Kiril Pejchinovich, the priest who had built this monastery and over whose grave we were standing, the professor invited me to visit the Leshok museum which was located on the first floor of the same building where we had just had tea with Bishop Kiril. When we arrived at the front steps, Professor Momirovski introduced me to his colleague Professor Petrushevski, also born in Leshok.

As soon as we entered the building we exchanged books. I gave the professors one of mine (that's all I had with me) and asked them to share it. Professor Momirovski gave me one of Professor Petrushevski's books entitled "Village of Leshok, Tetovo 1019 – 2003" and one they have jointly written entitled "Historical-Chronological description through photographs and documents of the Leshok Monastery" which they both autographed for me. Professor Momirovski later gave me another of his books, this one of poetry entitled "Nasleden Genski Kod" which roughly translates to "Hereditary Genetic Code".

The museum was busy with visitors, mostly Begaltsi from the Diaspora, and it was difficult to concentrate while constantly being interrupted but thankfully what the professors told me during the tour is also written in the books which I will read at my leisure. Most of the tour was about the various personalities who fought to protect and preserve the monastery over its long existence and about the churches and their history. Part of the tour was a visit to a small church called "Sveti Kiril & Metodi", the size of a small room inside the building. When I asked why there was a third small church inside the building when two already existed outside, I was told that it takes three churches to make a monastery. As we continued the tour Professor Momirovski took me to a small room where the real cover of Kiril Pejchinovich's tomb was safeguarded. The tomb outside was recently restored after it was damaged during the most recent conflict. Just as the professor was reading the old inscriptions on top of the marble plate we were again interrupted but this time by a priest calling out my name. This priest was accompanied by a second tall priest who was introduced to me as Pop Peritsa Bojkovski about whom I had written a story in my history book. While I stood face to face with this person, the first priest turned to page 485 in my translated book and read the few paragraphs that described this poor man's ordeal at the hands of his abductors. The passage was a news story I had picked up from the internet but never in

my life would I have expected to meet the real person. I didn't know what to say and neither did he as we stared at each other shaking hands. As soon as the first priest finished reading they left. Seconds later as I snapped out of my surprise I asked the professor what had just happened. He smiled and said this place has a lot of history. I ran into pop Peritsa again and again smiled at him shyly as we passed each other by.

After the tour I went outside and ran into Ireneusz Shlupkov who had brought copies of his book "The Communist Party of Greece and the Macedonian National Problem 1918-1940" in hopes of selling some. He asked me what he should do since he knew that I am not above selling my own books so I suggested he set up a stand right there and do the selling himself.

By now it was getting very hot so I headed for the trees. Leshok is a beautiful place nestled on the slope of a tall mountain, full of lush green vegetation as far as the eye can see. I tried taking pictures of the mountains but a photograph can't do justice in capturing the majestic greatness of tall mountains.

On my way up I ran into Gjorgji Plukov, a Begalets from Canada, enjoying the shade with his family and friends. He invited me to stay with them for a while and I was offered peaches, grapes and other fruits to snack on. The fruits were local. I was surprised that grapes had ripened so early in the season in Macedonia. While sitting with Gjorgji, Marko, the reporter and radio show host from Skopje, came by and invited me for coffee up at the Leshok café. There I met several other reporters from Skopje including a lady named Tanja Bitoljanu. Tanja was interested in interviewing me for a documentary her company was making about the Macedonians in Greece. While talking to Tanja, Gotche my Oshchiman friend found me and gave me the CD with songs he promised to give me and showed me a lot of old photos of his relatives from Oshchima. Tanja also showed interest in Gotche's photographs and asked him to tell his story when she found out he too was from Greek occupied Macedonia. Gotche gave her his phone number where she could reach him. Tanja spoke to her producer who insisted that we leave the noisy monastery and do the interview and filming at one of the houses in the village down below. I followed Tanja and the filming crew as we meandered down the narrow streets until we reached our destination. There I met several other people as we sat at a picnic table waiting for more people to arrive. I was offered an

assortment of drinks but I asked for water, it was hot and I was very thirsty. Unfortunately before the rest of the crew had arrived I received a phone call from Slave who was looking for me. Bishop Kiril was asking for his guests to join him for lunch. I apologized to Tanja and the people there for having to leave before the interview was even started but I promised them I would be back after lunch. On my way back I ran into more people I knew and I kept asking if they had seen Vera Foteva but everyone I asked said they had not seen her, not at Leshok and not even at other Begaltsi events. This was very unusual for Vera not to be there so we were all wondering if something had happened to her. I have not heard from Vera to this day. If someone has any information please let me know.

When I arrived in front of the building Slave was waiting for me and escorted me to the cafeteria. There were about fifty guests sitting at a long table with Bishop Kiril sitting at the center. Slave and I sat on the opposite side facing the Bishop. The table was set with fresh fruits, bread, salads, appetizers, feta cheese, wine, pop, water and rakija. I was both thirsty and hungry as I had not eaten since lunch the day before. It was 2:30 pm by now and it seemed as if everyone was hungry because the food was sure disappearing fast. We paused for a while for the blessing and to let Bishop Kiril say a few words then resumed eating and drinking. The wine, pop and water were going fast but no one was drinking rakija so I thought I would try some. Rakija is an alcoholic drink distilled with anise so it has a unique flavour. Rakija is a very old fashioned drink popular with Macedonians. The meal also included large portions of pork, chicken and dessert. It was a meal worthy of a Bishop. Thank you Dedo Kiril.

After I finished eating I continued to drink rakija and Slave decided to join me. I offered the bottle to others nearby but they shied away from it. I found the rakija here unusually strong and very clean tasting without any after taste so I asked Slave where they get it. To my surprise he said they make it here. Both the wine and rakija are homemade right here in Leshok. Imagine that? I will have to visit Leshok again in the future.

After we finished lunch we thanked our hosts and left. I reminded Slave of my obligation to Tanja so he drove us to the village. As soon as we started going down the hill I regretted getting Slave involved because the dirt road we were traveling on was so bad we all thought the car would fall apart from the holes and bumps. The village was a

maze of narrow streets and because we took a different path I couldn't find the place. Given the situation with the road, I asked Slave to abandon the search and head back for Skopje.

On the road to Bitola

When we arrived in Skopje from Leshok the evening of July 20th, I asked Slave to leave me with John and Tsena at Makedonka's house. There Makedonka treated us to drinks and snacks, including fresh baked bread and feta cheese while we watched the news about the Begaltsi on television.

I was scheduled to go to Bitola the next day so I asked John and Tsena if they wanted to come with me. Spiro would have taken us no problem but as it turned out there was a Begaltsi banquet in Skopje the next day which John and Tsena wanted to attend. I wanted to go to the banquet too but unfortunately I was running out of time; my relatives in Bitola were expecting me to be there since Monday.

As soon as I got to my apartment that night I received a phone call from Slave asking me to be ready at 7:30 am the next morning for an 8 am live television interview at the MTV1 studio. I had no problem with that because I wasn't expecting Spiro to arrive from Bitola to pick me up until much later probably 9 am so I agreed to go.

I got my wakeup call the next day as usual and was reminded to wear formal clothes. We arrived at the studio on time and were shown in. The morning show is hosted by two young ladies both named Eli so while the one Eli was interviewing a family of swimmers, the other Eli questioned us to get some background information. Both lady hosts spoke very fast so I explained to Eli that she had to take it easy with me and make sure I understood the questions. She was very understanding and helpful. The interview went well but took much longer than expected and I was getting concerned about Spiro. Both Slave and I had to turn off our cell phones to make sure we did not disrupt the live broadcast and Spiro had no other way of contacting us. It was just past 9 am when we were done so while I was collecting my books which I had placed on a table for the filming, I asked Slave to contact Spiro and let him know what was happening. When Slave returned he said, "We have a problem." I thought it had to do with Spiro so I asked if he had made contact with Spiro. Slave said yes he had contacted Spiro and told him where we were but the problem was Tanja Bitoljanu was looking for me, still wanting to do the interview for her documentary. Slave said the film crew was ready at a nearby café and advised me to do the interview. I was concerned about Spiro so Slave contacted him and

explained what was happening and told him where we would be. Spiro said he would meet us there in a short while.

