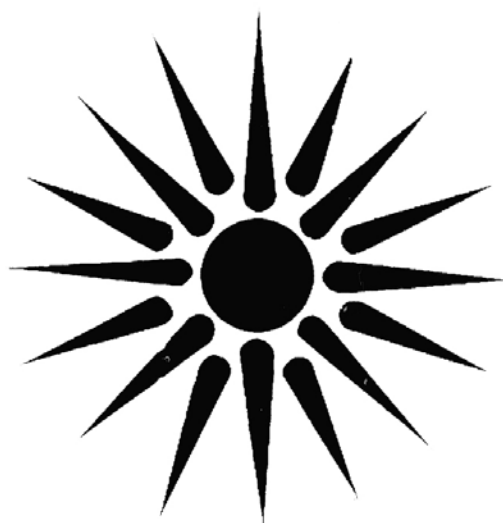


*On the Road
of
Time*



A Novel

By

Petre Nakovski

(Translated from Macedonian to English and
edited by Risto Stefov)

On the Road of Time
(Following the traces of memories)
A Novel

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“Η μνημη οπου την αγγιζεις ποναει” Γ. Σεφερης (“The memory wherever you touch it hurts” G. Seferis)

Any similarity is by chance

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On the Road of Time – Forward

Who will testify to the times
in which we have been immersed
and imprinted with countless targets
and bound with bloody strands?

Who will write that we live
a deeply rooted life
on our great grandfather's and grandfather's land
to which we are very much faithful?

They wrong us by their testimonies and colourless they wrote,
spreading a dark cloud over us,
a divide they dug between us,
and with lies and false promises they embraced us,
and at all times,
a bloody cover they laid under us.

Who will testify and record that for us
freedom has always had the colour red?

Who will testify if not we,
about our pain and suffering, crying and lamenting,
prayers and tears, waiting without end,
about the fire, the shout and cry, the horrible defeat,
about our uprooting and exile
that lead us so far away from home;

And hopefully the prophesy will come true
that after years and the passing of time
everything will be ours again?

For this great hope
and for everything, and for everyone who was lost to time,
may the glimmer of candlelight shine,
may animated and living ambers for eternity glow,
may God will, that in all of us shine
the enlightenment we possess today
so that we will be smarter and wiser tomorrow.

Amen!

On the Road of Time – Chapter 1

There was a whole pile of books and folders, full of magazine and newspaper clippings, on my desk. They were excerpts from archival documents and published memoirs of political and military leaders from both warring sides of the Greek Civil War. There were selected notes from boastful people who brandished invented lies and testimonies from collaborators. In separate envelopes there were notes from the plain, simple and vivid narratives of the war participants and witnesses who preserved their experiences authentically. All these documents were like bad dreams sealed in distant memories.

While leafing through the piles of papers, reading and re-reading them, there was a constant thought turning in my mind; in what literary form should I publish them: a novel, a travelogue, a report, a memoir? If I had one more choice then let it be a bit of everything but with a single desire; to preserve the entire experience. With a little bit of effort I was ready to brush off and clean the dust resting on the papers and allow the memories to flow regardless of how grievous and painful they might be.

Driven by the thought that these memories would be forgotten over time, I, together with my wife Ditta, on the eve of the Greek Civil War marked by the terrible defeat of the Democratic Forces, decided to take our notes, a living testament of the war participants, and once again bravely revisit the road of our uprooting and eviction from our homeland.

We went back to this time because it reminded us of who we were and of our existence - rooted in our great grandfather and grandfather's land, blessed with our own rituals and religion, devoted to goodness and filled with faith, but cheated and left with lost hopes.

Ever since then it has been our wish to dust off, at least part of the experiences, and document them with "written" words so that they might forever remain engraved on paper and in the collective and individual memories of our people.

Many years have passed. The generations that experienced and survived the evil are slowly diminishing. The multiple layered wish to return to our native homes has turned into a life long struggle. The few wooden crosses with no names written on them, placed over hastily dug graves in which those who had died in the battles were buried, in that three-year uneven, bloody war – are lost. They were levelled along with the soil placed over them, where today one can find it easier to trip over the scattered pieces of bombs, grenades and bullets than to trip over the broken tombstones, crosses and the remnants of what once used to be our homes.

These remnants are now the only reminders of the evil that once took place in these Macedonian villages and mountains. For us it is a terrible

evil which must never be forgotten. We must remember who did this and for whom the worst is over.

In following the traces of these experiences we endeavoured to save the pieces of a larger whole of human suffering from the darkness of oblivion.

Harnessed under the yoke of a great desire to document this past, we set off and took the road of time, following the footsteps of memories which are now part of our survival and existence, which, as some wise men would say, are a large component of our past and a small component of our present...

In the café at the end of the road in Kato Kaliniki (Macedonian name Dolno Kleshteni), the endopi (natives) – this is what the Asia Minor colonists and those south of Mount Olympus call the original people (the Macedonians) here and in all of Northern Greece – told us that the road to Kostur over Bigla is nicer and more pleasant to drive. You can, they said, go over Lehovo and Vicho but if you want to see a panoramic view of the Lerin valley then it would be best to take the road over Bigla. They also advised us to drive carefully because the fines for traffic infractions were hefty. We took their advice and set off for Lerin, the city which, short of one hundred years ago, was renamed Florina, as the large traffic sign outside the entrance indicated.

Upon our entry into the city we were surprised by the large church and immediately after that we were amazed at the charming new town square which filled the city with beauty, making it attractive with its well thought out décor.

We drove around in a circle looking for parking but all the parking spaces were taken. We kept looking and eventually we were lucky to spot a narrow slot, if one could call that luck, in which our little SAHO just barely fit, making the exit out of it very difficult. From there we went to the nearest café to catch our breath and for a little rest. The place was clean and well-lit and music was pouring out of the well-positioned speakers in the corners. The melody was familiar and reassuring. We listened to the lyrics for a moment, which warned us not to trust the swindlers from Bitola who promise things but never deliver. At that moment it seemed like we were back home in a Bitola café, where only yesterday we had heard the same song being played. Our musing was interrupted by the waiter, a smiling young man who greeted us in Greek and who, with a wide sweep of his arm, showed us to our table.

“Oriste, parakalo, kathiste...” (Please sit down...) he invited us in Greek.

“What are we going to order?” I asked my wife.

“Are you from there?” the waiter asked in Macedonian while pointing to the north.

“Yes,” I replied, “but with roots behind those mountains...”

“Ah, that’s what I thought,” replied the waiter.

“And you?” I asked.

“I am from a village in Kostur Region... I found a job here...” replied the waiter.

“Do you speak Macedonian?” I asked.

“I do speak, but not very loud because there are still rofiani (scoundrels) around...” replied the waiter in a quiet voice, while looking at a table on the other side of the café. “We speak a bit more here in Lerin Region... we also sing... in Macedonian... What can I bring you?”

“Coffee and water,” I replied.

“Greek or cappuccino?” asked the waiter.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, “as long as it’s good.”

After drinking our “Greek” coffee and paying for it, we went outside and walked down the road towards the market. The closer we got to the market the more we heard people speaking in the Macedonian language. It seemed to us as if the Lerin market was very similar to the Bitola market and so were the café’s and small restaurants. The only difference was the Macedonian language in Bitola was freely spoken whereas the Macedonian language in Lerin was spoken quietly, carefully and only in the company of friends.

Today is market day in Lerin and, from the language spoken, there is very little to distinguish Lerin from Bitola. On every corner travelers would be surprised by how often they would hear people speaking Macedonian. They would even be more surprised to see a sign on the wall of a multi-story building with the word “VINOZHITO” written in large letters in the Macedonian, Greek and English languages. This is the headquarters of the European Free Alliance - Rainbow POLITICAL PARTY OF THE MACEDONIAN MINORITY IN GREECE.

I read and re-read the writing and I asked myself, “Are there new winds blowing?” I asked myself this because I knew and remembered from my childhood years that here and in the wider region, no good, gentle, tame and generous winds ever blew from the south. It has always been my experience that only restless, hurricane-like, harsh, foggy, and merciless, the kind of winds that silence voices and spoken words, sow fear and drive and blow away all hopes, usually blow from the south.

I looked at the sign again; I listened and again heard quiet voices speaking words of greeting and farewell on the streets in the marketplace, in the restaurants, in the café’s and eagerly, very eagerly I asked the wind from the south to blow generous and warm air nonstop and allow people to freely and peacefully sleep with the hope that the next morning they would face a cleared dawn...

Our greatest desire was to visit the burial place of the dead, those killed during the great battle for Lerin, towards the end of the Greek Civil War. It

was not easy for us to ask where to find it because we were hesitant about who to ask...

We sat on a bench on this side of the bridge. To the right of us was a marble pedestal with a statue of Kote, a supposed legendary Greek hero – a strong man, who, for a few Judaic gold coins, a payoff from Karavangelis the Greek Bishop of Kostur, beheaded Lazo Pop Traikov, a Macedonian freedom fighter and revolutionary. “Kotas” was written on the monument. The “s” after Kota is there to affirm that he was a Greek. But “Kota” without the “s” means “chicken” in Greek. His dress and coat were stylized to agree with the time of his collaboration and spying but his moccasins were made of cow hide. The sculptor did not remove them because he wanted to preserve the symbolism of his external and internal poverty which together with his insatiable greed led him to fall from grace with his own people.

Incidentally, it is not just in Lerin that one would find monuments of such scoundrels, collaborators, spies and enemies of the Macedonian people, there are plenty of this kind of monument erected by the Greek state in a number of villages in both Lerin and Kostur Regions. The Church glorified them because it alone created them and fed them with Judean silver from its own treasury. The state shamelessly showed pride in their work of collaborating and spying on their own people. As an example, this kind of pride exhibited by the Greek state is how it educates the new generations of Macedonians. The moment these very young children begin kindergarten, the Greek educational system, drop by drop poisons their pure and innocent souls with the poison of alienation about their own birthright as it is written in the books with a Greek fountain pen. (Author’s note: “as it is written in the books with a Greek fountain pen” denotes the Greek laws with which the Greek state changed the personal names of the Macedonian people, the public place names in all of Greek occupied Macedonia and made the use of the Macedonian language illegal, punishable by hefty fines, imprisonment and death.)

“It is here,” the man said quietly and carefully so as not to draw attention and risk being discovered and insulted and cursed. We begged him to take us to the place of the mass grave in which are resting, according to some, 704 and, according to others, 1000 DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) fighters.

“It is here,” the man said with a heavy heart and tears in his eyes. He said nothing after that. He removed his hat, crossed himself three times and left without saying a word. We could see pain in the man’s eyes and a deep fear in his silence...

We parked at the side of the road and silently made our way to the barbed wire. The place was once a beautiful meadow, a field, now it was overgrown with tall grass and weeds. There was no other sign to indicate

that it was anything different. We stood there motionless, petrified, suspended and overwhelmed by the deafening silence, sickness and depression that lay underneath the soil before us. My heart felt tight and my thoughts went back to a bloody time when the young men and women, lying forgotten behind this rusted barbed wire, the only monument of their existence, were alive and fought for what they believed. Then one by one we lay down fresh carnations through the fence and after that we dug a bit of soil, collected it into a pile and placed some candles in it. While kneeling we lit the candles... to give the souls of those thrown into the abyss of oblivion some light...

The Lerin church bells do not ring here and do not call for prayers of remembrance and tribute; no fire burns here in the memory of those whose dreams were filled with hope... there was only burning pain... there was only silence here, no one dared break the seal of silence...

The candle flames quivered in the gentle breeze of the wind, spreading light over darkness. Once in a while the everlasting silence was stirred by passers by, people who knew the deep secret and who offered silent prayers in the memory of those lying in the abyss...

This day there are only a few living witnesses who remember that distant, fatal act of hatred, treachery and unforgettable shame, but powerless to act from fear, they walk the path before the barbed wire in silence... Their memory of it is dark, sick, tortured and very much hidden and greater than that is their shame... The ongoing hatred and attempts to forget the past and to erase traces of that great pain still exist here...

The voice of time is a constant reminder of that fateful February 11 & 12, 1949 winter night when the order to attack Lerin was given. It has been said that a great snowstorm took place that night. The wind was strong and cold and a lot of snow fell. Nevertheless, the DAG fighters did their best and followed orders to attack from the steep mountains and thick forests only to be blown up by mines and cut down by machine gun and automatic rifle fire at the approaches of the city. The adversary knew in advance of DAG's intentions to attack the city and was well prepared for its defence. The next day the attack ended in the afternoon. Three hundred and sixty women were mobilized from the Prespa villages to remove the wounded from the bloody battlefield. The open fields in front of Psoderi were set up to accommodate 1,500 wounded. They were carried here uphill by hand on stretchers through the deep snow and under constant attacks from artillery and machine gun fire. Then from here the wounded were loaded onto trucks and taken to the hospitals in Albania. And down at the approaches of the city, in the minefields and in front of the gun holes and bunkers, everyone was left where they fell, both wounded and dead. There they were tied by the neck with barbed wire and dragged behind the lines where soldiers waited with trucks to pick them up. The snow on the road

was red from their spilled blood which led straight to a meadow where bulldozers were digging a mass grave.

The horrible news travelled at lightening speed throughout the villages and a loud, inconsolable and great cry was heard like it had never been heard before. And that day and the days after, all the villages and mountains became walls of tears...

There was a report written and submitted to the highest political and military leadership about the 360 women, which in part read:

“It is recognized that in the fulfilment of their most noble task – transport of the wounded, they demonstrated affection, devotion, self-sacrifice and resolve. In some cases even under very difficult field conditions, under enemy fire, they transported our wounded. As a reward for fulfilling the task they were given a pair of army boots.”

Unfortunately they did not write why they had not given the women such warm army boots to wear before the battle.

Years later a witness wrote the following about that day:

“A great tragedy played out in Lerin after our withdrawal. At dawn the Royal Army collected all prisoners who were still alive and called on the Lerin city residents to come out to see them. Afterwards they dug a massive hole in the ground and tossed all the dead bodies into it. Those alive they shot in front of the crowd, making sure that the people witnessed the executions and then tossed their bodies into the hole among the dead. The wounded they did not execute but tossed in the same hole with the dead and then covered them with the bulldozers while they were still alive. These were the kinds of horrors perpetrated and experienced in that damn battle.”

And about that horror, the DAG Headquarters and Military Council, only a day later, met in the cave above the village Vineni in Prespa Region and in their final analysis could not conclude who was responsible for the Lerin defeat. They could not find who was liable for the fiasco! And why?!

After many years had passed one of them wrote the following in his memoirs:

“No one led the battle. All day we heard gunshots, but we did not know what was going on. It was difficult to establish a connection on the phone. Radio links were only established after the event. The only thing we could do was wait for darkness to fall and then give the order to withdraw, but even then the order did not reach all the brigades. The world has never seen such a disgraceful act of leading combat.”

And while looking for similar mass graves everywhere, the world, to this day, has yet to find this one.

There is only silence. And does he who remains silent approve of this atrocity? Who was he who threw the curse of silence over this atrocity and over this mass grave?

The bloody footprints and puddles of blood were covered up by the snow and washed away by torrents of rain destroying all evidence. The dead along with the wounded have disappeared, buried in the same ground, covered by the same soil in the same common mass grave that no one wants to think or talk about.

And the guilt? Who and what covered up the guilt?

Burdened by our recollection of the bloody Lerin battle we left Lerin and headed for Kostur. At the city's exit, on the steep slope above the road, there was a construction site. In it there was a high concrete support wall and written on it, in black graphite letters were the words: "11-12 February 1949". Was this put here to commemorate this black day in our history? Or was it put here as a warning to remind us of the ferocious, cruel, wild and raw episode that took place here that fateful day and that the same wild, blind, deaf and mute hatred exists to this day and is baked under those large black graphite letters?

The road, which still carries a stench of the past, is now paved with asphalt and its sharp curves have been rounded off as it snakes its way uphill. There are tall beechwood trees to the left and to the right of the road in whose tree trunks one can still see deep scars, remnants of the shrapnel from the exploding cannon and mortar shells that wounded them.

At the exit of the thick beechwood forest the road ended and beyond it was a large parking lot with clearly marked parking spaces for cars and buses. Ahead was Bigla and at its base, immediately where the forest ended, was a café-restaurant with a spacious terrace. From here one could view the beautiful panorama of Lerin and the Lerin valley and further back in what seemed like the end of the world, was Mount Kajmakchalan, whose peak was covered with snow. To the left there were the bare peaks of Bela Voda and to the right was Lundzer, a difficult fortress to breach during the Greek Civil War, built by the hands of the Macedonian men and women villagers. At the end of the parking lot, at the very edge of the cliff leading to a deep brook, there were wooden benches. This is the best place where one could sit and watch Lerin nestled between the mountains Bazdrovitsa and Giupkata and to the east one could view the wide open Lerin valley. We took pictures of the valley below and of the surrounding mountains all covered in thick beechwood trees, which portrayed a certain beauty with their green foliage. And while we both sat there admiring the sights, we did not notice that two old men, distinguished by the wrinkles on their faces, had sat down beside us on a bench next to us. They were staring ahead in silence. I was amazed by how long they sat there staring into the distance, saying nothing. Then I noticed the moustache of one of the men moving and his cheeks quivering, a moment later, I heard a long, difficult, sad and quiet sigh.

"Yes..." said one of the men quietly and stood up.

“That’s how it was...” answered the second man in confirmation, and then followed the first.

I gathered from the long stare into the distance and from the silence that they were remembering their common past – the road of big dreams and hopes, the road of youth lost in the difficult, uneven and bloody battles, in the long night marches, in the cold bunkers and trenches, in the hospitals and under the sky of distant countries; a long road which had now turned into a swarm of memories like beads on a silk string. They walked away in silence, one beside the other, stepping softly with one leg and hard with the other. Their prostheses’ swishing quietly like fluttering leaves in a gentle summer breeze.

They entered the café-restaurant. The waiter kindly took them to the table prepared for lunch. We sat beside them at an adjacent table, pretending we did not understand the language they spoke and listened to their conversation. One of them spoke at length.

“Down there,” he pointed with his hand, “where the parking lot ends, two women carried me in a blanket. I remember the whole place was filled with wounded lying all over the place. I could hear some were in extreme pain, some were yelling and others were swearing. At nightfall the trucks came and we were quickly loaded on board. That’s all I remember. I don’t know how many days I was out and which day I came to but I could not feel my right leg, it was missing. I yelled, cried and swore... They gave me something and put me to sleep. When I woke up I thought – that is that, here is where my road ends... But, as it turned out, my road had not ended, I still had time. I spent a long time in hospitals, sanatoriums and on courses where they pushed me to learn a trade. I learned to cut dog hair... The benefits were bigger than the pension I was getting as I spent my days with the ladies, the owners of my spoiled four-legged friends, filled with joy and satisfaction because I remained an old bachelor... No obligations, no worries.

That was my life in Brno, Czechoslovakia, from where I moved to Skopje. I had a two room apartment in Brno, not as good as the one in Skopje but always full of guests. And here I found it very boring. Every day I went to the same café, met with my friends and until noon we reminisced about the good old days when we were young and talked about the nonsense we had watched on television the day before. Then I went home for lunch, napped sitting with the newspaper in my lap and spent the rest of the evening yelling at the television, arguing with people who thought the world revolved around them. There was no end to their drivel.

Brother, life was good in Brno. I didn’t have a colour television and I didn’t need one. It was impolite to watch television when you had guests. My most frequent guests were students from the socialist countries who managed to gnaw away at my pension money from paycheque to paycheque. And believe me brother, once you allowed them to massage

your back they would gnaw away at your pension and your hands would become numb from caressing them. But I am not one of those whacked on the head that would constantly whine and complain. There was always give and take with me. I had a passport and frequently travelled to Poland and democratic Germany. In Poland I crossed the border on foot pushing an old bicycle in and pushing a new bicycle out. My gain was three to five times. And when pantyhose and other delicate things worn by women under the dress were in style, I took the road to Dojche Demokratishhe with permission to go and have my prosthesis repaired. I would fill the hollow part of my wooden leg with these items and from there go straight to Brno, where I personally and with my own hands dressed my dear female students from the socialist countries. And to those dunce customs people, it never occurred to them to notice the new bicycle or to check the hollow part of my wooden leg. My friends like me, some with a single leg and others with a single arm, but married, always gave me advice:

“You fool why don’t you get married, find someone and live like a person and not like this...”

“You are the fools,” I used to tell them, “I too am with a woman every day and I am not bored...”

“Okay, but,” he continued with a tone of great injustice in his voice, “my neighbours got tired of me and reported me to the police. One day I heard a knock on my door. I opened it and what did I see, two policemen.

“Dobre otpoledne,” (good afternoon) one of them said and asked if I was so and so.

“Aho,” (yes) I said and with a wide sweep of my arm I invited them in. I then politely asked them to sit down, like a good host should, and offered them something to drink. I placed crystal glasses on the table in front of them and then asked: “Would you like some schnapps or something more western?” They said either would do but with some appetizers. I cut a couple of thick slices of ham and asked: “What is the purpose of your visit?”

“Do you know, comrade Pavel, your neighbours have been complaining that it’s been noisy here at your place and have asked us to tell you to be a bit quieter...” They said nothing about having to stop receiving guests with whom the neighbours may have thought that I might be spreading some sort of immorality and breaking the law, but all around, quietly and politely they made their point as educated people should.

“I, comrades,” I said in a meek tone of voice while filling their glasses, “am a friendly, honest and hospitable citizen and would like to help all those who need help. If you want I can help you as well...”

“There is no need,” said one of them, “but please do tell us what do you do with those young ladies who come here?”

“Oh, that? Nothing bad, I just help them with their studies. For example, those who were here today have a test tomorrow and came to have their knowledge tested.”

“In which subject?” asked one of them.

“In Marxism...” I replied.

“The men broke out in loud laughter and drank my entire supply of Dojche Demokratishke schnapps and all of my more western booze. And if you want to know, that was quite a hefty punishment for me.”

There was silence at the table as the man put sugar in his cup, mixed it and began to tap his wooden leg with his spoon. There was a dull echo coming out of the dry wood.

“Do you hear that?” said the man while tapping his wooden leg loudly then quietly then, but only for a moment, waiting for the echo to die out. “They injured it badly at that damn battle in Lerin then they cut it off at the Elbasan hospital in Albania and then they brought me to Budapest... But, it serves me well so that I can travel the road that remains to be traveled...” He then slammed the wooden leg hard with the palm of his hand sending cold shivers down my spine, making me feel as if I had been hit by a volley of machine gun fire, gun shots and strong thundering grenades, from the distance...

Leaning on their elbows with their chins tightly packed into their crossed palms, deep in their thoughts, I wondered if now, overwhelmed by the silence, their thoughts were gone back to the trodden road of their past. Was the reel of their young life unwinding and passing through time? Were they re-experiencing the storm that had taken place down this great hill and across on the other side where their great hopes and aspirations ended? Could they see, with their blurred eyes, the great and swift defeat that took place in front of them?

The man, who until now listened, straightened himself and tapping on the table with the fingers of his left hand, asked: “Do you know what I thought about?” looking our way and without waiting for an answer, he asked again: “Why is it that only in the winter, during the deepest snow, cold and frosts, after long and exhausting marches, frozen and hungry did we attack the cities? We attacked Konitsa in Epirus on Christmas Eve in 1947 and we ended with many casualties. In Macedonia we attacked Voden, Sobotsko and Negush late in December 1948 and came out with even more casualties. Then we attacked Lerin in February 1949 and experienced an unprecedented defeat...”

The question sank in their eyes, nailed their lips and then there was silence. Watching them there sitting in silence, deep in their thoughts, I wondered: “Will anyone break the silence and give us an answer?”

The strangers, who in a short span of time had become close to us, paid their bill and went outside. They stopped at the edge of the hill which had a view of Lerin. Their eyes became focused on the bare peaks of Bela

Voda and on the rocky hill on top of Lundzer. They stared at the great mountains for a long time and then, with their hands, they pointed at them. Then they turned around and one of them spread his arms, pointed at the slopes of Bigla and Plochata and made a circle. The space occupied by the café-restaurant, the parking lot and the wide part of the road in the close vicinity was in the centre of the circle.

“Here,” we heard him quietly say, “was the key to the door that led to Prespa and Albania. Here the residents of the surrounding villages, together with the Partisans, were digging trenches and bunkers for nearly a year, but only during the night because the airplanes and cannons were bombing the area during the day. Their primary tools were the handsaw, the axe, the shovel and the pick. The cut beechwood tree trunks, cut from the nearby forests, measuring several meters in length, were carried uphill on the shoulders of older men and women. They were placed on top of the bunker one log beside another in parallel and more rows were added, each running perpendicular to the one below. Stones and soil were added on top of every row.

These bunkers were the necessary key to defending the road from government forces attacks and to block the tanks from entering the region behind our backs. I told you the key was built with the sweat and blood that ran from the bleeding shoulders and hands of the Macedonian villagers. This place was the key – a fortress to stop the enemy at Vicho, like the slogan said. After that they brought a unit, consisting exclusively of invalid veterans and called it ‘ταγμα θεσεων’ (positional battalion). In other words they brought in men who lacked the physical ability to abandon their position and gave them orders to defend the place to the last one. I don’t know if any of them survived this place and remained alive... What I do know is that they fought hard to hold the key, but in different places, before the massive government push came into effect, the keys and the strong doors were penetrated. Some say that others also helped...”

According to tourist maps, Bigla is now one of the best and well known winter sports centres in the region. There are three cable cars in operation and a fourth is currently being built. The cable cars, hanging from a thick cable, stand by until the first snow arrives and then carry people to the summit.

The remnants of the “positional battalion” are now covered with a thick layer of concrete on which now cars, buses, bars, cafés, restaurants, cable cars and parking lots rest... There is no monument or symbol to mark their existence... Even though they were once dedicated, powerful in spirit, faith and determination, today the fighters still remain nameless!

On the Road of Time – Chapter 2

About two kilometers from the foot of Bigla, at an elevation of 1,700 meters above sea level, is the Vlach village Pisoderion (Psoderi in Macedonian). The houses there are built with carved stone and above each door are placards which, in the winter when cable cars carry thousands of skiers from all over Greece, offer rooms for rent with various domestic village food specialties consisting mainly of beans and a variety of pastries. The languages spoken here are Vlach, Greek and the older people speak the local Macedonian dialect. There is a hotel being built above the road on the slope of Mount Bela Voda. The old road has been widened and paved with asphalt. During Ottoman rule this road was, then as it is now, a link between Lerin, Korcha and from there, via Durres by ship, to Italy and the rest of the world.

The road snaked down the hill. I had to drive slowly and very carefully because I couldn't get the story of the tragedy that had taken place in Lerin about sixty years ago out of my mind. Then I was distracted by a road sign that read "Holy Trinity 1 km" with a blue arrow pointing in a direction away from the main road. I turned and took the narrow, curvy path hidden in the shadow of the old and tall beechwood trees. Behind the end of the last curve was a wide parking lot and inside a stone yard was the Holy Trinity monastery.

We entered the yard and breathed an aroma of freshly cut grass. Clear and cool water was flowing non-stop out of a five tap spring. We toured the monastery yard and on the western wall we noticed a Greek inscription carved in stone that read: "Agia Triada" (Holy Trinity) and underneath it was written the date "1050". The entrance door into the monastery was not locked. An older man came out of the lodge and after greeting us in Greek we continued our conversation in Macedonian. He said that he was from the village Psoderi and his job was to look after the monastery and the lodge. We lit a number of candles in front of the altar, in memory of the fallen that had guarded Bigla and the road to Prespa, and left.

Lying nestled at the base of the mountains, divided by the River Bistritsa, we were greeted by the village Andartikon which, in the past and in the memories of its inhabitants, most of whom are now spread all over the world, was better known as Zhelevo. Zhelevo is remembered as the place where permanent scars were left in the history of the Macedonian resistance, especially during the Greek Civil War. Zhelevo was the village, as was German, where the first Macedonian schools were opened. It was November 1947 and the region was engulfed in the Greek Civil War. It was here and in German that the first Macedonian teachers were mobilized to teach Macedonian. Eighty demobilized young men and women, who had primary and a few years of gymnasium education in the Greek language, still dressed in their military uniforms received orders to learn to

read and write in the Macedonian Cyrillic alphabet. They were given fifteen days to do it in and after that were sent to complete an even greater task, to teach children to read and write in the Macedonian language.

Burdened with this knowledge and loaded with a saddlebag full of newly delivered books from Skopje, they set off to the various Kostur and Lerin Region villages carrying the burning torch of enlightenment for the Macedonian people. Classes were held at night.

After dark students gathered in cold classrooms and during the night, for the first time, by dimly lit lamps and shimmering candlelight, they learned how to read and write in their native Macedonian language. Learning by day was out of the question, no noises and laughter could be made by students in the daytime because of the menacing iron birds that flew over and beat anyone learning written or spoken words in that language.

Unfortunately that fall was misty and very sad for the people. Day and night news arrived at an alarming rate; bad news, undesirable news, the church bells kept ringing, signalling more death and more mothers were forced to wrap themselves in black. The winter passed in tears and sobs and when the dogwood tree began to bud and the first swallow arrived, the flame of the dimly lit lamps and shimmering candles illuminating the schools died out. Then when the migrating birds began to fly north, mothers abandoned their pride and joy and happiness from their arms, laps, homes, yards, neighbourhoods, villages. And when the fragrant blossoming spring arrived, there were no children to welcome it...

About two kilometers away from Zhelevo, towards Kostur, on the opposite side of Oshchima there was an intersection with a sharp right turn and before it there was a sign with the words: “Πρεσπες” meaning this way to Prespa. We made a right turn and took the wide, winding uphill road. We passed several passenger cars and buses going in the opposite direction. Then as we passed the last curve we found ourselves at the peak of the hill. This place is called Prevolot, a place where we stopped and had a look at the two beautiful Prespa lakes all nestled in the surrounding mountains. From here we saw and were fascinated by the enchanting picturesque and lush surrounding scenery. We saw the reflection of the mountain tops and the dense green oak tree forests in the lake waters. And looking up we saw a clear blue sky all decorated with puffy white clouds looking like cotton balls. We saw black and white storks, following the warm current of the wind, flying in wide circles over the waters, climbing higher and higher, reaching heights above the highest hills of Pelister and Galichnitsa. We saw proud pelicans regally and masterfully cut the lake waters, leaving a long wake behind them.

There was fog above Mount Galichnitsa and a cloud was lazily making its way on top of the lake. A rainbow could be seen forming, connecting

the bases of the great mountains. The colours of the lake began to change as the reflection of the sun in the water was slowly replaced by droplets of rain.

The road from Prevolot leading down to Prespa was treacherous and full of sharp curves but eventually straightened in front of the intersection where a new road is now under construction. The writing on the blue road sign above the arrow that pointed to the left said “Mikrolimni”, but under it, hidden, was the old Macedonian village name “Lak”. Above the arrow that points to the right there are a number of village names written in Greek. These are “Karie-Levkonas-Kalites-Plati-Milonas-Lemos-Agios Germanos”. But no matter what the Greeks call these villages, the people of Prespa have their own Macedonian names which are “Orovnik-Popli-Rudari-Shtrkovo-Medovo-Rabi-German”. We decided to turn left and visit the village Drenovo, even though it was not shown on any traffic or tourist sign.

The village “Lak” now called “Mikrolimni” (Small Lake) surprised us by its tidiness. We circled around while driving on the paved streets, delighted to see so many new houses with blooming flowers in their yards. We noticed that almost every house had a sign offering rooms for rent for tourists and visitors. We stopped in front of a café and after greeting the person sitting closest to us in Macedonian, we asked which road would take us to Drenovo.

“To Drenovo!!!” he said out loud in a surprised tone of voice. “Are you from there? I don’t recognize you...”

“No, we are not from Drenovo,” I replied.

“Are you from Skopje?” he asked looking at the licence plate of my car.

“We live there,” I replied.

“Ah, I understand. You are from this Macedonia. Please, come out of the car and let’s have coffee and after that we will go to Drenovo together,” he said.

Before praising the coffee I praised the village.

He agreed and said: “This is a beautiful village especially since it is full of people. But we are only very few... of our kind... We built our houses with money earned from Australia and America, some from Germany and some from selling fish. The streets and roads were paved by the municipality, in other words the state. And don’t think that the state used its own money. This country is milking Europe and is doing it whenever it feels like it. Before entering Europe we had nothing, we were very poor. Now we can even afford to have guests, tourists and visitors. Many come here from the big cities looking for clean air and peace and quiet. They breathe polluted air in the cities and come here for clean lake and mountain air. Only a few of our people ever return and fewer remain here. The old died out abroad and the young that were born there go to the

sea for their vacations. I tell them ‘whoever wants to have good health, come here, to Prespa.’ Do you need a room? I have one available. Would you like to see it?”

“We would like to go to Drenovo first,” I replied.

“Why do you want to go there? It’s a wasteland. There is nothing there. Nothing!” he repeated.

“That’s okay,” I insisted, “if there is nothing then we will see nothing.”

“Okay. If you want to go that badly then let’s go. Leave your car here and we will walk. You can’t go there by car, only on foot or by boat,” he said.

“Then we will go on foot,” I added. I repeated and stressed the word ‘on foot’ out loud, not by chance and not without reason.

The road was narrow and almost hugged the lakeshore.

“Here is Drenovo,” said our companion after we arrived on the other side of the great boulder hanging over the lake water. “This is Drenovo...” he repeated while making a circle with his hand.

The place was desolate, abandoned, tame and quiet. Except for the waves caressing the rocky shore, there was no other sound. One cannot conceive of the idea that here, in this abandoned remote corner of the world, the entire village was a “gathering place” for the enemies of the people. They used to call this “a gathering place” and not a jail or a camp. Here, the people’s self-appointed government, from the beginning of October 1947 to August 1949, for punishment without trials and judgements, sentenced many fathers, mothers and women with young children as well as those who had abandoned their rifles and fled to the other side.

They had no problem referring to these people, some of them being close relatives, as “enemies of the people” and plundering their homes until empty, in the name of the “people’s government”. The jailed men and women, healthy and capable of work, were placed in formations of two and made to walk to Orovnik and Rudari barefoot. There they were given shovels, pickaxes, hammers and metal wedges and forced to dig tunnels at the foothills of the mountains. They took them in and out blindfolded so that the enemy would not find out what these tunnels were used for and that they were actually stashes and warehouses for storing weapons and ammunition.

They cursed sunrise and sunset. They cursed sunrise because from the first to the last rays of the sun they were made to dig holes in the rock-strewn mountains. They cursed sunset because from the last to the first rays of the sun, exhausted, hungry and thirsty near water they were frequently awakened and forced to listen to the moaning and cries of those who were beaten, burned with a hot wire, their heads submerged in buckets filled with human filth and, during the day, exposed to ridicule.

And by such means, the power of the popular people's government was demonstrated.

Those simple, ignorant shepherds, ploughmen, cow herders, servants, janitors and simpletons, where and from whom did they learn to be public judges and cruel tormentors? Noted in a report sent to communist high command were the words: "We are teaching the enemies of the People's National Movement and the People's Struggle to love the struggle for freedom and to work for it and through their effort to be free..."

The last words of the report horrified me and reminded me of a similar so-called "meeting place" that existed far north where people were also freed through their hard work and effort. They were reminded about that every day by the writing above the entrance door and by the chimney bellowing black smoke non-stop. But in Drenovo there was no writing on any door and no bellowing chimney. There was only beating to unconsciousness, burning with a hot wire, exhaustion from work, a piece of dried up dark bread not exceeding one hundred grams per day to eat, half drowning in a bucket full of filth and public ridicule and humiliation. Mothers and fathers were coerced into signing pre-prepared letters which, by various means, were delivered to the sons who had moved to the other side, begging them to return to the Partisan ranks with promises that the People's Government would forgive their sins. And those who did return... by no means were they free. Three times a week they had to report to the police station and every day police agents shadowed them.

It was said that one particular man felt so much pressure and remorse that he returned because he believed that his mother, father and wife and two young children were suffering because of what he had done. He was killed at dawn in the grove above Drenovo upon his return. The People's Government did not forgive his sins. And this was not the only time that an individual was murdered in this grove and in the surrounding area. Automatic rifle bursts were heard there on a regular basis.

Early one morning two armed men with automatic rifles went into the cellar of one of the houses in Drenoveni and woke up the General of the Partisans, a general who had been sentenced to death because of "the failure" to capture Voden. The story goes something like this;

A few hours before the attack on Voden it was said that this particular general advised the men and women fighters to take a rest. The fighters were very tired, hungry and sleepy after a long march in bad winter conditions. It would be better, the general suggested, if they were given some time to rest, sleep, eat something warm and dry their wet uniforms before they attack. Another general, however, a member of high command who was well rested and well fed and rode on a horse and who had arrived over the Yugoslav border and did not take part in the march, gave a different order. He ordered the fighters to commence the attack immediately and without delay. As ordered, the fighters attacked and in

the process many drowned in the freezing Voden River, were blown up by mines and were cut down by machine gun fire in front of the enemy bunkers and naturally the battle was lost. While the fighters were being massacred, this particular general from high command slipped out of the battle and, traveling via Yugoslav territory, returned to Vineni and reported that the other general was at fault because of what he had said. A judgement was passed against the general in absentia and he was sentenced to death.

When he returned from the battlefield he was captured and imprisoned in Drenovo. His name was Georgiadis.

The two armed men who had awakened the general that morning told him that it was time for his usual morning walk. Looking through a crack in the cellar window, in the dim grey morning light, the general recognized one of the men. He was a Unit Commander in one of his brigades. The general smiled at the men and greeted them and without saying anything else, proceeded to walk ahead of them. They walked at a slow pace looking like they were measuring the road, turned left uphill and then entered the grove. The general stopped, turned towards the men and asked if it was far enough or should he take a few more steps into the forest. The men took their automatic rifles off their shoulders. The general unbuttoned his leather shirt and from the inside pocket pulled out a piece of paper that was folded in four and said: "Comrade Captain, this is a letter addressed to my daughter who lives in Athens. Please make sure that it is delivered, but if you can't then let it be known that I fought honourably and I am not a traitor." The general took a step back and with his legs spread apart, stomped on the ground several times as if checking if it was hard enough to support him. He then lifted his head up and looked at the peaks of Mount Bela Voda.

The sun was just about to rise when a volley of machine gun fire was heard above Drenovo. The two men returned to Vineni by boat. There were thirty bullet holes in the general's leather shirt. One bullet was not enough for the Partisan general...

Several days after that incident they brought twelve more men to Drenovo. Rumours were that they were caught at the border attempting to escape to Yugoslavia. They were not tried in a court of law because a long time ago an act had been passed which gave their captors the power to execute them without a trial. In fact anyone caught attempting to escape across the border or even thinking of escaping across the border was to be executed. Among the twelve prisoners was a famous clarinet player who had won first prize at a local Greek music competition held in 1936. No wedding took place in Prespa or in the entire Belitsa River Valley without the presence of the famous clarinet player known as Karatimio.

Before sunrise, as usual, they took the twelve to the grove above Drenovo. Only one was allowed to return, that was Karatimio's son. He

was a minor. That spring day in 1949 was the day when nightingales stopped singing in the thick lush grove above Drenovo.

Drenovo; a beautiful and peaceful place nestled between the forested base of Mount Vrba and the coastline of Lake Mala Prespa.

Drenovo; a place of suffering, an ugly picture from which the bad and evil, perpetrated against the poor, innocent Macedonian people by the Macedonian and Greek communist leaders, cannot be erased.

That ugly picture was etched in the memories of all those who experienced it. It was taken to far away places by the survivors, the wives and mothers from Kostur and Lerin Region. It was taken to the migrant working husbands and sons in Australia, America and Canada and, like a nightmare, it was etched into the memories of their children and grandchildren.

We took to the road and silently walked from Drenovo back to Lak on foot. We walked slowly and it seemed as if we could hear the quiet steps of the barefoot men and women who, with shovels and pickaxes over their shoulders, walked alongside of us on this cross bearing road. It seemed that we could hear the cries and moans of those suffering in the cellars of the Drenovo houses. It seemed that we could hear a clarinet playing for one moment and then going silent for another...

We walked in silence as if returning from a funeral, moving slowly, quietly walking away from the forgotten loneliness...

While driving on the main road we turned right at the intersection leading to Kula-Peroo. Our aim was to visit German which, by population, was at one time the biggest village in Mala Prespa Region. Some of the houses here looked like they had been restored, others were in the process of being restored and still others, by the cracks in the walls, the sagging roofs and the dented chimneys, looked like they had been left to the mercy of the elements.