It took us a couple of minutes to get to the café by car and there was a surprise waiting for me there. Sitting among the crew was Dr. Dushko Aleksovski whom I had met in Canada a few years back and had written several articles about his work on petroglyphs or “rock art” as he calls it. I had also written about his work in my history book so it was an unexpected pleasure for me to see him again.

After meeting everyone Slave announced that he had to go. He had a business to run which he had neglected for the last week or so.

Just as we set up to do the filming, the camera man complained the camera was not working. It appears someone had forgotten to charge the battery. Unfortunately the crewman had no charger but I was told there was no problem as their studio was nearby and so as not to waste too much time it was decided that we would all move to another café, one closer to the studio. I asked the producer to contact Spiro and let him know where we were going. When we arrived at our destination Spiro was there waiting for us. As luck would have it, after everything was set up to do the interview, the electrical socket where the camera was plugged in was not working. While the café owner and crew tried to get the camera working Tanja treated us to some fruit flavoured iced tea. By the time the filming started it was past 10 am. There were no pauses during the filming as the interview continued for fifty minutes until the camera ran out of tape. I was asked many questions pertaining to the Macedonian involvement in the Greek Civil War, the Macedonian prisoners on the Greek Islands, the refugee exodus, etc., etc. I was able to answer every question and in fact gave them more information than they expected. I was prepared purely by accident because I am currently writing a book about the Macedonians in Greece from 1939 to 1949. Having done my research for the book greatly helped me answer all their questions. The documentary film is due to air sometime in September this year. To learn more about the Macedonians in Greece please read my ongoing series of articles entitled “the Macedonians in Greece” at:

<http://www.maknews.com/html/articles.html#stefov>

A couple of things that I emphasized in the interview which I want to mention here are that Macedonians as a single nation have been struggling for their freedom and to form their own state since Roman times and that we the Macedonians from Greece, living in the Diaspora,

are not willing immigrants but refugees, victims of war and economic strife evicted out of our homes by the Greek state. Just because we happen to live outside of Greece does not mean that we have abandoned our country, homes, rights and dignity which Greece has taken away from us. Every Macedonian I have met and spoken with in the Diaspora has a story to tell. These stories have patterns that point directly at Greece and the wrongs it has done to the Macedonian people. As of yet, I have not met anyone who said they left because they wanted to leave and as such have willingly abandoned their family home and lands. The stories I hear paint a different picture, a picture of a people who left out of fear for their lives. A people who left due to economic strife and neglect and only abandoned their families, homes and lands because they were harshly dealt with by Greece. These injustices Macedonians are NOT willing to forget. Instead they expect Greece to reverse its attitude and admit responsibility for the wrongs it has committed and apologize to those that they wronged just like the Australians and the Canadians apologized to their indigenous people not too long ago.

By the time we finished the interview it was almost 11 am. We were expected to be in Bitola by now but instead we had to go back to my apartment so that I could change my clothes and pick up my stuff. It was burning hot outside but finally we were off to Bitola.

Spiro decided to take a less direct route so that he could show me some of the scenery. We drove on a newly built highway which Spiro used to take every day from Skopje to Bitola when he worked in the Macedonian Parliament so he was familiar with it and because of the higher speed limits he said it was possible to get to our destination faster. As we left Skopje I recognized the scenery. We were traveling on the same road we had traveled the day before when we went to Leshok. I noticed the maximum speed limit was 120 K/h but no one stuck to the limit. Almost everyone was traveling at least 20km over the speed limit with some traveling even faster. As we drove deeper into western Macedonia we noticed custom automobiles made from refurbished American cars, even some new North American cars. Spiro said, "Do you know who owns these cars and worse they race them without regard to the lives they take, even their own?" I did not ask and did not want to know who owned such cars but I had my suspicions.

Spiro too showed me the spot in Karpalak where our eight Macedonian soldiers died and the place where some people were thinking of dividing Macedonia.

As we continued to travel south-westerly I noticed the terrain was looking lush and green. The mountains looked tame and covered with green vegetation unlike the mountains we passed by a week ago in Eastern Macedonia which looked wild, desolate and burned by the summer sun. I couldn't help but feel sad about losing this land and felt angry at those who entertained the idea of wanting to give away this beautiful and fertile land. Did they have any idea what they were thinking?

By the number of Mosques in each village we could see that most of western Macedonia was inhabited by Muslim Albanians. As we passed by villages we could also see that many of the newly built houses were vacant. They build houses here but live and work elsewhere mostly in large cities in the Diaspora. No one but themselves knows the real reasons why they do that. To me and others from the Diaspora, people look and act alike but to those who live in Macedonia there is a psychological divide between the two ethnicities. Village after Albanian village, even in the center of Skopje, I saw the red-with-black Albanian flag, a foreign flag by itself displayed in public. And even though it irks every ethnic Macedonian, they can't do anything because they are now allowed to display the flag by law. The Macedonians see this as pure provocation which can't possibly be good for either side. To me it would appear that in order to placate some "higher power" authorities are working against the will of the majority of the Macedonian people. No one could explain to me the rational for having provocative foreign flags flown in Macedonia nor how that could benefit everyone and help to bring the various ethnic groups closer together or foster peace in the region.

The straight road turned into treacherous constant turns and curves as we continued to climb the mountains at break-neck speeds. I looked down the steep slopes and wondered how safe this road could be without guardrails especially during the night or in winter under icy conditions. Then I remembered that Spiro traveled this road for four years under every condition possible and managed okay.

We were both quiet as the car came to a halt at the top of the hill and Spiro announced it was time for lunch. After filling the car with petrol we walked up a hill to a restaurant and sat outdoors but when the

waiter failed to notice us we went inside. It was burning hot but there was a cool breeze blowing. The restaurant was full of people, mostly young, and judging from the conversations most were foreigners, probably tourists. I had not eaten supper the day before or breakfast that morning so I was good and hungry by now. I was Spiro's guest again and Spiro spared no expense to please me when it came to ordering food. "How does a Shopska salad (tomato and cucumber bits drowned in shredded feta cheese), a hamburger (large), a portion of broiled pork (large pork injected with cheese) and a plate of French fries sound to you?" he asked. "Then we will have some ice cream for dessert. But first we will have a couple of Skopski (beers)," he said. That was fine by me I said but who was I to argue? It was an excellent lunch. Thank you Spiro.

The road was just as treacherous coming down the hill but soon we were down in the valley and the road became less of a distraction as Spiro continued to tell me stories about the various landmarks. As we came closer to Bitola he showed me where his father (my uncle) worked and then where he works. Bitola looked much older than Skopje. It was a typical city left over from the Ottoman era with narrow streets leading all over the place.

After arriving in Bitola our first priority was to get together and meet with the rest of my relatives. Afterwards Spiro was going to take me to meet a couple of his close friends.

My visit with my cousins went well as we briefly met at my aunt's (Spiro's mother) house where we all got together within a short time after we arrived.

Just before dark Spiro drove us to the outskirts of Bitola, to a beautiful outdoor café where we met Risto and Petar. Spiro had said to me I needed fewer interviews and more contact with people from whom I could learn and if anyone fit that profile it would be Risto or Dr. Ivanovski, as I soon came to know him. Dr. Ivanovski was a storehouse full of knowledge and led most of the discussion. Dr. Ivanovski's expertise is in prehistory, less familiar to me which made me all the more interested. I asked him if he knew of Odie Belchevski because Odie is also into prehistoric stuff especially in linguistics and the study of Homeric words. Dr. Ivanovski said he had met Odie the day before and had had a long discussion with him.

I had promised Odie I would look for him during my visit in Bitola and what better time than to invite him to join the discussion right there

and then. Unfortunately the only number I had was from the home he was staying in and I was unable to get hold of him.

Dr. Ivanovski covered a lot of material during the short time we were together and there was no way I could remember it all. But he said, “Don’t worry you can read about it in my books.” To my surprise he pulled out six books all written in Macedonian and handed them to me. Five are self published and very controversial, the sixth entitled “The Mediterranean Original Homeland of the Europeans” was published in 1998 by MUB “Sveti Kliment Ohridski”, in Bitola. If anyone knows anything about the Pelasgians and Phrygians it would be Dr. Ivanovski. I just need to find the time to read his books.

We had a productive meeting that evening that could have lasted all night but Risto and Petar had to go to work the next day. Spiro and I on the other hand had had a long day and needed to rest.

Heraclea and Ohrid in one day

I spent the night at Spiro's mother's house and as usual was up early. As it happened, Sofia (Spiro's mother) is an early morning person too so I had an opportunity to get to know my aunt a bit better. She is an old Partisan's widow who now lives alone. She manages okay on her pension but does not have the money to buy extra things. The cost of heating fuel (parno) will be going up over 60% in Macedonia this coming winter so she is worried she will not be able to afford it. "I will have to switch to electricity," she said "because I can't afford the extra cost." Her apartment is equipped with central heating, electric space heating and wood stove heating. I imagine most old apartments are. Cost wise, wood would be the best choice but she is too old and weak to handle the wood. Even though each apartment is privately owned, the building she lives in and its central services are managed by the city. She has to pay monthly fees.

I figured 8 am was an appropriate time to contact Spiro and it was. Soon afterwards he arrived and picked me up. It was quiet outside as there was very little activity in the morning compared to the evening before. "What did you expect this early in the morning?" Spiro said. "People are still sleeping. They stay up late because it's too hot to sleep and sleep-in in the morning when it's cooler."

Since no place that we wanted to visit was open this early in the morning, Spiro took me to a café in downtown Bitola. It was a huge restaurant and according to Spiro very popular in the night. It is owned by a Macedonian from the Diaspora who converted it from an outdoor walkway to a money making venture. It looked more like a Canadian restaurant, very spacious with a high ceiling and ceiling fans circling above. All around the walls on one side were fish tanks with huge live fish. I imagine the fish are not there for display. I did not ask.

"I want you to try something new today," Spiro said as he asked the waiter to bring me a chorba (soup) made of cow's stomach. I don't usually eat soup for breakfast, let alone soup made of a cow's stomach but I was game for anything new especially when it came to sampling the famous chorba people talk about. The large deep dish of garlic spiced chorba came with bread, feta cheese and a dish full of hot peppers. I tried the soup first. When the first spoonful hit my taste buds I felt nauseous. It was the heavy taste of garlic coupled with the fat floating on top that turned my stomach but biting into a bit of fresh

bread solved the problem. As I overcame the feeling, the chorba seemed to be calling to me to try some more. Spiro watched me as I first struggled with it then wolfed it down. “Do you want some more?” he said. I laughed and said no thank you but I pity the poor person who will be standing next to me all day smelling the garlic.

I was a bit squeamish about eating the hot peppers at first but after trying one I ate all of them. They went down real easy with feta cheese and bread. What a breakfast!

Spiro mentioned that the cow gut comes from North America frozen but with all the spices and fat in the soup how can one tell?

After we finished our breakfast and morning coffee we were ready to go. The Bitola museum was our first destination but it was still not open. Given that we had to be in Ohrid by noon for yet another television interview, we decided to go to the Heraclea archeological site first. Unlike Stobi, this site is more developed. It has a visitor’s building with a model replica of the site just as it looked when it was first unearthed. The broken seats in the open theater have been replaced and the surrounding walls that had fallen had been repaired.

First to greet us as we entered the gate was a young lady named Biliana who introduced herself as the tour guide for the site. Spiro asked if Kuzman was at the site. For a while I had been asking to meet him. Biliana said at the moment he was not there, he was at another archeological site. I was then surprised to see Spiro calling him on his cell phone. I asked where he had got his number and how he knew Kuzman. He said, “You are forgetting I grew up and still live in Bitola. I know most of the people here.” “Wow,” I said “Kuzman is somewhat of a folk hero to me.” Unfortunately Kuzman would continue to be away for several days and I would not get the chance to meet him.

The next to greet us was Anitsa, the local archeologist who of course knew Spiro but asked if I was Risto Stefov. I was surprised by her inquiry and wanted to know how she knew about me? She said, “I promoted your book a month or so ago right here at this site. I thought it was you, I thought I would recognize you from your picture but was not sure.” Another wow for me.

Anitsa took us inside the building, offered us a drink and gave us a bit of a history lesson about the site. She then left us in the capable hands of Biliana, who by the way spoke very good English with an English accent. She was very pleasant and courteous and made sure I understood everything by repeating it in English.

Biliana pointed at a group of people working on the site and said they were American archeology students. Later when we returned to the visitor's building we ran into the students and I asked them in English where they were from. Only two women responded. One was from British Columbia and the other from Quebec. They were only there for a couple of weeks.

While we were still on the site, Spiro received a call which I thought was odd. It was from the Bulgarian Consul in Bitola. He had two complementary concert tickets for Spiro. Spiro asked me if I wanted to go but I said I wasn't really interested. Overhearing the conversation Biliana said the concert was scheduled to be held right here at the Heraclea ancient outdoor theater. In that case I said count me in.

When we were finished with the tour we returned to another building where Anitsa and another lady were waiting for us. Anitsa showed me a huge book with beautiful colour photographs of the Heraclea ruins and all the artifacts found there over the years. Unfortunately she had only one copy so I couldn't get one for myself. I asked Spiro to try and get me one when more are printed.

On our way back Spiro suggested we go to the Bulgarian Consulate first and pick up the tickets. I was curious as to why the Bulgarian Consul would give him tickets? Spiro said they were friends. They met at a conference they attended and became friends. He added that the Consul is Macedonian with roots from Kostur Region.

When we arrived at the entrance of the consulate Spiro asked me to go with him. "Come and meet him," he said "he is a nice guy." Thinking nothing of it I followed Spiro through the yard but the moment we entered the front gate we were stopped by a couple of security guards armed with pistols and mean looking metal handcuffs. One of them asked, "What is your business here?" The other guard recognized Spiro and started talking to him so I figured now that they know who we are they would let us in. But that was not the case. They knew Spiro but did not know me. After a short interrogation the first guard asked me for my passport. "Give it to him," Spiro said "he will give it back." The other guard (the one speaking to Spiro) came over with his metal detecting wand and checked me over. He told me to wait while the other guard wrote down all the information from my passport. So far so good I figured. They are only doing routine checks. But then I began to get nervous when the guard holding my passport made a

phone call and repeated my name several times. I couldn't help but wonder who he was calling and why? Later it came to me. He must have been calling the consul who probably was not expecting me. Spiro must have neglected to tell him.

About eight minutes later, and what seemed to me an eternity, the guard handed me my passport and we were off to see the consul upstairs. It was a beautiful building inside, renovated and well decorated with paintings, posters and bookshelves full of books. A good looking young lady with sharp, dark eyes came out to greet us and showed us in. For a moment I felt nervous under the stare of this young woman's dark eyes. She sat us down in the lounge and told us to wait. Spiro must have sensed my nervousness and said, "Don't worry about her, she is probably a local (Macedonian from Bitola) just working here, just like the guard I was talking to. But please don't say anything about your books and activities." About a minute later we were invited in to see the consul. He introduced himself as Naum Kajchev and gave me his business card. I guess he was expecting me to give him mine and when I didn't he asked me if I had a business card. I said no I don't work, I am retired. He asked many personal questions about my work, my life, my village, etc. and seemed to know a lot about the places I mentioned. He asked me where in Toronto I lived. I found the question odd but before I had a chance to ask, he said he had been posted in Toronto for a number of years and was familiar with the city. He seemed to know Toronto much better than I did. He also knew a lot of people from Toronto including the then mayor. He asked me to say hello to our mutual friend Steve in Toronto.