To the left of the wide paved road in front of the old weathered down wooden door, braced by iron nails, was a man sitting at the rotting doorstep. Leaning his elbows on his knees and bracing his chin with his crossed palms, he sat there in silence staring at the yard full of overgrown nettles and weeds. Slowly and quietly he switched his view between the roof and the chimney and then stared at the windows and, for a while, at the front door. He tightened his lips with his fingers and looking at him all shrunken and sad I did not know if he wanted to talk, cry, or scream. After I greeted him he sat up and adjusted himself, making room for us to sit at the doorstep beside him. Then, after being silent for a while, he pointed to the yard with his hand and said:

“People took me from this yard when I was just a little boy and others returned me in front of this door as an old man... It was like this;

The first to be collected were the young men, seventeen to twenty something years old, and two or three months later they collected the young ladies. After that, in the spring of 1948, in March when all the mountains around Lake Prespa were covered with snow, they collected us, around four hundred and fifty children ages two to fourteen. The children aged fifteen and sixteen were left in the village but the year after that they drafted them and put guns on their shoulders. So I am telling you, they took four hundred or so children and made us walk on foot from here to Dolno Dupeni and from there to Liuboino where we spent the night. The next morning we were loaded onto trucks and taken to Bitola, to the railway station. There they loaded us onto rail cars and took us to Brailovo where many children from Prespa, Kostur and Voden Region villages had been taken. Days later more children arrived from various other regions and villages. Every three or four days, children were loaded into rail cars according to village of origin or some other kind of list and I don't know where they were taken. Nobody was talking.

They put us in barns where we slept covered in hay and straw and for food they gave us a small piece of cornbread. Was it enough? No! We were all hungry all the time, a hunger that pushed us to go begging from house to house. But instead of giving us bread the residents swore at us, cursed us and chased us with sticks, sending their dogs after us... And they were right, how could they feed us when they had nothing to eat themselves?... Brailovo was very poor at the time and the only thing we received there was a load of lice and dirt. There were too many children for them to be able to do anything for them...

One day my cousin Kote and I decided that we had had enough of the kindness which the leaders of this excursion, with a woman named Vera in charge, had told us about in German and at every other stop we had made. We made up our minds and decided that it was time to go home; to return to German. We figured that we could walk back to Bitola over the rail line that had brought us here and then ask which line went to Prespa, take it and walk back to German. We left and walked and walked for several hours and I think we may have made it to the half way point when we were caught and taken back to the Brailovo barns.

Unfortunately we could not sit still and desperately wanted to return home. So even before a week had passed, we left again and walked on the rail line back to Bitola. This time we were wiser and every time we noticed someone or something unusual we hid in the ditches, in the brush, or in holes under the rails. We managed to evade capture during the first day and spent the night in a ditch. The next morning, before dawn, we arrived at the entrance to Bitola. We were frozen and very hungry. We were afraid to go on the road so we went to a cemetery and there, between the graves, we could see many cats and dogs gathering. We figured they were coming to eat the offerings the living had left for their departed... We chased the

animals with sticks and stones and collected as much of the bread, apples and pieces of pastry that we could find. We ate what we could and the rest we stuffed in our pockets. After that my cousin Kote said:

“From what I heard from my grandfather, our people, some time ago, used to come to the Bitola market from our villages. They took the road from Dolno Dupeni, Liuboino, Braichino and came out to a village called Kazani and from there they went straight to Bitola.”

We asked a very old woman to show us the way to Kazani. She asked us, “Why do you want to go there?” Kote lied and said, “We are looking for work as shepherds...”

“Go straight, only straight, past the mosque then follow the river up past the meadows and after that you go straight again...” she said.

We left and walked for about an hour on the road and another hour hiding from people off the road in the bushes and in the willow groves... We then reached open space from where we could see a dark snow cloud forming over the mountains and coming our way. We continued to walk until we came to the outskirts of the village Kazani where we hid in the first barn we ran into. We spent the night there. In the morning we asked an old man if this road led to Prespa? “Yes it does,” he said and disappeared into the narrow village lane.

A few minutes before sundown we came up behind a mountain. There were mountains to the left, mountains to the right and in the distance in front of us we could see the lake and beyond that a long mountain. All the mountains were snowed-in.

“You see that mountain far away?” my cousin asked, out of breath.

“I see it, so what?” I replied.

“We can see it from our village... Do you see that slit in the mountain that makes the mountain look like it’s broken?” Kote asked.

“I see it, but so what?” I replied again.

“That slit can also be seen from our village. So if we go to the left from here we will get home,” he said.

So we took the path to the left and walked until dark. It got very dark and we were cold but we dragged our frozen feet until we arrived at a village. I don’t know what time it was but the villagers were asleep and so were their dogs. We broke into a barn and spent the rest of the night there. At the break of dawn we went above the village and continued our trek. Kote, who was a couple of years older than me, remembered the mountains. He stopped and asked: “You see that mountain there? It is called Vrba. And that one, left of it, do you see it?”

“Yes I see it...” I said.

“Well silly boy,” he yelled out loud, “that one is called Bela Voda...”

When he said that mountain was Bela Voda I jumped with joy and yelled: “And under it is German?”

We were so happy to be so close to home that we hugged each other and laughed, forgetting our misery and hunger. We took to the road again and headed for Mount Bela Voda or what we in German call German's mountain. We kept moving and stayed to the left of the villages, avoiding being seen. We arrived in Liuboino by early evening. We recognized the houses and the large church... but our fear told us "stay away from the people..." There was a barn at the end of the village so we decided to go there. In the yard we saw a pile of leeks. Quickly we picked up a bunch and quietly entered the small barn door. Then, as soon as we had tucked ourselves in the hay, we began to eat. We were very hungry so we ate a lot of leeks but things did not go well for us.

Before dawn when we came out of the barn and took the road to Dolno Dupeni, we felt tired and exhausted; we had lost our strength; we could hardly walk... we had terrible diarrhea, we figured from eating too many leeks... We could not go on so we hid in a big church above the village and rested. From there we could see the tall peak of Mount Tsutse and to the right of that was Tsrveni Steni. That's where the border was. We recognized the mountain peaks because they were also visible from our village.

We decided that if we traveled along the brook we would arrive at Tsrveni Steni and from there it would be easy to get to German, so we left. The snow was frozen. My cousin Kote was wearing military boots and was able to break the snow and create holes. I walked behind him barefoot (my moccasins were torn to pieces). We arrived at the top of Tsrveni Steni and stopped beside a border marker. From there we could see our village. But soon the mountain was covered in fog. We welcomed the thick fog because it was easier for us to cross the border undetected. Unfortunately when we arrived at the bottom of the other side, the Partisans caught us and took us to the militia station. There they asked us many questions and we told them everything. Unfortunately, in spite of what we said, they insisted that we tell everyone that all the children in Brailovo were alive and well, that they were well dressed in new clothing and that they were sleeping in beds with white sheets and that there was plenty and all kinds of food for them to eat and that they could eat whatever their little hearts desired... When they saw me barefoot, they gave me a pair of military boots and after that they let us go.

Hey, do you know what happened to me after that damn Brailovo? After having to spend all that time getting there, after having to sleep in barns and after being frozen and hungry? And here I thought once I arrived at home, my father, sisters and brother would welcome me with open arms and hug me. My father would let me sit on his knee, pat my head and give me a warm embrace. My sisters would cook something good for me to eat and bring it to me nice and hot with plenty of bread. They would bring me nice woollen socks and sit with me by the warm fire. Then when I got nice

and warm I would fall asleep in my father's lap and in the morning when I woke up under a warm blanket I would drink warm sheep's milk... So I thought, as I walked home with a heart full of joy, hopping, dancing and feeling like singing...

Then I felt sudden fear, which made me want to get home faster... When I got there I found the door locked. I banged and banged, then I listened. I banged and listened again and again, once, twice, three times harder and harder but there was no answer. I got desperate and began to pound the door with my fists, with my knees and with my hard military boots. They would not open the door. I thought they must be out somewhere working and wherever they were surely they would soon return. The sun was still shining over the Drenicheto Hill on the other side of the lake and there was plenty of time until dark. I sat at the threshold of the gate and waited. I placed my elbows on my knees and covered my face with my hands and then waited and waited and waited. It became dark but still I waited and refused to move even after I got the shakes from the cold, feeling like ants were crawling up my legs. My face turned white from the cold, my fingers became numb and my ears felt like they were on fire. I felt sleepy and began to lose consciousness. I could not tell where I was and what time it was when I felt a shake on my shoulder. I came to and heard a woman's voice asking: "Who are you child? Get up. There is no one here in this house..." She took me home to her house. She gave me bread and cheese to eat. And while I ate she told me slowly, word by word that my entire family, my father, my sisters and my brother were taken, mobilized by the Partisans and sent to the front. She told me that my brother had been killed...

The bread and cheese I was eating fell out of my hands, my throat tightened, I saw sparks before my eyes, I began to shake and wanted to cry but I had no tears, I wanted to yell but had no voice, I wanted to run away but had no strength... And... and at that moment I felt utterly alone, I felt a great pain inside of me, I felt broken. And this is how I have remained to this day, all alone... Everything for me became desolate. But as they say, life goes on...

They treated my foot sores with all kinds of potions for months and my feet eventually healed. Then I took on a job as a shepherd... and worked from April 1948 to August 1949. More and more people were taken from the village during that time. Men and women capable of fighting were mobilized and taken to the battle zones. Older men and women and some younger women were mobilized and given the task of transporting ammunition from the Prespa warehouses to the Gramos battle zones.

There was no day that passed that the people in charge, led by some woman named Vera, did not come to the village, take the people to the school, tell them that victory was near and ask them to give everything they had. And the people did give everything they had. They gave their

bedcovers, pillows, forks, spoons, plates, cups, socks, shirts, sweaters and lives... there was no day when the church bell did not ring signifying the occurrence of a death. There was no day that bad news did not arrive of so and so being killed. Crying and wailing was an everyday regular occurrence in the village. And every day the village became poorer and more desolate; a wasteland...

There were no children my age. Except for the babies, there were no children at all... Mothers wept and wailed, took to the highway and waited at the border looking into the distance... They thought that by doing so their children might return. That's when I realized that our people had been robbed of their greatest joy and deprived of their most valuable... happiness... their children. One day in 1949, I don't remember which month, at Prisoio, near the border where my sheep were grazing, my father appeared to me. He was dressed in a military uniform and told me to quickly bring him clothes from home. I ran home and brought him some. He quickly changed and after he hugged me I thought that he was going to take me with him. But he didn't. I don't know why he didn't. So again I was left alone...

One day, I think it was in August, in the afternoon, Partisans riding on horses ran into our village. They ran up and down the village streets going from house to house banging on doors with the butts of their rifles and yelling: "Leave! Leave! Leave! The front has been breached! The Greek army is coming and it will slaughter and hang everything it finds that is living!!!"

Like a sudden storm, like a wild fury out of hell, like a flood spawned by a hailstorm, like a swollen muddy river and a cloud of fire, the frightening and terrible news was spread from house to house and from mouth to mouth. Great fear made throats of grown men tighten, hands tremble, knees buckle, faces distort, eyes sink, skins crawl and minds become confused.

"Leave! Leave! Leave!" thundered the hoarse voices of the horsemen, headlong and frantic, sowing the seeds of fear. Widespread fear was sown everywhere. When the fear of one becomes the fear of many, it becomes universal and nothing can stop it. And those who ordered the fear surely knew of its power...

The villagers, whom I came to know, already gripped by fear, now overpowered by the yelling of the horsemen who forcefully pushed the people to leave, quickly gathered their belongings, everything that they could carry from their homes. They took their bed covers, woolen blankets, etc., and some food and loaded them onto their wagons, donkeys (their horses and mules were confiscated by the Partisans), backs and shoulders. They also took their livestock; oxen, sheep and goats and ran for their lives.

We first took the road straight for Markova Noga. The border was close so we figured that we could cross it quickly, but when we reached the Sveti Jovan Church our Partisans closed the road on us. They began to yell and told us to return to our homes. One of the villagers explained what had happened and begged them to let us pass so that we could go to our relatives in the villages in Dolno Dupeni, Liuboino and Braichino where we would be safer than going back home. The man told them that most of us had family there and that we would remain there until the worst was over and then we would return to our homes. But our Partisans said, "NO!" and pointed their rifles at us. "Back!" they yelled, "Go back and take the road to Peroo and from there go to Nivitsi, Orovo and Grazhdeno." We refused to budge as more and more people kept arriving with their wagons, oxen, goats, sheep, donkeys...

But they insisted and kept yelling, "Back! We order you to go back to Peroo!" And as the crowd swelled up they opened fire with a couple of machine guns. The whistling bullets flying over our heads made us even more afraid. But still they refused to let us cross the border. We turned around and took the road to Peroo. The people from German and Rabi crossed over the bridge first then were quickly followed by people from the other villages; Orovnik, Poply, Rudary, Shtrkovo, Medovo... We, the people who crossed the Kula-Peroo bridge first, spent the night hiding in the sparse trees along the road. In the morning we could see airplanes flying over the mountains Lisets, Moro and Chukata. We could see piles of soil fly from the ground as the airplanes dropped bombs and then moments later we would hear the thunderous explosions. After that we saw tanks and soldiers running behind them, rushing towards Prespa on the other side of Prevolot. And on Bela Voda towards German, Partisans were running to the level part of the mountain base where more and more people were coming and rushing towards Peroo. Then the airplanes appeared in Bela Voda and flew at high speeds towards the level part of the mountain base.

"Quickly, quickly, quickly, move, move, run, run, run fast, and don't stop," we could hear voices calling and yelling at the people. Some of those running tripped and fell while others jumped over them and stepped on them. Lost in the mad rush, some people were calling out, crying and looking for their friends and relatives. We could hear the screams of babies and young children and the cries of mothers and women, the mooing of cattle and the bleating of sheep. Among the people and on the sides ran men and women Partisans and they too were yelling, shouting, stopping, crouching and firing their weapons. The airplanes dominated the sky all day, flying in shifts.

There was one way to salvation for those people – Kula – so everyone ran for Kula.

"Leave!!!" a voice was half heard calling amid the roar of the airplane engines, which for days had dominated the skies. Airplanes were flying in

and out of the area firing their machine guns, dropping their bombs, tearing up the earth, tossing soil into the air and blanketing everything with dust and black smoke. The tanks too were doing their bit adding to the chaos and ploughing the ground with their steel treaded tracks. The entire plain between the two lakes and every inch of land up to Peroo was full of people frantically running to escape the fire falling from the sky. Non-stop the aircraft persisted, flying low with engines thundering, firing long volleys of machine gun fire, dropping bombs that exploded into fireballs, giving rise to terrible flames that rose above the plains and burned people and everything in sight. Non-stop loud cries and wailing could be heard, people were dying from bombs exploding and from burning flames. Those alive were running, running, frantically running towards Peroo, falling and getting up again... There was salvation in Peroo, they would be saved if they reached Peroo but first they would have to cross the bridge, run across to the other side of the lake, take to the mountains and hide in the bushes and in the forest. To do that they would have to avoid the airplanes flying from Bela Voda, turning half circle and from high above firing their machine guns and dropping their bombs and grenades. They would have to pass through the fire, the smoke and the cries and screams of the wounded who had fallen all over the plains.

When the airplanes flew away we thought that they would not come back, but that was only wishful thinking. Soon after one group left, another group arrived, again dropping bombs and firing at the people with machine guns. Some were dropping bombs of fire. When the airplanes were changing shifts the cannons took their place pounding the plains. It was non-stop, one thunderstorm after another. The tanks were rolling, dominating the area between Orovnik and Rabi, firing their cannons during the time the skies over Prespa were free of aircraft.

Then suddenly there was a great big explosion. The bridge in Peroo and the lake flood gates were blown up. The masses of people left behind had nowhere to go. Without a bridge to cross and with water flooding the plain, many were left in peril... Some were lost to the bombs and now many were left to drown. The strait between the two lakes was too narrow to fit all of them. They jostled one another, shouted and screamed and, to save themselves, they jumped into the wild rushing water above which, every several minutes or so, aircraft flew and while doing so fired upon them and unleashed their bombs and rockets. Then immediately behind them, other aircraft flew and dropped the kind of bombs that spread fire and raised a lot of flames burning everything living and dead in their path. When the tanks and infantry arrived a vicious and bloody battle ensued. The aircraft began to bomb the coastline and the road that leads from Kula-Peroo to Vineni. The road was lined with dismembered bodies of people and animals. We took that road and sought our salvation on it...

I will say it again: an unprecedented hurricane hit Prespa. The airplanes dropped a hailstorm of hot iron from the sky and behind them flew more airplanes dropping blankets of flame. Black clouds of smoke rose from the earth, pieces of molten iron penetrated the living bodies of the powerless, a hailstorm of iron pounded the soil and long tongues of flames fell from the sky and scorched the earth turning everything to ashes. The sky was covered with black clouds and the lake waters turned red. Horrible, frightening, wild screams and death cries were heard everywhere and help was nowhere to be seen; it never came. The naked sandy plane between Rabi and Peroo was an open slaughter house... a killing field. That day our eyes were filled with horror, fear, despair, curses, swearing and hopelessness...

I experience that sight all the time, awake and in my dreams and have never managed to shake it off, to get rid of it, or to answer the question as to why it was so wild and fanatical, blind and cold, fierce and furious, why so much hatred and thirst for such savage killing? Why was there so much unnecessary, horrible, terrible and furious anger sown over Prespa? It seems to me that God never forgot that day... He gave strength and power to revenge, fire, evil doing and death...

Beaten from heaven and from earth, jumping over the bodies of those killed and wounded, skipping over the bloated carcasses of dead cattle whose intestines were scattered all over the road and in the meadows and constantly being accompanied by terrible screaming, we moved, dizzily moved through the wilderness that would lead us to the Albanian border. Walking with us were men and women Partisans carrying wounded on their shoulders, in blankets and on stretchers. There were old men and women and men and women of very old age walking, moving, trying to escape the horror... There were also very young children with a mad look in their eyes clenching at their mother's dress. They walked and walked and turned their heads, but only for a moment, just to see if there were living walking behind them and if they were keeping up the pace.

When we crossed the border and when the blasts of the bombs could not reach us, and when we could no longer hear the roar of the flying aircraft, that's when I felt the greatest emptiness, the greatest pain. That's when I realized how painful the forced abandonment of my home was. How could one carry their entire property, their belongings, things collected over centuries and put them in a bag and walk away? What about the house, the garden, the fields, the meadows, the vineyards, the forests? Could one even take a small piece of those and put them in a sack?

I could not even begin to imagine the pain that I would feel if I had lost members of my family, as so many of those traveling with me had done!

Can you imagine how much it hurts to leave your birthplace under duress? Do you know how much it hurts to be pushed to go to a foreign country and only take with you what you can carry on your shoulders,

under your armpits and around your neck? Do you know how upsetting it is to have to choose things from your long acquired property and take only as much as you can fit in a bag or sack? Do you know how much grief it causes to have to put a padlock on the gate of your own home and not to know when you will take it off?

Our days of hope blackened in only three days, our effort and sacrifices were in vain, all our hopes and aspirations were dispersed and disappeared. We were leaving but could not escape the war that raged behind us. Thousands of us crossed over the mountains and the same thousands left behind our homes, fields, meadows, vineyards, forests... which we had built with our own sweat and fertilized with our effort.

I could not even imagine how people, who were separated from members of their family, must have felt as they were leaving, running for their lives!

I realized that for us there was no other road except the road that led to our uprooting... and at that very moment we heard voices shouting, "Continue to Albania." We travelled... people and livestock together... Heavy rain fell during the night. There was no place to hide, to secure your head. We kept going, God knows where, traveling in a long column. Hungry and tired our livestock took to the meadows, gardens, fields and yards of the Albanian villages and we continued to walk on foot until we arrived at the village Pogradets. Here they loaded us onto trucks and took us to the plains just outside the city Elbasan. A month or so later they loaded us on ships and took us to Poland.

In Poland they placed the children, including myself, in children's homes. There I graduated from elementary, high school and university and established my own family. I visited the Republic of Macedonia, then a part of Yugoslavia, in 1961 so that I could see my father. He worked in Belimbegovo and lived in a small room 3 by 2.5 meters, had an iron bed, two blankets, a small wood stove, a table made of rough boards and one chair. I recognized him when I saw him but he did not recognize me. I went for a visit a second time after the Skopje earthquake and took my father with me to Poland.

So I, a former shepherd from German, known as Kole to some and Nikola to others, moved to Skopje in the summer of 1964 with my entire family and became a Skopje resident. With a degree in civil engineering I was able to get a job in the Directorate for Reconstruction and carry on with the reconstruction of various buildings in Skopje, including the University Library, the Archives of the Macedonian Institute for History, the Theatre for Nationalities, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum Complex of Macedonia and other buildings ... And that's the road I took..." concluded the man.

The man tucked his fingers in his hands for a moment and then spoke again, softly:

“I have built and restored many houses... Now, sitting here, I ask myself, “Will the government allow me and will God help me restore my father’s house?...”

The man hunched his shoulders, took a long sad look and with his pupils blurred and a broken voice said:

“I have built a house in Dolno Dupeni for the sole reason of being closer to German. Earlier, in my younger years, I often went up there and from there, from Tsutse, I watched our house with a telescope. Now I go to Sveti Ilija and from there, from the hill I watch the level plains. After August 15th, every year this part of Prespa is full of sounds, singing, fun and serious music. During those days the road leading to Sveti Ail is full of traffic, passenger cars, buses and luxury limousines. The Sveti Ail Island, for an entire week, holds concerts in the remnants of King Samoil’s Cathedral. This is not a local event and the concerts are not about what happened in Prespa between August 13th and 15th, 1949. Every year at the same time passenger cars, buses and cars with government plates, accompanied by security men arrive here. Do you know who and what lies in this plain and under the asphalt between Rabi and Kula-Peroo and from Peroo to the parking lot at the entrance of Sveti Ail?

While the concerts are taking place and cars and buses arrive and leave Sveti Ail, I go to Sveti Ilija, to the hill where the small Prespa Lake lies, to the surrounding mountains and to the Prespa Plains and light candles. I light candles to honour those who, sixty years ago, gave their lives and left their souls here for eternity. And as the candlelight flickers I stare at the plain motionless, thinking of the noises made by the flying aircraft, the explosions made by the bombs and grenades, the whistling of flying bullets, the smell of napalm, the cries of the hundreds being beaten from heaven and from earth, run over and crushed by tanks, running, trying to save themselves with all their strength, running in this last small bit of land by the lake with hopes of pulling a long straw that would save their life... I then cross myself and whisper: “Athenians, slowly, steadily, quietly... quietly, steadily...”

A while ago a relative of mine who lives in Lerin brought me a book entitled “History of the Greek Civil War”. It was an interesting read. On page 533 it says that in the space around the intersection in front of the village Rabi to the bridge at Kula-Peroo, a length of 5 and width of 2 kilometers, the Greek Military Air force dropped 34 bombs weighing 250 kilograms, 530 bombs weighing 125 kilograms, 1,900 bombs weighing 10 kilograms, 70 napalm bombs, 620 rockets, 26,000, grenades 20mm and 43,000 machine gun bullets 12.7 to 7.7 mm, all this in the course of August 13th to August 15th.

The author of the book did not specify how much iron and lead was dropped on the 5 by 2 kilometre (or 10 square kilometre) area nor did he specify how much more was added by the artillery, tanks, mortars and

infantry. Little or a lot, is a matter of personal judgement. As to how much iron, lead and fire fell on the heads of the wounded and maimed Democratic Army of Greece (DAG) Units and on the large civilian population that passed through here, only they know and can tell you! But let me remind you that they were innocent and helpless people, these were our people who felt this pain in this unprecedented attack that took place around Peroo! These were our people who were rushing to find salvation in this small peninsula which the enemy dubbed “Africa”!

The author says that eighty percent of those who entered this open space were killed. This was not a battleground. This was a slaughterhouse. Again a little or a lot, is a matter of personal judgement, as to the amount of iron and lead dropped on the heads of powerless people. A little or a lot are those lost, whose bones lie in the mass graves in the area between the intersection in front of the village Rabi and the Kula-Peroo bridge and in the area between the Large Lake Prespa coast and the sands and reeds of Small Lake Prespa?

On page 620 in the book “Anti-Bandit Struggle 1945-1949”, General Zafiropoulos wrote the following praise about the Greek Air Force:

«Η φιλία Αεροπορία απο της εω ενεσπειρε τον τρομον και την καταστροφην εις την περιοχην του Λαιμου.» (The friendly air force, from morning until night, sowed terror and catastrophe in the region around Rabi.)

We quietly and silently travelled the road from Rabi to Kula-Peroo at the slowest speed our SAHO could roll. The road was straight as an arrow and travelled at the centre of the flat plain lying between the two Prespa lakes. On the left was the long coastline of the small lake with its tall reeds waving. On the right was the long coastline of the large lake with its thick willow groves. This is the bloody killing field of which Kole spoke to us a while ago.

A bus caught up to us and began to honk its horn. It appeared that the driver was in a hurry. I could see in my rear view mirror that he was getting angry and making threatening gestures with his fist. And judging by the movement of his lips, I could see that he was swearing at me. I did not speed up so he followed closely behind for a while and then passed, speeding away leaving behind a trail of thick smoke and smell of burned oil. I continued to drive as slowly as possible, attempting to imagine, in my thoughts at least, a small part of the bloody picture, of the horrors that took place here.

Saddled with the burden of this difficult time, I did not notice that we had left the flat plain of horror and were crossing the bridge where the two Prespa lakes come into contact. After crossing the bridge I greeted the soldiers, leisurely sitting on a bench in front of barrack I greeted the right taking the road to Ψαραδες (Psarades). That’s what was written on

the traffic sign. I checked the old map, published by Chubovski, and found that Psarades (Fishermen) was the Greek name for the village Nivitsi. The uphill road was wide and led to the top of the lakeshore. There was a sharp turn in front of the Sveti Giorgi Church and to the right there was a wide parking lot with a great view of the eastern Prespa coastline which, to the north began in Asamati and to the south ended at top of the hill. In this view the mountains and villages rested in the palms of your hands and the lake below rested under your feet.

Excited by the beautiful scenery we decided to go and visit Nivitsi. The village is located on the lakeshore and is surrounded by rocks on which stunted oak trees grow. It has been said that, in the past, the people of Nivitsi lived off the “tsironi” (smelts, tiny fish) that they caught in the lake and sold to people in the most remote villages in Lerin and Kostur Regions. Unfortunately no one got rich from selling tsironi so today the people of Nivitsi stave off poverty with tourist money. By joining forces the people of Nivitsi built a hotel with a restaurant that offers famous Prespa carp and other local Prespa dishes. They also fixed up rooms in their old houses and now can accommodate paying guests. The hotel parking lot was full of buses. A well-established advertising campaign also brings them tourists from all over Greece.

But we did not come here for the hotel or for the famous carp. We came here because of a significant wartime event that took place in the Sveta Nedela (Golema Bogoroditsa) village church. The Second Congress of the People's Liberation Front was held here on March 25, 1949. It was here that resolutions were adopted to invite the Macedonian people to join the struggle (Greek Civil War) en masse. It was here that the Macedonian people were told and retold by the Greek Communists that they would allow them to create their own Macedonian state, unlike the Republic of Macedonia which was under Yugoslavia. But there was a condition, a catch. For that to happen, every able bodied Macedonian man and woman had to join the struggle. “All to arms – everything for victory,” read one slogan.

There were many slogans written especially in honour of Zahariadis, the so-called “greatest”, wisest and most respected son of Macedonia and then, a little later, no one wanted to believe that he was the “greatest” liar and cheat! But the leaders of NOF (National Liberation Front) and all those serving under him, believed and trusted him and that is why they all suffered and many died; because of those beliefs! Everything is known now!!! The entire nation suffered. The older people know and remember... but the younger generation did not want to listen. Now, hopefully, they learned from their mistakes.

We took the rarely used winding circular cobblestone path, now overgrown with grass, to Vronderon which, according to the old map, used to be called Grazhdeno in Macedonian. On the way there we passed a

place where the village Piksos, known as Orovo in Macedonian, used to be. There is hardly anything left of Orovo now. The only building left standing is the church now hidden under the shade of a tall oak tree grove. While visiting Grazhdeno we had a great desire to visit the large cave which served as a hospital for the Partisans during the struggle. Wounded Partisans were treated there after the houses serving as a hospital in the villages Nivitsi, Orovo and Grazhdeno were bombed. We expected to find only ruins and empty space in Grazhdeno but, to our surprise, we found new houses and children running in the streets... but the language spoken was Albanian. We surmised that the Greek authorities had populated this village with farmer and pastoralist settlers, refugees from Albania. They spoke to us in Greek but between themselves they spoke Albanian. They said it was easier to understand each other if they spoke Albanian.

After our visit to the cave, the former Partisan hospital, which still has remnants of wooden beds placed in layers of three, we took the road to Pili, or Vineni as it is called in Macedonian. Vineni was the first village in Prespa Region to receive Asian colonists, who, after the Asia Minor disaster, following the Greek-Turkish war, were settled here. The Macedonians call these people Madzhiri. They are distinguishable from the indigenous people not only in speech but also in appearance. They have black hair, bony facial features, convex eyes and eagle noses. They call themselves Pontii, meaning former residents of a region situated above the shores of the Black Sea. During the struggle most of the Pontii fled to Lerin and resided in the city. Their abandoned houses were occupied by the so-called Democratic Provisional Government of Greece, which was established in December 1947 in the village Asamati located in Prespa Region in the Republic of Macedonia. Before the village entrance, to the left of the road we noticed a piece of plank nailed to an oak tree which read: “Σπηλια Ζαχαριαδης” (Cave Zahariadis).

There is a narrow, uphill path leading to the cave and in front of the cave, under the wide canvas spread under the shade of the oak trees, the path turns left. There is another wooden sign with the same writing and about ten steps after that there are two connected rocks. Above the rocks there are old cracked oak trees growing with their roots stuck in the crevices of the rocks. Under the low hanging branches, facing west is an ugly, dark chill-giving, gaping hole; the cave entrance.

I turned on my battery powered lantern and carefully put my foot on the first step carved out of stone. There were three or four more steps like that going down and after I took the last one I was in total darkness... This, at one time, may have been a bear cave, but then, during the struggle (Greek Civil War), a brain came to live here. When the brain was here the cave was not a cave, it was a cabin. The floor was covered with smooth planks and hand woven carpets, believed to be gifts from Tito, given to Zahariadis in better days. To the left there was a large desk, a telephone

apparatus and a radio transmitter. To the right there was a long table covered with a red cloth and chairs stacked in a pile. These were for the members of his immediate political and military leadership. There was a colour portrait of Stalin, a personal gift, hanging on the front wall. There was also electric lighting and heating.

This is where the brain of one side of the war resided, where political and military solutions were conceived and decisions were made. This is where the decision to attack Voden, Negush and Lerin was made. And this is where not a single bomb was dropped. Vineni and the cave were two places where the government air force did not drop a single bomb. In those days there were few who knew and were able to cross the road to find the cave. Today many come to visit it. The cave that once was a home to bears, bats and spiders and the seat of darkness and misfortune, is now a tourist attraction...

It was late evening when we set off for Sveti Ail Island following the pontoon bridge, recently constructed by the army. The most noticeable object in Sveti Ail was Tsar Samoil's Cathedral which was constantly visited and photographed by many tourists. We did not want to miss out resting at the only and surprisingly wonderful hotel and restaurant with a large terrace overlooking the lake, so we decided to stay a while. Hosting this unusual establishment were the very kind Kosta and Vera. We were met with a bit of history at the entrance. There were wood and stone carvings of Tsar Samoil's blinded warriors. Preserved in their suffering and tortured faces were signs of pride and dignity, compelling you to want to stop and, with a restrained breath, pay your respects.

The restaurant resembled an ethnological museum. Much of Prespa's material culture had been painstakingly assembled and lovingly displayed. And while we lovingly observed all these exhibits with tremendous curiosity, our attention was caught by an announcement on the television that said Thessaloniki TV would be broadcasting a documentary entitled: "Πρεσπα η καρδια της Μακεδονιας" (Prespa the heart of Macedonia).

The camera lens captured the coastal reeds, the stillness of the lake water, the many flocks of various birds, Sveti Ail Island and the walls of the large, one time beautiful cathedral where Tsar Samoil and his warriors prayed. It captured the high stones and white lakeshore in which are preserved the cave churches and cells of monks and hermits. It captured the Sveta Bogoroditsa icon painted on a rock a hundred meters above the lake water. There was a lot of boasting and praising by the commentator about nature in Prespa but not a single word about its people. The documentary ended with pictures of houses, passenger cars and buses full of tourists crossing the bridge at Kula. They were delighted to be part of the beauty in this corner of God's world as they left to return back to the south. The lake wind picked up the dust and the noise left behind and Prespa once again rested in silence.

We left Prespa and before we crossed over to the other side of Prevolot we stopped and looked, for a long time, at the ring of mountains with the beautiful lake in the centre. The lake looked like a mirror in which the sky, clouds, stars, moon, sunrise and sunset constantly reflected.

A deep sigh came out of our chests and with it the question:
“Bogoroditse, whose portrait was painted on the rock and endured the cold and moisture, the beating of strong autumn rains and winter winds, the baking of the summer heat, why did you not protect us and keep us safe and away from harm? Why did you not raise Your hand against the hands of those who erased the people of Prespa from Prespa?...”

Prespa, a beautiful and peaceful place, cleansed, devastated, beaten, rinsed out, made desolate, cleaned out and left sad without its elders, the old men and women of Prespa...

Oh, Prespa, Prespa, you have been tormented, tortured and trampled...

On the Road of Time – Chapter 3

Kostur, compared to ten years ago, has become unrecognizable. The old, timeless market by the lakeshore has been turned into a city park. The only thing that has not changed is the fish market. The stores selling fish have remained as they were a long time ago. They were and still are operated by the fishermen from the village Mavrovo. The city stadium is gone and in its place is a new, recently built square. Part of the square substitutes as a market a couple of times a week. The place is clean and neat and a city government building has been added to it. Thanks to the European Union no doubt.

The winding road along the coast has been widened, paved and crammed with café's, taverns, restaurants and small shops. There are seventy Orthodox churches in the city, most of which are older than five hundred years and built in Byzantine style. This makes the city an exquisite tourist attraction. At the end there is a small square and in front of it, standing high up on a monument, is a statue of Bishop Karavangelis. Painted on the chest of the statue in black paint is the word "executioner". Beside Karavangelis's statue is a headless statue of General Van Fleet, the United States general who commanded the Greek government generals during the Greek Civil War. But that's not all; there are also other surprises and skeletons in Kostur.

We ordered coffee at the café (built of wood and decorated with many items made of plastic) next to the lake.

"Two Turkish coffees please," I said to the waiter.

"If you want Turkish coffee, go to Turkey," he replied angrily; a pale looking young man possibly suffering from insomnia. "We only serve Greek coffee here," he added strongly as he swatted a fly on the table with a towel.

After we drank our "Greek" coffee and the free water offered at this café, we left and went to the City Centre.

There were many stores side by side at the Kostur Centre, exhibiting mostly fur in their display windows. The fur trade was the oldest trade in the region and only the people of Kostur had the right to practice it by decree from the Sultan. But in the last thirty years or so the fur trade was taken over by the surrounding villages and towns, mostly by Russians. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russians with big money (only they know where they got it) came to Kostur and the surrounding region and built shops and on them they hung billboards with the inscription "SHUBY" (sheaths, furs) and since then the famous and renowned Kostur fur traders have become Russian employees and wage earners.

Out of curiosity we entered one of the stores. We looked at the fur coats and admired them without touching but were surprised and astonished at their very high prices. The talkative clerk, a middle-aged

man, followed us around explaining and praising the merchandise in an attempt to make a sale and when we stepped further away from the door, in an almost whispering voice, he asked in Macedonian: “Are you from Serbia?”

“No,” I said. “Serbia is further up, to the north of where we come from.”

“Oh...” he said.

“And you?” I asked

“I am from here, from Macedonia... Greece is further south...” he said quietly and with his hand pointed to the south.

When we exited the store he asked: “From which city are you...”

“We live in a city but we were born in a village here,” I replied.

“Which one?” he asked.

I said, “Polianemon.”

“I know it,” he boasted. “Its old name is Krchishta. Am I right?”

“Yes you are right. And that’s where we are going,” I replied.

“What will you be doing there? There is nothing there except wind after which the village got its new name!” he yelled out loud, stunned.

“Nothing, believe me, there is nothing...”

“That’s okay Sir, then we will see nothing...” I answered.

“Χρηστε και Παναγια!...” (Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary) he said in Greek and crossed himself.

The once terrible, potholed and narrow road leading from Dolno Papratsko to Krchishta has now been widened and paved with asphalt. The road ended where the threshing fields once used to be. On our way we made a stop at a place called Vishomo. Close to there, where the land rises and widens, is a church and all around the church there is nothing, only emptiness. The village Krchishta used to occupy that emptiness. As I stared at the desolate space where my village used to be, I was overwhelmed with a certain sickness and chills ran down my spine. The village was here but now it’s gone, only its name remains, a name given to it a long time ago, a name that means the “crackle” of chestnuts. I remember the old people saying that the name Krchishta was given to the village a very long time ago.

As I recall, a story was told that went something like this: During the Ottoman War against the Poles, which took place in 1689, a Beg (Ottoman officer) distinguished himself as a good fighter during the attack and capture of the city Hochim, so the Sultan rewarded him by giving him five villages and their residents, houses and land. So this Beg, in order to enlarge his fields, ordered the villagers to destroy the chestnut groves and their homes and relocate to a sandy, barren and less productive place. There he ordered them to build new houses for themselves, a house for himself and a mosque. The villagers did as ordered and, in respect of God,

would not destroy the village churches. So the only buildings left standing, as markers of where the villages once used to be, were the five churches: Sveta Petka, Sveti Atanas, Sveti Giorgi, Sveti Jovan and Sveti Ilija. These church buildings survived the test of time, rebellions and wars.

There was a grove of tall oak trees to the left of the road from where we were standing. "There," I said to my wife pointing at the oak trees, "is where the village Dolno Vishomo used to be and under the oaks was the church, Sveta Petka. We walked across the road to the oak grove and stood under its magnificent shade. Unfortunately there was nothing left of the old church, not even its foundation. The only things we found were a couple of rocks, some broken ceramic tiles, remnants of the old church and part of a burned candle stuck in the ground amongst the tiles. It was quiet in the grove except for the sounds made by the rustling leaves of the oak trees in a gentle breeze. A flock of ravens flew over us and disappeared beyond the forest. The sight gave me pain and chills. With a heavy breath we crossed ourselves and silently walked away and headed for my village.

The wide road ended where the village threshing yards used to be. To the left there was a wide metal door and behind it was a wide yard divided by a fence, behind which calves were mooing. There were many calves. On the opposite side was a house. A dog, tied to a post, was barking. A young man came out of the house. He greeted us in Greek and asked, "Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes..." I said, with tearing eyes as I looked over the entire yard...

"For who?" he asked.

I got a lump in my throat, my knees got weak and my chin began to tremble.

"My name is Lefteris. Please come in," he said inviting us inside the small house.

"First we will walk over to the elms," I said, "and then we will return..."

We left the car outside the farm (for fattening calves) and at a slow pace we walked on the street so that I could show my wife the village. After taking a few steps I closed my eyes to the emptiness, overgrown grass and weeds and in my imagination replaced them with the homes of the Nanovtsi, Damovtsi, Purdovtsi, Laskini, Popovtsi, Donovtsi, Liapovtsi, Pindzovtsi, Penovtsi, Shkoklovtsi, Trajkovci, Nakovtsi, Pandovtsi, Filiovtsi, Guliovtsi and other families. I imagined the fifty-four houses that existed here, in several rows, under whose roofs once lived over four hundred souls. I tried to imagine the feeling of the fifty or so other souls, who at the time were pechalbars (migrant workers) overseas, gone beyond the great waters, who never got a chance to return to see their homes and to visit with their families.

I spoke at great length, telling my wife about each house and the people who had lived in it, about the streets, about the time of the Greek

Civil War during which forty-three people were mobilized from whom twenty-nine were killed. I told her about the fifty-four children that were taken to Eastern European countries and about the seven families who fled to Kostur and Rupishta and all the other families that were exiled and scattered around the world.

“Well,” I said to her, “this emptiness was once a village and this void was once filled with life ...” “And here,” I said, “where we now stand was the house where I was born...” “Here,” I said, “was the large wooden door that was locked from the inside with a thick wooden lever. And there was the garden and behind it was the outdoor oven. Here is where the steps that led to the second floor used to be.” “Here,” I said, “is where my mother Fimka brought eight children into this world of whom three were given rifles, four were collected and sent to the Eastern European countries and one, the youngest, died in Albania. My brother, her third born son, left his soul in Gramos just before reaching his eighteenth birthday. So Fimka was left alone and, abroad where she lived, every night she dreamt the same dream - that some day soon all her children would again be together and have a meal at the same dinner table...”

My thoughts had taken me back to a time gone by, but then, for a moment I returned to reality, to the emptiness which again reawakened more memories, seeming like they were tied together by a chain, flooding back, pushing, scratching, pounding, squeezing, burning and creating sorrow. To calm my spirit I kicked some soil with my foot and out came a broken ceramic tile and underneath it, in the ashes, was a broken stone. I picked it up and blew away the ashes with my warm breath and then placed it near my heart but I could not feel my heart beating, it felt as if it too had turned to stone....

I took my photo album out of my backpack; a photo-album to which I had been adding old photographs year after year and from the photographs life began to sprout. Who were those people in the old photographs? What had happened to them? Who went where and who returned from where? Where are they today and what happened to them in the past?

Where!

The images of the people in the photographs seem to float, to come alive, to reflect on the life which now appears to me only in spirit and in shadows. Through the photographs I was able to see the people with their joy, sorrow and pain of what once was. What once was, is now gone. The families are gone. The houses are gone. Everything is gone. Only the ghosts and the shadows of the ghosts remain...

I look at the images in the photographs and imagine the people leaving, taking the road to banishment.

To what country did they go?

To what unknown latitudes of the world did time take them?

When did they leave?

Under what circumstances did they leave?
Did they travel one behind the other?
Did they leave quickly, en masse?
Time... What is time and what are people in time?
Time kills. Time wounds. Time heals. Time forgets. Time leaves no footprints. Time destroys. Time is a killer.
Is time a witness? Time passes. Time brings concerns. Time remembers. Time tells. Time verifies. Time accepts and rejects.
It is said at this and this time. During the time of great upheaval.
During the time of war. During the time of so and so plagues.
We are here. At the empty, naked, scarred place.
Time has passed, it has expired.
And here, now, at this time, today, at this moment of time, we are in a moment of time.
We are at the time divided between now and yesterday.
Time... Whose and what kind of time?..
We are here in time past, time without people and without homes; we are here in time present without life, only empty fields and flocks of crows.
Time. Whose time? What kind of time? Time for what? Time measured with what? Time marked with what and how? Time lost.
Time brings. Time brings what? Time of happiness. Time of hunger. Time of fear. For victims, lies and curses. Time for cursing, lies and betrayals. Time for cursing and waiting. Time compressed between times.
What kind? Time for remembering. Remembering what?
Time for existence, time for endurance, time for safeguarding time.
Here time was measured with time for digging foundations, for carving stones, for building walls, for laying roof tiles, for plowing and sowing, for living, for reaping crops, for celebrations, for holidays, for growing and aging, for happiness and sadness, for life...
After that time came time for war. It was a time of bad times, a time of great promises and many lies. It was time to separate the children from their mothers, it was time for eradication. It was a time of silence of the church bells. It was a time without faith in God.
Where did time stop?
Now there is only time for recollection of time past so that time past is not forgotten. Here now there is only now.
Will it last only that much, as long as we remain bowed over the burned out places and foundation remains of our homes?
Time remains in us forever preserved and baked in our memory.
Time over which the fog and dust of forgetfulness whirls and glides.
It is time for the fog to lift.
It is time for the dust that rests in time to be blown off.
It is time for ripening.

It is time to change time.

In the middle of the emptiness, a remnant of the bad times, the only building preserved was the Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa (Holy Virgin), which survived the Greek Civil War with only its roof, bell tower and altar demolished. The church was built in 1875 about which my grandfather spoke:

“Then, in Ottoman times, when our village was a chiflik (feudal estate), priests from Bulgaria and from Greece began to arrive. To us, the Christians from time immemorial, some said that we were Bulgarians and others told us that we were Greeks. We did understand some Bulgarian, but Greek not a single word. Both groups promised us many things, they even promised to liberate us from the Ottomans if we agreed to attend their sermons given in the Bulgarian or Greek language.

So the moment they mentioned “liberation”, the village was divided in two. Some wanted to be liberated by the Bulgarians and others by the Greeks. Half the village was received by the Bulgarian priest and the other half by the Greek. The families that were accepted by the Bulgarian priest, to the others, became known as “Bugaromani” and those accepted by the Greek priest, to the others, became known as “Grkomani”. Kostur, very early had fallen under the auspices of the Greek bishop, what was his name? Oh, I remember it was Karavangelis, right? No, no, at that time it was not him. I guess. Now who was it? He had comings and goings with the Ottoman authorities, and our Beg was a close relative of the Kaimakam that’s why he did not allow the “Bugaromani” to build a church in the middle of the village. They were kicked out of the village and were told they could go and pray in the old church of Sveti Atanas outside of the village. Their justification for not allowing the church to be built; Russia was about to declare war on the Ottomans, apparently to liberate Bulgaria...

Then a man was sent, carrying the symbol of the bishop from Kostur, asking the village to send someone so the bishop could speak with him. Such a man was sent and after offering him coffee and a lokum (Turkish delight) the Bishop got right down to business:

“You are saying that there should be a church built in the village centre, but not higher than the Mosque?”

“That is exactly right Father Bishop!” the man answered.

“And that’s the way it’s going to be, my son,” said the bishop, “that’s the way it’s going to be! Here kiss the cross and cross yourself...” replied the bishop, leaning over and taking a sip of coffee and leaning towards the man asked: “Money? I say money because you need money to build a church and not just wishes and prayers. Do you have money or are you expecting the Bulgarians to give it to you?”

“The Beg, Father Bishop, does not want the Bulgarians in the village – in the Chiflik...” replied the man.

“And that’s the way it is, it’s God’s will. Let Him be the glory of heaven. And money, my child, you are telling me you have no money? But if you turn our way, perhaps money could be found. That’s the way it is. Turn our way and maybe with God’s help money could be found in my treasury...” said the bishop.

“And in what language will liturgy be conducted?” asked the man.

“Well my child, in the language of who provides the money,” answered the bishop.

“We will think about it Father Bishop. It is not that easy. I am saying that the “word” and the “voice” are important things, Father Bishop. Our grandfathers left us a sign that in older times liturgy was conducted in the Slavonic language, the language of Kiril and Metodi, that is the way it has always been...” said the man.

“Well, if that’s the way it is my child then go beg the Bulgarians. They swear by Kiril and Metodi... Now go and think about it with your fellow villagers and come back in a few days...” replied the bishop.”

The Beg was in close contact with his people who were in collusion with the bishop and found out about the conversation. Then one day the Beg called my grandfather to his estate and told him the following:

“Be careful, both the Bulgarians and Greeks want your souls and not your faith. They give money to buy souls. We Turks are what we are. My great great great grandfather came here nearly three hundred years ago. He did not and neither did any of my later ancestors attempt to change your religion against your will. You have remained “kauri” (Christians) but you have not raised your hand against the empire. The Greeks and Bulgarians have raised their hand against the empire and what did they gain? They gained mutual hatred and foreign kings. Russia wanted to help them but the Port in Tsari Grad (Constantinople) sent its own people to the European kingdoms and there the Europeans whispered in their ears about “the meaning of Russia”. Those Europeans evaluated the situation from every angle and after measuring the benefits, they sent the Bulgarians and Greeks German kings.

May you live long and may the Supreme Being extend your years and safeguard your memory so that you can mention me for many years. The Greeks and Bulgarians and those Serbians further to the north, in time, will take your language and your souls. And if they don’t succeed in that, they will do everything in their power to diminish you so that even your shadows are not visible... You will disappear. Remember my words – bad people will overpower you and the time will come when you plead with us Turks to be your friends.

I am an educated man and I am giving you the benefit of my wisdom. I can see far and wide. I spent many years at school in Paris and now my sons are being educated there. My sons have written to me that the European kingdoms are spreading information that the Sultan is sick. You

understand? The Sultan is sick, meaning the Empire is sick. You understand? You are building a church, build one but be smart about it. But on whose advice will you build it? On the advice of the Exarchates or on the advice of the Patriarchates? All they want to do is to purchase your souls. But your souls are Macedonian. Stay with us, with the Ottomans. The Ottoman Empire will give you autonomy, if you can understand me, and after that, if you are smart, maybe you can create your own country. I am saying if you are smart because you will need to be smart to create a country. The time has come for the large, old empires to collapse and for new small and large countries to be born. Today everyone is working against our empire. The Ottoman Empire will be gone and you will be gone as well...”

This is what the Beg told my grandfather who often used to say:

“Since the Pope came into existence his view has always been to the east, because that’s where the world expands and prospers... The Western kingdoms think the same way...”

In October 1912, the Greek army entered Kostur when it found out that the city had been abandoned by the Ottoman army. It was about the same time that the Beg and my grandfather had another discussion sitting by the fireplace until early morning. In the meantime the women were packing suitcases and crates and loading them on wagons. Then, after shaking the ashes out of his tobacco pipe, Asan Beg said the following parting words to my grandfather:

“The time has come for me to go. The vine which my great ancestor began, receiving this place for showing bravery against the Poles, ends here. I was born here, I grew up here, I was married here and I went to war from here for the glory of Allah and the Sultan. For three hundred years the Raya (Christians) have remained under the shadow of my ancestors and myself. And you have remained Christians for those three hundred years with your own language, faith and name... thirty years ago with my permission, but with Greek money, you built a church in the middle of the village. Since then you have been divided into Patriarchates and Exarchates. You have created a great divide between yourselves and you have done that with their help, with the help of those who pretend to be your friends. How many times have I told you – to be smart about it, to use your good judgment. Under my authority you have not been slaves with regards to your language, faith and souls. Under the authority of your new masters you will be a slave with both your soul and language, even if you become a collaborator and a spy for them. In this fake world, outside of God, nothing is permanent...”

Asan Beg got on his white horse and before leaving he said the following to my grandfather:

“Goodbye Christian, goodbye and remember not to be a slave anymore...”

Asan Beg, riding his horse, took the lead of the ten loaded wagons and took to the road for Kapeshtitsa and from there to Bilishcha in Albania. After that we heard that he left for France where his sons were studying at the time. He left and after that he was never heard of again, as if he had drowned.

The church bells were ringing in Kostur, the Grkomani got out their Greek flags and hung them in their windows and on balconies. Without firing a single bullet, the Greek army entered the city and celebrated its great victory. A few days later Greek officials, escorted by the gendarmes, arrived in the city. They carried great big ledgers and in them they entered Turkish and Macedonian names as Greek adding to the old ancestral names: “os”, “is”, “u”. So that Damovski became Damopoulos, Petrovski became Petridis, Filiovski became Filipou... .

Did Asan Beg predict all this?

They say that the church Sveta Bogoroditsa has been renovated; it was not the same as I remembered it when I was a child. The wide enclosure of the porch in the yard, under which two sides had been lined with stones, was now gone. The belfry above the two wide halls where the faithful sat after service and where the women served food and drink from baskets for soul, health and prosperity was also gone. The church bell now hung from a beam in the ceiling. The icon of Christ with open arms hanging from the ceiling, protecting the parishioners was also gone. The throne was gone and so were the faithful, all gone... . On the altar, tossed in the corner and laden with dust was the christening vessel and beside it were icons, neglected, left there for the worms to make a meal... .

I stood in front of the large icon of Sveta Bogoroditsa, lit a candle and crossed myself three times and while staring into her eyes, I whispered: “Bogoroditse you did not protect the living in the past but please do not forsake their souls... .”

Lefteris was waiting for us in front of the large metal door leading to the farm that fattens calves. With a warm smile on his face he invited us inside the house. His home was poorly built with clay bricks and covered with sheet metal. An old woman greeted us at the front door. She wore slippers and a wide colourful dress and had a kerchief on her head, tied at the back.

“This is my mother,” said Lefteris and after the introduction, led us to a room. There was a hand-woven carpet on the floor, but all around the room, looking stubby, were the clay walls. In the middle of the room was a sofra (low table) and at the sides were cushioned wall benches. There was a door to the left leading to the kitchen. The woman greeted us one more time, seeming like it was a tradition to greet and shake hands with guests twice and after her second “καλος ηλθατε” (welcome) she sat us down on the benches. She continued to speak to us in Greek but I could detect she did not speak Greek with the proper accent. It seemed like she detected my

surprise and said: “We are Prosfigi (refugees [Asia Minor settlers])” and then began to lead us along the road which led her parents with two daughters and four sons, from Turkey to Revani, now called Dipotamia. She said and repeated that she was born eighty years ago and that she had lived in great poverty, but for the last ten years, since they came here and opened the farm for fattening calves they are doing better. Also they now have access to the majority of the fields here, which year after year, through state auctions, they have been able to acquire through bids. She says that the fields are not hers; they belong to those who had to leave because of the war, which she remembers well. She also thanked God for the soil being fertile and for the state purchasing their crops. She said they were not poor now as she pointed to the yard where two tractors, a combine, a passenger car and two trucks were parked. I got the impression that she saw my surprise and hastened to explain why they had not built a new house. She said that the land did not belong to them and then asked: “How can you build a house on land that does not belong to you?”

The hostess suddenly interrupted our conversation, tapped her forehead with her palm and said: “I am sorry I got caught up in the conversation and forgot to be hospitable.”

She went into the kitchen and returned with a dish full of lokumi (Turkish delight) and a tray of glasses full of water.

“Welcome and help yourselves. And will you have some coffee?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied “And please make it Turkish...”

“Turkish, of course,” she said, “but the coffee you are used to drinking is not real Turkish. I don’t know if you know or not, but if you don’t know I will tell you that real Turkish coffee is not boiled on an open fire or by flames and certainly not by an electric element. Real Turkish coffee is made when you allow the coffee to simmer slowly, to roast and develop a froth on top and the entire room is filled with its aroma, you then set it aside to rest from simmering and slowly pour it in a cup. This is real Turkish coffee, not the kind served in restaurants and cafés.”

“A relative of ours once ordered coffee in town,” she said, “and when he saw that there was no froth on top he complained to the waiter. The waiter took the coffee back to the kitchen and spat in the cup several times. And when he returned he said here is your coffee thick with froth. This is the king of coffee they serve in restaurants, boiled coffee. Real Turkish coffee is slowly roasted and you slurp it slowly when you drink it, inhaling each sip and then exhaling out loud with a long sigh. You then rinse your mouth with water to remove the coffee from your teeth and swallow the water so that the coffee will rest well in your stomach. Real Turkish coffee is very hot and sweet like a kiss...” concluded our hostess, laughing aloud when she went to light the fire.

And while the coffee was roasting on top of the wood stove, I looked into Lefteris's eyes and asked:

"Lefteris, what happened to the stones of the walls and foundations of our houses?"

There was silence. So I asked again:

"Lefteris, where are the stones of the walls and foundations of our Sveta Petka, Sveti Atanas, Sveti Giorgi, Sveti Jovan and Sveti Ilia Churches?"

Again there was silence. So I asked:

"Lefteris, what happened to the tombstones and slabs that were in the village cemeteries?"

Then after a long and deep silence, torn by a painful sigh, he said:

"They took them away with military trucks..."

"Who took them?" I asked.

"They, who wanted to build new houses..." he replied.

I did not ask who "they" were who took our stones to build new houses for themselves but I did ask myself this: "Who gave them permission to do that?" And my answer was: "They who did not want anything to remain here; to remind people that foundations and churches once existed here because if they existed then someone else might ask to whom did these churches and foundations belong? Who were these people, what happened to them and where did they go?"

We drank our Turkish coffee in silence and after thanking our hosts we bid them farewell and then left the void that was once my village. With us we carried our memories of the warm sunshine and blue sky, the green forest and the swishing sound of the wind, the aroma of chembritsa (thyme), the narcotic taste of mature forest strawberries and the wish that here, under the open sky and in the shade of the almonds, I failed to fulfil a wish to fall asleep and to dream of my childhood memories and of my most secret desires and sorrows.

The bitterness of wormwood, burned like mistletoe, stuck to my lips.

The church bell rang in the village. Was it sending us a prayer or calling us to prayer?

Dolno Papratsko. Two houses and, a little higher, a renovated church. The land looked like it was tilled and the stones crushed. At one spot it looked like someone had torn down the walls of a house looking for its foundation. With heavy hearts we stared at the desolation and remnants of this old village as we passed through and after a few minutes of driving around we took the road to Osheni, now called Inoi.

Inoi was the name of the village from which the newcomers were expelled. I remember Osheni to be a very poor village with houses built of clay brick and roofs covered with dried stalks of rye. The newcomers, the Prosfigi then, knew how to cultivate tobacco, corn and pumpkins. They brought these skills with them from their old Inoi in Turkey. Everything

else they needed they bought at the markets in Kostur and Rupishta where they mixed with the locals, the Macedonian population and learned to speak the Macedonian language and not Greek.

The new Inoi, in the past known as Osheni, now looks like a small city. Two and three story houses were built with carved stones and white façade walls and equipped with hydro electric power and telephone lines. The village has a gas station, a café, a pharmacy, streets paved with asphalt, a kindergarten, an elementary and high school and many passenger cars, tractors and combines. There is not a piece of land that is not plowed and if it is not sown with tobacco, corn, or pumpkins then it is sown with wheat.

Moving on to the next village...

In the middle of the village Aia Kiriaki (Sveta Nedela in Macedonian) there is a water spout with three faucets that runs non-stop with pure spring water. Above the faucets is a marble slab with the writing: “Για να ποτιζόντε η ρίζες της ποντιακής ιστορίας” (For watering the roots of Pontian history).

There is not a person who would not ask themselves: “What are the roots connected to the shores of the Black Sea doing here?” This metaphoric message is a burning reminder and an untamed memory of the longing for the homeland left for their descendents by the first Prosvigi brought to this village by force, which they never accepted with their hearts.

The new generations born and grown here are only present in body but not in soul, heart and thought. Their souls, hearts and thoughts belong to their ancestral home, a far away place located on the shores of the Black Sea which official Greece calls “χαμενες πατρηδες” (lost homeland). Even though it is a lost homeland, the Prosvigi still keep it alive with their jealously guarded memories and traditions passed on from generation to generation.

The spring flows non-stop as the inscription on the slab above is a constant reminder of a lost homeland. The Greeks call these people “prosvigi (refugees) a constant reminder that they are outsiders and not like the Greeks themselves, subjecting them to ridicule and daily abuse with derogatory and demeaning words and anecdotes. The Prosvigi on the other hand continue to speak the language of their ancestors, a language Greeks don’t understand, not only at home but also in public places, restaurants and cafés.

Here in Sveta Nedela the old memories of the Prosvigi have not faded, they are kept alive with the Macedonian spring that constantly pours water...

On the Road of Time – Chapter 4

“This must be the house of the person we are looking for,” I said to my wife and parked the car near the wrought iron fence. Behind the house was a wide courtyard all green with low cut grass. There were blooming roses on both sides of the concrete path leading to the front door of the house. I rang the door chime by pressing the button welded to the iron gate pillar. The entrance door to the house opened and a crippled, old person appeared. Leaning on a crutch the limping person approached us and asked in Greek: “Who are you and who are you looking for?”

“I am the person,” I said, “who, about two hours ago, called on the telephone...”

The old person thought for a moment and suspiciously moved around. I pointed to my car and as soon as he saw the licence plate he calmly spoke in Macedonian: “Welcome, please come in.”

The room we were led into by our host was wide, its floor covered with colourful rugs and hanging on the walls were many photographs of various sizes. The photographs were of people of varying ages wearing clothing, hats and hair styles from different times and different countries. The old man seemed to understand my curiosity and began to explain:

“This photograph is the oldest,” he said. “Those two are my grandfather and grandmother and behind them are my father and mother and the rest are aunts and uncles. This photograph is of my father taken in America. And this photograph is of nearly all the people in my village. It was taken during Easter. It says so on the back of the photograph. The majority of them lost their lives in the mountains during the Greek Civil War. This is my son; he is the oldest. He was killed during the battle for Voden. I don’t know where he is buried. In this photograph beside him is my younger son, my daughter-in-law and my grandchildren. He was educated in Romania and became a doctor and my daughter-in-law is a professor.

The grandchildren took after their father. They live in Skopje and frequently come to visit us. My wife and I also visit them but not very often. We are getting old... Honestly to tell you the truth, I am very bitter when I am there. I feel uneasy when I hear “those Aegeans this and these Aegeans that”. Listening to them bicker and argue with each other using the name “Aegeans” makes me feel as if they want to disassociate from us; as if we are not Macedonians...

This person here in this picture is me. Most of the others are from neighbouring villages, some are from further away. This picture was taken about a month before the war with Italy began, which is why we are all dressed in military uniforms. They summoned us to defend Greece from the Italians. And where do you suppose the Italians would have passed to get into Greece? Most likely right through our lands, that is why none of

our men fled or hid to avoid the draft. The war began in the fall and we managed to push the Italians back and pursue them to Ivan Mountain and after that to Pogradets. Our Greek superiors were full of praises speaking “big words” about us, telling us how brave and fearless we were, slapped us on the back and interrupted us to say “bravo, bravo, vre palikaria, Makedones” (bravo, bravo, brave Macedonians)... Yes, that is exactly what they were calling us... Macedonians...

This picture here was taken in Ai Strati. The island Ai Strati was a prison camp before and after the war. This is where many of those Macedonian “palikaria”, who fought the Italians and pushed them back, ended up. They did not praise us and slap us on the back here, they just cursed us, swore at us and beat us with sticks, whips and rifle butts...

This is me here. There were many of us there, from all over Greece. I read in the paper that now they are building a museum there. Let them build it so that the world can learn the kind of evil one man can perpetrate against another. From almost one thousand souls the Greek Civil War left only hundreds. They did not leave with the communists. They did not want to be saved by the communists. They saved themselves by hiding in the forests and damp mountain caves. When the bad passed they returned to their homes. The Greek Civil War not only caused devastation but it eradicated our people. Those who left to be saved were exiled and gone for good. If it wasn't for the communists they too would be home now. Very few of us are left now but we are at home...

I am telling you that two or three years after the Greek Civil War was over they released us. Those of us who were serving time in prisons and in the dry Greek island camps were let out, they let us go. We were able to return to our homes. We found our villages empty, desolate. We started rebuilding from the ground up; we began a new life if I can call it that. We were ordered once a week to report to the police station so that they could see that we were still here and to warn us that the prison camps still existed. And not only that, they sat you down on a chair and a policeman sat on other side of the table, to the left and to the right also were policemen leaning on their hardwood clubs. The policeman sitting in front of you persistently looked into your eyes, pierced you with his eyes and with his fist, slowly as if counting blows, pounded on the table. At the same time he continuously tapped the floor hard with his boot. The look, the pounding, the tapping noises overpowered you, caused you to sweat, caused your mouth to become dry, your throat to tighten, to run out of air, everything went black before your eyes, your heart beat faster, your body contracted...

The policeman kept doing this until fear penetrated your bones, until fear overpowered your mind, until fear grabbed you by the throat, the chest, it squeezed you, it choked you, it drowned you and when he saw that you were choking, shaking, ready to pass out, then he knew that he

had you where he wanted you; that's when the boot stopped banging on the floor and the fist stopped pounding on the table... Finally the blood of fury spilled out of his eyes and out of his lips came some hidden wisdom and, without taking his eyes off you, he handed you a piece of paper and silently, almost good naturedly, said: "Read out loud!"

Then you read: "I the undersigned, of my own will, consciously and without coercion, before the competent authorities, declare that I resign from being a communist"...

He then would take the signed paper, put it in an envelope and say: "Excellent! You are free to go but come back in a week!" The next week it's the same thing, sometimes worse. Again he would hand you a piece of paper and tell you: "Read! Read out loud!" And again you would read: "I the undersigned, of my own will, consciously and without coercion, before the competent authorities, declare that I will be loyal to the state and will respect all laws." He then would take the signed paper, put it in the same envelope and say: "You are free to go but come back in a week!"

You go home with an expressionless, dehumanized face. You go to bed in fear, you dream fear and you wait for the next day in fear. With terrible threats, glaring looks, tight fists, whipping rods, whips, wooden bats, slapping hands, wild yelling, listening under your window and winking at the collaborators who spied on you, they sowed fear into us, the "Palikaria Makedones" (brave Macedonians)... Fear on the road, in the field, in the vineyard, in the garden, at the market, in the store, at the post office, in front of the window. How can you overcome the fear? How can you free yourself from it? They found a way – a passport and a one way ticket. This is how many were freed from the fear and the Greek state from them.

They stubbornly stared into your eyes and waited for your muscles to quiver, your hands to shake, a pale complexion to develop on your face, sweat to form on your forehead, your chin to tremble... Fear for the individual and fear for the masses. The fear of one to be transplanted into another until it grabs everyone. The police were not the only entity that sowed fear, there were also the village mayor, the teacher, the priest, the judge and the court system, the military, the church, the radio and the newspapers. For example the newspaper "Φωνη της Καστοριας" (Voice of Kastoria), wrote something against us every day, it was calling us all kinds of repulsive names like snakes, savages and calling on all of us to "go to Tito", to disappear from the face of the earth...

I am telling you, the next week I went to the police station, I sat on the same chair at the same table and I took a look at the open piece of paper that the policeman shoved under my nose and ordered: "Read the part that is written in black ink." I looked at it and recognized it to be my son's handwriting. "Read!" the policeman shouted at me.

The letters sent to us from the countries behind the iron curtain were not delivered to our homes by the post office. When such a letter arrived, the post office informed us to report to the police station where the letter waited for us. We went to the police station to pick up our mail.

“I am waiting!” hissed the policeman while pounding his boot on the floor.

And what do I read in the letter? A request for me to fight against the Greek Monarcho-Fascists and against Anglo-American imperialism! The moment I read that part, “slap” the policeman hit me on the face, full force, with his hand, turning the letters on the page into stars in my eyes... A few days later the post office advised me that another letter had arrived and that I was to report to the police station to pick it up. The policeman handed me the letter and said: “Here, they are calling you to go to war again.”

The call to war was a bit longer in this letter but the handwriting did not match that of my son’s. Another hand had written this letter. The policeman put a piece of paper in front of me and said: “Read! Then sign it!”

I read it out loud: “I the undersigned, of my own will, consciously and without coercion, before the competent authorities, declare that I renounce my son who is now behind the Iron Curtain in communist countries...” I stopped reading, returned his paper and said to him: “My son wrote only what someone else told him to and you know who told him to do that, so go and ask him to explain and have him sign the paper...” and then I left without asking for permission.

They called me back wanting to see me again. But this time it wasn’t just me. Several buses were parked in the village square and there were men present from the surrounding villages. Someone said that we should board the buses. After we did they closed the doors and told us that we were going to the village Melas, known as Statitsa in earlier times. We stopped for twenty minutes in Aposkep, just enough time to enjoy the beautiful Kostur and Lake Kostur scenery and after that we arrived in Gabresh. The old village was on the left of the road; it was now desolate. The houses built out of clay bricks had fallen. All that was left of Gabresh were walls and gaping holes where the doors and windows used to be, looking gruesome. To the right, on the other side of the river, was the new Gabresh and in front of the bridge was a house with writing on top of the door which read “Police”. The new Gabresh resembled a small city with a public school, high school, post office, a new church, a drug store, several café’s, running water, sewerage, electricity, paved streets and a police station. “Neo Gavros” (New Gabresh) was constructed to gather all the villagers from the surrounding villages into one community supposedly to give them a better life but it was done for better control.

Ten kilometers or so later we arrived in Statitsa, or Melas as they call it now. Melas was the new name given to this village to honour a Greek person (Pavlos Melas) who, with a handful of paid mercenaries (himself also paid), came from Athens to free Macedonia from the Ottomans. The Greeks say a Turkish bullet cut him down in Dolno Statitsa. But with so many Turkish bullets flying that day, why was he the only casualty? Let me say that the Turkish army was not looking for Melas, it was looking for some Macedonians, leaders from the Ilinden Uprising. The house in which Melas was killed is still intact and has been turned into a museum dedicated to the Macedonian struggle, as the Greeks call it, especially dedicated to Pavlos Melas who they made into a legend. There is no school in Kostur Region where a portrait of Melas does not hang.

There is much written about Pavlos Melas, but nowhere is it written where and when he led a battle, even a small battle, against the Turkish Army to liberate Macedonia. No one has written about what really happened to his backpack after his death, in which he had gold to pay his “Palikaria” (braves), his spies and collaborators...

Every year after his death, on the day of Melas’s anniversary, the village holds celebrations dedicated in his honour. Police officers, bishops, priests and many cousins of Kote from Rula, attend the celebrations. The military band plays marches while bishops and teachers give speeches. And those, the locals making fun of him, now very few in number, in his memory quietly hum a song written about him a long time ago by the pranksters from the surrounding villages, which goes something like this:

Е, ре Павле, ре Павле, (Oh, Pavle, Pavle),
Паметвиш ре Павле, (Do you remember, oh Pavle),
Кога се криеме о ена воденица, (When we were hiding in a mill),
О која најдоме ена вдовица, (In which we found a widow),
Која ни даде биеница, (who gave us buttermilk),
И му трнаме по ена палица? (And we each put in her a rod?)

(The above text belongs to the Kostur Region folk language and the accent falls at the end of each word).

On our return from Melas some teacher, and after that a bishop, attempted to convince us that the language we spoke at home was “nasty”, “ugly”, “funny”, “unfriendly” and very hostile and detrimental to the Greek spirit. Some time later the men from our village were gathered in the church yard. The church bell rang, the Greek flags were swirling and a military band played Greek patriotic marches; mostly the following march:

Μακεδονια ξακουστη (Celebrated Macedonia)
Του Αξανδρου χωρα (Alexander’s country)

Εδιοξες τον Βουλγαρο (You banished the Bulgarian)
Και εισε ελευθερη τωρα (And now you are free)

While the music was playing and thundering, priests and bishops were gathering on the stage all dressed in their best robes preparing for a great service. There were senior army and police officers all decked out with decorations hanging from their chests. Also in attendance were the Mayor of Kastoria, village teachers, village mayors, journalists and all sorts of other people. There were more of them than there were of us ... and all around were soldiers and policemen.”

The old man suddenly stopped talking, took a long sigh, opened a cupboard and took out a bundle of papers. He blew the dust off the papers and with trembling fingers untied the bundle and began to arrange the yellowed newspaper clippings on the table. And while straightening the crumpled up edges he asked: “Can you read Greek? If you can’t, I will read for you.” He then divided some paper clippings from the pile and while mixing his Kostur dialect with the Macedonian literary language, he said: “Written here is when we swore that we would never speak our language again. Look and see what is written... The paper has yellowed but you can still see the black ink, the words are still legible. Look and see what’s written. I will read it to you in Greek and after that I will tell you what it says.”

He coughed, adjusted his reading glasses, and with a shaky voice began to read:

“Υποσχομαι ενωπιον του Θεου, των ανθρωπων και των επισημων αρχων του κρατους μας, οτι απο σημερον θα παυσω να ομιλω το σλαβικον ιδιωμα, που μονον αφορμην προς παρεξηγησιν διδει εις τους εχρους της χωρας μας, τους Βουλγαρους, και οτι θα ομιλω παντου και παντοτε την Ελληνικην, εις την οποια ειναι γραμμενο και το Ιερον Ευαγγελιον του Χριστου μας.” (I promise before God, before the people and before the Government officials of our state, that from today forward I will refrain from speaking the Slavonic idiom, which is only a false cause for the enemies of our state, the Bulgarians, and that always and everywhere I will speak only the Greek language in which the Holy Bible of our Christ is written.)

After taking the oath and kissing the bishop’s hand, who stood by the church yard exit, we left for home. When we arrived at our houses, my neighbour leaned over to me and quietly whispered in my ear: “Now that we have taken the oath that we will never speak our language again, how will we communicate with our wives?”

We looked at each other and hid our laughter by covering our mouths with our hands. Then when I entered my yard, even before I had a chance to go inside the house, my wife asked: “How did it go, what did you do?” I

yelled at her, “Don’t ask stupid questions, just get us something to eat...” forgetting the oath I had just taken.

All of Greece learned about the oath we took. It would seem that there was no newspaper that did not jump at the chance to write about this great Greek state accomplishment. Listen to what the newspaper “Eleftherotipia” wrote on July 7th, 1959:

“All the inhabitants from the village Karidia (Macedonian name Tremino), Ptolemaida District, were gathered together in the courtyard of the primary school. There, during a solemn service, the villagers took an oath that they would never speak the Slavic dialect again, at no time and in no place. After that various officials spoke, including the President of Kozani District, the Chief of Police and others, expressing hope that the residents of Karidia would be an example to all Greeks at the border zone.”

The next day the newspaper “To Vima” wrote:

“It can’t be perceived that which took place in one of the Kailari Region villages, when in the school yard the local population was gathered and took an oath not to speak in the Slavo-Macedonian dialect. That decision shows to the Macedonians that the Greek consciousness has never gone away in the Greeks of Macedonia and that the language that was used as a habit and as a result of pressure imposed in old times, does not change their feelings towards the Greek homeland. The Slav-Macedonian language should have been banned a long time ago. But now it is still not too late and it should be underlined and used as an example for other Greeks settled in Macedonia who now speak that language, something that is used by foreign propaganda to challenge the Greek character of Macedonia’s population.”

The old man stopped reading and asked me: “What did you understand from this?”

I expressed amazement with my eyes and he continued: “A month later on August 4th the Solun newspaper “Elinikos Voras”, with large letters, informed its readers as follows:

“Moved by the excellent initiative of patriotism expressed by the village Karidia in Ptolemaida District, the residents of the beautiful Kostur Region village Kria Nera (Macedonian Ludovo) who until now, besides Greek, spoke a foreign dialect, and in the presence of the competent authorities, spontaneously resolved to take an oath that they would completely forget that language and in the future they, along with their children, would always and exclusively speak the Greek language. The villagers, each raising their right hand, swore by repeating word for word the entire oath read to them by the blessed metropolitan, in an extremely heartening atmosphere.”

In the Athenian newspaper “Kathimerini” on August 11th, 1959 the following was written:

‘A ceremony was held in the Lerin Region village Atrapos (Macedonian Krpeshina) in which the village residents took an oath that in the future they would not speak in their Slavonian dialect. The ceremony was attended by representatives from the Florina authorities and from one hundred local district boards along with many peasants from the surrounding villages. The prefect Depas gave a speech in which he praised the initiative taken by the Atrapos residents.’”

The old man placed the newspaper clippings in my hand and, looking into my eyes, asked: “Are they heavy?”

I moved my hand as if to measure their weight.

“It’s paper...” I said in a stretched out tone.

“As papers they weigh nothing, but what is written on those papers, is that heavy?” he asked.

We looked into each other’s eyes in silence and at that very moment it seemed to me that the black letters were beginning to get hot and started burning my hand...

With a deep sigh I returned the clippings and he carefully placed them back in the cupboard and, after closing the door, he whispered:

“And just like that, whether you were home, on the farm, in the vineyard, garden, or market and after returning home, you constantly thought ‘how can I get rid of this fear?’ And while you were thinking about that, they had already conceived of a way to free you from your fear. They called you in and told you, ‘They are seeking workers in overseas countries’. Do you want to toil in poverty here or do you want to go there with your whole family? You will receive a passport and a ticket for free provided that you won’t want to return here... And as such many were liberated from their fear and at the same time Greece got rid of them...”

And that time was a time of lies, of humiliation, of betrayal, of cruelty, of spite, of neighbour turning against neighbour, of slander, of distortion, of destruction of what life meant; it was a filthy and inhumane time. And as much as it was ugly and damned, that time should be remembered because we were in that time and because that time swallowed us. And those times made time to be the worst and to be more injurious because that way fear could be delivered fastest and roots could be uprooted easiest...”

The old man stopped for a moment, coughed into his hand and said:

“It’s better now. They don’t oppose us. We speak our language inside our homes and outside. We listen to the radio on all frequencies and in all languages. We watch television on all the channels we get and can understand. I have two antennas; one looking to the north and the other looking to the south. They don’t prevent our guests from coming to visit us and they don’t call us to the police station after we return from our travels. Those in Athens are concerned a lot about us, have done and are doing a lot for us, but for you, for those of you who want your lands and

citizenship back, those in Athens did their math which can be shown by this equation: $A1 + A2 + A3 = 0$. And you know how you solve this equation? Like this: A1 is the group of people who were born between 1895 and 1915. All those in A1 have now died and left those born after 1915, meaning A2. A2 is the most hated group because it participated in the Greek Civil War and was spread over the communist countries. And that too is coming to a close. To this group they added the group indicated by A3, which is the group of children collected by the communists and taken to Eastern European countries. Now they will wait a little longer, ten to fifteen years until A3 also disappears. And after that they write down the result 'ZERO'. You ask, 'What about the children from the A3 group?' For them, the places where their fathers and grandfathers were born will remain a memory. And this is the math perpetrated by Athens."

Time kills...

On the Road of Time – Chapter 5

The road of time and tracing old memories took us to the village Ezerets, now called Petropoulaki. The name “Ezerets” is a very old name. This village got its name from another and much older village, which at one time existed higher up the foot of Mount Orle. Mount Orle, according to an old legend, got its name from the tall boulder on top of the mountain whose peak looks like an eagle’s head. According to another legend, the mountain got its name from the numerous white-headed eagles that once existed around this mountain, now almost extinct.

It is said that the old village was built in the middle of a mountain lake, now dry. We visited the place and all we could find were remnants of thick walls, where stones were dug out, and broken ceramic tiles. Further up the mountain was a sand cliff on which hollowed out rows could be seen. It has been said that between the rows there was some sort of writing, not in Greek but in Cyrillic letters and that during the Metaxa dictatorship in 1936 people came from the south and carved out the letters with pickaxes.

The new name now given to the village Ezerets was to honour some Greek man from the Island of Crete named Petropoulakis. As the story goes, this man leading a group of “palikaria” (strong men), mostly former prisoners, scoundrels and thieves, came to Kostur Region to free Macedonia from the Ottomans. In supposedly doing so Petropoulakis got himself killed, but it is unknown by whose doing. He was killed not at Ezerets but at Snicheni, a neighbouring village, which today is called Kastenafito because there are many chestnut trees growing there. It is unknown if any of his “palikaria” were killed and what happened to the sack of money after he died. But as the story goes, the frightened villagers from Snicheni secretly, during the night, took the “brave” dead man’s body and carried it over to the village Ezerets where it was later found. And that is the reason why Ezerets was named Petropoulaki.

There is no museum in Ezerets to honour Petropoulakis and it is not clear where his grave is located. There are no celebrations held to remember Petropoulakis, the Greek hero from Crete, or his “palikaria”.

Ezerets, once a thriving village with over a hundred houses and more than five hundred souls, is now empty. The ten or so people who survived the war moved on to Rupishta (now named Argos Orestikon). Ezerets comes alive during the spring and especially during the summer when the villagers, now living in cities, return to check on their houses, take their vacations in the cool clean air and clear mountain spring water, to clear the foliage around the tombstones and graves of their ancestors and loved ones and to light a candle. By doing so, they celebrate their endurance and survival.

Everywhere we looked our eyes met with ruins, remnants of the Greek Civil War. Decaying houses on whose doors locks were hung, a long time

ago. Locks hung by the owners who never returned from the road of the great lie. Owners who, forever, remained in the Eastern European countries... And the only evidence of their existence here are the falling houses, the locked gates, the rusted padlocks hanging on the gates, the dark and broken windows and the sagging roofs...

Ezerets survived the fires and sackings brought on by the Ottomans, the Albanian raids, the island robberies, the Italian and German assaults but not the ravages of the Greek Civil War which pushed the village into desolation.

For the people of Ezerets and for all those passing by, it seems like “the south” ends at the edge of Mount Odré whose peak lies at an altitude of 1525 meters above sea level. Beyond there the mountain slope is so sharp that it seems like the world comes to an end. When the south wind blows it carries with it air from the top of the mountain down the steep slope to the flat area of the land and with it, it brings a pleasant mountain tea aroma.

Early in the morning on a clear day, one can see the entire Kostur valley, the lake and all the surrounding villages from the top of the mountain. To the right one can see the slumbering Mount Siniachka, with its treeless top covered in fog. Straight ahead beyond Mali-Madi, standing tall, one can see Vicho and further, further back in the fog, barely visible, are Pelister and Ivan Mountains. To the left are Kopanche, Sveti Ilia, Krusha and Gorisha Mountains and behind is Kotelska Kula with its highest peak at elevation 1758. On the south side of Kotelska Kula is a steep rocky slope and at the bottom rests the village Kotili (Macedonian Koteltsi).

On the peak of the mountain we counted eight rows of trenches now shallow and overgrown with plants and grass. Around the trenches among the plants and grass we found rusted bullets and more empty shells than rock pebbles. On the peak of the mountain is a weathered old rock on which, carved by someone’s hand, is the date “July 16, 1947”. In the afternoon of that day the only two men remaining alive, from a Partisan detachment belonging to the fighters of the Democratic Army of Greece, were left there to defend that hill. When they ran out of ammunition, to avoid being captured by government soldiers, they jumped off the steep hill and landed in an abyss. Two men, one Greek the other Macedonian, met the same fate at the bottom of the abyss. We later found out that one of them was Vane Dorov Malkov from the village Sheshevo, Kostur Region, grandson to a revolutionary who died at Nozhot.

The rock at Kotelska Kula is very steep, like a wall, and the abyss is very deep. How long does the fall from top to bottom last? What can we call and how can we measure the act of those two men? Someone’s hand scratched the day, month and year on the rock but the dust that rests on it is blown by the north wind and washed only by the rain... There is moss

and sometimes a rare flower growing in the cracks. The entire space in front of the rock cliff is still marred by the remnants of trenches in which lush green grass and many mountain flowers now grow. I thought I should collect some flowers and create a wreath. I bent over, not to collect flowers but to bow before the dust and the shadows of those whose remains were left there forever... I stood up and looked all around and for a moment I heard a female voice, it was the voice of the eighty year old Partisan Mita. She began talking:

“The mountains of Northern Pindus are huge. This is a region commonly known as Gramos. They have tall hills, some are bare, some are rocky, some have hundred year old pines and dark forests growing on them, some have natural springs of water running, chiseling channels through them. During the night when the sky is clear the heavens appear woven with rows of stars. The stars seem to be so close that you can knock them off and they will land in your hand. The early mornings are clear, moist with dew, cool and blanketed with white fog filling all the deep valleys and depressions. Then there are the dark clouds, black and fearsome, carrying cold and long lasting rain. They appear suddenly with strong and loud thunder with echoes carrying through the long and deep brooks, cracks and ravines. There are also the gentle white clouds which carry heat.