The air conditioning in the consul's office must have been running on full blast because the place was cold in comparison to the burning heat outside. We were treated to a cup of coffee after which we left. The young lady escorted us out to the stairs and we slipped by the guards with just a simple good-by. I was happy to be out but have to admit that what I felt was my own insecurity because no one said or did anything to make me feel any different.

As soon as we left the consulate I asked Spiro to forget about visiting the museum in Bitola for now and head on to Ohrid. Slave, John and Tsena would be arriving there from Skopje before noon and we should be there. Spiro agreed and we were off to Ohrid. On the way we passed through Resen, Prespa Region. Spiro pointed out that this

used to be Tsar Samoil's kingdom and is now famous for its beautiful big apples.

We arrived in Ohrid before noon and made our way to a private parking lot near the harbour. All the café's, shops and picnic areas near the lakeshore were packed with people. The sun was beaming but there was a cool breeze blowing from the lake which kept us cool. Ohrid was beautiful and I could see myself spending a lot of time here but it would have to be in the future. As soon as we made our way around the harbour and visited a few places and took some pictures, we got a call from Slave letting us know that they had arrived. It took us a while to find them but when we did we decided to have lunch. We found a nice outdoor café and the five of us sat down at an unsheltered table. The café was packed with customers and the waiter took some time to get to us but as soon as he got there it started raining. It was a quick shower but it made a mess on the table. As soon as we moved to a table under a shelter the rain stopped. Moments later we were joined by the producer of the television show that wanted to interview us. He introduced himself as Boshko Rajchovski from Ljuboino, Prespa Region who now lives in Detroit. I did not recognize Boshko's name but I certainly recognized his voice which I had heard on the radio before. He confirmed that yes it was him that I had heard on the radio. Since we had already ordered our lunch, we asked Boshko to join us. Given the mix of people we had at the table I announced that this lunch would be my treat. No one objected. As usual Spiro ordered for me and again it was a big meal consisting of three pieces of pork prepared three different ways, Shopska salad, cheese, olives, bread, Skopski (for some, pop for the non drinkers) and some "yellows" (whisky) for me, Slave and Boshko. I have to admit that for the first time I couldn't finish the entire meal. Neither could Spiro so we asked the waiter to put our leftovers in a "doggy bag" (as we call it here in Canada) so that we could take them with us. For those interested, I was able to treat six people, including myself to a king's meal for just over 5,000 denars which works out to about \$ 125 Canadian. Where else in the world can a poor tourist from Canada, eat like a king?

We took our time eating while waiting for Boshko to make the call for us to get going. But after making phone call after phone call he finally said that his film crew and reporter were not there and it would take some time before they arrived. In the meantime we took a walk in the promenade above the shoreline under the shade of the trees and

arrived near the statue of Kiril & Metodi where we were met by the film crew, accompanied by an American woman and her daughter. The woman, of German roots, was married to a Macedonian from Ljuboino and at the time was vacationing in Ohrid. I talked to her while waiting for the reporter to arrive.

It was 4 pm when the reporter finally arrived and we found a nice café near the lake to do the filming. Some of the customers were asked to move from their tables and make room for us to which they obliged. The music too was turned down and the scene with the lake in the background was set. The interview took about twenty minutes.

When we finished it was past 5 pm. Spiro handed me a couple of DVD's. They were from a singer, entertainer named Tomislav Manich. "These are a gift for you," he said "from that man over there. They are recordings of his performances." I said I did not know the man but Spiro said, "It doesn't matter; he knows of you and wants you to have them." I thanked the man for his generosity and for giving gifts to a perfect stranger.

As soon as we walked outside the café people were saying it's going to rain, a storm was coming. I looked up and all I could see was blue sky with a few clouds.

It took us about ten minutes to gather everyone together and another ten minutes to get to our cars. Slave was leaving for Skopje and John and Tsena were coming with us (Spiro and I) to Bitola. No sooner had we transferred John and Tsena's luggage from Slave's car than it began raining. By the time we were out of the parking lot the rain had turned into a torrent. As we were leaving Ohrid we saw downed trees and branches all over the road. It continued to rain all the way to Bitola where we dropped off John and Tsena at their hotel. "I guess the concert is going to be cancelled on account of the rain," I said to Spiro. But he was quick to remind me that he heard on the radio that the concert was still on. It had been moved to an indoor theater. It was scheduled for 9 pm and we could still make it. I told him I didn't really want to go and that he should be going with his wife Lenche.

By the time we arrived at Spiro's house we were both tired and Lenche did not want to go so we all spent the afternoon and part of the evening at Spiro's house.

Spiro made us all sorts of snacks and Lenche served us coffee and other drinks while we watched DVD's from Spiro's collection of

speeches he had made during his days in the Macedonian parliament and flipped through photographs from his political campaign.

Spiro took me back to his mom's house late that night. The rain had stopped and the night was cool, just right for sleeping.

From Smilevo to Krushevo

As soon as I got to my Aunt Sofia's place late that night, I went to bed immediately so as not to disturb her sleep when I realized I had forgotten something. In the hustle and bustle between the interview and the rain in Ohrid, I forgot to go and visit my cousin Goche's daughter Dafina. Dafina is my only relative living in Ohrid and had been my primary contact with my cousins in Skopje prior to my arrival in Macedonia. She was definitely expecting me to go and see her especially since her mother had told her I would be in Ohrid that day. I felt terrible for not seeing her and the only way to make it up to her I figured would be to call her the next day first thing in the morning and apologize to her. So I did and she was a good sport and accepted my apology with grace and forgiveness.

Speaking of apologies, I forgot to mention in an earlier part that Kole Mangov had given me a book he wrote himself entitled "Za Makedonskite Chovechki Prava" ("About Macedonian Human Rights") published in Skopje in 1995 by MRT-Makedonsko Radio. My father just finished reading it and would like to compliment Kole for his excellent work. Thank you Gospodin Kole Mangov.

Even though it was a cool night and I went to sleep late, I still woke up early the next morning on Wednesday July 23rd. My aunt had an assortment of foods for me to eat for breakfast but I only asked for coffee. She knows how to make good Turkish coffee the old fashioned way and made it for me the way I like it, with no sugar. She loves to put a lot of sugar in her coffee but because she is diabetic now she has to drink it with practically no sugar.

That morning I also met Mende, my cousin Neda's son, who is into body building and speaks pretty good English. Of all my cousins' children he was the most curious and inquisitive about my books and activities.

Spiro had an errand to run that morning so he arrived a bit later than expected and we were off sightseeing more of Macedonia. Just as we were putting my luggage into the trunk of his car, an old friend of his arrived at the doorstep and stopped to talk to us. He wanted to know who I was. Spiro told him I was a cousin from Canada but the old man wanted to know my name. "Ah Risto Stefov," he said as if he knew me. "Of course I know you," he said "I am Aleksandar Popovski, President of the Detsa Begaltsi Association of the Bitola Chapter. All the Begaltsi

here in Bitola know you.” Spiro later told me that he (Spiro) belongs to the Bitola Association and when his father was alive they used to tell the Begaltsi about the various articles I wrote over the years, especially the ones about them.

On our way out of Bitola we stopped to see Spiro’s son Vasko and Vasko’s wife and child.