The winds are sometimes so strong they can topple you over. The ageless trees bend and sway as waves of them hit them and push against them. Swirling winds make loud noises as they enter rocky chasms and crevices and brush against the southern rocky terrain; stripping and smoothing its edges. The northern side is overgrown with all kinds of trees and all the green foliage your heart desires. It is very hot during the day; the rocks heat up so much you can fry an egg. From the high hills the eye can see the entire Kostur valley and surrounding settlements. You can see Vicho and beyond that you can see Kaimakchalan and the higher hills of Mount Pelister. To the south you can see the summit of Mount Olympus. The winters here are very cold and a lot of snow falls on the mountains. There are many blizzards that pile the snow in high drifts creating treacherous conditions and making the region impenetrable. These mountains are best suited for spring conditions. It's lovely up here during the spring. The fall is okay but at times it is hazy, damp, foggy and cold.

It was decided that we were to face our opponent here, at Gramos. We were to ambush him right here, “said Mita, the old Partisan woman, who at the time was only eighteen years old, “from these stationary bunkers and trenches, which we were then occupying. This is where we became repeated targets for the enemy. It was here that we waited for the enemy with only our infantry weapons, several mountain cannons and with only five thousand cannon shells. Were they enough to crush the enemy? Yes, we were told by High Command and by the military leadership. The

enemy, on the other hand, threw more cannon shells at us in the course of one twenty-four hour day, than we had in total, all put together. Not to mention the number of mortars and bombs dropped on us from the sky by their air force...

Here behind the rocks and mountain peaks people were hard, stronger than the rocks. This is how we were and that was recognized and documented by the reports generated by the opposing generals. This is also well-documented in their memoirs and military notes. They said that the “nofiti” meaning us the Macedonians, are fighters with a strong spirit, great physical endurance and above all, very brave fighters.

We defended ourselves and we were protected by the rocks, the mountain peaks, the forests... Our opponent knew where we hid our heads and every day he beat us with his cannons, mortars and most of all with his aerial bombs dropped from above by his air force. And in places where it was difficult to break through, with American permission, he used napalm bombs brought here from America. And when that did not work, Athens asked for permission to use a special kind of bomb, which had just arrived in Greece, but Washington did not allow it. These bombs were new to the world and if used they could have destroyed and burned everything. And after their use, there may not have been any life left. But the tanks, their shells could not reach all the way here to the front lines. The terrain was rough and steep and the goat paths were too narrow for them to travel on.

Count the days from July 14 to August 22, 1948, how many days are there? That’s how many days and nights the battle lasted. That’s how many days and nights we lasted. I remember the first days of the battle, when the government brigades couldn’t break our defenses, when the aircraft were pounding us with some sort of special bombs. They had dropped bombs on us before but these particular bombs, brought here from America, were called napalm. They were terrible, everything burned from them, heaven and earth. We were also burning, but we learned how to protect ourselves, unfortunately, day by day there were fewer of us left and our space became smaller and smaller...

I remember the evening of the sixtieth day when the order was given to withdraw to new positions. These were the last positions. Behind us was Albania. In the night we took a count of how many of us were left. From the 460 men and women fighters aged 16 to 22, which was the number of fighters in our battalion before the battle started, 95 were left alive 60 of which were wounded. Who can you patch up first and who can you carry to the hospital? Some died in our hands...

Many years have passed since then. Many of the fighters who survived by now have also passed on. Participants of this episode cannot talk about their lost youth without tears in their eyes. They try to escape it but deep down in their consciousness and in their memories, the images are stored of that world, which they, like an incurable wound, have to carry with

them all their lives...” concluded old Mita.

I asked myself “Were the young men and women born between the years 1920 to 1930, the backbone of Vicho and Gramos, brave?”

Standing on top of the hill behind which the deep Kotelska Kula abyss lies, I attempted to imagine, to form a picture of the two men who plunged to their death. But for me that picture was vague, it was far from the reality of war which then was part of their lives. A war which left some on the timeless side, others maimed and crippled for life and yet others forced into exile forever. A large number of whom, to this day, remain expatriated in foreign lands and among foreign people...

My attempts to imagine, to form a picture of what it was like when the fires of Gramos were burning and how the young men and women felt when bullets, steel shells and bombs were dropping on them from the English and American aircraft, were pale in comparison...

From here and beyond, standing tall, were the mountains Bel Kamen, Gorna Arena, Dolna Arena, Charno, Krastavets, Aliabitsa, Gramos and other mountain peaks where, from July 14th to August 22nd, 1848, many young Greek and Macedonian men and women, from both sides of the battle zones, lost their lives.

Yesterday we visited that part of the old hell. The entire time silence was our only companion. The only sound we heard was the swishing wind passing between the leaves and thick trunks of the pine and beechwood trees, scarred by the cannon and mortar shells a long time ago. There are tons of pieces of iron littering the soil, now overgrown with thick green grass. It is unknown which number more around the bunker and trench remnants, the pebbles and small stones or the bullets, empty shells and shrapnel.

Lying on the rocky hill, overgrown with ferns, under whose shadow wild strawberries grow, I found a large piece of an aerial bomb and half a mortar shell. I put the pieces of iron in my backpack and took them with me as souvenirs. When I placed the backpack over my shoulder and felt its weight I began to wonder: “How much lead and iron fell on the young men and women during those seventy days and nights when they were defending these mountains? How many of them died, how many survived and how many were pulled out of there maimed and mutilated for life?”

In those days, these mountains, hills, rocks and hill tops were symbols of unprecedented devotion and bravery. Now, after much time has passed, a question comes to mind: “What was the purpose of the eight thousand or so Partisans, soldiers of the Democratic Army of Greece, entering the trenches and bunkers with only infantry weapons? Did they think they could resist the government army of eighty thousand well-armed soldiers with all kinds of modern weapons?”

Macedonian and Greek young men and women died here defending these dry hills, rocks and mountain tops. They lost their lives to the cannon

shells, mortars, napalm and other bombs brought to Greece on ships from America. Were they satisfied with the weapons and ammunition delivered to them on mules, horses, donkeys and on the fragile backs of the Macedonian women from the Kostur and Prespa Region villages?

These women were living witnesses who every night, in columns of 300 to 500, loaded beasts of burden, travelled the narrow paths from Rulia to Breznitsa, Smrdesh, Lobanitsa, Krchishta, Novoseleni, Shak, Revani and Kalevishta to deliver ammunition to the storage depots at Pilikati, Janoveni, Slimnitsa, Omotsko and Tuhuli or directly to the combat zones. Those were women aged 16 to 60. How long is the road from Prespa to Gramos? It was as long as the night lasted, from sunrise to sundown. Daytime was reserved for the flying aircraft. Nothing could travel and survive under the shadow of the metal hawks...

We traveled the same path, not on foot but by car. The then narrow goat paths have now been widened and paved with asphalt. They passed through the villages which today do not exist and testify that there were churches and some tombstones in the desecrated cemeteries. Today there are no houses, not even remnants of houses. If the Madziri (Turkish Christian colonists) villages in Kostur Region were built with chiselled stones, then those are the stones taken by military trucks, during the fifties and sixties, from the houses in the villages Smrdesh, Lobanitsa, Kosinets, Krchishta, Vmbel, Dmbeni, Dolno Papratsko, Novoseleni, Kalevishta...

Their houses are beautiful. The foundations and walls of their new houses were built with the stones of our houses, churches and tombstones, markers of our ancestors. Those of our people who remained say, and I repeat: "If our people did not leave and cross over the border, their houses would have been larger and more beautiful for certain."

Today is Sunday and the church bell at Sveti Nikola Church in Ezerets is ringing, calling us to prayer. I noticed that the bell rang longer than is usual. The last six tolls were longer and quieter than the previous ones and there were longer echoes in the distance.

"For whom does the bell toll?" I asked. No one opened their mouth to give me an answer. I persisted trying to get an answer but the people from Ezerets, as if conspiring, would not speak.

After worship we gathered at Pop (Reverend) Sterio's house. During a lengthy conversation about the village and its past, I asked the reverend: "Father, for whom did the church bell toll softly and at length?"

"For the souls..." he said quietly and, with a shaky voice, he told us about the event about which only the old people spoke and only in secret.

"March 17, 1905, it was a Friday when a group of Greek "palikaria" entered the village. They said they were searching for Macedonian revolutionary leaders but they were acting strangely. They went from house to house ransacking people's cellars and barns. But it wasn't revolutionaries they were after, they were looking for gold. When they

came up empty handed they selected six men from the village and took them to Sveti Ilia Church located just outside of the village. There they tortured the men for a long time and in the end they cut the vertebrae and tendons at the back of their necks and left them there alive to bleed to death. They would not allow the villagers to help the men so they died in agony. The villagers then buried the men during the night and since then no one outside of the people of Ezerets knows the whereabouts of their eternal resting place.”

Pop Sterio placed his finger on his lips. By that gesture we understood that we couldn't talk about it. This historic episode could only be remembered in silence.

“Anyone in the village can tell you what their names were, but no one will speak about where they were buried. We can't tell because we know someone will come and desecrate their eternal resting place. One hundred years have passed and no one has muddied their dreams. But now I will tell you their names and where they are resting,” said Pop Sterio.

Slowly, quietly, in silence, walking as if in a funeral procession, we got there... Pop Sterio crossed himself and we too made the sign of the cross, all in silence. We kept quiet staring at Pop Sterio's cane as he pointed with it to the eternal resting places. He said: “Here lies Sterio Sidovski, whose name I carry. He was thirty-five years old when he died and left behind four children, Ziso, Kosta, Ritsa and Tana. Next to him lies Sterio Fotovichin, a young unmarried man. On that side is Petro Nikolov. He did not have any children. Next to him is Sterio Liochkovski. There is Stavre Stavrovski and next to him is Gele Shomovski...”

We prayed for their eternal peace and went back to Pop Sterio's house. In our conversation, in which we embroidered the distant past, I told Pop Sterio that we had visited the village Osheni (Iton in Greek) and noticed that they had a high school there. I wanted to say something more but Pop Sterio abruptly interrupted and said:

“And what do you think if they had not collected the children, there wouldn't have been a high school in Ezerets? There would have been one, even larger than that in Osheni, but someone thought it was not important to have a high school here.”

There was no occasion about which Pop Sterio did not express his opinion. He even expressed doubts about the existence of the Republic of Macedonia.

“But how will that tiny country live and survive in poverty?” he asked with a concerned tone of voice while shaking his head, expressing doubt.

“My dear Reverend Father,” I said to him quietly, “she is now like a tiny, lonely and poor bear cub...”

“What?!” he raised his voice sounding surprised. “You say a tiny bear cub? A bear cub which one day will grow up to be a bear?!...”

“Well, what can you do Reverend Father, bear cubs do grow into big bears...” I replied.

We left Ezerets at noon. The Sveti Nikola Church bell was still audible as we drove past the last turn before crossing the bridge. It seemed like the bell was telling us something... ..there is no death or disappearance of a person as long as the memory of them lasts...

On the Road of Time – Chapter 6

On our way to the village Ieropigi (Macedonian Kosinets, Ieropigi in Greek means “Sacred Spring”. This name was given to the village because water flows from under the church foundation) just outside of Mesopotamia (Macedonian Chetirok. Mesopotamia in Greek means “between rivers.”) we met an old man sitting at the side of the road. Should I stop, I wondered. Earlier we were warned that there might be thugs out there who might force you, at gunpoint, to drive them south to one of the major Greek cities. But looking at the sad expression in the old stranger’s eyes made me stop. The old man greeted us in Greek and wondered if we were going to Ieropigi and if we could give him a ride.

“Get in,” I said and, driving slowly, we struck up a conversation. To begin I asked him, “Where are you from, who are you and what are you doing?...” He said he lived in Ieropigi. I then asked him if the village was always called “Ieropigi”.

“No,” he said. “Earlier the village was called Kosinets and “endopii” (indigenous people) used to live there, but they are gone. There is only one family of endopii left and they are old people...”

“Where did the endopii go?” I asked.

“I don’t know. They are dispersed all over the world,” he said.

“And do you like the place, the village?” I asked.

The old man shook his hand and with a confirming voice said: “No. I don’t like it. Who wants something that does not belong to them? We have no roots here. The young leave for the cities or for Europe and every day there are less and less of us. We die on foreign soil. We like the places where they uprooted us from, from where we emigrated. Every day we slowly wilt without the meadows, the mountains, the peaks and the waters of Pindus... we die without them. Without them, without the peaks of Pindus we feel short. We were eagles there and here we are not even jackdaws (small kind of crow). They took Pindus from us and stripped us naked. Eagles need heights and peaks and we, the Sarakachani (Vlachs), need the endless pastures and the cold waters of Pindus. We are unhappy, very unhappy because we can’t do without our mountains on Pindus. There are mountains here as well, but they are not like our mountains... Now we only go there to visit the graves of our ancestors...”

“And where are the graves of the endopii?” I asked.

“They were moved to another place. Now there is a garden there in their place...” answered the old man.

“There once used to be houses there, right? What happened to the stones from the houses?” I asked.

“They were used to build the new houses... The village is more or less new, built below the old one...” he answered.

There was a café at the entrance of the village. It was time for coffee. There were many white-haired old men sitting at the tables, leaning their arms on a shepherd's staff, waiting for their cup of coffee to arrive. We greeted them and they greeted us back.

"Down there, the building with the sheet metal roof, what is that?" I asked.

"We keep several hundred sheep and goats there during the winter," answered the old man.

"You have so many," I praised the old man.

With a difficult sigh and a disappointing tone of voice, the old man said:

"When they relocated us here I brought with me fifteen thousand sheep, ten thousand goats and three thousand horses. These mountains are too small and narrow for that many animals. At the end of the nineteen-fifties we were almost left without sheep and goats. There was not enough land for them to graze on and we had no money to purchase more. That's when the government forced us to farm the land and plant wheat, barley, rye and potatoes. We had no idea how to work the land but were forced to learn quickly. We used tractors and other farming equipment which helped a lot..."

The old man stopped talking and after a moment of silence, asked:

"Where in Greece have you seen a Vlach, a Sarakachan reduced to plowing? The Vlachs, meaning us who came here, more correctly, us who they brought here from Epirus, only know how to look after sheep and goats and make all kinds of cheese. In Epirus we despised the farmers and villagers. In Epirus we were the aristocracy, the first people in Larissa and Athens. The Vlachs were the cream of Greece. In old times the Vlachs fed all of Europe with their various cheeses. Our caravans went to Belgrade, Budapest, Bucharest and even as far as Vienna. We brought back riches and built Greece with them. The Vlachs built schools, churches, the first public buildings, the first palaces and theaters in Greece. You want a Greek doctor, judge, lawyer, professor, historian, rebel, advocate, diplomat, look to the Vlachs. Don't look for them among the Greeks. The Vlachs were and still are the cream of Greece. There at Pindus, in the Vlach villages, our houses were palaces. Everyone had a house built in the village with chiselled stone and everyone in Ioannina, Metsovo, Samarina and other places had palaces. And I mean palaces. Do we like this place? No! They made villagers and plowmen out of us, the proud Sarakachani from Epirus. We have become a mockery of people... they disgraced us... Come... Please, come to our house for coffee..."

The old Vlach, Sarakachan woman greeted us with open arms and with a wide smile behind which flashed several gold teeth. She sat us down on a wide sofa covered with a wide red, woolen blanket. And while placing a sweet made of figs on the table in front of us, I saw a cross carved on her

forehead covering her wide wrinkles. The old man noticed me looking with surprise and hastened to explain.

“It is an old tradition that our women have a cross between their eyebrows, which originated back in the time of the Ioannina Pasha (Ottoman general). A cross was carved between the eyebrows on the forehead of our women to remind the Turks (Moslems) and Turk converts to keep their hands off them. We marked them with a Christian cross and as such no Turk or Turk convert dared take them...”

While we drank our coffee the old Vlach told us that here, in the desolate Kostur Region villages of Dmbeni, Kosinets, Lobanitsa and Smrdesh, as in Prespa, a Greek politician and statesman, the richest Vlach among the Vlachs in Greece, promised them a paradise. He did not mention his name. But a paradise he did not find. He became poor in doing this. So I gathered his real motive was to change the character of the desolate region.

We thanked our hosts for their hospitality and got up to go.

“Where are you going?” asked the old Vlach.

“To Lobanitsa,” I answered.

“Ah, it’s called that by its old name,” confirmed the old man.

“What is its new name?” I asked.

“It’s called Agios Dimitrios now, but the village no longer exists... There is nothing there, except for a small church built by the people of Lobanitsa who now live in Australia,” answered the old man.

We headed to the western part of the village along the old upper road, now widened and paved with asphalt (there is also a lower and wider road, built after the Vlachs were brought here). At the exit, at the end of the asphalt there was an old road, a pre-war road. This road was built by the villagers from the surrounding villages in the thirties by unpaid labour. This is the place where an older road used to exist and was travelled by the Romans. This is the link between Kostur – Bilishcha and Korcha and from there to Durres. The hill and the flat area on top of the road and below the road are fenced with rusty barbed wire, on which a rusty sign hangs with the writing “Mine Field!”

No one to this day has made the effort to remove the mines. The mines have been hibernating here since they were put in by the Democratic Army of Greece demolition crews in August 1949. There was an intersection twenty or so meters from here. There was also a church in the middle and to the right there was a wide winding road leading to Kristalopigi (Smrdesh in Macedonian). It said so on the traffic sign. (Kristalopigi, meaning “crystal spring” the new Greek name given to the village because of the natural spring of water running near the village church, Sveti Giorgi.) To the left, in front of us, a little down the hill was a cobblestone road.

“This is the road,” I said to my wife, “the road that leads to Lobanitsa.”

The cobblestone road was covered in moss and overgrown with thorn bushes on both sides. Growing on the sides were scruffy, short elms. It looked like the road was not used at all. We came out of the car and turned our attention to the south. In front of us lay the Kosinsko valley, further over were the Boulders (Faltsa) and beyond that was Mount Odre. Left of Odre was Mount Orle and to the right, on the west side, lined up were the mountains Krusha, Gorusha, Bel Kamen, Petre, Peleni, Sveti Ilia, Amuda, Nikoler and Aliabitsa and behind them was Gramos. Behind us, on a gentle rise, were the hills of Kosinets and Lobanitsa, overgrown with thinned out dwarf oak trees languishing in silence and quiet. Continuing beyond them, up high, all covered in broken stones and becoming steeper as they went further, were more hills that tied to the hills of Mali-Madi.

The warm air moved in gentle waves as the ghostly silence caused a restlessness in us. From what I have been told, I know that it was from here that the government army wanted to enter behind the DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) Partisan lines and thus open the door for the tanks to enter Smrdesh and close the escape route to Albania. It was here on these hills, from August 10th to 11th, 1949, that the DAG Brigade 105 strongly opposed the government army. It was here at the bases of these hills that Division IX of the government army became disabled, saving the lives of many Partisans. About those days, General Zafiroopoulos wrote the following on page 619 of his book “Anti-Bandit War 1945-1949”.

“Ουτω ο ελιγμος της ΙΧ Μεραρχιας απετυχεν ολοσχερος μετα μεγαλων απωλειων, 354 εκτος μαχης μονον της 41-της Ταξιαρχιας...”
(And as such the manoeuvre of Division IX completely failed, leaving 354 dead on the battlefield from the 41st Brigade alone...”

I drove very slowly over the aging cobblestone road and when I came out of the shade of the tall and wide-branched oak tree, a wide space lay in front of me all covered in broken rock. I recognized the place from the surrounding bare hills and from the large rock. The village Lobanitsa was located here. I remember the place from the three tall poplar trees that grew near the river on whose bank the church, Sveti Dimitria, was built. And near it was the boulder from whose veins flowed a spring of water. The poplar trees and the church are now gone and water no longer flows from the spring under the big rock. I remember the two-story houses built from chiselled stone, covered with Turkish ceramic tiles and window frames painted with blue paint. These houses were built after the Ilinden Uprising (1903) but now are gone and so are the stones and Turkish tiles. All gone!

I remember the tall white house, built high up, at the edge of the village from whose balcony one could see the entire surroundings. That was my aunt Zoia's house and she and her daughter-in-law and two year old grandson were imprisoned for two and a half years in the village

Drenovo in Prespa Region. She was accused of being an “enemy of the people” because her son crossed over to the other side of the border. We moved to that house in the fall of 1947 because they burned our house. The tall white house is now gone.

I remember the school very well. In the late fall of 1947, after sundown, the school would open its doors and during the night under the dim light of kerosene lamps, for the first time, we would open our Macedonian primers and the teacher, Konstandina Todorova all nicely dressed in her military uniform, would teach us the Cyrillic alphabet. The school is gone now and so is the teacher with the nice Partisan hat and long braided hair, she too is gone; she died in Skopje after moving there from Poland.

I remember many of the faces of the people of Lobanitsa. They too are gone. I remember Partisans arriving in the village very early in the morning, exhausted from a long night’s march. They would rest here during the day and would be gone after sunset. I remember the nights when long columns of loaded horses and mules, guided by women wearing white robes, passed through Lobanitsa. The women were from Prespa and would whisper that they were carrying ammunition.

I remember seeing a yellow airplane fly in circles over Lobanitsa and the surrounding countryside and because of that the days were dead and the nights came to life. I remember late in the night women from AFZH (Women’s Anti-Fascist Front) came to the houses and had long talks with the mothers. The fathers then were mobilized and digging trenches and cutting oak, beech and pine trees to build bunkers. And what did the women from the AFZH, in their long conversations, have to say to my mother to persuade her?

I remember that day well. It was March 24th in the afternoon when the gathering began and lasted until sunset. Crowds of children were gathering in long queues, exhausted from their long journey. There were small, big and bigger children. The mothers carried the little children in their arms and on their shoulders and the bigger children hung on to them by their dress. They were all exhausted making the trip on foot to Lobanitsa from Breshteni, Galishta, Ezerets and Novoseleni. They spent the night sleeping in the school, church and houses in Lobanitsa. The next day they spent their daylight hours hiding in the forest just outside of the village. The day after, more children were arriving the entire day from the villages Dolno Papratsko, Krchishta and Kosinets.

This was the first time I had ever seen so many children and mothers. I remember that afternoon our yard smelling of roasted chicken and freshly baked bread. I also remember my mother taking out our clothes from the chest and dressing us the same way as she dressed us when we went to church... I remember it was a warm spring day, the almond trees were flowering and the nightingales were singing.

As I continued to drive towards the broken stones I felt chills run down my spine. The closer I came to the piles of rocks and soil where the houses used to be, the more chills I felt coming over me. At the end of the rubble, to the right where the road bends slightly, I stopped the car. This is where we stopped on March 25th, 1948 to say goodbye...

...In front of us, far away, the sun was setting on top of Mount Morava. The early evening light was dimming before our teary eyes. In the early evening the children cried loudly with tears welling up in their eyes. The sun set behind Mount Morava and the darkness was filled with weeping. And behind us, up there on the steepness of the hill, stood our mothers watering the soil beneath them with tears, shaking the rocks around them with their sickly loud cries and sobs and waving their black handkerchiefs at us, saying goodbye...

We walked in the dark not knowing where it would lead us. We walked, stumbled, fell, got up again and dragged our steps in a long column... Somewhere in the middle of the column several people started to sing, but no one joined in, no one sang the song that would give us courage and joyfulness. The voices of those singing slowly died out. They dried up. They got lost in the sea of crying and sobbing... Before stepping over onto foreign soil, the column stopped for a short time. Someone, one of the people escorting us, took my bag with the roasted chicken and still warm bread...

Years afterwards, when I was an adult, long after we were separated and under a different climate, I heard from my mother. She told me the following:

“They told us that after the bad had passed our children would be returned to us, which should not have taken more than twenty days. This is what they told us and that’s how they convinced us to voluntarily take you by the hand and escort you to the border. There, at the corner when they told us that we could only go this far with you, we waited on the hillside. This is where they held us. This is where we begged them and prayed for your return to us as soon as possible... Was there a single woman that did not cry? We cried my dear, we pulled our hairs out crying, we screamed and wailed mournfully like we would when someone died. After you were gone when we returned home, that’s when we realized our mistake and the wrong we had done.

Things went from bad to worse. The house was empty and desolate, the yard was empty, the village was empty and every lane was desolate. We waited and listened, hoping the door would open, someone would call out, someone would cry, would laugh. Nothing! Emptiness! Not a single child’s voice, no matter how much we wished to hear one. Not a voice, not a cry, not a laugh was heard...

There were no children, no voices, no laughing, no happiness and no joy. Life becomes difficult when someone takes away your happiness.

They took our happiness and gave us a wound, a sore, a cut, an open gash... a wound in the heart, a wound in our soul, a wound that does not heal, a wound that hurts with every mention of birth, a wound that opens, that bleeds, that burns. No one's heart could help reduce the hurt because the pain was buried deep in the heart and soul...

Right here," she tapped her chest, "like a mistletoe, it is stuck, pressing and scratching and whispering, I listen but there is no voice, no noise, only silence, there is nothing, it is desolate... and that desolation hurts, it never stops. After a while we began to blame ourselves, to curse ourselves, how could we do this? Why did we do this, send our children away and turn our lives upside down? Why did we put our children in strange hands? Why did we put the fate of our children in someone else's hands?

Our separation became a permanent wound. An open wound that constantly bled and burnt. The wounds from a bullet, a knife, a dagger, would heal, but the wounds from this kind of pain, anguish and sorrow would not heal. Every day, with each passing day, the wounds became wider. There were as many wounds as there were missing children. Open wounds. They were constantly open. Our chests were torn apart from the heavy sighs. You go out to the yard, it's desolate; you go out on the balcony, the street is desolate; you look out of the window, the neighbourhood is desolate; it is desolate at the spring, in the streets, everywhere it is desolate, empty, devoid of children. Emptiness and desolation existed everywhere.

Every mother missing her child was wounded. It seemed like even the birds flew away and abandoned us. Their voice and song too we could not hear. And what were my thoughts? What else could a mother think, if not first of her children? About what else can a mother think, whose children they took away, an act with which they muddled and poisoned her happiness?

Silence and great sadness befell the village; silence in the home, in the yard. Restlessness circled, scratched and dug, but only in the mind, it did not allow the heart to calm, to settle and find peace. There was no day with hope or night with sleep without pain... The days were hard and the nights were even harder. Was it fate? A great weight, a great weight was placed upon us. Do you remember? First they collected the older children. They collected them during the night and took them somewhere in the forest, in the mountains... They told them and us that they would be fighting for freedom, for Macedonia. Then after, they collected you the younger children. They told us that you would remain over there, in the countries (Eastern European countries) for only several days, until they kicked out the enemy... We believed them and we gave you to them... Then we were left all alone...

After that, one by one, they took our sheep, goats, chickens, horses, oxen and told us that they were for the struggle and gave us a piece of

paper with writing on it that said the “People’s Government” would return them to you. Then they collected our bed covers, woolen blankets, pillows, winter coats, gloves, socks, sweaters, hats, wool, pots, plates, spoons, forks. They told us they were for the hospitals, for the wounded. No one asked if we had anything left for ourselves...

Something was left for us, my dear child, something was left. Our naked life, pain, suffering, torment, wounded soul, and the beleaguered hope of waiting was left for us... Left for us were these arms and shoulders ... with which we became part of the flood, the rising storm which became more frightening with each passing day...

About those who were engaged in the war we were always burdened with the worst thoughts, with the greatest of fear and for those young ones, who were collected, our thoughts were that at least there were no wars, no shooting, no killing where they took them and that they would be alive and well. We had the same wish and prayer for both the young and old; to be alive and well, even if they were far away, our prayers for them were always to be alive and well. Nothing we did we could hold with our own hands. Everything we held fell out of our hands. No sooner were our crops and gardens ready to be harvested than they were there to collect them just as they had collected our older and younger children. They said there would be great battles and for them to win, to achieve victory, we too needed to give, to go, if not to battle then to harvest, to deliver and to transport.

We dug at night and delivered and transported at night. The day was reserved for the airplanes and cannons. They beat on us during the day. So we turned things upside down and made the day into night and the night into day. The pain in our backs, shoulders, arms and legs, from carrying logs and ammunition persisted, ever increasing with each passing day. But there was no time to think of our personal pain, when the war effort was at stake, so they kept telling us...

The entire crop from the fields, meadows and gardens, the sheep, goats and oxen were left for the old people to look after. It was all left to those who could hardly stand or walk, to those who could hardly lift or carry a bushel, swing a scythe or a sickle, to those who could hardly carry a deceased in a coffin or a wounded on a stretcher... And you tell yourself, please God protect us and cross yourself with your thoughts, with your thoughts because your hands were full carrying a stretcher, a log, a coffin, a shovel, an axe, a pickaxe, a stone. You made a cross with your thoughts, because you couldn’t make it with your hands. And when you were carrying a wounded person, you said to yourself, “Is there another mother like me carrying my children like this?” That’s when you began to be afraid, to experience numbing fear, to feel your legs collapsing under you. Fear had you in its grip and you couldn’t think of anything else. You dedicated your entire thoughts to the drowning fear which had you

burdened and locked in its grip. And that's how we faced each cruel day being beaten again and again with horror that had no end...

There were only two or three children left in the village. Very young children that did not leave, that were not separated, that were not torn from their mother's embrace. When these children cried we all wept with them, we all rejoiced. When they laughed, we all laughed and cried. Their laughter, their ga-ga-ing and crying was a light in darkness. It was like the sun shining after the passing of a dark storm... Unfortunately the happiness was short lived and after a bit of sunshine, the dark clouds would return. There was light and then darkness, a short burst of sunlight followed by a long episode of darkness and the tears never dried up. We had tears for both the dead and the living...

It was a bad time, a very bad time. There were many children at home and then, suddenly there were no children, the home was empty. The silence was deafening, sickening. What did we do? We mostly cursed. We cursed those who brought us no good, those who came to our homes and took our happiness, our light and left us in darkness. We prayed at home, we lit pine sticks in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary and prayed some more. We felt a bit better but not for long. We went to church and prayed there too. During the night and when we were carrying wounded, if we passed by a church we stopped and prayed, we prayed for our children, we prayed for all those who were in stretchers. We prayed for them to be safe and remain alive... Our days and nights became moments of prayer. I don't think God ever heard so many prayers. And the miracle is that in God we believed the most...

In the night we knelt in front of a lit pine stick, we had no candles, and while looking at the icon of the Virgin Mary, we prayed for everyone. For those who were at war and for those who were in the countries. And after that we waited... we did not leave the pine stick to completely burn. We needed it for its light the next day and if any were still left we needed it for the next night; that is if we were not at work carrying logs and stones for the bunkers, or carrying wounded from the battlefield to the hospitals. We would all gather together in one room, that is all of us who were still left in the village, take our black handkerchiefs off, light the pine stick and, in its light, look at the pictures of our children. We whispered to them but all they did was look back at us and we, with our whispers, spoke to them and lightly touched and caressed their faces and kissed their eyes with our slightly moist lips. And they, they just looked at us in silence. And quietly, pleadingly, we asked them to please say something, smile... We talked to them but they kept quiet, silent and only looked at us and looked at us. So then, for the longest part, we looked at each other in silence..."

My wife and I remained on the hillside for a long time. We were quiet for most of the time. Then we closed our eyes and for a moment, behind

our eyelids, we witnessed the large crowds of women and old people, all around us, standing on this very hillside and weeping in silence and waving goodbye... and in our ears they whispered their wishes and prayers and in the silence we heard their muffled cries and whimpers... And all over again we were reminded of the day when they gathered here and when they brought us with them. We remembered it was a time when the almonds were flowering and the Nightingales sang. It was March. A warm and fragrant spring day...

They collected us and took us away and behind us remained the unfinished story in a grandfather and grandmother's voice... And we thought and asked ourselves: "Will there be anyone, where they were sending us, who would caress us with a warm hand like the hand of our mothers, who would kiss us goodnight before sleep, like our mothers kiss us, who would gently look at us like our mothers looked at us, who would smile at us with our mother's smile, who would tell us a story, sing us a song, wipe our tears? Would there be anything there from our home? Where are they taking us? When will we return to our homes?"

They took us away and left my mother and all the mothers of all the other children with an empty lap and with an empty embrace. They left our mothers with their eyes fixed, looking, always looking, down the road on which they took us. And forever and without stopping they allowed the mothers to think that we would be returning on the same road...

Despite the many things we desired, our greatest desire was not to forget the road that took us away from home... We needed to remember it like we remembered our mother's eyes, our mother's voice, words, smile... This is what we wanted the most!

In the desolate burning hot ruins, washed by the rain, naked and hidden stood that same hillside sinking in deep silence... We too stood there frozen - petrified and with our entire being we felt the pain of separation that never stopped and for which no one has found a cure. There are wounds which will never heal and cannot be cured. They hurt and they will always hurt...

We descended the hillside in silence and got back on the highway and passed by the road that once was the road of separation. But our journey on the road of time and in search of our memories does not end here.

We left.

We took the road away from here but before leaving we took one last look to better remember the place of our separation. We came to the intersection and took the wide asphalt road.

On the Road of Time – Chapter 7

The winding forest road took us to the top of Lisets Hill whose summit soars at an elevation of 1827 meters above sea level. The top of the hill, where the antennas are located, is bare and treeless with a wide view of the surrounding mountains. One can see Bigla, Lundzer, Vicho, Siniachka and Mali-Madi from here. And beyond there, one can see Orle, Odre, Gorusha, Bel Kamen, Nikoler, Aliabitsa and further, further away in the gray fog one can see the summit of Gramos. At the foot of the mountain is an area called Koreshta which includes the Kostur Region valley, the city Kostur and Lake Kostur. To the west lie Vrba, Ivan Mountain, Galichitsa and the two Prespa lakes. The picturesque view was captivating and charming. But we did not come here to admire the picturesque landscape and the rare and beautiful Macedonian mountains. We came here to look for traces of the struggle, of the last effort symbolized by the slogan “The enemy will not pass Vicho”.

Thousands of villagers from nearby and distant Macedonian villages, along with seven or eight thousand Partisans from DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) spent seven months here digging trenches and building bunkers. All the hills and mountains in the Vicho vicinity were a chain of defence. On the eve of the major offensive, on the eighth and ninth of August, the opponent brought a large force to the Koreshtanska basin and all through the night the Partisans, through the bunker gun holes, watched the lights of the pitched tents.

The Partisan brigade commanders, deployed in the surrounding hills and mountains, kept a watchful eye on the build up of this large government force and did nothing to stop it. They received no orders to start bombarding it with their 45 cannon and mortar tubes. Not a single shell or grenade exploded in the Koreshtanska Basin that night. What would have been the result if all the Partisan forces in the surrounding hills had concentrated their fire on the government forces in the Koreshtanska Basin? What would have been the result if the entire Partisan artillery, positioned all around the hills, were to thunder before the great and decisive battle? Unfortunately the Partisan guns never thundered... Insiders say that never happened because there was treason...

...During the night of August 10th and 11th the government brigade attacked Lisets. The hill exchanged hands several times before it was eventually taken by the government troops. The enemy passed Vicho and the road was wide open for Prespa and for escape to Albania.

While standing on top of Lisets Hill, I took my notebook out of my backpack and began to read the notes I had made at the Institute of National History of Macedonia, before leaving on this trip. Safeguarded at the Institute were dozens of monographs, written in the last forty years or so, about the villages of this part of Macedonia. Some monographs were

simple point-form notes, made in a hurry to preserve the information. Others were properly written with elaborate data attached to them. Irrespective of how they were written, the monographs are historic documents that detail many facts about the villages such as names, places, description of events, customs, folk songs, dances, etc. They prove that each village was once a living and thriving entity. The information about these villages that left me with the most painful impression was the numbers. Population numbers, the number of people mobilized, the number of people that died during the wars, the number of people that died in the prisons camps and dried islands, the number of people displaced and evicted from their homes and so on. But the numbers which I wrote in my notebook were the numbers pertaining to the Greek Civil War as follows:

Village name, number of people mobilized, number of people killed

Aitos, mobilized 132, killed 39
Besfina, mobilized 96, killed 25
Bapchor, mobilized 180, killed 62
Tiolishta, mobilized 55, killed 20
Mokren mobilized 188, killed 75
Konomladi, mobilized 367, killed 69
Dobrolishta, mobilized 53, killed 20
Ezerets, mobilized 34, killed 12
Krchishta, mobilized 43, killed 29
Vmbel, mobilized 105, killed 19
Grache, mobilized 66, killed 38
Grazhdeno, mobilized 46, killed 21
Zagorichani, mobilized 87, killed 62
German, mobilized 288, killed 92
Nestram, mobilized 127, killed 60
Statitsa, mobilized 185, killed 53
Setina, mobilized 160, killed 65
Oshchima, mobilized 87, killed 26
Zelenich, mobilized 95, killed 23
Dobrolishcha, mobilized 51, killed 20
Breshcheni mobilized 41, killed 13
Kosinets, mobilized 66, killed 22
Sheshtevo, mobilized 87, killed 20
Staricheni, mobilized 30, killed 12
Zhuzheltse, mobilized 33, killed 11
Chereshnitsa, mobilized 54, killed 13
Novoseleni, mobilized 32, killed 15
Krushoradi, mobilized 62, killed 36

Drenoveni, mobilized 42, killed 9
Rulia, mobilized 125, killed 36

Under what law were these people mobilized when a government did not exist? During the course of the war one of the orders was to “go in with ten and come out with twenty”. In other words, ten fighters would go into a village and they would return to the mountains with ten more. This is how they mobilized the young men and women from the villages and forced them out to the mountains... Many of these young men and women, forced out of their homes, lost their lives in battle. A great number of them were killed in 1948 and 1949 at Gramos, Vicho, Negush, Voden and Lerin. This is how many I recorded in my notebook... But how many more died that are not recorded, that I don't know about?

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(The dotted lines above are left for the readers to fill.)

I owe my gratitude to each reader or researcher if they can fill the empty rows above with information about their village and all the villages they know about the number of people mobilized and the number of people lost during the Greek Civil War. Those empty rows were left there deliberately so that our readers can make a personal effort to supplement the list with more information before that valuable information is forgotten and lost forever. This list represents the tragedy that befell the Macedonian people in their struggle for their rights and freedom. And that's not all. How many more have died and remain forever in the cemeteries of the Eastern European countries, former USSR and former Yugoslavia?

Numbers... Numbers... Numbers...

Behind each number there is pain. Behind each number there are tears, suffering and the hopelessness of having to wait. Behind each number there is a widow and orphans. Behind each number there is an unknown, unmarked grave. Behind each number there were many long marches in rain, snow and cold. Behind each number there were unsuccessful battles, hunger, wounds...

Numbers... Behind each number there is an abandoned house and roots that have been cut. Behind each number there is a dearest, a loved one, a close one, a most thought of, a most waited for,...

Numbers... and as you close your eyes it seems like they come to life, they smile and promise that today, tomorrow, the day after, next year, they will return...

Numbers... they are for those who were left at Kopanche, Aliavitsa, Charno, Krastavets, Sveti Ilia, Krusha, Gorisha, Kiafa, Kleftis, Gorna Arena, Dolna Arena, Vicho, Mali-Madi, Baro, Iamata, Roto, Plati, Krsto, Bigla, Lundzer, Bela Voda, Vrba, Grevena, Negush, Voden, Lerin, Prespansko Ezero, the hospitals in Korcha, Durrës, Elbasan, Tirana, Sukt, Iasenovo, Katlanovo...

Numbers... Numbers... Numbers...

We put a foot on Vicho and Bigla, on Lundzer, Lisets and Mali-Madi and the rest of the hills looked like they were tied by a chain in a circle looking like a giant wreath...

I felt like yelling so I called out:

People, people, oh people!... Where are you oh people!!!

There was no answer. Only heavy silence as deep as the dark abyss; fatal silence from a heavy curse... and pain, pain from an open wound...

This was the wish of others... “for there to be no people... for there to be no human answer...”

On the Road of Time – Chapter 8

At the border crossing Kristalopigi (Macedonian Smrdesh), one of the most beautiful villages in Kostur Region, the border guard was leafing through our passports. (Kristalopigi, as stated in chapter 6, means “crystal spring” the new Greek name given to the village Smrdesh because of the natural spring of water that runs near the village church, Sveti Giorgi.) He stamped my wife’s visa without hesitation but was not happy with my passport so he went through it, leafing through the pages again. He stared at me for a while, then he stared at my passport photo, giving me the impression that he was suspicious of something. Perhaps he was suspicious of me or perhaps there was something suspicious with my passport?

“FYROM?” he asked while tapping his finger on the cover of the passport.

“That’s what it says on the top. In two languages,” I replied.

“Ah, that’s in your language...” he said.

“Yes sir!” In my language, understandably, in my language,” I replied.

“And your visa? Where is your visa?” he asked and looked at me with stern eyes as if I had been caught stealing something.

“There is no need. It is written in two languages further down...” I replied.

“Diplomat? You are a diplomat?” he asked in amazement with a surprising tone of voice and with doubt in his eyes.

“That’s what it says,” I replied.

He leafed through the passport again and went and checked in his computer. He looked at me suspiciously again and asked:

“From which border point did you enter Greece?”

“From Niki...” I answered. (For those who don’t know, the Macedonian name for Niki is Negochani)

“There is no evidence here that you crossed the border...” he said while suspiciously looking into my eyes and nervously tapping his pen on my passport.

“There is,” I said. “You dropped it when you were leafing through my passport.”

“Yes, here it is,” he said in an unhappy tone of voice. “So you entered five days ago and today you are leaving?...” he asked and then stamped the piece of paper with a hard bang, as if taking his anger out on the paper and then asked: “What will you be doing in Albania?”

“We are going to look for a bride...” I said mockingly.

He handed me the passports with a frowning look on his face, without saying a word.

The hard bang of the stamp reminded me of my last year’s visit to Greece when I crossed the border at the Niki border crossing. The border

police officer was a young man. After leafing through my passport and checking its validity on his computer, he pulled a printout out of an envelope and began to ask me all sorts of questions like my first name, my surname, the name of my father and mother, place... and immediately after that he gave me an advanced warning:

“I want to know, not how you call yourself now, but how you were called...”

I didn't let him finish before I interrupted and asked: “Are you thinking of the name that I was registered in the church register?”

“Exactly that...” he said.

“Exactly, but for that I don't have confirmation. At the municipality they told me that I do exist by the first and last name you asked me to tell you but they also told me that they are prohibited from issuing me a certificate to prove it...” I replied.

The officer did not know what to say. He thought about it for a while as we looked at each other. Then I smiled and said: “Sir, open the drawer and there you will find all the information you are looking for. I've crossed this border check point several times before and always with the same papers. So you are wasting your time and paper for nothing...”

The young officer looked at me for a moment, dropped his pen and said: “This is what we were ordered to do and I am carrying out my orders.”

“Okay then, do your job...” I replied.

“But those here who ordered us to do this don't see that the whole world is moving forward and we Greeks are moving backwards. People have gone to the moon but we Greeks are still standing in the same spot. You understand?!” he said.

“No, I don't understand...” I said and as I tried to ask for clarification as to what was I to understand, I heard the “boom” of the stamp on my piece of paper, with which, if necessary, I needed to prove that I had crossed the border legally.

“Welcome!” he said and handed me the passports through the half open window on the counter and asked: “Where are you going?”

There was a civilian standing a little ways from us, probably listening to our conversation. He spoke up and said in Greek: “Stin parida tus pigeonun... Sto patriko tus homa. Etsi den ine?” (They are going to their homeland... To the land of their ancestors! Isn't that right?)

I turned towards the man and, as confirmation of his statement and question, I winked and said to myself, “It appears that sick Greece is now beginning to slowly recover...” Unfortunately my diagnosis was premature.

After moving my car into position to pass through customs, a small man, I am referring to him as a small man because he was very thin, short, narrow in the shoulders, bold and had a pale face, seeming like he was sick

with tuberculosis, but he had a strong voice and with a sharp tone demanded:

“Open!!!” he said in Macedonian in a loud voice.

I came out of the car and in Macedonian, asked: “All the doors and the trunk?”

“What!? Are you speaking to me in that...” he cleared his throat and spit, “in that gypsy language? Why don’t you speak Greek? You know Greek! You were speaking Greek to the policeman, eh? Or have you forgotten that this is Greece and everyone who sets foot on Greek soil must speak Greek? Move away from the car!” he ordered.

I did as he asked and moved away. The little customs man was now in control. I then whispered to my wife: “Switch over to the other side and keep an eye on his hands, make sure he doesn’t toss anything into the car that will land us in jail...”

The little customs man angrily ran out of the inspection station to the parking lot and, from the van, brought back a dog; a German shepherd. Now the two of them, the little customs man and his dog were in charge. The German shepherd sniffed under the seats, jumped into the trunk, got out, sniffed the tires and then the exhaust pipe. The dog then sat down and raised its muzzle, looking at the little man, seemingly saying all this work was done for nothing. The man then ordered the dog to go back to the van and motioned for me to leave.

Without saying a word I pointed to the two suitcases that were taken out of my trunk and motioned that they should be put back. We angrily looked at each other for a few seconds until he realized that it was his duty to put them back and one by one he obediently put the bags back in the trunk and checked to make sure that they were correctly placed.

“Bravo!” I said, keeping my anger and frustration to myself.

The drive over the curvy and dangerous road in Bigla seemed to calm down our nerves but still we were very unhappy about what had happened to us at the border crossing. While heading to Kostur we decided to stop in Rulia. They call the village “Kota” now, named after Kote a no good scoundrel and enemy of the Macedonian people who killed and cut off the head of the Macedonian revolutionary leader Lazo Poptraikov. There was a paved road leading to the village and at the entrance was a “welcoming” marble bust of Kote. We parked our car at the village square beside a Lada with licence plates from Skopje. Several people came out of their yards and approached us. Among them was also a man in a policeman’s uniform.

“Hi, how are you?” one of the men asked in Macedonian. “Welcome. Are you from Rulia?”

“We are fine, thank you,” I answered “We are not from Rulia, we are just visiting...”

We conversed for about fifteen minutes before a wrinkled old lady, holding a cane, interrupted us.

“How are you? Where are you from my children? Welcome. Are you from Rulia? I don’t recognize you,” she said in a shaky voice.

“We are from over that mountain,” I said, pointing to the north.

“Oh, good, good...” she said, coughed and walked away. And as if she had forgotten something she returned and, while hitting the asphalt with her cane, in broken Greek she said: “Edo ine Elada... Avto to glosa na mi to milate. Na milate ta Elinika...” (This is Greece. Don’t speak that language here. Speak Greek...)

The people broke into laughter. The policeman took the old lady to the side and in Greek, told her: “Grandma go home and leave the people to speak as they wish.”

When the policeman returned I said: “Don’t discourage the old lady maybe she is one of Kote’s cousins...”

After three days of visiting our homeland, as the man at the border crossing correctly pointed out, we returned to the Republic of Macedonia, again over the Niki (Negochani) border crossing. After we had passed through customs I asked to see the Police Chief and briefed him regarding the customs officer’s behaviour at Kristalopigi. He advised me that this was not a matter for the police and that I should speak to the Chief of Customs. But at that time the Chief of Customs was on vacation so I made contact with his deputy. After showing him my diplomatic passport, I told him what had happened and at the end I said: “At the border crossing there is a huge sign with the writing ‘ΕΛΛΑΣ’ and ‘GREECE’. There is something missing on the sign.” He looked at me with a stunned look on his face. “You need to also write that everyone who enters Greece must speak only Greek. Sir,” I continued, “in my job I have passed through many borders all throughout Europe and around the world and everyone asked me how I was doing, how was my trip and they wished me a nice visit in their country and no one has ever said to me that I needed to speak only in their language because it was their country I was visiting. This kind of behaviour reminded me of the Metaxas days when my mother and father and my grandmother and grandfather were punished for speaking their native language, the only language they spoke...”

“But sir, please, sir, leave history alone. It is the past... I apologize to you. You are right. Sorry. It is truly a shame if that’s what the customs officer said to you... You know he is ‘Ντοπιος’...” (Ντοπιος – endopios is what the Greeks call the Macedonians in Northern Greece.)

I walked away and said to myself: “if he is Ντοπιος then he must be one of Kote’s cousins...”

On the Road of Time – Chapter 9

The Albanian border crossing was not as elaborate as the one on the Greek side with its lounge, café, shop, tourist brochures and piles of newspapers and magazines lying there laden with dust and soiled by flies. And contrary to the behaviour of the Greek officer, the Albanian officer greeted us with a smile and welcomed us in our language. We in return greeted him with the Albanian words “mir dita” (good day); thus establishing a cordial mutual relationship.

“Are you Macedonians? From Skopje?” he asked as he examined our passports.

“Yes, we are Macedonians,” I answered.

“I can tell by the licence plate on your car. Please let me see your international driver’s licence and proof of insurance for your vehicle. It would be a shame if you don’t have these documents because without them you will not be allowed to enter Albania. I am sorry but that’s the law here,” explained the policeman.

I gave him an envelope which contained all the documents that he was looking for. “This will take a while,” he said, “please have a seat and I will call you when I am done.” The policeman then shut the window over the counter, leaned over and began to write things down. About twenty minutes later he called us back.

“Everything is in order,” he said.

“How much do we owe you?” I asked.

“There is no charge for you sir, but the lady will have to pay one euro. Will you be paying in “leks” (Albanian money), in your money, or in some other currency?” he asked. He then said, “Keep this receipt, they will ask you for it when you exit Albania. Also later you will be paying an additional two euros for use of our roads.”

Although he did not ask us for our visas he did not forget to ask what the purpose of our trip to Albania was.

So I said, “The Greek policeman asked us the same question.”

“What did you tell him?” he asked.

I replied, “...to look for a bride...”

We all burst out laughing, which caught the attention of those behind us waiting in line.

“Goodbye and enjoy your stay with us,” he said as we departed.

Both sides of the border crossing were surrounded by forested hills, shaded in dark clouds, ready to start raining. The wide asphalt road, part of which was constructed by the Macedonian firm “Granit”, stretched along the narrow gorge on whose slopes, clumped like mushrooms, were concrete bunkers with grey lids; remnants of a recent bygone era. Along the way we saw a traffic sign at an intersection indicating: “Right to Bilisht” (Bilishcha in Macedonian) and “Left to Kapsthice” (Kapeshtitsa in

Macedonian). We turned left. The road was paved up to the entrance of the village located about five hundred meters from the intersection. There was no road after that... Where to now...

Beyond the paved road, on what looked like a cobblestone path, was a narrow lane paved with pounded rocks and mud, laden with puddles of muddy water. It seemed like the 20th century ended here and we were entering the 19th century. I came out of the car to examine the road and see if our SAHO was capable of jumping over the rocks and swimming through the mud puddles. We decided to risk it.

We drove down the narrow lane about twenty meters or so before our left tires got stuck at the edge of a compost heap. At that point a flock of screaming chickens ran off in all directions as a pack of barking, village dogs charged at us. It seemed like the loud barking awakened the villagers. Bolted wooden gates flung open and women and children silently stared at us from their yards. Filth from the spinning tires flung over and was sprayed along the lane, which ended several meters down. In front of us was a tiny lawn, which probably was the town square and a little to the right were three tables. I guess this was the village inn. I got out of the car, walked over to the men sitting around the tables and greeted them with “mir dita”, in Albanian. There were bottles of coca cola and juice on the tables. The men looked at me suspiciously and continued to play their game. The game they played is called “Iuch.” It is a popular game in the Balkan villages. I said “mir dita” again and asked if anyone spoke Macedonian. There was silence. “Does anyone speak Greek?” I then asked. Again there was silence. They remained mute and I too remained mute and mute I left to return to my car.

“Hey, you!” I heard a voice calling. I turned. “Wait!” said one of the men in Greek as he started coming towards me. “Are you foreigners? What are you doing here?” he asked.

“We are visiting,” I said.

“Who are you visiting? Are you looking for something?” the man asked without looking into my eyes. He looked to the side and somewhere far away.

“We are looking for the road to Trstenik,” I said. “This is what the village was called before.”

“There is no such village,” he replied.

“How about Trestenik?” I asked, remembering that that is how it was written on the Albanian map.

“Yes there is a Trestenik. Turn left and then go straight along the road,” he replied.

“Is the road any good?” I asked.

“Very good...” he replied.

“Thank you. Be well!” I said and left.

After slowly pulling out of the compost heap we turned left, drove down the village lane, scared the chickens off the street at the end of the lane and, after being barked at by every dog we met, came out of the village and got on the “very good” road. We lost track of the many rocks we ran over, the many puddles we drove through and the amount of mud we scattered around, driving along the “very good” road. And as we continued along, a horse drawn carriage came towards us from the opposite direction. The wheels of the carriage jumped as they hit the stones, tilting the carriage sideways and jostling the people riding on it.

“Stop the car!” piped up my wife. “Don’t go any further because we will have nothing to return in. The car will be destroyed. Turn around.”

I stopped in front of the horse and said “mir dita” through the open window. One of them gave me the same greeting and that was the extent of our conversation.

“Trstenik?” I asked while pointing my hand in our forward direction.

“Trstenik,” said the man and shook the reins for the horse to get going.

I too shook the reins of my car to resume the trek on the “very good” road, constantly wondering how long before we would break down and how many nuts and bolts we were going to sow on this road. The road was rough and full of deep potholes. All around from there to the border of the village was a single flat green valley planted with wheat. There was not an inch of land that was not plowed and planted. We continued to drive and about twenty minutes later we came to the first houses in Trstenik, or as the Albanians call it Trstenik.

I remember Trstenik from my childhood days. In those days there were only a few white houses and the yard was surrounded by a high wall. The yard wall was also painted white. Trstenik was then a great Chiflik which included almost the entire field that lies from here to Bilishcha. Trstenik is now a large village but judging from the clothes people wear and the exhaustion and fatigue on their faces, it is a poor village.

We greeted the villagers with the customary “mir dita” but we hardly got a response. They were dubious about people who had foreign licence plates on their car and who spoke a foreign language. A tall woman came out of a house and said something in Albanian. We didn’t understand what she said so we asked her if she spoke Macedonian or Greek. She said she spoke very little Greek. She said she was a retired teacher and that she had learned some Greek from her children and grandchildren who work in Greece.

Other villagers gathered around us and we found it strange that none would look us in the eyes or in the face. They looked down or far away when we made contact, seeming as if they were telling us to leave this place at once. We told the retired teacher that sixty years ago we had spent a night here, in one of the meadows between Trstenik and Lobanitsa. We

also said that the meadows must be behind the hill east of the village and that we very much wanted to see the place.

“There is no road that goes there,” she said, “there are only fields.”

The bunkers, I thought, one can see the round white concrete covers from here. I said “faleminderit” (thank you in Albanian) but I was not sure if I had said it right because none of the villagers who were gathered around us replied, they just shook their heads and stood there in silence, digging and straightening the soil under their feet with their rubber boots, seemingly wondering when we were going to leave.

We didn’t leave immediately because from here I could clearly see my village, my birthplace. Even though I had been there the other day I had a renewed desire to see it again so I stood there for a long time, staring at the beautiful and memorable landscape with tears in my eyes, feeling immense sadness. I was feeling hurt, very hurt being forced to abandon it... It was hard to picture Telok with heavy tears in my eyes...

...Yes there, there is Telok beyond the Sveti Iovan church. Every year on May 8th the villagers from the surrounding villages gathered there. More than ten lambs were roasted on spits and the music and dancing did not stop until way past sundown. To the left is the leafy green Nakovski oak tree grove which my grandfather Giorgi purchased from the Turkish Beg after his first pechalba (migrant work) in America. Past the grove is the Sveta Bogoroditsa church which was destroyed in the fall of 1947 and rebuilt in 1980. Golema Bogoroditsa (The Great Mother), considered the biggest holiday in Krchishta, is celebrated on August 15th. Golema Bogoroditsa was celebrated during Turkish and Greek times, that is until the village was eradicated during the Greek Civil War and Golema Bogoroditsa was completely abandoned...

Many people came to visit us that day, not just relatives but also residents from the villages Dolno Papratsko, Novoseleni, Lobanitsa, Kosinets, Dmbeni, Smrdes, Breznitsa, Vmbel and all those who were working in the cities...

I closed my eyes for a moment and I could see people celebrating and full of joy. I stood there with my eyes closed afraid that if I opened them, my memory of that world, like an unforgettable dream, would immediately disappear. Further over is Stenite and beyond that is the chain of mountains – Orle, Odre, Gorusha, Aliavitsa.

Is it a dream? Is it a ghost? No, it is real. My birthplace is close; it is so close I just needed to run, cross the little river that divides the two countries and climb on Telok. But here they placed a great divide between our people so that we couldn’t see each other or visit our birthplace. No lamb has been roasted on a spit in Telok for the last sixty years. Krchishta, for the last sixty years, has not celebrated the Great Mother, a celebration held every year on August 15th without fail. For sixty years the Poprashcheni, Novoseltsi, Kosincheni, Lobancheni, Dmbencheni,

Smrdesheni, Vmbelcheni have not come to stay with us because they are all gone, swallowed by bad fate and spit all around the world. They uprooted us from our birthplace. They told us that a great battle was coming and that we needed to leave, to go to Albania to save ourselves. A year later they told others, the ones from Koreshtata, that they too needed to leave, to go to Albania to save themselves because a great battle was coming. And from there they put us on ships and sent us to foreign climates under the eaves of others... They relocated us - moved us and told us – “now you’re free”...

Our houses are gone, our villages are gone, we are gone, disappeared by name, by home and by people... our foundations too are gone... others brought their own names and made our places their homes. Sixty years have passed in silence without the beating of the drum, the playing of the flute, the ringing of a cowbell, the flocks of sheep taking to the hills, the cry of a newborn, the ringing of the church bell. The hearth has been extinguished and the spark has gone, taken by the wind... That is what someone wished us and that’s exactly how it turned out.

From Trstenik, with my fogged-up eyes full of tears, I could see Telok, Stenite and the Sveta Bogoroditsa church. That is all that’s left of my hometown Krchishta when seen from here, so very close but for me so very far...

We did not go to the place – the green meadow – where on March 25th, 1948 we spent the night awake, lying on bare ground and covered with moist ferns, waiting for dawn to arrive. We did not go to the place where we spent the night of March 26 where they divided us. We knew which direction to go, but we could not find a path that would take us there. Now the entire place is a field. We did not go there, even though we wanted to, to find the place, to trace our first childhood footsteps in a foreign country and to once again take the same steps on the road that led us to the distant countries. We wanted that very much because it was from here that our one way journey into the world began.

We did not forget the place, we remember it well. We also remembered the night filled with quiet, silent, secret and sad sighs involuntarily coming out of our chests... That night, under a starry sky, hugging one another we, then young children separated from the lap of our mother for the first time, sobbed quietly reflecting the full moon in our tears. Our eyes were filled with stars, one of which broke off and fell, it fell somewhere far and fizzled away. Someone said it broke off someone’s happiness, someone’s destiny...

Was it our destiny?

The colour of the moon that night was amber, shining warmly non-stop reflecting in our eyes, nailed into the infinity of the starry sky. That night the sky was starry and was cut in the middle, from end to end, by the Milky Way. That is how we remember it... That night we were also

burdened with a great desire and hope that soon we would return home and, awake, we awaited the arrival of dawn.

As the night came to a close and as the stars high up in the sky were falling asleep, we awaited the day with great hope, while sending the night away with pain... The trucks to take us arrived at dawn and we left Trstenik in silence...

We left Trstenik feeling sad but filled with compassion for the people of Trstenik, not only because of their poverty but also because of their silence, their distance and their coldness. Was it because of their lack of hospitality that we felt sad? Definitely not! We believe the people of Trstenik (Trestenik) are not at all like that. In their eyes we could see that they were a different people, good and noble people. Here, perhaps among themselves, there must be something else; what it is we don't know. But we feel that something is bothering them, something deeply ingrained in them and until we find out what it is we will always be there with them.

We left Trstenik and did not throw any stones of doubt behind us against the people for whom we had the warmest and most sincere wishes, for whom we had acceptance for their silence and for whom we had compassion for their bitterness and anguish. From our visit we could see that time stood still here even though the houses had electricity and two tractors were parked in the village square. Everything here seemed like it belonged to the last century.

There was a half open wooden gate at the village exit through which, in the yard next to the entrance of the house, we could see a grey concrete bunker. In front of the bunker entrance we saw tall green rye grass growing.

The villages in the area were linked by narrow lanes which surely remembered old times and the great impression cultivated soil can make. They were the hallmark of the labour and sweat of these silent people who barely spoke a few words and who did not look you in the eyes, but looked at the ground or away.

Later in an interview conducted with a Macedonian in Elbasan, I was told:

“It does not surprise me how these people responded. In Enver Hoxha's Albania every stranger was considered an agent of some sort and anyone who saw them had to immediately report them to the authorities. It seems like you had no idea what terror was. They are still afraid. In those days they terrorized us at every opportunity and fear became part of life, part of everyday life. Fear was the largest and most powerful guardian of the government...”

Several meters away from the village exit we found ourselves in the midst of a large flat, level wheat field. Gentle wind was blowing down from the direction of Mount Morava caressing and gently rocking the green wheat stalks and bending their heads in great waves. It was an

incredible sight to see, which took our breath away and at the same time made us happy, glad that there was hope for the people here. Soon the wheat would ripen and be harvested and if God was willing there would be bread for everyone...

We left the village Trstenik behind us, but all this area on both sides of the village road where wheat grows and stalks wave in gentle waves is also Trstenik. Wheat grows straight up and the heads are loaded with grain. The bread slowly ripens in them. It was a fascinating sight to see this green carpet growing in the heart of the ring of surrounding mountains. I drove slowly. I drove slowly but not carefully, not constantly looking at the road to avoid rocks and mud puddles. Also I did not look at my watch checking the time. I got the impression that time was darkening and that it was taking us back.

The weather cleared up when we arrived at the first houses of the village Visochishta. This is where the pot-holed, stone laden village road ended and the asphalt paved road began. The asphalt was black and it seemed like it was still warm. We stopped and I came out of the car. My wife very quietly asked:

“What is it? Did something happen?”

“Yes,” I said with a concerned tone of voice. “We have dirtied the asphalt...”

On the Road of Time – Chapter 10

We had our SAHO washed and cleaned and were ready to head back. On our way we patiently waited awhile, so to speak, to merge into the express highway linking Albania to Greece. The highway was packed with a chain of traffic, mostly heavy trucks and tractor trailers with Albanian licence plates from Elbasan, Tirana, Durrës, Fier and Flora. Some crossed the Greek border empty, others coming back carried construction material, bricks and tiles and headed west to Bilishcha (Bilisht), whose name is written on a blue sign with large capital letters. I quickly merged into a gap between two large trucks and kept up the pace. There was an exit at the entrance to Bilishcha. On the left there were instructions for heavy trucks. On the right there were instructions for passenger cars and a wide sidewalk for pedestrians. I took the exit.

We drove into the city on the main street which was covered in shade. Almost the entire street was shaded by wild chestnut and linden trees. The trees were in bloom and the aroma from their yellow flowers was intoxicating. We looked for a place to park but all the parking spaces were taken. There were vans, Mercedes and all kinds of vehicles with Greek license plates. Here they called the owners of Greek cars “Giorgos”. So while looking for a parking space I went past the city limits and then I saw a sign for “Korcha”.

To the left of the road there was a beautiful, big gas station with an empty parking lot large enough to park dozens of cars and trucks. Inside there was a restaurant, a café, a car part store and a grocery store with all kinds of food items. The place was clean and tidy and the employees were neatly dressed and full of smiles. As I struck up a conversation I could see that these people had no problem looking directly into my eyes. They also spoke English, Italian, Macedonian and Greek. There was not even fifteen kilometers distance between here and Trstenik (Trestenik) but there was decades of difference in the conduct of these people compared to those in Trstenik; if such a difference can be measured in time.

A middle aged man dressed in a company uniform came out of the building and approached us. We greeted each other with the customary “mir dita”, which in Albanian means “good day” and from what he was saying in Albanian I gathered that he was asking us something.

“We are looking for the road to Vrbnik,” I said to him in Macedonian.

“Oh, you are Macedonians? From Macedonia? It is rare for us to receive guests from Macedonia,” he said, “how can I help you?”

We again greeted each other “mir dita, si shkoine, mir,” shook hands and were invited for coffee.

“Falaminderit,” I said to him, which means ‘thank you’ in Albanian and again I was not sure if I had said it correctly, so I put my right hand to

my heart, a sign for thank you, and again said that we were looking for the road to Vrbnik.

“To Vrbnik?” he asked and thought for a moment. “Ah, I know but it is not called Vrbnik, it is now called Vrnik,” he said, “you need to return to the city and when you arrive at the centre you will see a bank. After you pass the bank turn left and drive uphill to the first corner. At the corner turn right and then left and then drive straight to where a new house is being built. From there drive straight until you pass all the houses. There turn left and that road will take you directly to Vrnik. That is the only road that goes to Vrnik. You can’t go wrong. He wished us a good trip and all the best from him and his company.

We thanked the man with the kindest of words and left. We then took the road towards Bilishcha’s city centre and drove slowly, looking at the newly constructed residential buildings and at the one and two storey houses constructed with colourful facades. We looked at the small shops, restaurants, cafés, bars and tea houses. When we arrived at the city square I immediately turned left, drove uphill, turned right, right again and then left and taking the wide road we arrived at Vrbnik now called Vrnik.

Vrbnik is a Macedonian village. It lies in a slightly flat valley overlooking the south. All around it are bare hills laden with grey rubble. The houses are low, old, built with stone and covered with stone slabs and old ceramic tiles. The yards are fenced with walls of medium height constructed from stone and every terrace has a well and many vines.

The cobblestone lanes are narrow but kept clean and in good repair. Before the village entrance on the left, above the old road, was an Orthodox Church, built with chiselled stone, half-buried underground. The church bell rarely tolled these days because the worshippers were not there any more; they were gone, dispersed all around the world.

Beyond the hill was the village cemetery where many pechalbari (migrant workers) were laid to rest. They found peace here. They came here from America, Australia, Canada and some European countries. It was their last wish; to be brought here to be laid to rest on their own land and under their own sky. They returned from overseas and as their pictures attest, they were well dressed, smiling with faces full of joy. They looked content and satisfied dressed in their city clothing.

In contrast to the pechalbari were the other villagers who lived here all their lives, who dressed mostly in peasant clothing and who looked sad with deep concern painted on their faces. Their gloomy look and sad eyes left us with the impression that they were waiting for someone or for something...

In the cemeteries, their Macedonian names and surnames are inscribed on white marble slabs and crosses, written mostly in Cyrillic letters with a few written in Latin letters...

There is a long two storey building in the upper part of the village. This used to be a school. Now it is a decrepit old building with broken windows and a gaping hole where the front door used to be. In bygone days more than two hundred students attended primary school here where they were taught subjects in both the Macedonian and Albanian language. After that the students were sent to the middle and high schools in Korcha, Elbasan and Tirana. Of the children that attended this school, thirty became teachers, ten became doctors and one became a lawyer and in time was promoted to public prosecutor in Albania. The people of Vrbnik were very proud of them.

The people were also proud of the memories left behind by the village cultural arts group which undertook numerous performances throughout Albania, participating in various festivals all over the country and spreading Macedonian culture in the form of song and dance. It too is gone. Left there now are the sad memories and the sighs of older people who do remember...

“Enver Hoxha, regardless of who he was, a dictator or a mad man, did not prohibit us from practicing our religion, from speaking and writing in our own language, or from singing Macedonian songs and dancing Macedonian dances. But now these new people who call themselves democratic and Europeans, after taking over, have forgotten the Macedonians...” complained an old-timer from Vrbnik who now lives in Korcha.

Here too, as in Kapeshtitsa and Trstenik, it seemed like time had stood still but the difference here was that we were greeted very warmly and generously by the people. The first person we encountered was a woman dressed in black. We could see in her eyes that she was grief stricken and her face looked like it was covered in pain. She was mourning, we gathered. A close one must have passed on.

A wooden gate was flung open and, gesturing with both hands, the woman invited us inside. We offered our hand and expressed our sympathy for the soul of her son when we found out that he had died in America. In her son's honour she offered us rakia (homemade whiskey), lokum (Turkish delight) and cold water from the well. She then took out an album and showed us black and white photographs taken before the wars and colour photographs taken after the wars and during the rebellion against the Enver Hoxha regime. She showed us photographs taken in Vrbnik and in America of her son, daughter-in-law, grandchildren and close and distant relatives. She has been, she said, to Italy, Greece and Macedonia. She had photographs of all her close relatives, photographs taken from the places where they had been in pechalba (migrant work). As we could see from the photographs, those abroad were dressed in the type and style of clothing of the country they were in. Those photographs taken here in Vrbnik showed the people wearing homemade clothing.

The village, said the woman, is almost empty now. The men are gone to pechalba, the local school is closed and the children are bussed daily to a school in Bilishcha. The church bell rarely tolls these days because most of the time the church is closed. There were days, she said, when a priest came from Macedonia to conduct prayer in the Macedonian language. Now we rarely get a priest and when we do, prayer is conducted in Greek or in Albanian. She begged us to tell the church authorities in Skopje to send them a Macedonian priest to conduct prayer in Macedonian. She promised the priest would be well looked after by the Vrbnik Macedonian community. The woman spoke in the Kostur Region Macedonian dialect and in that dialect we conducted our conversation.

We heard a noise outside in the yard, it was a car. The woman looked outside the window and said: "It's my son, my youngest son. He lives in Bilishcha where he owns and operates a restaurant located on the main street. He came here to bring medicine for his father who is resting in the room next door. He had an operation in Tirana a while ago and needs medicine."

A few moments later we went outside to meet a man who looked like he was in his forties. He had a peaceful look about him and a wide smile on his face. He greeted us as if he had known us for a long time and asked many questions, especially about the "name."

"And what do you say, what are we going to do with the name? Are you going to give it up?" he asked.

"And you?" I asked.

"No, we are not giving it up. A name cannot be given up. And you must not give it up either! Do we understand one another?" he asked with reproach in his voice. "Forgive me," he then said, "I need to go back to the restaurant, all my tables are reserved and I need to tend to my customers. Please come and visit us, I will find a table for you. I will be expecting you..."

"We will come," I said, "but another time."

"We will be expecting you but please call ahead," he said and quickly left for Bilishcha. His mother watched him until he disappeared driving past the corner.

"Let's go back inside," she said and walked in front of us.

"On which side are the villages Vmbel and Smrdesh?" I asked before she entered the house, knowing that those two villages are close to Vrbnik and that many of their residents are related to the people of Vrbnik.

"Over there..." she said quietly pointing to the east with her hand.

I sensed distress and pain in her voice as she took a deep breath.

"Over there..." she repeated and again pointed at the treeless hill, "there behind the hill, but there is nothing left of the villages now... not of Vmbel and not of Smrdesh... the people of those villages are also gone..." she said in a sad, quiet voice. A moment later she said, "They are gone..."

and waved her hand in front of her face as if trying to swat something ugly and evil.

The hill she pointed at was facing the sun and was overgrown with green grass. Above it we could see gray ripples of heat waves rising. The woman looked up and while pointing at the hill with her hand, quietly said:

“I can remember it like it was yesterday, the multitude of people and animals descending. Aged men and woman, elderly, infants... the place was packed with people, with our people. The next day Partisans and Albanian officers came and disarmed those with weapons. There were also many wounded being carried on stretchers and in blankets. They were taken and housed in the school. And what did we do? The village council ordered us to help them. Unfortunately all we could do was give them food and water, we could not find the words to console them and to relieve them of their suffering. Did they stay here long? No. The Partisans collected them during the night and I don't know where they took them. The next day, loaded with everything they had brought from home, driving their animals in front of them, oxen, sheep, goats... they all left on foot... Where did they go? They went down the hill towards Bilishcha...”

The woman seemed to have lost her voice. She waved her hand in front of her eyes and after a long moment of silence, whispered: “A great tragedy... it was terrible what happened to those people...”

An hour and a half later we left Vrbnik. As we drove past the first corner outside of the village we were cut off by a van. The driver of the van came out and ran towards us, followed by a number of children, two women and three young men.

“Welcome, countryman,” shouted the driver. “I can see from your car's licence plate that you are from Skopje, right?”

But before I had a chance to answer, I found myself in his embrace. He gave me kisses on the cheeks, forehead and eyes. He then passed me on to the women and went to greet my wife. They too gave us hugs and kisses. Very happy to have made our acquaintance, the driver then turned to the children and yelled out: “What are you waiting for?! Greet our guests. They are our people. Can't you see they are from Macedonia?”

The children approached us shyly, gave us their hands, smiled and extended their cheeks for a kiss.

“We are returning to the village from Bilishcha,” said the driver. “Every morning I take the children there to attend school. Albanian. We have a school in the village but we have no teacher. There are not enough children to secure a teacher. The people have left for the cities. Almost all are in pechalba now. The village is falling apart, my brother... So, you were at the village. Who are your relatives?”

“Everyone...” I said.

The man stood there for a moment with his mouth and eyes wide open. Then after recovering from the surprise, he hit me hard on the shoulder and said:

“That’s right, brother. Now I remember. We are all relatives. Now turn around and let’s go to the village. Come to my home. We will eat and drink what God gave us, we will talk and tomorrow, God willing, we will each go our way. Come, turn the car around and drive... and you, all of you, back in the van,” he ordered the children.

“Brother, thank you, but another time. We will be back here very soon...” I said.

“What? You are not coming?” asked the man in a disappointed tone of voice.

“We will come; we will come for sure next year...” I replied.

“Please do come. Our door is always open. And by next year the road will be paved with asphalt. The bulldozers began to work the other day. By then even the old name of our village will be returned to us. We call it Vrnik now but its old name was Vrbnik. We were promised this by the government... Can I ask you something? What will you do with the name? Are you going to give it up?” the man asked.

“Are you going to give it up?” I asked.

“Never!” he said. “We will never give up our Macedonian name! What is ours will remain ours. That’s the way it is... end of discussion!”

We said our goodbye’s and left. The day was coming to a close as the sky over Morava Mountain was burning purple...

Far from here, over the mountain ridge as the sun descended behind the mountain the entire Devolsko valley began to change colour...

On the Road of Time – Chapter 11

The Grand Hotel is located in the centre of Korcha. The whole city and surrounding area could be seen from there. The city, from the seventh floor, looked like it was sitting in the palm of a hand with its two way streets running from north to southeast. The second highest building in the vicinity was the belfry of St. George Orthodox Church, located in the very centre of the city. Without wasting time, because it was raining hard that day, we left the hotel quickly and, passing by St. George Church, we took a road that led us to the southeast side of Korcha. We were looking for the house where residents of Korcha had taken us when we were children, frozen and crying on March 26th, 1948.

I remember a young woman of average height separating me from the group of children, stroking my head, saying something in Albanian, putting her hand on my shoulder and leading me in front of a table where, in a large ledger, she wrote my name, her first and last name and her address. After that she spoke to someone and after signing the ledger the person gave her a sheet of coupons. She stroked my head again, grabbed my fist in her hand and took me away.

We walked for some distance on a dimly lit cobblestone lane. I remember looking at the houses and to me they all looked alike. We stopped in front of a wooden door, she knocked several times and then a tall, thin woman opened the door. Her face frightened me. For some reason I thought she was very strict and a bad woman. I crossed the threshold of the house scared and with a step of uncertainty. The tall woman pulled me onto her lap, kissed my forehead and took me to the fountain to wash. While I was washing, she talked and I talked but I did not understand what she was saying. Her voice was warm, soft and gentle.

After washing I was taken to the sofa (low table) and ate dinner with her children. In all the days that I was there they treated me as one of their own. I was happy and pleased to be there because I was treated with kindness, tenderness and warmth, being embraced as one of the woman's own children. Early in the morning the children went to school. I, on the other hand, followed the woman around all day. Holding my hand she would take me to the bakery to get bread. There was always a long line of people there waiting, mostly older men and women. They stood in line silently holding out the sheet of paper from which the woman on the other side of the counter cut out coupons with her scissors. Then, with a big knife, she would cut a slice of cornbread sitting in a large pan. The bread was not swollen, cracked and thick like the rye and wheat loaves we made at my house, it was more like a large rectangular slab baked in a shallow pan...

All the days that I spent in that warm home together with these good, peaceful and kind people, I ate corn bread. Day after day three times a day,

for breakfast, lunch and supper I ate cornbread. For breakfast and dinner I was also given a chunk of dried marmalade and a cup of tea. I received exactly the same sized portions of food as the others in the house. In fact, all the people waiting in line outside the bakery also received the exact same sized portions.

And now after many years have passed, not without excitement, I am reminded of the corn bread. I feel, smell and taste it as I did in those days.

In another part of town is the house where Ditta (now my wife) was accommodated. From what Ditta remembers the house was white and had a balcony. The yard was fenced with a wrought iron fence and roses bloomed everywhere.

I remember that “my house” (if I can call it that, because I felt then and I feel now like it was my house) was short and had only one floor. Its roof was covered with ceramic tiles and its courtyard was surrounded by a high wall. There were many varieties of flowers and roses in the yard. The neighbouring houses were very similar and looked almost the same as my house. I remember the streets were narrow and laid with cobblestones.

So, now sixty years later, in which house was I accommodated? Who were the strangers who took me in and treated me warmly, kindly and gently as if I was one of them? On which door should I be knocking? We described what the house looked like to the people who now live in those neighbourhoods. An older woman said she remembered such a house but it was demolished some time ago to widen the road we were standing on.

“And the people?” I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders gesturing that she either did not know or could not say?

No, I had no luck finding my house. And no, I did not find my angels, the people who looked after me. For years I carried with me the wish to go to Korcha, to find these people and say “faleminderit” (thank you in Albanian) in their language and “blagodaram” (thank you in Macedonian) in mine!

That tall good-hearted housewife and mother, that dear lady who did not separate me from her own and looked after me as if I was her own, I did not succeed in finding, to kneel before her, to kiss her hand, and to say: “NANE, FALEMINDERIT!...” (“mother, thank you” in Albanian).

We left and took the wide street that was being prepared for paving. About a hundred meters down the road it merged into another road which followed the canal. I remember there was no canal then but there was a river nearby. I remember the landmark and the mulberry tree growing there. The river is now gone and its bed is overgrown with grass and shrubs. It looked like the water had been diverted.

We took the narrow wooden bridge and crossed over to the other side. I remember there was a street there that followed a wall which led to a hospital. Now there was no street and no exit. There was a tall building

covered with black sheets of metal behind which I believe was a yard or shops, but there was no access to it from here. We took the road that led to the hospital. We decided to look for the hospital.

An old man approached us and asked something in Albanian.

I said, "I don't understand Albanian," and asked if he spoke Macedonian or Greek.

"Yes, I do," he said. "We are looking for the hospital," I said.

"Hospital? What hospital?" he asked.

"Somewhere in this part of Korcha there was a hospital in which Partisans from Greece were treated," I said.

"Are you Greeks?" he asked. "No. We are Macedonians," I said.

"Macedonians? From which Macedonia? From Greece or from the Republic of Macedonia?" he asked.

"From the Republic of Macedonia, but we were born..." I said and was interrupted before I had a chance to finish my sentence.

"I understand.... I speak Macedonian," he said in a stretched out tone of voice. "Why don't we sit?" he proposed. "So, you are looking for a hospital... but first let me ask you, how are things in Macedonia? We hear on the radio that you fight a lot, you argue. And what are you going to do? Are you going to give up the name?"

"And what do you think? Should we give it up?" I asked.

"No, you should not give it up. Defend yourselves... A name cannot be given up... The hospital did you say? There is nothing left of what you remember. There is not even a footprint left from those days, except..." the man paused, coughed and resumed talking "except for me..."

"You have been there?" I asked.

"Yes. I used to work there as a plumber and an electrician. And not only that, I also substituted as a nurse, a stretcher carrier, an assistant to the stores, a cleaner and a kitchen helper... Those boys and girls gave me a reason to live and took my loneliness away. Without them I would have been completely alone. I am still in contact with some of them and I sometimes speak to them, we are not separated for too long ... They still remain part of me, part of my life. Part of that will never be separated from me..." concluded the old man.

"The hospital is gone for sure?" I asked again.

"Yes, it's gone. Don't waste your time," he answered.

Taking a shot in the dark, I said to the man: "Here somewhere I knew some people and I am looking for them. Their house was around here somewhere... It was a small, clean, short house with a cobblestone courtyard full of rose bushes. There were also other types of flowers planted in pots."

"Was the lady of the house tall, with a long nose and a hidden smile and her husband carried a handgun?" asked the old man.

"That is correct..." I said while thinking about it.

“I know them,” said the old man with confidence.

“Then let us go and visit them,” I said.

“Unfortunately they moved. The man was a Major in the military. The word is he died in some camp. There was a time here in Albania when many camps existed and people were often sent there. Their house was right there, right in the middle of this street. They demolished it about a year ago and are still rebuilding the area. They took the houses down with bulldozers.” the old man concluded.

“What a shame,” I said while taking a long breath and coming to the realization that I may never find them... “And the children?” I asked. “They had two sons and a daughter. One of the boys was my age. Then they all used to go to school. We didn’t go to school. Every day we gathered at this bakery and waited there for our day to come when we could return home...”

“I don’t know their fate. Perhaps they are still alive. Only God knows. Only he knows why these evil things happened to us in those days that nearly ruined us, turned our hearts and minds upside down. I have not heard about them and neither have I asked because it was asking for punishment. You ask and you go to prison. Of course I knew the Major. He was strict but a good man with a good heart... Why don’t we go home to my place? Nowadays no one drags us to the police station if we are caught speaking to strangers or inviting them to our home. So come, let us go for coffee and lokum (Turkish delight). There is plenty of coffee and lokumi nowadays. There is plenty to eat, we are not hungry and we don’t need to stand in line in front of the stores for our food.” said the old man.

We did not go to his house but Tahir told us he lived in a modest house. He lived alone.