It had been raining on and off during that night in Bitola but it was clear when we took the side road to Smilevo. Smilevo is a small village perched on a cliff much like any other typical village up on a mountain except this village is famous for producing a lot of Macedonian revolutionaries including Damian Gruev, the legendary commander and chief of the 1903 Ilinden Macedonian National Uprising. We parked the car in the center square and watched people coming out of their houses to investigate what was going on. It reminded me of how we were back in Oshchima where everyone knew everyone and looked at strangers with curiosity and in our case with suspicion. We entered the variety store where Spiro bought us chocolate bars and some juice. Spiro asked the clerk where the museum was and which one was Damian Gruev’s house. The lady gave us directions and we were off. Gruev’s house was on the other side of the hill and we assumed it would be private property so we photographed it from the distance and left for the museum. We were lucky the curator was there and was able to give us a tour.

When I wrote my history book I mentioned Damian Gruev as the sole leader of the 1903 rebellion but when Aleksandar Donski reviewed my book he mentioned that I had omitted two other names that should have been mentioned side by side with Gruev’s so I was wondering if the Museum too would have neglected those names. I was happy to see all three names displayed at the museum side by side. The three men who lead the 1903 uprising were Anastas Lozanchev, Damian Gruev and Boris Sarafov.

The building was renovated inside and kept very clean and organized. It had a rich collection of photographs, mostly reproductions, of the personalities that organized, supported and lead the 1903 Macedonian National Uprising. One thing they lacked was a pamphlet or booklet to give away to visitors. Again it boils down to lack of funds from the government which does not have resources to support all the projects that are currently ongoing in Macedonia. The

local community too is not that well off to be able to give support to its museum. I think time will solve this problem.

I enjoyed my trip to the museum very much and Spiro summed it up when he said that now I know a bit more about the revolutionaries about whom I have written in my books.

As we were descending one mountain and getting close to ascending another to go to Krushevo I received a phone call from my internet friend Tomche who was anxious to meet with me. I was happy to hear that he would be available to meet during the evenings for the rest of the week so we set a date for Thursday.

Just as we were approaching the peaks of one of the mountains near Krushevo, Spiro made a point of mentioning how difficult the mountain was to climb even by car. That's why it took the Turkish army twelve days to overpower the famous Krushevo Republic during the 1903 Macedonian National Uprising. I then jokingly said to Spiro that what Macedonia needs are helicopters. It took us about half an hour to come down one hill and climb up another which would have taken us no more than a couple of minutes by helicopter. In fact with a helicopter one could probably see all of Macedonia in a single day. Macedonia could start its own industry manufacturing helicopters as a specialty and sell the finished products to the tourist industry and not just in Macedonia. Spiro also mentioned how much easier it would be to patrol and defend Macedonia with such helicopters. Just an idea.

When we were almost at the top of this great big mountain we took a diversion and drove over an unpaved path. "We are entering Mechkin Kamen," Spiro said. "Tourists are not allowed to drive up here. They usually leave their cars at the side of the road and walk the rest of the way. But since no one is here I will drive us further up." When we reached the peak we could see the clouds below forming. We could also see rain in the distance. I had to take pictures because no one back in Canada was going to believe that we were standing high up above the clouds. I could feel moisture, tiny droplets on my skin. It felt as though we were inside the cloud.

Spiro took me to the great big bronze monument of a man with a rock raised over his head getting ready to hurl it. This is the place where only a handful of Macedonian fighters in 1903 took on the entire Ottoman army and held it back. "The picture on the cover of one of your books is of this statue," said Spiro. Spiro was talking about the book "This Land We Do Not Give a history of Macedonian resistance

to foreign occupation” by Michael Seraphinoff and Chris Stefou, published in 2008 by Nettle Hollow which can be found at www.MacedonianLit.com and at www.oshshcima.com.

On our way back we stopped at an open area to marvel at these majestic old mountains which had seen so much and heard so many secrets. As clouds passed by we could see the valleys below dotted with villages and patterns of fields and meadows.

We could have spent hours breathing the thin fresh air and enjoying the cool moist breeze as it blew in our faces but we had more of Macedonia to see so we headed for the village Krushevo.

On our way down we met the rain we had seen from the distance and drove through it into Krushevo. The first stop was Toshe Proevski’s memorial. Toshe, a very popular pop star not just in Macedonia but in most of the Balkans, was recently killed in a road accident outside of Macedonia and was buried in his hometown Krushevo, where he was born. In spite of the heavy rain his memorial was packed with people, probably fans paying their respects. Judging from the languages they spoke, most of them were foreigners but no less devoted to him for his music and humanitarian beliefs.

The rain continued to pour as we again headed for the road, this time uphill on a muddy dirt path. As we drove further and further up the road became steeper and there were moments when I thought we would never make it. I couldn’t help but feel that any moment now we would be stuck in the mud. I guess Spiro had more faith in his car and in his ability than I did. Personally I would never take such risks.

When we finally reached the top I could see the outline of a giant circular white structure with circular protruding windows and a long ramp leading to it. I had seen it before in pictures but I failed to estimate its huge size. It’s called “the Makedonium”.

In spite of the pouring rain we got out of the car and ran up the open ramp to the shelter inside.

As soon as we got in we were greeted by two men, one was a guard and the other was the attendant. They both recognized Spiro and immediately struck a conversation, mostly about politics. Spiro did not know them but obviously they knew him. As Spiro busied himself with the two men I looked through the building and was met by a group of visitors. I could see that they didn’t look like Macedonians so I spoke to them in English. They were Norwegians hiking through the Macedonian mountains. I asked them what their interest was in visiting

this building and one of them, a woman, laughed and said they were using the building as shelter from the rain.

Before leaving the Macedonium Spiro bought me four wood-framed etchings of Macedonian revolutionaries and a great big photo album entirely composed of old photographs of Macedonian revolutionaries from the 1903 Ilinden era. The book, written in both Macedonian and English, is by Professor Dr. Blagoj Stoichovski. It is entitled “Macedonian Revolutionaries 1893 to 1908” and was published in 2006 by N.I. Historical Museum of Krushevo. For me this was a great gift because it has the largest collection of photographs of revolutionaries and of revolutionary bands that I had ever seen in a single book. Thank you Spiro.

The rain had somewhat subsided as we left Krushevo and headed for Prilep. Our plan was to visit Prilep then Veles then return to Bitola Region and meet up with Lenche (Spiro’s wife) and her father at her father’s cottage for supper. We then received a call from Slave informing us that I was invited to do another interview in Skopje early in the morning the next day. Unfortunately the next day I was committed to visiting with my relatives in Skopje. On top of that Spiro kept getting urgent calls from his work where he was needed. So I had to make a decision which was a bit of a compromise. Instead of going back to Bitola and driving to Skopje early the next morning, I asked Spiro to take me back to Skopje that afternoon so that he could be back to his job the next day and I would be able to do the interview early in the morning and visit my relatives at noon. I hope I didn’t disappoint Lenche who spent the entire day cooking for me and preparing for my visit at the cottage. I am sorry Lenche, I hope you can forgive me.

As we continued our trek north Spiro pointed out various historical landmarks like Marko Krale’s kule (castle), the Marko Tsepenko Cultural Center, the Drenovska Klisura pass where Pero Toshev was killed and more.

As we continued to travel we passed through Kavadarsti Region, famous for its grapes and wines. There we could see nothing but vineyards stretching for miles.

We arrived in Veles around 2 pm and stopped for lunch. Spiro wanted to take me to this particular place because this town has its own traditions of preparing foods. It even makes its own beer.