“I used to unload your wounded with these two hands, or I should say our wounded. I washed them, I changed their bandages, I comforted them and held their hands before leaving for the battlefield, begging them to be careful. But they were not careful and within a week or so some would be back in worse shape than before, maimed, mangled and mutilated for life,” the old man said with a sad look on his face.

“Where did you learn Macedonian?” I asked.

“Here in Korcha. My neighbours were Macedonians,” he answered.

“And Greek?” I asked.

“I learned Greek from my other neighbours. I used to play with them when we were children. And with games one can learn a language. We also had Turks here so I learned a bit of Turkish too. The entire city is a mix of people but we have no problems, everyone respects everyone else’s languages and religions. Do I have photographs of that time? No. Nothing is left. They took everything during a raid...” answered the old man.

After being lost in thought for a moment, the old man continued:

“I remember the names of many wounded fighters. I also remember the places where they fought battles, where they were wounded and how they were brought here to Korcha to be treated. Initially the largest group of wounded we received was about two hundred, it was during the beginning of August in 1947 after the unsuccessful battle for the city Grevena. After that a smaller group was brought in followed by a larger group in October after the battle for the city Metsovo. Then in December another group was brought in after the unsuccessful battle for the city Konitsa in Epirus.

All the wounded received first aid here in Korcha. The lightly wounded we kept here, the badly injured we sent to Elbasan, Tirana and Durres. Severe cases that needed complicated surgery were sent to Belgrade and Budapest. Not a day passed in the fall and winter of 1947 that we did not receive wounded. Then between June and August 1948 we accepted an average of one hundred wounded per day. That was the time when the great battles were fought on Gramos.

I often heard the names Kopanche, Gorusha, Bel Kamen, Aliavitsa, Charno... from the wounded. We also received many wounded in September 1948 after the battles in Mali-Madi. But the largest number of wounded we ever received, I remember the number 1500, was in February 1949 after the unsuccessful battle for the city Lerin. We offloaded so many trucks... everything was full. The hospital had no place to put them. The hospital rooms, corridors and even the basement were filled with wounded. But the trucks kept coming, bringing more and more wounded. We offloaded them and laid them in the yard on the snow and in the cold. We had to quickly clear the high school next door to the hospital to make room for them. We threw out the desks and put the wounded in the classrooms, hallways, corridors and even the stairs. There was no space left unoccupied. We had no beds or stretchers so we had to lay them on the bare floor.

Here we gave them first aid, covered them with blankets to warm them and gave them some food and tea. We had no idea they would bring us so many wounded young men and women. Almost all of them were bandaged with dirty bandages, pieces of shirts, blankets and basically anything that they could lay their hands on. The wounded would tell us that their wounds were first dressed in the battlefields by older women who carried them on stretchers or in blankets to the road where they were loaded on trucks and sent to a designated area. There they would be examined by a doctor and the heavily wounded would be put back on trucks and sent here. The lightly wounded, capable of walking, were sent to the border on foot, the rest were carried on stretchers...

After offloading the wounded we washed the trucks spilling the blood, filling the yard with gelatinized, frozen clots that did not flow but rolled on the frozen ground. It was cold. It was February. We sent them to Elbasan during the night. Were there many? How many? How many is many?

There were many! It is difficult to say how many was many when there was so much pain, so much suffering, crying, moaning, whining, cursing, swearing... We took them to the doctors in wheelchairs, carried them, or walked them.

Where were the doctors from? They were from Macedonia, Albania, Greece, Yugoslavia, Poland; but most were from Hungary. Before this they all worked at the hospitals in Spain, providing care for the Spanish fighters. They were all experienced doctors.

Were there days that no wounded arrived? No. There were no such days. Every day new wounded arrived. There were also the repeat wounded, the ones we would send to the battlefield and sometimes, the next day, would be back with new wounds.

Did you get any wounded that were old? No. They were all young people. There were no old people...

Did any high ranking officials come to visit the wounded? I have never heard of anyone like that coming to visit the hospital. At least I never heard of or saw anyone like that..." answered the old man.

The day passed quickly and I did not notice that it was getting dark. The street lamp came on and dimly illuminated the old man's face, who by now had a hoarse voice from talking. It was hard for me to ask him more questions because, besides his voice being broken, every word he spoke was bitter and painful for him. His hands shook.

Without me having to ask a question, the man extended his hands towards me and said:

"Here, with these hands I offloaded them from the trucks, I carried them, I embraced them, I changed their dressings, I brought them to the toilet, I washed their faces, I fed them, I gave them water to drink and comforted them when they had unbearable pain. And to the best of my ability I spoke to them, I encouraged them; I consoled them so that they would heal quickly and their suffering would end sooner, at least for now. And what did I not promise them, begging them to be strong and to endure their pain with courage. And when they cried, I cried along with them. To lessen my own pain..."

Then, after some silence, he asked: "Where are you staying tonight?"

"At a hotel," I replied.

"If it is not satisfactory for you there, you are welcome to come and stay with me," he said in a slow tone of voice. "Let us go then..."

We walked the old man to the door of his house behind St. George Church.

"Will you come in?" he asked.

Without saying a word I hugged the man firmly. By what other means could I have expressed my gratitude to this man and to the hundreds of other Albanians? In what other way, other than speaking words of gratitude, could we express our warm, gentle, cordial and sincere

appreciation? Every spoken word is only a reflection and expression of respect that surges with the noblest sentiments of gratitude, love and admiration... We were humbled before the greatness of their hearts and souls...

We said goodbye to the kind old man and gave up on our wish to find the hospital. But if we could not find the hospital then, at least, we should be able to find the place where the hospital once stood. We wanted to meet the people who treated and perhaps the people who were treated there. To be given the opportunity to feel, at least in our imagination, their pain and suffering and their joy of being returned back to life...

Thanks to Tacho and Iovan, activists of the organization Macedonian Alliance for European Integration in Albania, we found the hospital and visited the place the next day.

A spacious former Italian hospital, now forgotten, was standing on the outskirts of town, surrounded by tall pine trees. This was the place where many wounded, thousands of Macedonian and Greek young men and women, fighters of DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) found relief. The place is abandoned now, left to the elements to take their toll. There is nothing there now to indicate that in the interior of this building, lives were once saved.

The once full, bustling hospital rooms and corridors are now empty, ruled by a deep, dead silence disturbed only by the quiet cracking and squeaking of broken glass, open windows and semi-unhinged doors... disturbing the loneliness that was causing us a nagging sense of anxiety and pain. Long cobwebs hung down from the ceiling in the corners. Dust was raised with every step we took. We quickly came out, mute, bringing with us the sense of loneliness that weighed on us, that sat heavy in our hearts. It seemed like someone was groaning, yelling, calling out, begging... We came out quietly, in silence, with a lump in our throats... Silence, solitude and more silence followed...

Feeling anxious and with my hands shaking, I decided to take some pictures of the old hospital building to capture and preserve its present character before it is demolished and completely disappears forever...

There was one more place here in Korcha which I cherished in my memory and which had left an impression on me...

"Here, right here," I told my wife, "under the shade of this mulberry tree all the children from my village used to gather in the morning every day... Here," I said to her, "we gathered and waited ... waited for the trucks to come and take us back home. We scratched little red lines on the stone wall with a broken piece of ceramic tile marking the days that passed. Then we counted the marks to see how many days we were there and every night we dreamt of the trucks waiting for us. We waited for the trucks because we were told that in twenty days they would return and take

us back... I do not know why or who told us that but we waited for the trucks here every day...

One day, before nightfall, the trucks did come. It was raining, pouring but we were all very happy yelling “quickly, quickly, run, get on, get on, we are going home.” They loaded us in the dark in large trucks and took us away and we were so happy and full of joy thinking that we were finally going home, returning to our own homes. The trip was long and lasted all night. Then at the break of dawn we were offloaded somewhere by the sea. I remember that there was a lot of sand and then we realized that we were not going home, far from it...

And from that day forward we were no longer the children of our mothers and fathers... We became known as the children of the Greek Partisans, the children of General Markos, the children in Evgenia’s group, in Maria’s group, in Lina’s group, in Tina’s group and we were not called “children” but “this” and “that” group; to come, to go, to get in line, to breakfast, to lunch, to supper... we were in a group that had no children’s names, but a number inscribed on a small metal plate with the image of Markos. We wore the metal plate on a chain that hung from our neck... I wore the number 2884.

After that, far north, we became children’s home number 1, number 2, number 3... and after that we were divided by class... rare were the letters we received from home... “Only if I were a bird...” wrote our mothers.

The great desire to see us, became a fantasy for our mothers, a desire to turn into birds with strong wings to fly to us and be with us and cry with happiness and joy and, with their tears, cleanse their eyes, hearts and souls... Unfortunately they had no wings, but had strong arms and strong shoulders to carry wounded, to carry boxes of ammunition to the hilltops and to carry long beechwood logs for building bunkers. They had strong hands to hold shovels and pickaxes and to dig trenches. And up above, from the hilltops looking down, it seemed to them that they could see us, their children at the bottom. But the way to the bottom was long and the light, filled only with wishes, was disappearing...

“Let our children be alive and well, and if God is willing they will return to us,” they whispered and consoled themselves with great desire and hope...

Only in Him, they believed only in God and all the promises the others made were only offers of good intentions that led to more suffering.

“...If I were a bird then I would fly there...” wrote our mothers but they had no wings to fly. But others, who were never mothers, did fly, they came to see us, to see how much we had grown and if we were ready to do battle... They gathered us, by the hundreds and sent us to battle, and to us, the smaller ones, they left us their wish that we would grow quickly...

On the Road of Time – Chapter 12

We left Korcha in the morning. I drove on a muddy road now under construction. Perhaps this year or maybe next year we will be able to drive from Korcha to Pogradets on a wider, flat and more modern road. About ten kilometers down the road we turned back to look for the road to Zvezda (Zvezde) and Poian; the first two large villages where, a long time ago, civilians fleeing from Prespa, DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) fighters from the 14th Brigade and other DAG Units spent the night. This was the first place where they had a bit of a rest, enough to get their strength and find each other...

They hardly slept that night. They were more concerned with finding each other and tracking down their animals, which were scattered all over the yards and fields. But in spite of their long searches they could not find their animals, it seemed like someone had already done that but no one knew who and where the animals were taken...

The next day they were told to move on but no one told them where to go. Obediently and without argument they left their carts and all the possessions that they had carried with them this far, including their oxen, sheep and goats, and picked up only what they could carry on their own backs and, with bitter feelings for being turned into refugees, they went on their way. Black clouds could be seen forming over the Korcha valley with fierce lightning cutting through the sky, brewing a wild, angry storm over them.

I drove over the same road, or what seemed like a road, and for a short time we were diverted at Podgorie, where we inquired if anyone remembered a large crowd of refugees passing by here a long time ago. No one seemed to remember, not even the old people sitting under the shade of a mulberry tree playing Iuch. Did they truly not remember or did they not want to speak to strangers?

No, they and all those from the surrounding villages did not want to talk about those days. They did not want to admit to having rounded up the stray animals belonging to the refugees from Prespa and to taking everything that they could lay their hands on and craftily making it disappear. They did not want to admit that they had sold the property of others for gold and that their animals were quickly moved to the yards and stables of new owners.

And what did these crafty people say to the people of Prespa when they questioned them as to the whereabouts of their property? They said don't worry, your property is in safe hands and it will be returned to you after the enemy's neck has been broken at Gramos and when you go back to your homes. Were the people of Prespa convinced of that? I don't think so but what choice did they have? Without being given any assurances or any other explanations they were ordered to hit the road on foot, all while

being beaten down all night by the rain, before arriving at the meadows in Pogradets where trucks and people with open notebooks were waiting for them. Here their names were recorded and they were asked to line up on the side of the road in the line that bore the name of their village.

“Here,” they called to the people, “is where you from German should line up, there you from Pply, over there you from Medovo, on the side...” and after that they led the people to the trucks and one by one they loaded them on board... The trucks then drove off on the same road that we were currently traveling. We arrived in Pogradets in the afternoon.

Pogradets was a living town. Macedonian could be heard being spoken everywhere on the street, in the shops and in the cafés. There were new houses, new streets and hotels everywhere but we could not find a place to rest after driving for almost the entire day. Someone suggested we spend the night in a hotel located at the end of the road leading to Elbasan, on the lakeshore of Lake Ohrid. We decided to take this person’s advice and took the bumpy road leading to the Lake Ohrid lakeshore.

Pogradets was a bustling town with its streets overflowing with old Mercedes and a variety of other cars. Crowds of people were moving around like it was market day. At almost every kilometre on the road there were aquariums set up, full of fish, from which young men, at the sight of an approaching car, pulled out a trout or an eel attempting to entice the travellers to buy it. About ten kilometers from Pogradets, in a locality called Poiske, immediately next to the lakeshore we saw a huge billboard. Written on it were the words, “Welcome Lyhnicas kompleksi turistik”. That meant that we had found the hotel that was recommended to us.

The large neon sign flashing the hotel’s name looked inviting. There was a small parking lot fenced all around with an iron fence, in front of which was an iron gate. The yard was clean and surrounded with a variety of blossoming flowers. To the left and to the right were beautiful wooden bungalows and between them was the way to the hotel. A tall man, calling himself Nako Bregu, greeted us in front of the hotel entrance. He said he was the owner of the entire complex and was glad to receive guests from Macedonia. He spoke Macedonian well.

At the hotel they rented us an apartment overlooking the mountain, under which was the second and main four storey tourist complex of this hotel, on whose roof was a glowing sign with the words “LYHNIDAS”.

Situated in a beautiful ambiance, this tourist complex, the work of architect Zoran Raftovski from Struga, had 29 double bedrooms, 15 apartments, an outdoor pool, a restaurant that served both local and European cuisines, a conference hall with a buffet and the most modern electronic equipment for holding meetings, seminars and workshops. It is here that specialists from UN organizations and other international associations from Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Italy held debates in

the fall and winter. We were amazed at the comfort, latest equipment and excellent service this hotel provided.

Cost per day? Out of season 30 euros, in season 40 euros with breakfast.

In the morning after breakfast we returned to Pogradets. I had a burning desire to once again visit the villages and places through which the population from Prespa and Koreshtata and the Partisans of DAG retreated on August 16th and 17th in 1949.

We asked the people in the surrounding villages if they remembered the refugees who, many years ago, had passed through their villages and travelled along their roads, fields and meadows? We found an eighty year old man in the village Podgorie who said he did remember the refugees from sixty years ago but when we asked him who these people were and where they had come from he did not have much say, or knew and did not want to talk to strangers?

We returned to Nako's hotel and after spending the night there we left for Prenies in the morning.

The road to the Kiafasan border crossing was difficult, coiling through the treeless hills overgrown with tall grass. The biggest impression left on us, at first glance, were the rows of concrete bunkers, to the left and to the right, which seemed as if they were going to open fire through the dark gun holes at any moment. It felt as if they held you in their sights from all sides. On the opposite side of the first curve in the road, beyond the wide crossroads in the middle of the hill among the growing shrubs, there was a whole row of bunkers. It seemed like the dark eyes of the gun holes kept an eye on us, targeting our foreheads and would at any moment open fire.

Those who constructed the bunkers surely chose these locations so that they could bring their opponent down with a single shot to the forehead. The very thought of this caused you chills and cold sweat. The new authorities did not remove the bunkers. Perhaps they left them there to surprise the tourist and the traveller, or they left them there as a reminder of a different time during which those who led the country held power with these numerous concrete bunkers, confirming just how committed they were to the spirit of defending their country? For now the bunkers were not bothering anyone, but unwittingly they attracted the eye of the traveller and evoked many questions.

At the great bend in the road there was a big sign. To the left it pointed to the road that led to Pogradets and Korcha, to the right it pointed to the road that led to Elbasan and Tirana and further down, before the bend in the road leading to the Kafasan border crossing, there was a great big blue sign with large Latin letters with the writing "MACEDONIA". Past that there was one more smaller sign with the same writing but the letters on this sign were smudged with black paint, indicating that someone had a problem with the name.

After a short stay in the car park, and after enjoying the beautiful panorama of Lake Ohrid, we turned left and took the road to Elbasan. We drove slowly keeping to the third lane in the wide strip of asphalt as we descended the winding steep hill, keeping a safe distance behind the large trucks which moved at turtle speeds, hugging the road in front of us. Others, on the other side of the road, travelled uphill at even slower speeds, carefully hugging the sharp turns. Finally the wide road levelled out into a gentle decline as we descended into the green valley surrounded by a ring of mountains and there, on a blue traffic sign, we saw the letters “Perrenias”.

We parked on the side of the road, turned off the engine and left the car. From what I had been told, I knew who was here and what their lives were like. As we got closer my knees began to tremble with excitement and slowly, as if trying to walk through a dark shadow, painful memories began to appear before my eyes. These were the memories I had inherited from my parents and from the many others who had spent a very difficult time in Perrenias right after the purge from their birthplace.

Located at the end of the valley was Perrenias, probably easier to pronounce and remember it as “Prenies”, which, when looking from above, resembled a huge cauldron. Sixty years earlier, our people were settled in the barracks, horse stables and stores of an abandoned Italian military base. But I remember Prenies from having passed through it. It was late November 1948, more precisely November 28th, a day I will never forget, a day which will remain forever in my tortured and bitter memory. I was only eleven years old then but what I saw and experienced stuck in my memory forever. But from what my mother Fimka had told me, she along with thousands of others, suffered painful and difficult times here that lasted sixteen months. I carried that memory with me for a long time, determined not to forget it and to safeguard it by writing it down.

About the end of that November day when we passed through Prenies, years later, my mother Fimka told me the following:

“It was early morning and from down where the ovens were, a sound, not a sound but a scream was heard – “They are coming!” And we knew that it was trucks. But this time they were not carrying recuperating fighters, they were carrying our children. We ran out of the barracks, rushing, stepping over one another to get to the trucks, to our children, as soon as possible. We ran beside the trucks falling down into the ditches and calling out for them to stop, but they would not stop. We ran faster and followed the trucks calling the names of our children but still nothing. A whole crowd of people gathered...”

I fell down but the others kept running, some jumped over me others stepped on me and yet others tripped and fell beside me, then got up again and ran on all fours trying to catch up to the trucks. I was in pain unable to get up and lay by the roadside. I felt stabbing pains all over my body but I

kept yelling calling my children by name. When the trauma subsided a bit I got up but only managed to kneel and with my arms lifted up towards the heavens I began to yell and yell louder, crying out the names of my children. Then from over there, from the trucks I heard shouts and cries...

‘Mom!!! Mom!!! Mom!!!’ the children, with their arms held out, were calling out to the people running after the trucks...

These were not screams of joy but shouts of pain, of sorrow and anguish, they were loud, desperate, heart wrenching and inconsolable cries and howls, cast upon us, spreading all over, driving us wild and tearing our hearts out... And those damn trucks kept passing us without stopping, taking with them our appeals, our loud, sad groans and our prayers... They did not stop but kept going and going until they disappeared in the distance of the winding curvy uphill road leading to the top of the mountain...

There were so many trucks that the dust they picked up and dropped behind them had no chance to settle. Up, over on Kafasan a new cloud appeared and another behind it and another behind that seeming like they were bound by a chain, running down along the great winding curves... We knew these trucks were loaded with wounded but we stood at the side of the road, waiting for a chance, hoping that someone may have heard something about our dearest children. But again the trucks came and went without stopping, noisily passing by, drowning our cries and screams with their loud roar and with the cries and moans of the wounded that they carried.

And every day after that, some going this way others going the other way, the trucks kept coming and going, bringing more pain... Every day we stood motionless on the side of the road, crying, staring at the mountain with our faces and eyes covered with black head kerchiefs... and so we waited and cried every day... Then ... Then, as we did every day, we gathered together in the barracks and in the horse stables and again and again we told and retold our painful stories and in our most mournful whimpers we prayed for relief from our anguish...

So, every day, no day passed when there was no crying in Prenies... I did not see my children that day but it seemed to me that I had heard their voices. Perhaps they saw me? ... I had fallen at the side of the road and had been stepped on but I did hear children shouting ‘Mama - Mama - Mama!!!...’

How many mothers had fallen down by the side of the road that day and did not see their children? And as such I did not see mine... the only time I saw my children, crying and extending their arms to me, begging me to hug them, was in my dreams, that is, when I did manage to get some asleep... Then I suddenly awoke and, shaken, I wondered where they were and would anyone be there to wipe their tears, to speak comforting words to them, to hug them and pat them on the head and gently kiss them on their cheeks?... My chest hurt inside from the heavy sighs, the prayers and

curses that I hurled but still I did not know who to curse the most. Who was at fault?...

That night a woman went crazy... The same night, next door, two infants died in the barracks. They were wrapped in worn out Italian blankets and buried after midnight. They said they died a terrible death... I do not know how to describe the pain we felt over those deaths... That day we did not line up to get food from the cauldron. We sat huddled together on straw mats and imagined ourselves running behind the trucks, following them as they climbed their way uphill, high up the mountain beneath the clouds... There, up high, was where we believed our children had been taken, behind those foggy hills. That was where our cries and tears were directed but the pain always remained with us... That's how it was... that day in late November. The next day the weather turned cold and it snowed."

Thirty or so years later the Skopje Publishing House, "Kultura", published my first novel entitled "Postela za Chemerite" (A bed for Sorrows) in which I dedicated my first pages in memory of those times. This is what I wrote:

"On the hard soil and stone ground, on the side of the road, there are long gray rotting barracks, built with bricks and covered with rye straw. On the left there are old ovens. On the uphill there are common toilets. Under the hill there is a cemetery and under it there are barracks lined up in a long line with narrow, tiny windows through which, because of the iron bars, the sky is reflected in squares. In the middle there is a dusty open space. Slightly to the side is a low house, built of carved white flint. This is Prenies.

The road was narrow and packed with thick flint gravel. The ditches were wide, deep and overgrown with weeds and thorn bushes. On the days when it rained, red silt and muddy water flowed down from the hill. It was very cold during the night when the sky was clear and very hot during the day. The stones were washed clean by the rain and baked and cracked by the burning sun. When the wind blew, which came in waves from the mountains, red clouds of dust hung over the barracks.

Of all the places our people could have gone to save themselves, they had to come here, to this godforsaken place. Bitter, ruined, restrained – very old men, widows of six wars, exhausted sick women, loners, nursing mothers and among them, sick men and men enslaved by their own fear.

A cloud of dust gathered over Prenies twice a day. Once early in the morning and again in late evening when a column of trucks passed by. If the dust rose from down below where the ovens were, the trucks would be carrying recuperating fighters from the hospitals in Elbasan, Tirana, Durres and Suk. With them they would also be carrying food and ammunition for those on the battlefields of Vicho and Gramos. The trucks would transport the food and ammunition to the border and from there it

would be carried to the mountains on the shoulders and backs of people, donkeys, horses and mules.

When the valley was filled with grey fog, the trucks would reach the place where the ovens were with their lights on. And when the grey light given off by the first rays of the morning sun began to shimmer on the tops of the surrounding mountains, the trucks would begin their snaking downhill descent from above the hill, making their way down to Prenies. Descending down the cobblestone road they would carry wounded; bleeding, moaning and cursing...

Twice a day the words 'they are coming' would be heard over Prenies and every day, morning and evening, the people would pour out of the barracks and horse stables moaning, groaning, disturbed and disheartened and run to the road. And the closer the column of trucks got, the greater was the hustle and the surge pouring out of the barracks and horse stables and running towards the road. People treading over the beaten ground, running from all sides and calling, calling, pushing and falling. And in the loud cries nothing was heard, not a name and not a surname, only 'oh-oh-oh-a-a-a-!', weeping, crying, praying, cursing and swearing. Everyone was calling and searching for their closest, their most beloved, their dearest...

Everyone was looking for their closest: they ran towards those old Czech and Italian trucks which did not want to stop, pushing each other, hitting one another. Those who fell lay there like ninepins, trampled by the rush... they did this day after day, twice a day. Every evening a pile of women and old men ran behind the trucks all the way down to the ovens, to the first guardhouse, to the first bunker behind which the road to Elbasan extended. They stopped there... and left behind, lying on straw mats in the barracks, were crying infants, grunting, groaning and moaning, uncertain of their life and existence.

Every day they ran behind the column of trucks snaking its way up hill... at the crossroads, bayonets mounted on rifles shone under the first rays of the morning sun. The surge stopped there and the trucks quickly disappeared around the last corner. The old people waved at the column and then crossed themselves. They blessed those returning from the hospitals and heading for the battlefields... Some, with tears in their eyes, would mumble: 'May their scars remain healthy...'

In silence, with black head kerchiefs in their hands, they bid farewell to those headed for battle. After that, slowly they made their way back down but would not immediately return to their straw mats in their barracks and horse stables. Sorrowfully they would search the road, the ditches, the tall grass, the shrubs, looking for letters that the trucks may have dropped. And then, in the barracks and horse stables, from dusk to dawn and from dawn to dusk there would be constant weeping and wailing. Shadows would be seen moving from barracks to barracks. Relatives gathering together to mourn and weep for those who had lost their lives in the battlefields of

Gramos and Vicho, Epirus and Thessaly and for those who were badly wounded and died in hospitals in foreign lands... And when their cries and tears had dulled their pain, they would whimper in the dark, muttering words, as if those they spoke to were still alive...

On the hard soil, on the road on which, with the birth and death of the day, black turmoil poured, grass did not grow; everything was stamped down. For the sorrowful, beaten and tormented, living in the barracks and horse stables, lying on straw mats, there was only one-hundred centimeters of space available for each person. Above them there were long, half rotten, beams and underneath them were cobblestones on which, who knows for how many centuries, horse urine had been absorbed. The healthy wished the sick a quick and painless death - to save themselves from their own agony and to save the healthy from being tormented.

Even though the place was well guarded between the two checkpoints where the trucks passed, and in addition to people being frightened and intimidated, there were always the few who secretly slipped out and climbed the summit. And from there they would look at the large bodies of water and the mountains and grey mountain peaks all around them and then whisper to each other with fingers pointing: 'Look, over there, that's my house.'

Every day here in Prenies, with burning desire, they waited to hear the words: 'People, come out, we are going home!' This is how they always spoke: 'People give, people bring, people be patient, people persist.' Every day they waited for the day when a voice would call out: 'People, we are returning to our homes.' They always had their belongings ready, waiting to be tossed over their shoulder, waiting for the long trek home."

"That's how it was," said my mother Fimka, wiping a tear, running down her face with the edge of her black head kerchief... She threw a sad glance in front of her and after a long silent pause, with a heavy sigh and motioning with her hand, said: "There, along the road, after the trucks left, every day we searched in the shrubs and grass looking for letters, one woman found a letter. She quickly hid it in her chest, the only place they would not look when they searched us. We got someone to read the letter during the night by moonlight. The letter said the children from so and so villages were located in 'Duresi' (Dures). That's all it said. Not who wrote it and not who dropped it. That's all it said, nothing more. It did not even say what 'Duresi' was, was it a city, a country, was it a village?... Only 'Duresi'. So we began to ask what was this 'Duresi' but we did it in a secret way and we only asked those we trusted. No one knew. What do you expect from people that had never travelled? In Prenies we were stuck in a chicken coop, getting out during the day and returning at night. That's all we knew. One night we sent an old man to Shkumbin. That's an Albanian village outside of Prenies. We begged him to go and ask an Albanian what 'Duresi' was and where it was located. The old man went

and returned at dawn. He said 'Duresi' was a provincial town, a big provincial town near the sea.

Oh my God, we began to yell, shake our arms in the air and pull our hairs out crying. If our children were near the sea, surely they would drown. Three or four women got together and asked the old man to go back to the Albanian village and ask how far it was to 'Duresi' and how to get there. After much begging the old man did go and when he came back he said: 'Duresi is a provincial town located about ten days travel from here by foot.' It was not too far we thought. After all we traveled for an entire month on foot and fully loaded with our belongings, what's ten days compared to that, especially for a man? We decided to send a man, but whom? We found ourselves in a big dilemma about who to ask. It had to be someone who wanted to see his own children. In the end we decided to ask Traiko. He had strong legs and knew a few Albanian words, so he would be able to find his way if he got lost on the way.

All week we collected small pieces of bread, breaking pieces off the bread they gave us in the food line. Piece by piece we filled a sack full of bread and dried marmalade. We got the trusted old man to whisper instructions into Traiko's ear on how to get there. 'First you must pass by Librazhd and stay along the side of the road, if you find a truck, you can go by truck and when you arrive near a large city called Elbasan, take the upper, I mean lower road. If you take the upper road you will be heading to Tirana, if you take the lower road, along level ground, you will arrive in Duresi and there you can ask where they have many children.' This is what they told the old man and this is what he told Traiko.

Traiko left during the night. Many days and nights had passed since he left and there was no sign of Traiko; no one knew where he was. His wife became very upset yelling, screaming and cursing, wondering how she was going to live and survive without him. 'Traiko my dear, oh Traiko why did you leave me alone, what am I going to do without you, being without you is like being blind,' she screamed out loud and cried and cursed.

We all began to think of the worst. Something terrible must have happened to him. You never know. This is a foreign country, many things are unfamiliar, travel would be difficult for a man who has never travelled... When six weeks passed, we decided we should send Ilio. Ilio was familiar with travel, before the Great War Ilio used to go to pechalba (migrant work) in Thessaly. He had worked on the farms in Thessaly during the spring and summer ploughing, sowing and harvesting crops and after that he used to travel to Thrace to make coal.

Ilio went to Duresi and two weeks later he returned. He told us that he found Duresi and the place where the children were and that several times during the night he secretly met with Evgenia, the oldest woman responsible for the children. She told him that all the children were alive and well, that they were all clothed, clean and well-fed. She told him to

give her regards to all the mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers and to wish them all well and to tell them not to worry. She also sent regards to all from all there.

After many months of waiting and wondering, this was great news for all. It brought much happiness to the mothers. People were going in and out of Ilio's barracks every day. Every mother wanted to ask details about her own child or children. Traiko's wife too stopped her yelling, crying and cursing. Ilio whispered in her ear that Traiko was alive and well and that he was hiding in Duresi and secretly visiting the children and that when times changed and things improved, he promised he would return... That's how it was...

One day the visits and conversations ended. Some high ranking officials came to Prenies and called all the men to a meeting. They spoke to them about the great battles and how our side was always winning but to shorten the war and bring victory faster they needed their help. The officials spoke for two or three days about these great battles and took turns visiting the barracks. There they found crippled and maimed people, some holding their hip, some holding their back, some walking with a cane, some bracing themselves against the wall, some coughing badly, some lying on straw mats, some dashing for the toilets...

When the officials saw the condition of those men, they decided that battles could not be fought with these kinds of men and victory could not be achieved. They found only five men capable of delivering victory, Ilio was one of them who the officials took with them when they left. Almost four months later, during a cold, snowy winter day, Ilio returned. They sent him to Prenies back to his wife because he was no longer needed. His right sleeve was hanging empty...

That day our trucks did not come twice as they did many times before. I call them 'our trucks' because they carried our young men and women from and to the battlefields. They brought our wounded and maimed young fighters to the hospitals and when they recovered, the trucks took them back, back to the battlefields. Sometimes the trucks brought one or two officials, clean and shaven, boots shining and cheeks glowing red. They came to Prenies to let the men know that victory was near and for victory to be even nearer they needed to give, they needed them to give it their all, but all these men had to give was their lives and the rags they wore on their backs.

Our sheep and goats were grazing up in the mountains, being looked after by very old Macedonian men hired by the Party. Our larger animals were strays, left alone out in the fields and meadows and no one knew their number, how many were sick, how many had died and how many were still alive. Being deserted their numbers surely had declined. People were saying that some had died from sickness and others had been killed by wolves. But the truth was something different all together...

One of the women, one time, went to an Albanian village and there she saw her two oxen harnessed under a yoke. The sheep and goats, they too found themselves in the yards of Albanian villagers. Resourceful people sold the animals to the Albanian villagers and all the while they were telling us that they took them to the Party and were returned to the front for our fighters to have something to eat. There were people who secretly left the complex to collect tea in the mountains and recognized their own goats and sheep grazing among the Albanian livestock. We had no problem if our livestock ended up in the cauldrons of the Partisans. It was wrong however for it to be in the yards of the Albanian villagers. And as such we lost everything we had taken from our homes, everything we had managed to bring with us all the way to Prenies. Surely gold coins were slipped into someone's hand...

And this picture, this view of running behind the trucks, the crying, the pain, the yelling are all experiences buried in my memory and now, being reminded of them, they are coming back like a wave, like a swarm, they spring to life, they burn... they are strung like pearls; word beside word, cry beside cry, moan beside moan, tear beside tear, sigh beside sigh, all bound together by a chain, pressing, squeezing, scratching and hurting... That memory weighs on me, it squeezes me, it chokes me and makes my soul ache..."

We turned right from the main road and parked the car under the shade of a willow tree, and, with tears in our eyes, went for a tour. Both the left and right side of the street were laid with a blanket of fresh asphalt. There was a whole line of long buildings standing in a row finished with a grey-white façade. Up above there were square windows covered with iron bars and below were large crooked doors. These looked more like stores than stables. Among them were also small houses. In front and underneath each large colourful tent were discarded plastic coca cola and a variety of colourful juice bottles. There were also stacks of empty packages from smuggled sweets and candy.

We decided to go up the street. Children ran in front and all around us curiously inquiring as to who we were. We seemed strange to them because they had never seen us before. We stopped at a place that resembled a café. There were two tables and about ten plastic chairs. A young lady in her early twenties was waving a broken mulberry tree branch left and right chasing annoying flies. From her movements and from her smile we gathered that she was inviting us to the café. She did not speak any other languages besides Albanian so we stood there mute. But gesturing did help a little. Then a young man in his twenties came to assist. He said he gathered that we were from Skopje because of our car license plates. He told us that he spoke a bit of Macedonian but was fluent in Greek and Italian. He had learned these languages while working in those countries.

“Are you looking for someone?” he asked.

“Yes we are but we prefer to find someone older,” I replied

“Right now I will bring you someone,” he said and a few minutes later he came back with an old man.

“Are you from here, from Prenies?” I asked the old man after we greeted each other.

“Currently I live here in Prenies, but originally I am from a neighbouring village behind these mountains,” said the old man while gesturing east with his head.

“When did you move to Prenies?” I asked.

“When Enver Hoxha collected us and brought us here to build the factory and the rail line to Pogradets,” answered the old man.

“And where do you live?” I asked.

“Over there, in the last houses, behind the mosque. That’s where they relocated us,” answered the old man.

“What about these houses?” I asked while pointing at the stores or horse stables whatever they may be.

“In those days the army was located there. There were a lot of troops here then. They were guarding the border and us,” replied the old man.

“What about before that?” I asked.

“Before that we were at home in our village. I told you they brought us here to build the factory and rail line and to dig chromium...” answered the old man.

“Do you recall if there was a cemetery located near here?” I asked.

“Yes I do. There were two cemeteries here. Up there, at the corner, where they are digging now, above the road there was a cemetery where they buried Italians. The other was where they buried Albanians but on the other side,” answered the old man.

“Before they brought you here, were there any other people here?” I asked.

“People? No, there were no ordinary people, only a lot of soldiers...” answered the old man.

As we continued our conversation another man joined us. He looked like an older man from the wrinkles on his face.

“Pliak, how many years did God give you?” asked our translator.

They all laughed out loud at the question.

“What God are you talking about? Hoxha uprooted us and Him from our minds and hearts. When someone mentions God, we go silent and look around. We hope no one from the security services is around. It’s a habit. Then, in those days, they even pushed our children to spy on us. That’s what they were teaching them,” concluded the other old man.

“And today?” I asked.

“Today? You can say whatever you want and no one will scold you or say anything bad to you, or look at you strangely. That’s democracy...”

And you and the lady, are you looking for something?” asked the other old man.

“Yes we are. We are looking for a cemetery,” I replied.

“What? Did someone close to you die on the road?” asked the first old man.

“Yes, many died on the road and on other roads here in Prenies and we want to know where they were buried,” I said.

“And when was that?” asked the old man.

“It was during 1948 and 1949,” I answered.

“That was a long time ago. I don’t know if you could find anyone here at Perrenias that knows such things. And who were the dead?” asked the old man.

“They were our people, Macedonians...” I answered.

“And what were they, your Macedonians, doing here?” asked the old man.

“The war brought them here,” I answered.

“The war, but which war?” asked the old man.

“The war in Greece...” I answered.

“Oh, a long time ago when I was back in my village I heard that there was a war there and I remember that after that we had to give some of our wheat, rye and corn. But I never heard of your people being here in Perrenias. No one living in Perrenias today is a native. We are all immigrants. Maybe in the villages up the mountain there may be people who might know. But that was a long time ago. People have died, people have aged and their memories have been diluted. Go up the mountain, maybe there you will find someone who remembers. But not with this kind of car, the road is no good for this kind of car. It’s best to go on foot,” advised the old man.

The old man finished drinking his coffee, greeted us with both hands and sluggishly walked away up the lane. Then suddenly he paused for a moment, turned around and gave us a hand signal to approach him.

“Ask the people from these houses. When they were digging foundations for their houses they said that they found bones. Ask them. Maybe the cemetery is under their houses,” suggested the old man.

“Yes,” said the woman, “here we found many bones from people. It looks like the place was a cemetery...”

Further up a bent over old man approached us and asked:

“Are you the people asking about the cemetery? Yes there was a cemetery. Over there...” said the bent over old man while pointing with his cane.

We took the bent over old man along with our interpreter to our car and drove to where the cemetery used to be.

“Right here, the cemetery was at this place,” said the bent over old man.

The place did not look like it ever was a cemetery. We saw a wide three lane road marked with white lines. Above the turn was a hill.

“It seems to me that the cemetery was dug up with the excavation for widening the road... the cemetery was not ours (Albanian), it was Italian. Over there where the road widens that too was part of the Italian cemetery. Soldiers were buried there. Last year people came from Italy and took two truck loads of bones in boxes. And over there, on the other side of the hill there was a cemetery, and to whom it belonged I don’t know,” said the bent over old man.

“And is there anyone very old here in the Perrenias...” I asked.

“You will not find anyone older than me. Don’t waste your time. It was the way it was but now it has passed. The times are different now. As you can see people are building houses, widening their yards, opening cafés and trying to make a life for themselves, they don’t care about any old cemeteries. They dig and build wherever they can find space. The people have become greedy...” concluded the bent over old man.

I thanked the bent over old man for his help and, without mentioning God, I wished him many more years, one-hundred-and-one years, and then placed a box of cigarettes and a bag of coffee in his hand. He placed the cigarettes in his chest pocket and took a whiff of the bag, then smiled meekly and said:

“There is no need. Now we have all kinds of things, as much as you want. People bring things from everywhere... But if it is given from the heart then I accept it with all my heart.”

Our interpreter then translated:

“Pliak, the man thanks you and says that you told him many things...”

“Well, you, I told him... I told him what I know,” he said in a disappointed tone of voice and walked away sluggishly.

And as such they took us from place to place to where once there were cemeteries and everywhere they took us the places were empty.

On the Road of Time – Chapter 13

We returned to Prenies. There we took a right turn. On the left was the mosque, behind which was a residential settlement. Two and three storey houses had been recently built there and a little above that, next to the intersection, was the Orthodox church.

Suddenly a question popped into my mind, “Why was there, in those days when Italians were here, an Orthodox church in the middle of an Italian military base, shouldn’t it have been a Catholic church? Or was this church built to honour the memory of those who died here? The question bothered me as I became more and more curious. But who to ask?

There were many flowers decorating the outside yard door and there was a locked padlock hanging on the door. People passing by stopped for a moment and shook their heads, gesturing that they did not understand what I was asking them. Then, when speaking among themselves, they shrugged their shoulders. I began to feel isolated and disappointed.

Suddenly our translator appeared from somewhere and spoke to people and from the conversation concerning the church we understood only two words; some said Catholic and others Orthodox. We realized that nobody knew anything about the church. For them it did not exist, even though they passed by it many times each day, they had no clue as to whom it belonged. Unfortunately the question kept gnawing at me; “What is this Orthodox church doing here? Is it an Orthodox Church or not?...”

Then suddenly I remembered. Well, yes. At that time a friend of ours was here in Prenies and before coming here we had visited him and told him that we were coming here. God bless those who invented the mobile telephone. Anxiously I pressed the buttons with the numbers and then I pressed the green button.

“It’s ringing,” I said to my wife. “He is answering...”

I heard a sleepy voice answer on the other side. Afternoon is usually nap time.

“Hello, Done, good day, how are you? Wait, don’t answer, I have a question for you first. You have been to Prenies, right?”

“Yes I have,” he answered.

“Do you remember if there was an Orthodox church in Prenies then?” I asked.

“No there wasn’t one. I am sure there wasn’t one,” he replied.

“What about a mosque?” I asked.

“No, there was no mosque either,” he said.

“Was there a cemetery?” I then asked.

“Yes...” he said.

“And where was it?” I asked.

“Well, where are you now?” he asked.

“We are in Prenies. We are standing on the right side of the main road. In front of us we see a row of long buildings with wide doors and small windows up above that have iron bars in front of them. The buildings look like camp barracks and between them there is a road...” I replied.

“Those were the stores and horse stables where our people were housed. Now look in the direction of the field. You should be able to see a large number of long wooden barracks on the other side of the road...” he advised.

“I am looking but I don’t see any barracks. There is something there that looks like a playground and in the middle of it there are stakes placed into the ground on which old boards had been nailed. The place looks more like an open bazaar...” I replied.

“That’s were the barracks were. And a little to the side do you see a white house?” he asked.

“Yes I see it,” I said.

“That’s were the Administration and Party Committee were located. And at that time that was the only house built in the area, everything else was barracks, large and long stores and horse stables with large doors on the north and south side...” he said.

“Yes, I see them. They are exactly as you describe them,” I replied.

“Now, follow the road up. When you reach the last store or horse stable, turn slightly to the left... Are you there yet?” he asked.

“Yes, we are there...” I replied.

“Do you see a small hill to the right?” he asked.

“I see it,” I said.

“Go to the bottom of the hill and about ten steps further you will find the cemetery,” he instructed.

“All I see here are only single level houses...” I replied.

There was silence on the receiver... After a moment or so a long sigh and after that was Done’s voice saying: “The cemetery was there...” He hung up and that was the extent of our conversation.

It was hot... The valley slumbered in the encirclement of the surrounding mountains. It is hot here all day during the summer. They say the heat is unbearable in the summers and the winters are stone cold. Then, in those days, the frail and sick, the old, the babies and the young children suffered the most. Their salvation was the cemetery which we are now trying to find...

We brought candles with us so that we could light them at the Prenies cemetery. We knew that from the end of July 1948 to the end of October 1949 many people had died in Prenies from various ailments and diseases; the majority were old people, babies and one and two year olds. So there must have been a cemetery in which they were buried. These were our people and the cemetery in which they were buried is our cemetery, even though it is located in a foreign country.

We lit candles for the souls of those who sixty years ago lost their lives here. For those whose destiny was met with eternal darkness. We lit candles to revive the memory of them and keep them from being forgotten... We wanted to light candles in the Orthodox church but how were we going to find the priest or someone who had a key?

“Why don’t we go to the café,” suggested the interpreter, “maybe we will find someone who knows more.” We agreed; it was a good idea.

There were three tables under the branches of a grapevine and past that there was a door, probably leading to the kitchen. One of the four men sitting around the tables got up, took a few steps towards us and greeted us with a big smile and wide open arms as if he had known us for a long time. He invited us to one of the empty tables. The man kept talking with a wide smile on his face and we, understanding nothing that he said, smiled back and shook our heads in agreement. We gathered he was the owner of the café and did not look a day over thirty. Our interpreter struck up a conversation with him. I think he explained to him who we were and what we were doing here.

Before sitting us down, the man swatted the flies off the table with his not so white towel, turned towards us and, with the help of the translator, asked for our order.

“Coffee please,” I ordered.

“Hurie, vale tria kafedakia,” (Bring us three coffees.) ordered the translator in Greek.

“Milate Elinika?” (do you speak Greek?) I asked in Greek.

“Yes I do, very well. I am also teaching my wife to speak Greek. We are planning to go to Greece in the fall to work there. We want to build a house and we need the money. I worked in the Peloponnesus for twelve years. And you, from what my friend tells me, are from Macedonia, right?” the man asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“You have big problems with the Greeks, right? It is difficult to live with Greeks. I know them very well. They are not honest people. They are big liars. I am familiar with them. I worked like a slave for my bosses. But what are you going to do when you have obligations. You will work as a slave for your bread... Let them be what they are, that’s how God made them, even God endures them. He puts up with them cursing His Son and swearing at his Son’s Mother... Every second word is a swear word... Please madam, forgive me, it is not decent of me to talk about these things...” he said to my wife.

“Tell me,” I asked, “since when have you lived in Prenies?”

“This is my second year. Why do you call it Prenies? This place is called Perrenias, a name which it got from the many slopes found in the mountains on the west side of the settlement. ‘Prii’ means slope and

Perrenias means many slopes. Earlier the place was called ‘Domozdroba’ and in the fifties it began to develop as a town,” said the man.

“Tell me when was the church built here?” I asked.

“The church and the mosque that are built on the same street, on the opposite side, were built after communism fell. If you want to know more we will call the church custodian and he will be able to tell you more. I don’t go to church or to the mosque. In communist Albania we were all forced to become atheists and since then I have remained that way. But please allow me to finish. You know the large field behind us, the one by the road that spreads east and south and slopes down the mountains? Well that field was owned by a Beg before the war. I don’t remember his name. The Italian government purchased the part of the field that we are standing on in the thirties of the last century. This was the most unproductive part of the field, which Italy purchased to use for 99 years and they built a military base. The only thing that remains of that base today are those ugly buildings which some say were stores and others say were stables. Everything built around them and over the road was built on usurped land. Last year Italians came and said that this place was theirs and that we Albanians were building our houses on stolen land. We said that there were another 30 years before the 99 years expired, so until then we were staying right here,” concluded the man.

While the man spoke I could not help but think about our people stuck in those stables and stores, now eaten away by the elements and time.

The barracks were gone. The place where they stood was now flat and in their place were poles stuck in the ground on which rotting old boards had been nailed. Those grounds today are the market place of Perrenias. Above them are the stores and horse stables. They had been painted with bluish and white paint, which in some places had eroded by the passing of time and in other places had cracked, exposing old layers of paint in a variety of colours.

Underneath one of the layers, I could see, but just barely, an outline of painted letters. I used a piece of glass to scratch away and under the paint I exposed the letter “Д” painted with pale red paint. The letter “Д” is a Cyrillic letter. At that moment it seemed like cold drops of sweat were dripping from my forehead. The letters were at chest height so I began to scratch even faster, exposing more of the pale red paint. I continued scratching for another thirty or forty centimeters until the entire Macedonian word “БРАТСТВО” (BROTHERHOOD) was exposed. There was no doubt that both words were part of a slogan and most likely remnants of the then very popular slogans with which “bratsvo i edinstvo” (brotherhood and unity) was promoted between the Macedonian and Greek people.

I went and got a larger piece of glass from a pile of broken glass and continued to scratch a bit higher. I scratched an entire strip and under a

brown layer I noticed a bit of white paint. I realized that the wall has been painted over at least three times. I again began to scratch from right to left and under the brown layer I found a pale red line and a dot under it. It looked like an exclamation mark. I scratched further and after exposing more of the wall the letters: “а, т, а, д, е, б, о, п...” appeared in that order from right to left.

I took a step back and looked at the exposed letters. I read from left to right and noticed that they spelled: “победата” (victory). I wiped the sweat off my forehead and face with my sleeve and continued to scratch until I had exposed all the writing to the last letter. The last letter turned out to be the first letter in the slogan, which to this day, sixty years later, was hidden under three layers of paint.

I then stepped back and read: “Сите на оружје! Се за победата!” (All to arms! Everything for Victory!)

I stepped to the side and sat on a half rotting stump and stared at the slogan. After being silent for a long time I wondered out loud: “How many more walls are adorned by this kind of slogan, put there to invite the exiled to battle?”

Here in Prenies, preserved under layers of paint, are the slogans, a testament to the times, when every day they nourished the trust and encouraged the spirit... of a war that extended all the way here, calling and beckoning... They collected all who were capable, and then they collected all who were less capable and after that they waited for the young to grow so that they too could be collected and sent to battle. They collected people, property and food by force and using the slogan “Everything for victory.”

On the Road of Time – Chapter 14

Later Done told me more about his stay in Prenies. “In the dormitory in Sinia, a city in Romania where we were stationed, every day we were encouraged to call out the slogan, ‘Forward with Markos’, at the top of our lungs until we developed a good appetite for it. Then one day the head of the dormitory informed us that some dignitaries from our struggle had come to visit us. In those days we called the Greek Civil War ‘our struggle’. The head of the dormitory told us to gather in the great hall after supper, but only those who were older than fourteen years of age were invited to attend. The rest were told to return to their quarters.

The place was packed; there was not enough space for everyone to sit. Even thirteen year olds showed up, some taller than the fourteen year olds with gentle fuzz growing on their chins and under their noses.

A portrait of Markos in a military uniform hung on the wall behind the stage. He was wearing crossed belt straps on his chest and creased boots on his feet (every time I looked at the portrait the boots looked dirtier). Three people went on the stage and one by one they each gave a speech. And as far as I can recall their talk went something like this:

‘I,’ said the tall skinny man, ‘am Porphirogenis, member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Greece (CPG) and together with my comrades have come here to bring you greetings from your fathers, mothers and brothers who are heroically and selflessly fighting for freedom and democracy against Anglo-American imperialism and its domestic servants who are now sitting in Athens. The struggle,’ he continued, ‘is very difficult and for it to be successful we need new fighters.’

The moment he finished saying this we all jumped up and began to yell in Greek: ‘Imaste etimi!!! Imaste etimi!!! Imaste etimi!!!’ (We are ready!!! We are ready!!! We are ready!!!)

We were yelling at the top of our voices, punching everything around us and pounding on the floor with our feet as if the floor was the enemy. We gave them our answer. We were ready to fight. Porphirogenis continued to speak for a long time but his words were lost in our shouting, calling out that we were ready to do battle. We could see satisfaction on his face but the man had difficulty relaxing.

Apostolou greeted us next. He was a representative of the Provisional Government of Greece in Bucharest. He was not as talkative as Porphirogenis. He said what he said and after the applause ended they introduced our comrade Evdokia Baleva, more commonly known as Vera. Her speech, from what I recall, went something like this:

‘Dear and very beloved children, the pride and joy of your fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, who today are fighting against our wretched enemy to the death and winning everywhere, raising the flag of victory,

which is very close. I, together with my comrades who stand beside me, bring you great greetings and appeal to you to be ready to help so that we can defeat the enemy and free our people from enslavement and suffering...'

Even today their words resound in my mind. I don't remember everything exactly, but I remember that they all talked for a long time. Their mouths were filled with big, enraging, important, beautiful, clever and inflaming words. They spoke without interruption and their voices were filled with anger. They raised their clenched fists and made threatening gestures with their hands. Their fingers were pointed at us, seemingly saying 'YOU and YOU and YOU, what are you waiting for?'

I just have to close my eyes and I can see those people in front of me. I can see their angry faces overflowing with unquenchable hatred for the enemy and their faith in victory. I can hear big, sharp, inflaming and damning words coming out of their mouths, words which cut like lightning and echoed like thunder in our minds, strengthening our faith and inflaming our fighting spirit.

Influenced by their words we all became even bolder and yelled even louder. We yelled that we were ready now, that we were prepared to fight, that we wanted to go now and that we wanted to immediately go to battle. Some of the children from the back rows then began to sing: Во борба, во борба, во борба, (To battle, to battle, to battle,) Македонски народе, (Macedonian People,) За света народна слобода... (For the Holy Freedom of our Nation...)

And before those in the back had a chance to finish, another group erupted singing a different song: Напред, напред Македонци, (Forward, forward Macedonians,) За слобода и за живот сите напред!!! (For freedom and for life all forward!!!)

We used to sing those songs at home. We learned them from our partisans who spent time in our villages during their short rests, when they stayed in our houses. They stayed long enough to get a wink of sleep, eat some bread and cheese prepared by the warm hands of our mothers. We learned the songs from them and practiced them on our own. We then sang them in our native Macedonian language schools, after they were opened. After that we sang them out loud in the dormitories and even outside when we went for walks in this foreign country... By then we were older and could sing even louder...

So the comrades who came to visit us ended the first part of the gathering with us singing songs and shouting slogans. The second part also ended with songs and slogans. This time they placed a table in front of the stage with an open book and beside it were several sharpened pencils. By now we were all ready to go, to join the war and do battle with the enemy. We lined up in front of the table and wrote our name and surname in the book in Greek, our Greek first and last name of course, and a bit further to

the right we wrote 'volunteer.' That evening our comrades made a copy of the book and left. A few days later all the 'volunteers' were taken to Arad and from there to Tulgash.

How many were we? Three hundred and fifty children, not children, soldiers ... We exercised up and down for several days, marched a few strong marches and sang battle songs. After that they gave us military uniforms, one battery powered flashlight, a towel, some thread, a needle, a handkerchief, a pocket knife with a spoon and fork and then they boarded us on a train and as such we became soldiers and were no longer children...

Yes, we were children of war. When the Great War ended we were twelve and thirteen years old and then every day all we talked about was fighting and the war. Our life and our environment had prepared us for war; to be soldiers. A day rarely went by when there were no soldiers and no Partisans in our lives. We talked about the same things that the adults talked about. We sang the songs the adults sang. They had real guns, so as young children we carried sticks and poles on our shoulders carved to look like guns and played war with them. We grew up in a war in which we thought and dreamed at night only of victorious battles. What do you think a child would think about surrounded, day in and day out, by armed men, calls for war, slogans and battle songs?

That year, before they assembled us and sent us out from our homes, we breathed the same air as our Partisans, we hung around them, we touched their guns and machine guns and we grieved that we were not older so that we too could walk with them in the mountains and in the forests. The roaring, muddy and dirty waters of the war river flowed before our very eyes. The songs and slogans were not strange to us. And there, in far away Romanian cities, we took the war with us and preserved it. Even our tutors constantly spoke about the war. We built the war with songs and slogans and by speaking about our heroic and victorious battles. We strengthened our spirits every day by playing war and we filled our days and nights with dreams of battles and war.

This is how we mended our destiny. And when the comrades came, we suddenly grew up. They did not need to convince us because they found us already convinced. All they had to do was give us the word; toss a little lit matchstick at us and our fire would be ignited. And our fire was ignited as we pushed each other to get in line to sign the book.

The train took us to Bulgaria and we got off at Berkovitsa, just outside Sofia. I don't know whether this was some kind of town, or camp, or shelter but it had a hospital because there were many wounded. Those who had already recovered were waiting their turn to be transported back to the battlefields. They loaded us on trucks and drove all night. Before dawn they unloaded us behind the Markova Noga barracks, near the village Dolno Dupeni. There we spent the day under the shade of a willow grove.

We crossed the border during the night under the light of a full moon. We arrived in Medovo late at night and spent the rest of the night there.

They woke us early the next day and counted us, prepared us and sent us to Rudari on foot. In Rudari they gave us guns and we began exercising. A few days later they regrouped us into various groups; telegraph operators, powder monkeys, archers, saboteurs... We exercised every day and one day women came from the hills up above. They were carrying shovels, axes and pickaxes. They looked very tired and exhausted. They stopped and watched us exercise for a while as we fell down, rose up, ran, jumped and leaped over trenches. Then suddenly we heard a voice crying from their direction calling out: 'Iane, my son!!!'

There was only one Iane among us in the group. When he heard the voice calling his name he turned towards the women. His rifle fell out of his hand and with a quiet voice and huge surprise he whispered: 'Mother?...'

We stopped exercising and, surprised, we all turned to look... Some among us saw our mothers there that day...

The same day they took us away from that particular area but not from the watchful eyes of our mothers. The mothers were very upset to see us being brought back and used like this and protested. Protests took place in most of the Prespa and Koreshtata villages. The mothers were so upset that their voices were heard by the leadership in the village Vineni. There, those who had decided to turn us into soldiers reacted to the protests and decided to pull us out of the exercises in Prespa. My feeling was that they took us away to simply hide us from our mothers...

They took our guns and made us hike nearly all night from the exercise range to where the trucks were waiting for us. The next day we spent the day in a forest. In the evening they loaded us on trucks and brought us here. We arrived at dawn. We learned from the people that this place was called Prenies.

Here the barracks, store houses and horse stables were overcrowded with people. The majority were women, old people, babies, infants and crippled people. They had been brought here the year before when the battles for Gramos began. All the women wearing black and the very old men were suffering here... Together they shared their pain for their loved ones who had lost their lives, for the ones that were crippled and maimed, for their abandoned villages, for the loss of their property...

Their pain was clearly visible on their faces. Not once did I see a woman laugh and I never saw a man laugh either. They just sat on the half-rotten beams, always in thought, silent, swallowing their bitterness, grieving, grieving with both their thoughts and words, grieving about their villages, about their houses, about their orchards, vineyards, gardens...

And when someone spoke, they spoke the words 'they were coming', letting everyone know that the trucks were coming. That's when everyone

ran to the road chasing after the trucks, begging the drivers to bring them candles. They told the drivers to pick up some candles from the Orthodox churches in Pogradets, Korcha, or Bilishcha. They told them that they could always find candles in Orthodox churches. They ran beside the trucks to hear some news, both good and bad. They begged the drivers to slow down, to stop if only for a moment...

What did we do in Prenies? Every day we exercised but without weapons. Not because there were no weapons. There were weapons alright! Rifles, machine guns, automatic rifles, hand grenades. All these weapons and ammunition were hidden in some tunnels waiting to be used. And while the weapons waited, we were growing up, learning how to fight. From time to time we went and cleaned the weapons to prevent them from rusting. Every day we were ready to receive them. But instead of giving us weapons, during the night, sometime around midnight they would wake us. But not all of us, they would wake as many as they needed.

The days and nights in Prenies when someone did not die were very few. The burials took place only during the night. We dug holes with pickaxes in the hard, stony ground during the night and after that we placed the dead body wrapped in an old blanket into the hole and we covered it with soil. Besides us, no one else was allowed to be at the burial... That's how it was...

It was a cursed time then, turned ugly by horror and fear. It was a time full of weeping for the most beloved. It was a time when some wanted badly, and as soon as possible, to lie under the hard stony soil. It was a time of confusion, anxiety and hopelessness. It was also a time of enduring the impossible... And now, as the years rush by unnoticed, I often wonder whether we learned anything from that time and if we have become smarter as a result...

Time is passing and progressing, the years are piling and the memories are fading. There are many names, faces, eyes, cheeks, events, places, experiences, happenings, that time devours and ruthlessly shakes off and casts into oblivion. But there are also things that can never be forgotten. Some, buried so deep in the memory, will be remembered to the last days of our life. They appear to us when we walk, when we sit on the bench in the park, when we take the first sip of our morning coffee. They take us to the place we left behind so long ago, a place from which we can't detach; a place that is an inseparable part of us.

I remember it was late August 1949. We were in Prenies and, as we did every day at the same place and at the same time, that day too we were exercising throwing hand grenades and after that attacking the trenches and bunkers. When the commander was happy with our performance he let us rest for a while. We took our rest on the rubble under the hot sun in an area where neither grass nor trees grew. That day I was lying on my

stomach with my chin in my hands and my elbows on the ground. When you lie like that all kinds of thoughts tend to cross your mind. For a moment I noticed that a woman was coming down from the direction of the village Shkumbin. She was carrying a bag on her shoulder and an earthenware jug in her left hand. I thought to myself there is a nice housewife bringing food to her husband in the field. And for a moment I thought I saw my own mother.

Every day at noon the woman hung the bag on her shoulder, took the earthenware jug full of water in her hand and went to the field, or to the meadow, or to the vineyard to deliver lunch to her husband. Every day I put my hands over my eyes and imagined seeing my own mother in her. She had the same hand and body movements and walked with the same ease as my mother. There were movements in this woman that were very similar to those of my mother's which gave me an irresistible desire to suddenly run to her. In my own imagination she was my mother but in reality I know she was a stranger, an Albanian woman. Then one day walking slowly, very slowly she came towards us. Before coming too close she stopped and said something in Albanian. We stood up, brushed the dust and dirt off our bodies and stood there in silence. She motioned with her free hand for us to sit and we all sat down. She sat down beside us. She tilted the earthenware jug on her knee, took the bag off her shoulder and took out something that was wrapped in a white towel.

'Take it,' she said in Albanian and handed the earthenware jug to the person closest to her. After that, gently, almost timidly, she began to unwrap the towel. She unwrapped one half, paused for a moment, seeming as if she forgot something, then unwrapped the other half exposing a red pumpkin, full of aroma, slightly burned at the edges and still warm....

The surrounding air became intoxicated with its aroma which, with our eyes closed, we breathed in. The sweet and attractive aroma was sumptuous and delightfully zesty and had all the aromas of a bakery. And while we were breathing its aroma and swallowing its sweetness, the woman took her cutting knife out of her pocket, which was tied on her belt with a string, and cut the pumpkin into pieces, handing each person a piece as she cut them.

Half of my hand was filled with a warm and fragrant piece of pumpkin. I broke a piece of crust from the side and with it I scooped a tiny piece, brought it up to my lips and left it there for a long time, breathing its ecstatic aroma deeply as deep as my chest could open. After that I took it with the tip of my tongue and swirled it around my mouth savouring its awesome sweetness and swallowing it very slowly, keeping my eyes closed while savouring its flavour.

And just as she came quietly and shyly, the woman left silently and without saying a word. We on the other hand, sitting at the bottom of the hill where we practiced throwing hand grenades, looked up and remained

silent and sad. We watched the woman walk up hill into the distance and for a moment I couldn't help myself but think that I had just seen my mother...

I never forgot the Albanian woman and I still have the desire to kneel before her and kiss her hand. After that I never saw her again but I do remember her as if it was yesterday. She wore a colourful headkerchief on her head, had a pale but good-natured face and her eyes were filled with pain. I can still feel the warmth of the hand with which she gave us the piece of pumpkin. Her hand was warm and her look sad, just like my mother's...

And what else do I still remember? I remember the sharp whistle I heard the day I turned sixteen years of age. They woke us up abruptly that night, handed us guns and hurried us onto the trucks. Then, after driving all night, our people intercepted us on the road outside of Korcha, but they were not carrying weapons.

'Where are you going?' someone asked. 'We are going to help our fighters at Gramos!' someone from our side yelled out.

'Back, go back,' a man with a bandage on his head was heard yelling. 'There is no more Gramos... Gramos fell...'

They returned us to Prenies the same day. About twenty days later they put us on an airplane and sent us to Poland. There the Poles sat us down and told us that we could conquer the world by learning...

That cannot be forgotten. We were very enthusiastic and great believers in victory. That's the way it was.

All who were there during the bad times have their own story. Every one of the many thousands who became homeless during those days has their own story to tell. I was there for nearly a year and I just told you a brief part of my story, exactly as I remember it... Unfortunately a lot has been forgotten because people tend to forget with time and memories become blurred, sometimes unsure, sometimes insecure and suspicious...

The human mind at one point in time is full of fresh memories, these memories, however, slowly and with time tend to disappear, to wither away... But even though some of these memories disappear there are memories that are still there, which remain imbedded deep into the recesses of the mind that cannot be torn out or uprooted...

And now, with the passing of time, I am often reminded of what I have experienced in Prenies. I see the trucks coming, the crowds dashing, the people rushing, I hear their shouts, cries, pleading and cursing... I see myself as a guard. I see myself and my friends in the middle of the night carrying dead bodies from the barracks and horse stables and burying them in shallow graves in the hard ground... That is exactly how it was... That is how it was and that is how it should be written down so that it will be remembered so that it will become marked in ink and will be remembered forever..."

On the Road of Time – Chapter 15

There was a beautiful view of the harbour from the second floor of the Crystal Hotel in Durres. On the right was the sea where four ships, one behind the other, were waiting in line to take their turn to dock in the harbour. On the left there were tall buildings ten to twelve storeys high or even higher, which did not exist here sixty years ago. This was the new face of the town in the vicinity of the port. A wide, open street could be seen splitting from the small city promenade and extending outwards along the seacoast. On the west side of the hotel were skyscrapers. Sixty years ago this was a big swamp overgrown with various reeds and grasses and filled with decaying algae whose stench spread far and wide.

The street “Makadam” that once existed here is now gone. Also gone are the ten or so burned military trucks that were left on the side of the road. Past the road, on the right side, on top of the tall hill is Zogu’s, the Albanian king’s, white palace. At the bottom of the hill were white villas with extensive orchards in which orange, fig, lemon, tangerine and palm trees grew and many roses adorned the gardens. This area, away from the city, from the noise and from city poverty was once settled by the rich. Now it is abandoned, left empty, left to the elements and to the tooth of time.

I remember us sneaking under the barbed wire and secretly entering the villas through windows whose glass had been broken. Inside it was a wasteland. The former owners, the majority of whom were Italian merchants, ship owners, restaurateurs, hotel owners, public house owners and small industry owners were expelled by the People’s National government and their properties were confiscated. Now the villas are gone, they have been replaced by skyscrapers. The entire place from the seacoast to the bottom of the hill has been replaced with skyscrapers, which on the ground floor have restaurants, cafés, pizzerias, banks and offices occupied by domestic and foreign companies.

Between the buildings is the wide avenue called “Rruga Tautantia”, built on top of the old “Makadam” road. It is a straight road, leading west from the newest part of the city, extending all the way to the sea. The road is decorated with tall palm trees on both sides. I drove slowly and carefully, watching the Mercedes pass me by on both sides of the street. Wherever I looked, parked or in motion, Mercedes were everywhere. And now among them and in between them was our little red Saho. The avenue further down was still under construction and we did not know where it was going to end.

There were piles of crushed stone on the coast, on the opposite side, and leaning against the hill base was the new University building, now under construction. In front of it was a nicely arranged parking lot. Sunlight was reflected off the building’s white marble facade. New buses

were picking up and dropping off students, taking them from here to the city centre. The space beyond the building, as far as the eye could see, was a flat and level sandy plain.

This was the beach to which they brought us in the summer of 1948 to exercise and practice our military skills and to swim and sunbathe. This level plain must be the new urban beach where, in the near future, people, not in the hundreds but in the thousands, will be coming to swim and sunbathe; bringing plenty of money. The foot of the hill is divided into plots. Most of the plots, now under construction, have been overlaid with stone in preparation for laying the foundation of future hotels with their own beach space in front of them.

We turned back and took the road in search of the houses where we once lived from May to the end of November 1948. To better navigate this new part of Durres we chose the white Albanian Navy barracks, the cigarette factory and the skin tanning factory from which to establish our bearings. We remembered those places. The two and three storey buildings in which we were placed were located at the edge of the city near the port. We remembered there was a road on the north side that went up hill to the royal palace.

There was a park with palm trees and lanterns on the opposite side of the building where we were lodging and behind it was a fortress in which, they say, many prisoners were locked up. The cigarette factory was close to our building and the barracks were located next to “Makadam” road, about fifty meters from the seashore. There was a courtyard between the barracks and the buildings and in the middle of the courtyard was a tall wide-branched willow tree. The willow tree had a broad shadow but was too small to shade the 1600 children who were accommodated at the shelter. Standing under the shade of this willow tree we waited, like beads on a string, for “Marianthy”, that’s what they called her, first to inspect us, see if we were standing properly in line and then give a speech about DAG’s (Democratic Army of Greece) great victories.

After that, at precisely 12:00 noon, the box hanging on the branches of the willow tree would begin to speak. It was a great big radio from which we heard more hissing and scratching noise than actual words. It became a habit for us to listen to the big box every day in the hottest part of the day and to hear it telling us about the great, difficult but victorious battles fought in Gramos. The haunting voice on the box never ceased to say, that every hour, every day and every night the Democratic Army of Greece won every battle everywhere. At the end of the broadcast we would hear Marianthy applaud with all her might and yell out “Me ton Marko embros!” (Forwards with Marko!) We too had to cry out and repeat what she said, in a single voice, while squeezing our left fist tight and raising it to our temple.

We had pasta for lunch every day and every lunch began with the cry “Me ton Marko embros!” (Forwards with Marko!) It was almost like a greeting, like saying “hi” or “hello.” It was most unfortunate for those who reached for the food before the slogan was done. The penalty was confiscation of their macaroni.

A fence of barbed wire divided the courtyard from the barracks. Exit and entry into the buildings was through a large door on which barbed wire was nailed. People required command approval to enter or leave the buildings.

Lined up in columns of four, we were expected to keep an orderly formation and a fast pace. We were divided into platoons, brigades and battalions. Our commanders were usually older boys from among us. We ranged in age from three to fourteen. The chief among us was Marianthy, of course. She was a Profiga (settler), an heiress of the so-called Greeks who were expelled from Turkey in 1923 and were settled in Macedonia. Assisting Marianthy was Evdokia, a meek brunette in her twenties from Rupishta, Kostur Region.

In an attempt to trace our steps from sixty years ago, we got lost in between the buildings. Not speaking Albanian, we tried asking questions by hand gestures but all we succeeded in doing was attracting onlookers that were passing by. Then a middle aged man signalled us with his hand to stop and asked us something in Albanian:

“Mir dita i civete... si shkoine... mire” (Good day... how are you... what are you doing... good...) is all we could figure out from using our Albanian dictionary.

The person asked me something in Albanian. I said, “I do not understand what you are asking.”

“Italiano...” he said. No, I shook my head. Almost every older person in Durres speaks Italian.

“And you,” I asked, “do you speak Macedonian?”

He said “no” in Albanian.

“Milate Elinika?” (Do you speak Greek?) I asked.

“Milao,” (I speak) he said.

Greek was a good language to know in Albania because you were most likely to be understood by more people if you spoke Greek than any other language outside of Albanian. In the southern part of Albania, for example in Bilishcha, Korcha, Elbasan and Tirana, we were immediately able to find people speaking good to average Macedonian. But Greek was spoken almost everywhere by almost all Albanians aged 18 to 70. Many people worked in Greece, some for five years and others for ten or more and hence had some knowledge of the Greek language; enough to be understood.

“Are you looking for someone?” the man asked.

“Yes Sir, we are looking for the cigarette factory,” I replied.

He looked at us with a surprised look, shook his head and thought for a moment.

“There is no cigarette factory here. Look at the type of buildings that have been built here... hotels, restaurants...” he replied.

“Yes, but some time ago there was a cigarette factory around here somewhere,” I insisted.

“Perhaps some time ago there was one, but there isn’t one now. Where are you from?” he asked.

“From Macedonia,” I replied.

“You came all the way from there to look for a cigarette factory? Who are you? Factory owners? Tobacco manufacturers?” he asked.

We looked at each other. I extended my hand and said: “Thank you Sir, you have been of much help. Forgive us for wasting your time.”

“Wait,” he said, “I am new here. Let me ask the person who is coming our way.”

He explained our difficulties to the person in Albanian and then he said:

“The person says that there was a cigarette factory somewhere around here, but he does not know for sure where it was located. He said it was probably demolished and replaced by one of these tall buildings...”

“Was there a park with thick walls at the entrance to the factory? Looking like a fortress?” I asked my wife.

“Yes there was...” she replied.

“Sir, I believe that the entrance to the factory was from the park...” I said to the man.

“Ah, you mean from ‘Rruga Anastas Dursaku’...” he replied.

“And where is this ‘Rruga?’” I asked.

“It is behind these buildings. You see that tall white building?” he asked.

“You mean the one with twelve stories?” I asked while pointing at it with my hand.

“Exactly that...” said the man.

We smiled at each other and split up. We soon arrived at the tall white building. There were piles of building materials scattered all over the place and the area looked like a maze with buildings popping up everywhere. So instead of looking for “Ruga Dursaku Anastas” we now found ourselves lost in this maze unable to find our way out. The day was soon coming to an end and without street lights it was going to be difficult to find our way out. Finally we found a way out but were unable to find “Anastas Dursaku Ruga” or the cigarette factory.

We took the road back to the hotel; tired from our day long journey. We were somewhat disappointed in not finding the place where we, as children, had lived sixty years ago. I made my disappointment loudly known as we took to the main street. A man and woman, arm in arm, were

coming towards us on the other side of the street. The man walked upright and was sure of his step.

“That man there,” I said to my wife, “might be a military man...”

“And how do you know that?” she asked.

“Only military men, officers, walk like that with a straight posture and a flat step. I am pretty sure he is a military person... Look at his flat stride. Wait; let’s ask them where to find this ‘Ruga Anastas Dursaku’ place. Let’s go, don’t wait for them to pass us by. Greet them in Albanian,” I said to my wife.

“Mir mbrama,” (Good evening) said my wife Ditta, with a wide smile.

“Mir mbrama...” replied the man and the woman, who stopped walking. They looked at us while we looked at them, all four of us keeping silent.

“Excuse us, we are from Macedonia...” I said as the man interrupted.

“Oh, Macedonia!!!” said the man out loud and began to speak Albanian. We didn’t understand a thing. He stopped talking, obviously expecting a response from us.

“Ruga Anastas Dursaku...” I said.

“Ruga Anastas Dursaku?” he asked.

“Yes...” I said.

“You speak Russian?” he asked.

“Yes Sir, I do speak Russian,” I replied.

“In that case let us speak Russian. I understand you are looking for ‘Ruga Anastas Dursaku,’ said the man. I noticed his Russian was fluent.

“You need to go to the end of this street. When you reach the wide intersection, there you can see the traffic lights from here, immediately turn left and you will enter the street you are looking for. And what are you looking for there? Do you have relatives living there?” he asked.

“No, we don’t have relatives living there. We are looking for the cigarette factory,” I replied.

“Cigarette factory? Yes some time ago there was such a factory but it’s now closed, abandoned. There was word that it was going to be demolished. They will be building something new in its place. And why are you looking for this factory?” he asked.

“Near it there was a grey three storey building...” I said.

His wife, who probably understood some of our conversation, nodded her head several times, repeating... po... po... po... and then after that she spoke to her husband. (“po” in Albanian means I understand.)

“My wife says that we should sit down somewhere. We would like to invite you for coffee or tea... Over there, there is a very nice café... Is that okay?” he asked.

“Yes, okay but it will be our treat...” I suggested.

“Okay,” he said, “but in Macedonia. Please,” and pointed with his hand in the direction of the café as they took the lead ahead of us. A young

waiter with a great big smile and good manners greeted us at the door. He was wearing black pants and a white shirt with long sleeves and a bow tie. We followed the waiter into the café, walking over a thick soft Chinese carpet. There were five tables, all covered with snow-white tablecloths. There was a barely audible air conditioning unit humming in the corner. It was cool inside after being baked by the summer heat outside. There were bright paintings hanging on the walls. The bar was well-lit and decorated with various bottles with foreign labels.

A middle aged man stepped out of the bar and, in a very friendly manner, greeted us and our hosts Ismet and Marieta. This is how the man and woman introduced themselves to us when we first shook hands. In the manner that we were greeted and by the tap on the shoulder, we gathered that our hosts were close friends of the bar man. Ismet said something to him in Albanian in which the word “Machedone” (Macedonian) was included several times. The bar man looked at us with wide open eyes and a big smile while repeating po... po... po... meaning he understood.

From the conversation we heard in Albanian we only understood the name of the street we were looking for and the words coffee and tea. That was the extent of our understanding of the Albanian language. We ordered tea.

“Do you drink Russian or Chinese tea in Macedonia?” asked Marieta.

“We have all kinds of tea, but we prefer mostly our domestic tea,” answered my wife Ditta.

“Tea is also good when it’s very hot outside, and today it is hot,” said Ismet.

Ismet’s friend served us our amber colour tea in person in glass cups. I tasted peppermint with the first sip and then mint and thyme.

“The taste is similar to our popular tea,” I said.

“My friend served us Macedonian tea. He gets most of his tea from Macedonia. He buys it in Struga,” said Ismet.

“Po... po... po...” said the bar man in Albanian, greeting us with a wide smile and a low bow, and then he left and went behind the counter.

“So you are looking for a grey three-storey building on Ruga Anastas Dursaku Street?” asked Ismet.

“Yes... we are looking for that building...” I replied.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because we lived in that building...” I replied.

“When?” he asked.

“We lived there from the end of May to the end of November 1948... We were around eleven years old then. There were also younger and older children... There were many, many children...” I paused. Ismet translated what I said for his wife and when he finished he leaned on the table and covered his face with his hands. The silence was long. Marieta spoke next:

“Were you together with your parents?” she asked.

Ismet translated. “She is asking if you were accompanied by your parents.”

“No madam, we were without our parents. Children only... We did not know where our parents were and they did not know where we were...” I replied.

There was silence again. I suddenly had an involuntary, difficult and painful sigh...

Ismet finished his tea, moved his cup and looked in our direction. Lost in his thoughts he stared at us for a long time...

“Yes...” he said in a stretched out tone of voice. I gathered from his thoughtful gaze and from his quiet tone that something was happening. We looked into each other’s eyes in silence. I felt that he wanted to say something, to reveal something he had experienced a long time ago, something deeply engraved in his memory. Then he spoke:

“Did you say that you lived in that three storey building sixty years ago? In 1948?...”

“Yes...” I said.

“And there were many children and you were only eleven years old?” he asked.

“Yes...” I said.

“I was twenty years old then and served in the army. I was a lieutenant. I was the commander at the border checkpoint. The village Lobanitsa was on the other side of the border...” he said.

As the man spoke my own memories began to open up.

“They arrived after sunset, soon after dark... There were many, many children; I believe there were two thousand. They arrived with women who were looking after them. We were informed by high command prior to the arrival that some children were coming but we had no idea that there would be so many and so young. Our orders were to hold them all night at the village Trstenik and...” said the man as I interrupted.

“And riding on horseback you brought back those who attempted to escape, wanting to return to their homes, right?”

“Yes, that is correct...” he replied.

“And you also ran to put out the great fires that were burning the piles of fern, right?” I asked.

“How do you know all that?” he asked.

“Because I was one of the children who wanted to run away and return to my home and who started the fern fires...” I replied.

We looked at each other, adjusted ourselves and our smiles soon diminished... Ismet wiped the sweat from his forehead and after being silent for a while, began to speak again:

“About a year later, on the morning of August 9th, 1949, the duty officer woke me up and with a disturbed voice informed me that Greek military aircraft were flying in our direction. I jumped out of bed, quickly

recovered from my heavy sleep and without my uniform I ran barefoot to the barracks. But before I had a chance to activate the alarm the barracks roof was sprayed with machine gun fire from the aircraft flying above. A few minutes later they started dropping bombs on the villages Trstenik and Kapeshtitsa.

After that the aircraft turned right and flew along the Albanian-Greek border, machine-gunning all of our watchtowers. I immediately notified battalion command in Bilishcha by telephone. After the planes left Greek artillery batteries, stationed outside the village Krchishta, opened fire on us. From what I could see with my binoculars I saw Greek military units charging towards us from Faltsata Hill. Again I contacted battalion command and told them what was happening. Immediately after that the platoon was ordered to combat readiness and if Greek troops entered Albanian territory we were ordered to immediately open fire on them. Trstenik was only fifteen kilometers distance from Bilishcha.

We had no bunkers or trenches. We had to fight the Greeks in the open, a fight that lasted a short time but killed almost half of our platoon. The Greeks occupied the village Trstenik and began an assault on Kapeshtitsa where we withdrew. There we were joined by armed villagers from the nearby villages. And even though the road from Kapeshtitsa to Bilishcha was under constant bombardment by the Greek air force and artillery, two units from Bilishcha ran to assist us. A fierce and uneven battle soon followed us against a bigger and better armed enemy. We could no longer hold our position and the village Kapeshtitsa fell to the Greeks who continued to fire on us but with a smaller force, while the main force stormed the road that led to the village Smrdesh, located on the other side of the border.

Units of DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) attacked the Greek Royal units from the flanks. New forces arrived from Bilishcha and our (Albanian) artillery began to barrage the Greek Royalist units. By the evening there were many Greek dead and wounded left on our territory. From a captured lieutenant we learned that the purpose of the Greek Royal units entering our territory was to capture the village Smrdesh and then to surround the DAG fighters west of there who were holding positions in the hills above the villages Kosinets, Lobanitsa and Mount Mali-Madi.

Then," continued Ismet, "I was twenty years old and that battle was my baptism as a fighter. Although I came out unscathed, I lost many of my Albanian friends there..." he concluded.

We all went quiet for a while. Ismet asked for another cup of tea. He drank it very slowly. I got the impression that he was thinking about the past. He was thinking of the time in the meadow not far from the border, outside of the village Trstenik where, in the evening of March 25, 1948, along with his soldiers, he kept us until the next night when the trucks came to take us to Korcha.

“So, you are one of them, huh?...” he asked.

“Yes. They drove us all night from Korcha and brought us here on trucks and at dawn they placed us in some houses by the sea. They were two storey houses. The first storey was built of stone and the second of planks of wood. That’s what I remember. We called the place “Pesutsite” because of the large body of sand that divided us from the houses. We watched the boats from there... It seems to me that today we passed by the large body of sand but we did not see any of the sea. There were high rise buildings in the way which did not exist then.

“And did they move you here from the ‘Pesutsite’?” he asked.

“Yes, I believe it was at the end of April. We walked all the way from Duresi. We walked all day. They placed us in some single storey houses not far from the city centre. Today, driving through downtown, I recognized the building with the clock. Then it was the tallest building in the vicinity. Now it’s one of the shortest... Around the middle of May they moved us to some white buildings by the sea. They were around here but I don’t see them now...” I said.

“And you are looking for the building in which you lived then?” he asked.

“We want to see it. It is part of our childhood and is embedded in our memory,” I replied.

Ismet looked at the clock. I got the feeling we were holding up these people.

“Sorry,” I said, “we took so much of your valuable time...”

“It was our pleasure,” he said and while looking at the clock he tapped it with his finger and said, “tomorrow morning at this time,” pointing at 9:00 o’clock, “I will be waiting for you at the crossroads at the beginning of Ruga Dursaku Anastas and we will find your building... your former home...”

The owner of the cafe did not accept our offer to pay for the Macedonian tea. “It’s on the house,” he said and, with a great big smile, walked us to the door.