It was still raining when we entered the sheltered part of this large outdoor restaurant which at the time had only a few customers. The

waiter took his time to come around to get our orders and it took twice as long for the food to be prepared but we were not in any hurry. This time Spiro ordered a surprise meal for me, a specialty, only made in this town. When the food finally arrived we were served a Shopska salad, three varieties of bread, peppers, cheese and a number of spicy sauces. Spiro got a huge chunk of pork and I got a four inch in diameter brown stuffed ball sitting in a bowl of thin, fat laden gravy. "What is this?" I asked Spiro. "Sample it first," he said "and then I will tell you." I ran my knife over it and as the skin broke the stuffing fell into the bowl of gravy. I scooped it up with my fork and took a bite. "Mmm it's delicious," I said. "What is it?" "It's a sheep's stomach stuffed with meats, grains and spices," Spiro said "something like a Scottish haggis." Now I know what you are thinking but don't knock it until you try it. I will never think of haggis the same way again (as something disgusting).

When I finished eating the haggis, which by the way absorbed all the gravy on its own as the stuffing landed in it, Spiro gave me a chunk of his portion of pork (why I don't know) and on top of the salad, peppers and bread, I ate that too. The local beer was just as good if not better than the Skopsko. Thank you again Spiro.

When we were finished with lunch we visited the monument of fallen heroes and Alexander the Great's new statue before heading back to Skopje.

We arrived in Skopje around 6 pm and after saying our goodbyes Spiro left immediately for Bitola. I stayed in my apartment and used the rest of the day to organize my visits for my next few remaining days in Macedonia.

There the sunrise warms the soul,
The sunset glows on wooded heights;
There are gifts in great profusion
Richly spread by nature's power.
Watch the clear lake stretching white
Or blueely darkened by the wind,
Look upon the plains or mountains:
Beauty's everywhere divine.

To pipe there to my heart's content!
Ah! Let the sun set, let me die.

Konstantin Miladinov
(1830-1862)

(www.tikves.com.mk)

Meeting with friends

I was back in my apartment on the evening of July 23rd and Skopje was nice and cool. The rain had dropped the temperature to the low 20's and sleeping was not a problem.

Slave came early the next morning and we were off to the MTV1 studio where we were met by Krstenka, the host of the show. Scheduling was not a problem because the interview was going to be taped for broadcasting sometime after August 2nd.

Krstenka took us to a studio and asked us to wait there while she went to get us some refreshments and find the film crew.

At this point I asked Slave to contact my relatives and let them know where we were so that they could let Zoran know where to find us. I had asked Zoran to pick me up from the studio but I had no idea where it was. I did not have Zoran's cell phone number so I could not tell him what time the interview was going to end and where to find me.

The interview, which was supposed to take about half an hour, took more than an hour but once the filming began we could not answer our cell phones. So Zoran had to wait outside the MTV1 building not knowing what was going on.

The interview went very well and Slave was quick to mention that this was by far the best interview we had done.

As soon as we had finished, Krstenka escorted us out of the building and there were my cousin Vasil and his son Zoran waiting. I thanked Slave for his assistance and left to visit my relatives with a quick stop at my apartment to change into more casual clothing.

I had asked my cousin Vasil to do the impossible and get all his brothers and sisters together in one place at the same time so that I could visit them all at once. To my surprise all of them and even some of their children and grandchildren were there by noon. Vasil's family had prepared an elaborate meal and Zoran cooked the meat in their brick barbeque in the backyard. Vasil also has a gazebo in his backyard which easily accommodated the dozen or so people in attendance. This was indeed an honour for me to have everyone there on such short notice. Some had to even take a day off from work just to be there with me. I am truly grateful.

After lunch the time passed quickly as we drank Vasil's personal stash of rakia (alcoholic beverage) and shared stories about our separate

experiences back in Oshchima. I hope we didn't bore the young ones too much, those who had never been to Oshchima and had no idea why we cared so much for the rustic and desolate place we once called home.

By five o'clock everyone looked anxious and ready to go and I decided it was time to go too. I said my goodbyes and left with my cousin Lena. Her son Slobodan took me back to my apartment.

Just as I arrived around 6 pm I received a call from Tomche asking me if he could bring some friends with him and if it was possible to move our meeting to an earlier time. I told him I was ready now and gave him instructions where to find me. About twenty minutes later we were sitting at a café near where I was staying, drinking Skopski.

Tomche was a lot younger than I expected and he knew a lot more about me than I knew about him. He had read many of my articles posted on www.maknews.com and had been a reader of mine for some time. Tomche is also a contributing member on the www.maknews.com/forum and regularly posts his views on Macedonia from the inside, since he lives there.

Just as we got comfortable more of Tomche's friends arrived and eventually we had to join two tables to accommodate everyone. To my left sat Tomche, beside him sat Voislav, Igor and Avram. Tomche listened for the most part while the others exchanged ideas and stories. Compared to me these new friends were young men in their late twenties but intellectually and knowledge wise they all spoke like professors. I couldn't help but feel proud that the future of Macedonia would be in good hands. They were no nonsense young men who knew who they were and what they wanted. What impressed me even more, which at least three of them mentioned, was that somehow I was responsible for putting them on this path. When they started looking to learn more about Macedonia, they found my articles on the internet. The information they found confirmed what they had known from their own parents and grandparents which appealed to them and drew them even further in their search to find their place in the world. This reassures me that I am on the right track in terms of my own activities for the Macedonian cause.

In a short span of time these young Macedonians will become the bearers of Macedonism. They have the knowledge and confidence to hold their own.

I think it was Igor who gave me a couple of red T-shirts. On the front of the T-shirt up at the chest are two yellow crests; the Macedonian 16 ray sunburst on the left and the Macedonian lion on the right. Below the crests, written in yellow Cyrillic letters are the words “Makedonets do koska” (Macedonian to the bone). On the right sleeve is written the website Milenko.com.mk and on the back in white letters on a black background it says “Makedonija Tsvilizatsija Idnina” (Macedonia Civilization Future). Thank you guys for the gifts.

When we ordered food, I told everyone that I had just eaten a big lunch and was going to skip supper but in typical Macedonian fashion they ordered food for me anyway and then gave me portions of their own food. Feeling they had done enough for me I announced that it was my turn to buy at least the Skopski (beers). I knew how little money they made in Macedonia and I didn't want them to frivolously spend it on me especially when I could easily afford it. I told them I have money and I can afford to buy everyone a beer. That's when someone whispered in my ear and said it wasn't a matter of affordability but a matter of pride. These young men want to treat you because they respect you, don't take that away from them. Friendship is not about who has money and who doesn't, it's about being equals and treating each other with respect. So, an old dog can learn new tricks after all. I took this person's advice and zipped it as they each treated me to Skopsko after Skopsko with mugs full of beer lining up in single file one behind the other like soldiers.

I asked the guys if I could take pictures of them and they agreed so we asked the waitress to take some group shots with several cameras. Tomche said he was going to post his on the Maknews forum. I think it was Igor who left for a few minutes and came back with hard copy photos and gave us each one. I had a great time that night. Thank you Tomche for inviting me and introducing me to your friends. Also say hello to the guys and thank them for me for all they have done.

Surprisingly with all the beer I drank that night, I did not get inebriated. We left the café at midnight. Everyone had to go to work the next morning and I had plans to visit Dr. Kosta Peev. I walked to my apartment.

At 8 am the next morning I contacted Dr. Peev to confirm that I was coming and he gave me instructions on how to find his house. He lives in Selo Bardovtsi just outside of Skopje which took about half an hour to get to. I wanted to go early so that I could leave early because I had

an open invitation to visit Aleksandar, my soldier friend. But even the best laid plans sometimes don't work out. When I arrived at Dr. Peev's house I told him my plans and that I was going to leave around 11 am. Unfortunately Dr. Peev had different plans for me and shot down my idea by simply saying that I came all the way here from Canada but I could not make the time to at least have lunch with a friend? I have known Dr. Peev and his wife for about four years now and have been to his daughter's house to see him in Toronto a couple of times. The last time I went visiting he insisted I visit him in Macedonia.

I agreed to stay for lunch provided we ate very close to noon. His wife, who at the time was serving us breakfast and Turkish coffee, suggested 2 pm. I was thinking more like 12 noon but we agreed on 12:30 pm.

Dr. Peev first showed me what he was working on and then took me for a tour of the neighbourhood. Dr. Peev for some time now has been working on a dialectal dictionary of Aegean dialects, particularly those of south-eastern Aegean Macedonia. So far he has published four volumes from the Cyrillic letters "A" to "P". Currently he is finishing volume 5 and getting it ready for publication. He has one more volume to go before the entire dictionary is completed. However he has a problem. He is not sure if he has sponsorship to publish volume 5 and definitely has no sponsorship for volume 6. There were some commitments made for volume 5 and he will not know until September if those commitments are firm or not. Dr. Peev's work is invaluable in terms of preserving those particular dialects because the Macedonian population from that region has been ethnically cleansed by the Greek State and if the language is not preserved it will be lost.

Dr. Peev and I exchanged books. He gave me a copy of each of the four volumes and I gave him a copy of my history book. I know it's not a fair trade but Dr. Peev insisted that I take the books. Thank you Dr. Peev.

The tour of the village included a visit to the local church "Sveta Troitsa" and its visitor's quarters where church goes from out of town can spend the night. The lady caretaker took us from building to building telling us stories about each. After we were done she invited us to her home where we met her husband sitting on the front porch. She served us all Turkish coffee while Dr. Peev chatted with her husband about church matters and local village issues.

Behind the church property Dr. Peev showed me a new housing development of expensive houses encroaching on the village. “As long as the locals hold out and don’t sell their properties,” he said “we will be able to preserve our village and our simple life.” Both Dr. Peev and his wife are retired now and have lived in this home for a while and don’t like the hustle and bustle of the busy city life. They have two daughters both living in the Diaspora.

As promised lunch was served at half past noon, followed by a second cup of Turkish coffee without sugar. She remembered not to put sugar in my coffee from the first time we met during my visit to her daughter’s home. I had said that I don’t take sugar in my coffee which she found amazing that I could drink “that bitter poison” without sugar. But since then she had been cutting down on sugar herself and now she also drinks it without sugar.

I gave Dr. Peev the phone number of a taxi company (Bel Marsedes Taksi) that was recommended to me by one of Gjorgji Donevski’s assistants and he called me a cab. Twenty minutes later I was on my way to Skopje.

As soon as I got back to my apartment I contacted Aleksandar and asked him to meet me at the plaza where I spent the previous evening with Tomche and his friends. Aleksandar was there within an hour but before going to the café he took me to a sporting goods store and bought me a stylish T-shirt and one for his friend John Kuzev in Toronto. While visiting with Aleksandar I received a call from Tomche. I told him where I was and that I was with a soldier friend and then asked him if he wanted to join us. Tomche brought with him Gotse, another friend who also turned out to be one of my readers. Gotse was one of the people responsible for bringing the Mir and his wife (Hunza King and Queen) to Macedonia. He is also very active in the Macedonian community and working for the Macedonian cause.

The last time I met Aleksander I mentioned something to him about how I was never a soldier and was curious about how I would look in a Macedonian military uniform. Well tonight Aleksander had a surprise for me. He had invited Tony, a Macedonian army officer I had met back in CFB Borden several years before. Tony was the only officer in that group with roots from Aegean Macedonia. I was happy to see Tony again who surprised me by giving me his old uniform. Unfortunately it’s too small for me and I would have to lose a few pounds to fit into it

so I will not be marching dressed as a Macedonian officer in any parades anytime soon. Thank you Aleksandar and Tony.

Besides picking up the tab for everyone that evening, Aleksandar also had another surprise for me. I don't know where he got it from but he gave me a lovely memento. It was a porcelain plate, the kind that hangs on the wall, which bears the "Army of the Republic of Macedonia" gold crest in the center and an inscription with red Cyrillic letters on a white background all round. Again thank you Aleksandar.

I was really proud to be with this group of friends because as I found out they were all soldiers or former soldiers with a lot of stories to tell. Tony who is still a soldier was the higher ranking officer in the group and a lively talker. He had us holding on to every word.

As the hours passed well into the night, one by one everyone left and only Tomche and I remained. It was getting very late and he too had to go to work early the next morning so we called it a night with prospects of meeting again the next evening.

I don't recall what time I got home or what time I went to sleep but all I could think of was how great it was to be with these guys and to bring old and new friends together.

Last day with friends

Saturday July 26th I received a call from Slave early in the morning reminding me that Stojan Trenchevski (mentioned earlier) had invited us to visit with him at his office. I just want to say that Slave is an early morning person who gets up at 5 am every morning and does his long jog along the Vardar River banks before he goes to work.

After visiting Mother Teresa's statue and a construction site of a building being built in her honour, which I had visited several times before, Slave and I headed for Stojan's office. At the moment Stojan was not there so we sat on a bench to wait for him and reflected on my visit and the experiences I had in Macedonia. It seems that almost everyone I met wanted me to write something about Macedonia.

When Stojan arrived he greeted us with many blessings and apologies for his tardiness. His office was on the ground floor in a multi-story building a couple of steps below ground level.

Stojan's office was not just an ordinary office, it was a shrine decorated with icons and mementos of Mother Teresa, Toshe Proevski and others. Among the various paintings included there were three by our very own Canadian-Macedonian world renowned artist Michael Close. Michael has done a lot to promote Macedonia and the Macedonian cause worldwide and his works can be found everywhere in art galleries, embassies and even international buildings like the United Nations. Just recently Michael donated a large painting to Dr. Srgjan Kerim, President of the sixty-second session of the United Nations General Assembly. Thank you Michael.

When Toshe felt lonely and blue he used to come to Stojan's office and marvel at the paintings, letters, photographs, mementos, etc. of Mother Teresa. "Toshe gave me this comfortable chair right here," Stojan said pointing at it "in which he used to sit in solitude when he wanted to pray. I had given him a key to get into my office whenever he needed to."

We spent over an hour with Stojan as he recounted story after story of his experiences of how he met Mother Teresa and how they became lifelong friends. I wish I had a movie camera or tape recorder to record all that was said because it would have made an interesting story. I hope some day Stojan will publish it.

One thing that Stojan said stayed with me of what Mother Teresa had said to him, which by the way he has recorded on tape. This is how

he phrased it to me. “There seems to be a competition between various ethnic groups laying claim to Mother Teresa’s ethnic identity but her true identity is not what others want it to be but what she herself said it was.” He posed this very same question to Mother Teresa herself during a taping session and she answered it by saying, “I was born in Skopje and I am Macedonian.”

When we were ready to leave Stojan gave me a book he had written himself entitled “Vozdushkite na Gotsevata Vnuka” which roughly translates to “The Spirit of Gotse’s niece”, a collection of interviews and visits with Gotse Delchev’s niece Katerina Trajkova-Nurdzhieva. The well illustrated book with photographs was accompanied by a DVD made of Katerina’s visit to Skopje.

When we met Stojan the previous week he had given me a CD of another of his projects which contained various liturgies performed by Bishop Kiril on the 40th anniversary of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Stojan was also supposed to give me a CD of the radio interview he did of us the week before but the CD I received was of songs. He must have given me the wrong CD by mistake.

When we were finished he gave us each an 8.5x11 inch autographed photograph of Mother Teresa and a tour of the construction site where her building is currently being constructed.

Since I didn’t have anything else scheduled for the rest of the morning Slave decided to take me on yet another tour of Skopje and some of its neighbouring landmarks. The first stop was Sveti Spas, the church where Gotse Delchev’s remains are laid to rest. There we visited the museum of artifacts, weapons and photographs of the revolutionaries of Delchev’s time. In the same yard on the other side of the museum we visited Sveti Spas, the 17th century Church built underground. Slave mentioned that there was a reason why it was built underground but I failed to note it. Perhaps one of our readers who is familiar with the church’s history can write to us and let us know.

The inside front of this church is covered with the most exquisite and intricate wood carvings I have even seen. It must have taken a lifetime of work to accomplish such an achievement. I couldn’t help but admire the dedication of the person or people who carved it.

After our visit to Sveti Spas, we picked up Sonja (the lady who translated my book) and went for coffee to another church outside of Skopje called Sveti Pantelimon, located in the village Gorno Negrazi.

On our way there Slave pointed out the Theological Faculty near Sveti Jovan Church and reminded us that today was the 46th anniversary of the massive Skopje earthquake.

Before stopping for coffee at the local Panteleimon café we went inside the Sveti Panteleimon Church and marveled at the original old frescoes painted on the walls which will soon need repair. It is amazing how this beautiful church survived two world wars and a massive earthquake and is still standing, considering it was built I believe in the 14th century (1376?). We were not allowed to take photographs inside.

The view of Skopje from the outdoor terrace at the café was breathtaking. At the same time we could see dark clouds forming and coming in our direction so we decided to move indoors under a shelter but before leaving Slave and Sonja picked handfuls of wild plums that were just hanging over the terrace. Knowing how I loved to munch on the sour fruit they both gave me a handful.

After coffee we dropped Sonja off and Slave took me for another big lunch at “Kaj Zlate’s” restaurant to which I had been several times before. I had what Slave had which came with a Shopska salad, olives, cheese, large portions of meat and plenty of “yellows” (whisky), Slave’s choice of drink. Thank you again Slave.

After that Slave took me back to the apartment and gave me an old suitcase of his for the trip back to Canada in which I packed most of the books that were given to me.

As soon as I got back to my apartment I changed into more comfortable clothing and contacted Tomche for our last evening visit. Tomche said he would be bringing more of his friends and would be picking me up by taxi.

As I waited for Tomche at the usual intersection I met a Macedonian man selling flowers. I was standing under a great big advertising sign sheltered from the rain while he was standing at a corner getting wet so I asked him to move his flowers where I was to avoid being rained on. Unfortunately he was afraid the proprietor of the property would chase him away so he declined my offer. I then asked him to move here to get out of the rain. He took my advice and did. From our conversation he could tell I wasn’t from Skopje so he asked where I was from. After I told him I was born in Greece and now live in Canada he sympathized with me and mentioned how Greece has wronged the Macedonians and is still punishing them by not allowing them to return to their birthplace and reclaim their properties. I said I

was not a Begalets (war refugee). My family and I are economic refugees but just the same we were driven out of Greece but for different reasons.

I asked the man if selling flowers was his livelihood but he said no. He had a full time job but sold flowers to supplement his income. Some days he could make up to 1,000 (\$ 25) denars an evening which was twice what some people made working a whole day. "There are all kinds of extra jobs people can do if they want to, they can pick up some extra denars if they are willing to clean the street in front of shops, even collect plastic bottles or cardboard boxes and sell them," he said. I felt proud to have met such a person so I asked him if I could give him some money in advance and he could donate some of his flowers to whoever he wanted. To my surprise he refused to accept such money and said if I wanted the flowers for myself then he would gladly sell them to me but not as charity. I then asked him if he would sell some to a young lady passing by and I would pay for them. He agreed but it was difficult to find such person as one after another refused them. Finally one agreed. At first she refused but when I explained what I was trying to do she accepted and we had a sale. I bought her two bouquets for 100 (\$ 2.50) denars each. Both the man and young lady thanked me as the taxi with Tomche arrived and picked me up for another evening of visiting.

"This evening we are going to the 'Irish Pub' café," Tomche said "the place where I work." This is where Slave and I had visited with Robert the professor and Zoran the Macedonian consul from Perth, Australia.

After a few drinks of Skopsko one of Tomche's close friends, Stojadin (www.macedonialovesyou.com) arrived with two young ladies, one his girlfriend named Vaska and the other Elena, a visitor from Bitola. Afterwards more people joined in but I didn't ask for their names. Tomche from Drachevo, kept silent and listened for the most part while Stojadin acquainted me with his activities. Physically I was there but I lacked the usual pep and flare that night, I guess by now the late nights were catching up to me so I too sat silent most of the time and listened to the conversations around the table.

The place was very busy and getting busier as the night progressed. Almost everyone there knew Tomche and stopped for a conversation. We met all kinds of people, even a relative of Lui Temelkovski's. After conversing with him for a while, the young man said to say hello to his

relative Lui and tell him it was “Igor son of Foti” who we met. Tomche was anxious to introduce me to all the people he knew with roots from Aegean Macedonia.

By 11 pm I was getting tired and I asked for a taxi but Tomche asked Stojadin who had a car to take me home. We said our goodbyes and I went straight to bed for a long rest before flying home the next day.

The late nights had indeed taken a toll on me as I felt tired and weak the next morning, barely able to pack my bags. I was worried about how I was going to make the long trip back home but after some rest I felt better and focused on packing, trying to balance my luggage weight so I wouldn't get fined. I was told it would cost \$ 10 per kilo if my two bags weighed over 23 kilos each. I was lucky the students who lived in the apartment there had a scale and was able to juggle things to balance the weight. I came to Macedonia with 6 kilos and left with 44.1.

I was in no shape to visit anyone that day so I spent most of the day resting in the apartment until Slave came to take me to the airport at 1:15 pm. He gave me more things to take including a couple of books from Boshko Rajchovski (the person who interviewed us in Ohrid) which I put in my bloated carryon bag.

We were at the airport by 1:45 pm, early enough to beat the crowds and after checking my luggage we said our goodbyes and Slave left as I pressed my way to the waiting area.

We boarded the plane on time at 3:10 pm when I caught a glimpse of Pobeda Piskacheva who was also returning to Toronto on the same flight. We had an hour and a half layover in Budapest and left on time at 6:00 pm for Toronto. I was lucky to get a window seat and was able to observe the terrain below all the way from Macedonia to the Atlantic Ocean. After that it was dark and we were traveling at 33,000 feet.

We arrived in Toronto at 10:05 pm about half an hour later than our scheduled time. It took a long time to get through customs but since I had nothing to declare customs did not bother to check my luggage and sent me through.

I was home by midnight.

For those who are interested I compiled a small list of income/expenses items below from questioning various people (including Spiro) in Macedonia. These are by no means accurate and should not be used for anything other than for personal information.

Wages and pensions in Macedonia (\$ are in US dollars)

Range of workers' wages 130,000 (\$ 3,250) to 240,000 (\$ 6,000) denars per year, the mean being 180,000 (\$ 4,500) denars per year.

A Member of Parliament or director of a factory earns about 504,000 (\$ 12,600) denars a year.

Pensions for seniors can range from 108,000 (\$ 2,700) to 240,000 (\$ 6,000) denars per year.

Cost of some items in Macedonia

Gasoline costs 80 (\$ 2.00) denars per litre.

Beer at the bar costs 80 (\$ 2.00) denars per half litre.

Beer at the store costs 70 (\$ 1.75) denars per 1.5 litres.

Meat costs 250 (\$ 6.25) denars per kilogram.

Cheese costs 500 (\$ 12.50) denars per kilogram.

Bread costs 25 (\$ 0.65) denars (half kilo).

Bottled water costs 20 (\$ 0.50) denars per 1.5 litres.

Fruit juice costs 60 (\$ 1.50) denars per 1.5 litres.

Average cost of hydro for use in a typical house costs 18,000 (\$ 450) denars per year.

Rent for a two bedroom apartment in Skopje costs 150,000 (\$ 3750) denars per year.

Rent for a two bedroom apartment in Bitola costs 90,000 (\$ 2,250) denars per year.