We said goodbye to Ismet and Marieta and promised that we would be at the designated place at precisely 9:00 am the next day.

Somewhat relieved that there was a chance that we would find what we had come for, we headed towards the hotel but we did not go inside. We were held back by a wave of people walking. There were many, so many that it seemed like all the people living in this town were coming our way. The entire long and wide seacoast promenade was filled to the last centimetre with people. All the benches were occupied by older people. We could see them talking but their voices could not be heard over the river of people walking by dressed in modern summer clothes from every country in Europe.

There were young couples vocal and smiling, embracing one another and sharing kisses in public without any care of who was looking and what others thought of them. They did things their own way and had their unique vision and understanding of the world. They made use of and enjoyed the world's pleasures now, this moment with a burning desire. They exploited the beauty, pleasantness and sweetness that life had to offer. They enjoyed their experience of kissing, sharing smiles, sights and passionate looks. They lived life for now, for this moment. There were also children of various ages walking or running alongside their parents. Entire families were enjoying the walk. Seed and sundry vendors were also part and parcel of the wave of people on the promenade.

Swept by the wave of people walking, we walked over to a great big modern gas station located at the entrance of the port. We then turned and walked over to a newly built concrete dock that was embedded deep into the sea. The promenade ended there. On the other side of the dock there were heaps of soil and broken concrete blocks and beside them there was construction machinery. It looked like they were going to build more tall buildings here.

We turned back and looked for a place to sit and rest for a while, but we had no luck. The place was bustling with people. We passed café after café, restaurant after restaurant, pizza parlours, but everywhere it was busy. No one was wearing a hat and none of the women wore a coat or a head kerchief. These Albanians here did not look anything at all like the Albanians in Macedonia.

We sat on the concrete wall which separated the sea from the mainland and once in a while we were sprayed by droplets of salty seawater. The full moon shone on us from high above and from its reflection in the water. A light breeze blew, cooling off the warmth from the previous day's leftover heat. The promenade began to slowly empty. The full moon began to fall and the stars seemed to fade, but the insatiable lovers sitting on the benches and on the concrete wall remained in their warm embrace...

On the Road of Time – Chapter 16

After breakfast the next morning we left the hotel and went to the intersection at the promenade near the sea. There were pigeons flying individually, in clusters and in waves all around us, sweeping down at the quay, collecting everything that had been discarded by the visitors the night before. They were very aggressive and pecked at crumbs, seeds, fruit peels and other discarded food right from under our feet. They were not afraid and were used to being around people.

There were tall buildings in front of us and behind the buildings we could see the port cranes rising. We encountered only a small number of visitors at this hour and truck and car traffic was also light. The city was just waking up. Street sweepers were cleaning and washing the streets and the quay. We crossed the street and arrived at a crossroad. On the left at the corner, about a couple of meters above the sidewalk, was a board on the wall with the inscription: “Ruga Anastas Dursaku.”

We had found the street we were looking for. The entrance to it was surrounded by palm trees. This was the place where the night before we had made arrangements to meet Ismet and Marieta. We did not wait long and after they arrived we all went up the road towards the royal palace. To the right were thick walls that had belonged to the old fortress. The street was divided from the park by a row of benches, tall palm trees and cast iron poles with lamps on top of them.

“They look the same,” I said to Ismet, “they look the same as sixty years ago.”

We continued to walk looking for the house where we were accommodated and... we found it. We recognized it by the greenish metal window shutters and by the balcony. We found the iron, now rusty, crooked double door leading to the cigarette factory. Both sides of the door were tied together with a thick chain and a large padlock hung on it. Nothing had changed here, on this part of the street. The palm trees had grown taller on the other side of the street.

The grass had been cut short, the benches were painted and the paths were cleared. We stood there staring at the three-storey grey building with its small windows and closed shutters. The children from the village Ezerets were placed on the ground floor which had windows at almost the same level as the pavement. The children from the village Krchishta were placed on the first floor and the children from the village Grache were placed on the second floor. There was one more floor now but it did not exist then. From the cracked façade on the old walls it looked like it was added later. Nobody lived there now.

The narrow street between the building and the cigarette factory still exists. Then, when we were here, there was a door with four rows of barbed wire on it. The door was put there to keep us from leaving.

I mentioned to Ismet and Marieta several times that this was the house where we once lived and from the expression on their faces I realized that they were sharing our excitement. Then, while they sat on the park bench, we continued to explore our former place of residence.

We took to the narrow cobblestone lane. On the left there was a large yard from which we entered our then home. In one of the corners, the furthest one, under the tall mulberry tree, there was a constant fire burning. We had boiled water in a cauldron to wash our clothes. The yard was now hidden behind a gate, fenced with wooden boards. We knocked repeatedly on the gate until finally a girl, wearing a transparent summer shirt and very tight blue jeans, opened it. We greeted her with the three or four Albanian words we knew but that was the extent of our conversation. We were stuck; we could not tell her what we wanted, especially of our great desire to see the house. A man came out of a small house, probably built illegally in the middle of the yard, and asked something. We stuck our heads inside the gate and said we wanted to come inside. The man shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he did not understand, waved his hands and went back into the house.

The yard was unrecognizable. The large mulberry tree and the water tap were gone. The orange trees were gone. They had been replaced by a ten storey building now under construction. We came back to “Anastas Dursaku” street and crossed to the other side. There, while standing under the shade of a large palm tree, we stared at the window shutters behind which were our rooms. We were cramped in those chambers which had two sinks but we never saw water come out of them. We had to go out to the yard to wash. Now, after so many years, we stood there staring at the window shutters behind which we spent seven months of our lives...

After catching up with Marieta and Ismet we left “Anastas Dursaku” street and following the narrow passages, remnants of the old city, we headed for the city centre. Ismet later told us that he was a retired colonel, a graduate of the military academy of Kiev. He told us that after Nikita Khrushchev and Enver Hoxha had their fallout, he was removed from the army and sent to a prison camp where he served for five years.

The city centre was surrounded by a chain of ten storey buildings among which were many old, one storey houses. We were looking for the houses in which we were placed after being moved from the “Pesutsite” but there was no trace of them. The houses were gone, replaced by new residential skyscrapers. The narrow street which then was our exclusive place, where we played soccer with a ball made of rags, was now a wide road driven on almost exclusively by Mercedes.

From what I remember, there was a soccer stadium around here somewhere. They used to take us there, not to watch soccer matches, but to spend half a day of our time playing in the low cut green grass. And then, at noon, we would march single file, singing songs, along the main road

straight to the port, then turn right past the Albanian Navy barracks, and end our march under the willow tree.

We did not find “our” stadium. Neither did we find the large field where, after a severe rainstorm, we were sent to collect the flattened out grain stems that were not harvested. We collected all the grain heads and placed them in huge piles beside the harvesting machine. Marianthy went from group to group, urging us, telling us that by doing this we were helping the people’s government and that we were fighting against Anglo-American imperialism. I guess she was not at all concerned about us baking under the summer sun and burning with thirst.

We held competitions to see which unit would collect more heads of grain, sing louder, and make a bigger pile. So, through our effort and sweat, burning and enduring thirst in the big field, we became stronger and bolder in our preparedness for bigger things in the future. There was plenty of space in our child’s minds for memories, which is why we did not forget the words of our daily slogans that were drilled into our minds day after day.

The big field was no longer there, but on the same site there were large residential buildings which, unlike the former, complemented the new character of the now unrecognizable Durres or Durasi, as some liked to call it. But, in the midst of modern Durres, there were also little signs that reminded us of the old Durres. There was the municipal building with the big clock, the street that was now called “Anastas Dursaku”, the grey building in which we were placed, the royal palace; all almost untouched by modern times. These were places that had not yet been touched by the Albanian renaissance.

Looking to our left we recognized the short houses, the cobblestone path and the small yard with the crooked iron gate standing in front of the palace. We had never been inside the yard. We didn’t go this time either even though the entry was not guarded by armed guards. From here, from this height, in the place where once a swamp used to sit, one could see the most beautiful part of modern Durres. One could watch the port and the ships in the open sea waiting in line to dock. And beyond that, blurred in the light summer fog, one could see tall buildings divided from the sea by a long sandy strip of beach. And beyond there, far away, barely visible to the naked eye, was a small corner. There, where the land met the sea, ended the sandy area of the great beach...

That’s how we remembered it. How many times had we run up and down this street? How many times had we gone up to the locked iron gate at the royal palace where there always was an armed guard on duty? How many times had we run up and down in step, making a tap... tap... tap... sound like that of a single person running. When running together you had no time to catch your breath, to let the pain in your side subside, to stop

and gasp for air... you just ran, you ran to unconsciousness. That's what Marianthy taught us, that's how she wanted us to be. She wanted to hear the sound tap... tap... tap... tap... a single military tap per step no matter how many were walking, marching, or running.

And now, sixty years later, as I remembered the tapping sounds, it seemed that I could still feel the pain in my side, the shortness of breath and the drenching sweat...

Tap - tap – tap! Tap – tap – tap! Our child's steps rang on the street now called "Anastas Dursaku"... And those who couldn't stay in step because they had pain in their sides, were denied breakfast and were humiliated in public. That's how Marianthy wanted it; to bring us up as soldiers... And when we returned all sweaty and exhausted, our peers waited for us in front of the barbed wire gate with guns on their shoulders. Why?... That's how Marianthy wanted it... She often used to say that General Markos had pulled her out of the combat formations and sent her here to Durres for the sole purpose of turning us into fighters; to teach us to want to fight and to grow quickly and continue the work of our fathers and brothers who were bravely fighting against the Anglo-American imperialists.

That's what she used to tell us. But in 1947 when Macedonian schools were opened, our Macedonian teacher used to tell us that our fathers and brothers were fighting for Macedonia. Who to believe? We understood and loved our Macedonian teacher, but we did not understand Marianthy and on top of that we hated her. We had no place in our hearts for her, even as young children. Then when we found out that she was fooling around with an Albanian we called Fortsa Karotsa (a night watchman, a Greek from Epirus snitched on her) we demanded that she leave. And sneaking under her room window, we swore at her and called her every dirty word in the book.

Marianthy left at the end of September 1948. It was peaceful the next day. The harsh sharp ringing sound of the bell that used to wake us up early in the morning was silenced. The days of having to run in the early dawn, in the dark, still sleeping while getting into formation out in the square were over. The days of having to run along the designated route as fast as we could, all in step, past the barracks, every morning at the same time as the Albanian navy was doing gymnastics were over. Every day when the sailors came out of the barracks they were met with our jeers and mockery because that's what Marianthy encouraged us to do. By doing this we were told that we would become stronger and braver and better prepared for greater things in comparison to the Albanian defenders of the sea.

Evdoxia introduced new rules. We were to wake up at six o'clock in the morning, do ten minutes of gymnastics at seven o'clock (no gymnastics for the small children), wash, get dressed (our clothes were in

tatters) and then eat breakfast. The hard marches, the long runs, the running to the palace, the marching songs, the jeering at the sailors, the standing under the willow tree and the calling out of slogans about Markos were all removed from our daily routine. The box disappeared from the willow tree and the voices of the two women on the radio, who every day at twelve o'clock sharp spoke about the great battles and about DAG's (Democratic Army of Greece) victories, went silent. It was strange that all of that suddenly disappeared and we finally had some peace and began to feel like children again...

October came and with it came the cold. Strong cold winds began to blow from the sea turning the cold concrete floor even colder. We slept on the concrete floor in our rooms. We were issued two blankets to every five children. We used one on the concrete floor and the other as a cover. We were lined up like rifle shells all in a row and hugged one another to keep warm. The clothes we came with were summer clothes, worn out and useless against the cold. Our shoes were also worn out and torn up and we, more or less, walked barefoot.

A day or two after Marianthy left, we found out that the Albanian city committee fired Fortsa Karotsa. All we had left after that was the caretaker, who having no job to do snoozed under the willow tree. The first days we had no one to supply us with food, but soon they appointed another Albanian. In addition to food this person also supplied us with socks and shoes. The food was better too. Each day every child received a bun of rye bread the size of two fists and a spoon of sugar. Almost every day we were served potatoes for lunch. The potatoes were sliced lengthwise, seasoned with flour and very sweet red pepper and boiled in a large cauldron.

In the shelter we called the appointed Albanian officer in charge of supplying us with food, "Shoku Karotsa." We constantly accompanied him and his Albanian assistant who spoke a little Macedonian. The Albanian assistant pulled a chariot (similar to an Indian rickshaw) filled to the top with bags usually containing pasta. From May to late August 1948 we ate exclusively pasta for lunch every day. By volume and by weight, we received more food than the Albanians. We were not starving but we were not sufficiently fed either.

One day a truck came inside the shelter yard and offloaded a whole bunch of military shirts. They gave us one each. The shirts served us as winter coats. They were so large, we got lost inside of them. They were long, stretching all the way down to our knees. We also had to fold the sleeves several times in order to see our fingers. The shirts were not new and had been scorched in many places. There were also dried up blood stains on some. In some of the pockets we found photographs of women, children, girls and whole families. There were also letters, mostly written in Greek. Some written in pencil, some in ink and some had drops and

spots of blood on them. We got those who could read Greek to read them to us out loud. Most of us did not know the Greek alphabet so we could not read but we listened very carefully and felt very, very sad. We did not know these people, but through their letters and pictures we shared their joys and sorrows. Through their letters and pictures we became very close to them because, like us, they too were separated from their families, but unlike us they were able to make contact with their loved ones through letters....

We received neither letters nor pictures and we sent none either because we had no idea who was where at the time. One thing we knew was that our homeland was at war and that was for certain. When we heard familiar names of mountains and hills from the box hanging on the willow tree we knew clouds of war hung over our villages and our homes were on fire and burning. Did our folks stay home? We did not know. And even though we knew that the letters and pictures that we had found in the pockets of the bloodied military shirts, bloodied by the war, would leave us with cumbersome and awfully painful memories, it seemed that they were the only living thread that tied them to their family while they were still alive. We were alive and yet we had no thread running from us to our families and from them to us. We felt very sad and grieved over each letter we read and over each photograph we looked at; images that gave us nightmares. We no longer dreamed of green meadows, of ripe fruit and of birds singing... we now dreamt of burning houses and weeping mothers...

It became even colder in November. Dark clouds hung over the city and over the sea, it rained more and stronger winds blew colder air from the sea. The time to return home grew longer. Our parents told us that we would be back home soon. That's what they were told. They said the sooner the conflict ends, the sooner your children would be returned to you. Your children would be back as soon as the government forces were defeated, they were told. As soon as the government was expelled and the military planes and the artillery disappeared, your children would be coming back they were told. That's what they were told. Had the military planes and artillery disappeared?

At the end of the month one afternoon, twenty military trucks arrived and were parked on the road a little further from the naval barracks. They were brand new vehicles and people were saying that they had just arrived from Russia. We heard a loud voice in the evening saying:

“Pack your bags! We are leaving!”

We had nothing to pack. Half the clothes our mothers sent with us by now were worn out. We took very little clothing because we were told we would be coming back very soon.

“We are going home, we are going home!!! Home!!! Home!!!” our voices thundered as we prepared to return to our homes.

We were overwhelmed with happiness and joy. The news was sudden like lightning coming down from the sky. We yelled, jumped, embraced and shook one another and filled the place with laughter at the great news which filled us with hope. Never before until now had we had such radiance and clarity in our eyes. Filled with immense feelings of joy we could not sleep and impatiently waited for dawn to arrive. The next day they woke us very early in the morning. They grouped us and lined us up by villages. We knew very well how to stand in line. Then single file, they loaded us onto the Russian military trucks.

We did not turn back, not even for a last look at the three storey grey house, the willow tree, or the playground where we had spent seven months of our young innocent lives, of our not so happy childhood. The trucks left early in the morning and with them ran and flew our thoughts and imagination. It seemed to us that the trucks were not moving fast enough and that we could walk home faster. All this time we imagined how it would be; how fast we would run to our mothers, to embrace them and hug them; how it would feel to be hugged back and be called by name; how our mother's tears would roll down their cheeks when they first saw us; how they would smile and be full of happiness. We imagined ourselves running in our yards, in our village streets. We imagined filling every street and every corner with noise and laughter, we imagined...

...No, the new Russian military trucks did not take us home. They took us high up the mountains to a meadow covered with snow near the border. There we were loaded onto different trucks that took us to trains which transferred us even further north to wider and greener fields...

On the Road of Time – Chapter 17

We returned to our Saho and drove north following the long chain of old Mercedes. The wide, asphalt road ended outside of the city and there was a sign indicating that beyond here the road was under construction. We turned east and entered a long side street. There were one storey houses on both sides of the street and the sidewalks were paved. There were also young linden trees planted not too long ago on the side of the street. This was the outskirts of Durres. There were no activities here so I drove very slowly while we looked at the well-groomed yards of people's houses.

Then suddenly there was a loud honking sound behind us, as though a vehicle was yelling at us, probably because we were going too slow or because my car had drifted to the centre of the road. As soon as I pulled to the right a big bus passed us, leaving a cloud of smoke behind. I drove about another hundred meters or so and then stopped behind the stopped bus that had honked at us. Several passengers got off. I got out of my car quickly and approached a tall man. From his stature and appearance he looked like an older man. I greeted him in Albanian and asked him if he spoke Macedonian. The man put down his briefcase and at that moment I saw his eyes sparkle with excitement.

"Yes, I speak Macedonian. I am Macedonian..." he said enthusiastically, "and from your car's license plate I can see that you are from Skopje, right? What brings you here?" he asked.

"We are looking for the road to Sukt..." I replied.

"Sukt" he corrected me. "There are two roads. One goes over the hill, the other one is the one in front of us."

"We are looking for the road over which Macedonian and Greek partisans from the Greek Civil War were transported and treated in hospitals in Albania sixty years ago..." I said.

An expression of surprise appeared on the man's face, whose name at the time I did not know, and after a short silence he said:

"I have never heard that such a thing took place in Sukt..."

"And which road leads to Sukt?" I asked.

The man turned west and, pointing with his hand, tried to persuade us that this car could not possibly take us there because the road was dug up and under construction.

"There is nothing out there... except for the vineyards..." he said.

"Are there any barracks or building debris?" I asked. (For more information about the Macedonian and Greek Partisans and their treatment in Sukt, see my novels "Postela za Chemernite" and "Golemata Izmama" (The great Lie).

“No, there is nothing. I have been there... Sixty years ago you say? That was a long time ago. Time has erased things...” he said in a dragging tone of voice.

“Yes...” I said in a protracted tone of voice, “but we still want to...”

“Turn time back?” he interrupted.

“Time? No, our memories... yes...” I replied.

“There is nothing left there from those days... Perhaps you can find out more from someone who was there and is still alive...” he advised.

It was noon and the sun was burning hot. We felt empty, robbed of our hopes and disappointed. We kept silent...

“Sorry,” he interrupted the silence, “I did not tell you my name. I am Itso, a construction engineer, now retired...”

We also introduced ourselves and asked him to direct us to the highway leading to Tirana.

“That’s easy,” he said, “but first I would like to invite you to come with me to visit my relatives. Let us get out of the heat for a while and meet my relatives. They will be very happy to meet you especially when they find out that you are from Macedonia. Shall we go?”

We accepted his invitation and Itso, through his mobile telephone, informed his relatives that he was bringing guests.

He took us on a side street to a small house built some time ago. There was a Mercedes parked in the driveway. An older man came out of the house and hugged and kissed Itso three times on the cheeks and, without asking who we were, did the same with us. Then, with a wide sweep of his hand, he invited us to go inside the house. A woman greeted us at the door and she too gave us hugs and kisses. Then after taking off our shoes we expressed our warm feelings for inviting us and complemented the beauty of their house. We wished them peace and happiness as they sat us down on a sofa covered with a hand-woven rug. Itso and our host sat cross-legged on the floor opposite to us. The woman went to the kitchen and a while later came back bringing small cups of coffee, sweets and glasses filled with cold water.

“So, you are from Macedonia?” our host began the conversation. “I have been there about ten times. On business of course. You are okay over there but us here? You have forgotten us Macedonians in Golo Brdo. You left us to the Bulgarians. They came here, the Bulgarians and told us that we were Bulgarians. They brought us used, threadbare clothing. They unloaded them off their trucks in the middle of the village. They also brought sacks full of flour, beans, lentils, sugar, packages full of sweets for the children, juices, cola and even water.

Take them they said, if you admit that you are Bulgarian and declare yourselves Bulgarians we will bring you more. They knew we were poor and they wanted to buy our souls with gifts. We took everything they brought and much of it we sold at the markets in Peshkopi, even at the

markets in Durres and Elbasan. That's what we did. When we go to Skopje we beg the authorities to open another border check point closer to us to make it easier for us to travel to Macedonia. We beg them to allow us to come and find work there, any kind of work; labour, mason, etc., so that we can earn a few coins. We are not ashamed of doing any kind of job. We will do anything...

And as the conversation of "how Macedonia had forgotten the Macedonian people of Golo Brdo" continued, more and more Mercedes were being parked on the road outside by the people of the neighbourhood. These people were all from Golo Brdo. Some were temporarily settled here waiting to be resettled in Durres and others were in pechalba, (migrant work) working as labourers and masons.

"Do you know," said our host, "that many Macedonians live in the outskirts of Durres? There are many living inside Durres as well. We, for example, will be moving to Durres soon. My sons work in Italy and with the money they make they will soon be able to buy a large flat in Durres where we all will be moving. But first we will have to have a wedding for our older son..."

As for the Bulgarians," he remarked while looking in the direction of the door, "it would be hard to purchase a soul with flour, beans and sugar... But what are you going to do? Macedonia seems to be so far away from us... Earlier politics were different here and there, but now Macedonia is a country and should help us, defend us and protect us..."

On the Road of Time – Chapter 18

Even though we were told that the road to Bureli was dug up and bad to drive on, we decided to go there anyway. We arrived at night.

Bureli was a quiet town, nestled in picturesque surroundings in a remote place located about one hundred and forty kilometers north of Durres. The place was unforgettably beautiful and left the traveller with a desire to return. But it was not the beauty of the place that attracted us. We had not come here to specifically enjoy the charm of the place. Our long journey to visit this place on the dug up makadam road was hardly a tourist curiosity... We came here, as we had visited other places earlier, for the purpose of tracing the path we had taken in the past, sixty years ago, that had brought us here and placed us in the now abandoned shelters and barracks.

While the hills of Gramos were still burning, defeated, disarmed and fleeing DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) military units were brought here by truck. It was here in Bureli, one hundred and forty kilometers north of Durres and twice the distance from the Greek-Albanian border, that five or six people from the political and military leadership attempted to investigate what had gone wrong with their campaign. Five or six people demanded, of the thousands of defeated DAG fighters, what had gone wrong and who was to be blamed for their own failure. Here was where fingers were pointed and here was where the guilty were found.

Before going on the road of time and tracing the footsteps of our past, I had discussions with many former Partisans and DAG fighters about what had really happened at Bureli. In fact the word “Bureli” was well-preserved in their memories, not because of the bloodshed and the pain of defeat, but because of what happened later. More painful than the physical wounds and the bitter taste of defeat were the events that took place there. These painful events were engraved in the deepest recesses of their minds. The mere mention of “Bureli” brought them back to crazy times. Very few and very rare were those who were willing to open their mouths, hearts and souls to reveal the “secret” that took place in that dreadful place.

Their stories were often interrupted by heavy sighs, disappointment, bitter questions and resentment.

“Morning and evening for days and for weeks,” a woman, then eighteen years old, began to tell her story, “they were telling us that we did not lose the armed struggle, but we temporarily suspended it due to Tito's treachery. According to our top leaders, Tito had placed his agents and spies among our ranks and then closed the border. They continuously and methodically made such claims inflaming and spreading collective hatred for the man for whom we sang songs, celebrated and thanked for his country being the first country to offer its hand to us, to feed us and to treat our wounds. But the truth is we never did such things. Almost a year

before, in the name of the party, our political secretaries had badmouthed Tito. They badmouthed him in the trenches and bunkers and before going or after returning from combat.

The word ‘traitor’ always made us turn our weapons and keep our fingers on the trigger. The things that the Party Secretary and the Political Commissar said were the ideas of the Party. Things which we accepted without question, things that we considered to be sacred. They spoke in the name of the Party, to which we were unconditionally devoted and trusted. So it was difficult for us to believe those returning from the hospitals in Jatsenovovo and Katlanovo. But we needed to know so we asked in secret and in confidence, ‘okay let it be that way, that Tito closed the border and that he was a traitor, but how did you find yourselves in Jatsenovovo and Katlanovo, if the border was closed? Did traitors heal your wounds?’

Truth or lie about the border being closed or not was not a great concern but the damage caused by it was tremendous. A lot of damage could be done even with a small lie. But that lie then was huge and the damage it caused was horrendous. That lie struck at us, the Macedonians, the most because we, at some point or another, were the ones accused of celebrating and singing songs about Tito. Then suddenly he was a traitor and an American agent. The damage was huge. One needed to be very crafty to be able to destroy one belief and create another just like that. The lie is very dangerous when it becomes truth.

Earlier we had heard from our political commissars that Tito had turned his back on us, but this time the charges were even more severe. The language the top leadership used to describe the situation was very convincing, so convincing in fact that it caused massive hysteria and anger amongst us. They needed something like this and got it very quickly. So when it came to Tito and Yugoslavia, they left no stone unturned. When they were done with that, they quickly turned against the leadership of NOF (National Liberation Front) and AFZH (Women’s Anti-Fascist Front).

They singled out the twelve of them and brought them out every day on a makeshift stage. That’s when we found out that they, the twelve of them, were Tito’s imbedded agents and spies. They pushed them to go on stage and say something but we couldn’t hear what they were saying above the angry voices swearing and cursing at them. It seemed like the top leaders had no need for the twelve to explain themselves, all they needed them for was to make us angry, to rile us up and bring us to a boil.

There they were right before our eyes, Tito’s agents and spies, the culprits who had maimed our democratic movement and who had disabled our people’s revolution from the inside. They, the top leadership and Party officials said, were the reason for our defeat. They, the Party said, were the people who had stained the honour, pride and dignity of every fighter. And they, the top leadership said, needed to be cleaned out. We, the crowd, on

the other hand, demoralized and suffering from a humiliating defeat needed revenge.

The speeches of the Party leaders, the gestures in their voices and their choice of persuasive words, all fuelled our desire to be rid of the culprits as soon as possible, to punish them by the most severe punishment deliverable. We sought revenge and we made our demands known vocally. We demanded that they be executed immediately. ‘Death!!! By hanging!!! Three meters under the wall!!!’ we all yelled and demanded... This was our answer to their every attempt to speak or try to explain. Nobody listened and everyone wanted their heads.

When someone talked to you about struggle, about victory, about courage but you had never seen them on the front lines or in long and exhausting night marches in the rain or in severe cold weather, then you didn’t like them. You didn’t like them because they had never slept in a damp and moldy bunker, never stepped in a muddy trench and had never bruised a shoulder from carrying a machine gun and ammunition. You couldn’t bring yourself to like them if they had never carried a wounded person, never visited a hospital, never ate moldy bread, never drank muddy water from a mud puddle and never ate raw flour muddied in water... You didn’t like them because they had never eaten grass, swollen buds, or leaves. You didn’t like them because they had never seen a wound, never mind being bandaged in dirty rags, festering and full of pus. These kinds of people you just didn’t like...

When we went on brief leave in frontier villages in Kostur or Prespa, people like that used to show up and give long speeches and we, sleepy, worn out and exhausted, frozen, hungry and dirty, were forced to listen to them... ‘Death!!! By hanging!!! Three meters under the wall!!!’ we cried out at the top of our lungs while swearing and shaking our fists at them. Not one, from the thousands of fighters gathered at Bureli, spoke on behalf of the accused. Why? Why did not one of us get up and say something to those people accused of being traitors and spies? Why did no one say something like ‘comrades, you were the leadership so where is your responsibility?’

Unfortunately we were all blinded by our so-called Party obedience and loyalty and by the Party leader... Yes, we were blinded. That’s how they taught us simple village children to be. We were so brainwashed that there was no place in our brains for our own thoughts and opinions... They told us that our friends were our enemies, spies and agents of Tito and the Americans and we believed them. It was the same as throwing gasoline on the fire. And if we had had guns, then our fingers would have been at the trigger. ‘Death!!! By hanging!!! Three meters under the wall!!!’ We did not stop to look for evidence, or proof, we were ready to immediately do our duty... And those at the very top sure knew how to fuel our fires.

Every one of us wanted to see the accused dead. We wished to see them hung; we wanted to see them three meters under the wall and to be shot by hundreds of bullets. And while we all shouted at the top of our lungs, demanding death, they, the top leadership, arranged themselves on the stage, accusing, yelling, spitting and pointing with their fingers.

‘Death!!! By hanging!!! Three meters under the wall!!!’ is what we were calling out, not because they were our thoughts, others had thought about that for us, but because we were performing exactly the way they wanted us to perform. It was not for us to question the arguments put before us, we were soldiers, a large number of us were Party members and those at the very top, pulled the strings that made us perform. Those from NOF were saying something but we could not hear their voices. Their voices were lost in our cries calling for their heads.

And again they said, ‘we are not traitors’, but at the same time, they did not say who the traitors were... And why did they not say that? Did we stop them from saying it? Did we say a single word in their defence? If anyone told you that we did they would be lying to you. We did not come to their rescue. And why did we not come to their rescue? Because at Bureli Zahariadis and his cohorts tossed an apple of discord at the Macedonians. The poison of the discord wiped out our thinking processes. And were we ever capable of independent thought in the first place? Unfortunately not because he always made sure that we had no independent thought. He didn’t do that personally but through his cohorts. And included among his cohorts were those who he fingered as being agents and spies; the ones who actually listened to him and obeyed him without question. The ones who celebrated him and spread his name far and wide turning him into a star that could do no harm.

We, the embittered, angry, humiliated and defeated DAG fighters, with our pride and dignity wounded did not want to, or had no desire to listen to those who the Party, i.e. Zahariadis and his aides, pointed fingers at and blamed for our defeat. It was like that. Whatever the Party said we did. The Party’s word stood above all and for us this was ideal. The lie, they say, does not tolerate the truth. Lies were transformed into truth and the truth was turned into lies. One had to be very crafty to be able to do that.

According to Zahariadis, the very top leadership was clean, but the Macedonians were not clean and because of those dirty Macedonians, specifically because of the twelve Macedonian leaders, we suffered our defeat. Zahariadis was quick to also point out that ‘the twelve standing on the stage cared only for themselves because they only defended themselves and cared nothing about those who gave it their all. The twelve never stood behind those who sacrificed everything and all the twelve said was I, we, I, I, and we.’ We in the crowd however could not hear anything they were saying above our own loud voices judging them and finding them guilty

over and over again. No one in the mass of fighters lifted a finger or spoke in their defence.

In Bureli our silence was a powerful weapon in the hands of Zahariadis and his company which they used to not only condemn the twelve, but all of the Macedonians. Even though the Greeks were incapable of carrying out the struggle even for a month without the Macedonians, according to their own accounts, they still blamed the Macedonians for their defeat. For three long and miserable years the Macedonians bled for them, gave them food and shelter, gave them their homes and beds, their belongings and even their children... and this was how these Greeks repaid them...

Those twelve Macedonian people that the Greeks found guilty of treason were very loyal to the Greeks, especially to Zahariadis. It was they who went from village to village informing the people and speaking on his behalf saying that no Macedonian should be left out of the formations. It was they who attracted the Macedonians to the struggle and who built Zahariadis's army. It was they who convinced the heads of the households to donate their meagre possessions voluntarily. It was they who convinced them to empty their homes, send their sons and daughters to battle, give their children away and donate their furnishings and properties... That's how it was.

And now, after all these years, it seems to me that we unconsciously sought death, the gallows and three meters under the wall for those who led us... We were young, inexperienced and misguided. We were big dreamers. We dreamed a lot and we wanted so badly to believe and we believed that we would win. We believed in our dreams. We believed in hope. That's all we had... But ... some seemed very keen to rob us of our dreams, of our hopes and of our desires. Someone wanted it that way. Someone wanted us to want things badly but to not think for ourselves. Someone wanted us to allow others to think for us... (D. Vlandas memoirs)

If those closest to us who led us, if they had had their own thoughts then we would not have gone to hospitals in Korcha and Elbasan. We would not have heard the screams and moans of our mothers when we passed through Prenies. We would not have gone to Bureli and other distant foreign lands... Our hopes and dreams were replaced with promises, big promises. And we believed in those promises. Our beliefs were very useful to some but unfortunately we were unable to see what it was, to figure it out and to measure the damage it was doing to us. Years later one of them wrote the following in their memoirs: 'We knew that we would be defeated but we wanted to deal a larger blow to our opponent so we continued the conflict to the bitter end.'

You ask me about those in our leadership? Had we seen them? We were in the mountains, in the forests, in the trenches, in the bunkers, in the dugouts, on constant night marches. We marched only at night because the

day belonged to the military aircraft. They pursued us from the sky and buried us into the ground. The night was ours... We were constantly on alert and in constant battle mode. Our leaders on the other hand were always in the villages in Prespa Region. If you did not find them in German, then look for them in Ppli. And if they were not in Ppli then look for them in Shtrkovo or Nivitsi. And if not there then they would be in Grazhdeno... They went to all the Prespa villages.

Where you would not find them was in the night columns carrying ammunition to Gramos. You would not find them at the battles for Mali-Madi, Kostur, Voden, Negush, Lerin... But they were quick to condemn us and put us to death for the slightest infraction. Fighters found themselves 'under the wall' (put to death) for such small infractions as taking a loaf of bread from the villagers. But among us the highest infraction of them all was to be accused of being a traitor. That accusation carried the highest penalty. We killed our own friends for such accusations. And in Bureli when we heard the words 'traitors', 'agents', 'spies', our blood boiled and we sought revenge. This was what we were taught in the trenches, in the bunkers, on the short rests after long night's marches and in the wet dugouts...

Even though we were losing battles everywhere we were fully committed to the belief that we would win. I can say that we only saw those who led us, from head to toe, here in Bureli when they were accused of being Tito's agents and spies. Imagine that, being accused by Zahariadis, the very same man whom they worshipped, venerated and celebrated. Zahariadis paraded them on the stage, then, in front of everyone, made harsh accusations against them. The accusations were especially harsh now because in war time they were brought before a military court and the harshest punishments were delivered. They were accused of 'treason' and pointed at with a finger that said 'these are the culprits for our defeat'. And we, with our bruised pride and wounded dignity, called for: 'Death!!! By hanging!!! Three meters under the wall!!!!' Was it for only that, that we wanted their heads or was it for something more?..."

I sat silent listening to this eighty year old woman who was once a Partisan and fighter of DAG, and who unexpectedly and with a bitter tone in her voice, asked me: "What do we call the time to which our memories have returned? They brought us to Bureli after the last bloody battles at Gramos and housed us in barracks where the top political and military leadership, the five or six of them, ordered an investigation to find the reasons and the culprits for our defeat. And they found them. They found them in our people (Macedonians), the leaders of NOF and AFZH. They arrested them in Bureli and sent them to Moscow where they tried them, found them guilty and sent them to Siberia. The twelve were sent to

Siberia while the rest of us, numbering in the thousands, were sent to Tashkent...

Well, I said much of what I wanted to say and now I want to tell you this. If someone avoids answering questions about that time and swings their hand at you, then you need to have some understanding for their silence. It is certain that much has changed in our convictions and beliefs in the last sixty years. We were young then and full of enthusiasm, faith and courage. We were dedicated to our ideals and we were always ready to make self-sacrifices. You need to understand that. But you also need to understand that these people carried their pain with them all these years. The pain of defeat, of being lied to and of the loss of their youth.

As for myself, I didn't agree with those who acted illegally and, like thieves during the night, inducted us into the struggle. Who gave them that right? And there in the camps, hidden in the dense forests of Gramos and Vicho, they took advantage of our innocence and brainwashed us. I didn't want to understand nor do I agree with those who took it upon themselves to take ownership of our young and exploit their enthusiasm to their detriment. They do that even now and think that it is their right to do so. Even today under certain circumstances, they act in the name of a supposed greater good, calling on nations to rise. And do they care when people get robbed, are displaced and exiled? No! I have no need or understanding of the vanity of those who do that and I never will...

I have no respect or understanding for those who took advantage of our youthful courage, enthusiasm, heroism and faith and turned it into something ugly... There are still people out there, like me, who in spite of their troubles, regrets and bitterness, who would like to talk about those times. Yet there are also those who like to keep silent and for them I have no understanding. Why do they still remain silent? Why have they not broken the seal of silence and spoken out publicly and openly about who is to be blamed and at whom the finger of blame should be pointed? Perhaps they feel better if things are left alone and forgotten? That would certainly be of benefit to some...

Do they want to send their memories to oblivion so that they themselves can forget them? If there are no memories of yesterday and if there are no memories of today then there can be no memories for tomorrow.... Well, the same goes for people...

We are the self-igniting and defeated generation who measured time with hope. Unfortunately time has caught up to us and our memories are slowly beginning to be erased, but we need to, I emphasize, that we need to be remembered and to be recorded in time, in our time..."

On the Road of Time – Chapter 19

We returned from Bureli on the same road and took the highway leading to Tirana. We were surprised by the large number of ongoing developments in the area. To the left and right of the highway there were numerous hangars and factories painted in various colours and with U.S., German, Italian, French and Spanish flags flying on their roofs. The region before Tirana had grown with a large industrial zone along the new roads leading to the seaside towns. Albania, it seems, was coming to life.

The mountain road took us to Elbasan where, west of the town, at the foot of the mountain, we saw olive trees with olives maturing on them. Among the olive trees there were grey buildings with cracks in their façade. This was a hospital complex where thousands of wounded Partisans from the Greek Civil War had been brought to be treated.

From Elbasan we took the road that led us to the Durrës harbour. Here we strolled along the docks admiring the anchored ships. We walked from one end of the harbour to the other listening to ship sirens and seagull calls flooding the air with sounds, slowly awakening sleeping memories in us.

How had they determined who was to blame for DAG's (Democratic Army of Greece) defeat since they never reported that DAG was defeated in the first place. Had they not said that, "they did not lose the armed struggle, but temporarily suspended it?" And what about their weapons, were they ever laid down or merely set aside? The day after they assembled in Bureli, Athens threatened Tirana. If Albania continued to protect the "bandits" in its territory, which the Greek government army failed to crush in Gramos, Greece would declare war on Albania. Tirana, being well aware of the situation even before it was threatened by Athens, made an urgent request to Moscow to find a solution. And a solution was found.

The wounded and the entire refugee population were to be accepted by Warsaw, Prague, Budapest and Bucharest. The armed and capable fighters were to be accepted by Moscow and taken as far away from Europe as possible. This was what I was recently told by a ninety year old man named Stefo, who, through the entire Greek Civil War, was a driver, driving an old Czech "Tatra" on the roads from Durrës - Elbasan - Prenies-Pogradets - Korcha - Bilista - Prespa and often from Prespa to Jasenovó and Katlanovo. Food, weapons and ammunition were set aside on one side and the wounded on the other side.

"On that road," Stefo said, "I knew every corner, every pothole and every rock sticking out of every cobblestone road... I could drive with my eyes closed and I never had an accident. And please don't record my surname. Let me remain 'unknown' as there are so many of us 'unknown' out there. Are names more important than the deeds we did? I was just an ordinary driver, a chauffeur to hundreds of wounded who my Czech

“Tatras” transported to hospitals in Korcha, Elbasan and Sukt and to Jasenovno and Katlanovo and from there, with their wounds still not fully closed, back to Prespa. Wounded there - semi-healed back. I drove all night and all day. The days were rare, very rare when we got a full day’s or night’s rest.

The women from the Kostur, Prespa and Lerin Region villages carried the wounded to the border. They carried the fighters on stretchers, blankets and overcoats and the ammunition on horses and mules. The women were responsible for transporting wounded and ammunition directly to and from the battlefields. Oh, those women ... exhausted, out of breath, putting down the stretchers slowly, staring at the pale faces of the wounded, begging them to hold on, moistening their cheeks, lips and foreheads with their damp black head kerchiefs, holding their hands to comfort them and lessen their pain. Oh those women fatigued and with sunken faces, rubbing their shoulders to ease their pain from the heavy stretchers. We had no words to exchange, just a grip of the hand, to say goodbye to some until later and to others to say goodbye forever...

I often secretly wiped my tears when, after a day, after a week and rarely after a month, I had to drive the same boys and girls to the same hospitals from which I had brought them back. Were they complaining? Were they bent over with pain? Were they praying? They were doing all of those things lying there with their bodies mutilated. They begged me to drive slower when they were hurting badly. They begged me not to hit bumps and to avoid potholes on rugged roads. They begged me to give them water...

Was it difficult for me? The hardest thing for me was when we unloaded them in the hospital yard and found some not moving. You drove them all night long, you tried to comfort them, you prayed for them and encouraged them to hold on and then they didn’t make it. You begged them to stop moaning, you promised them that there was only one more curve to go before the road levelled out, you assured them that the hospital was near and when you got there you found them motionless, cold and they looked at you with glass eyes. That was the hardest thing for me. Then I had to do it again... and again... and again...

So instead of putting them on a stretcher and straight onto a hospital bed, we left them outside covered with a blanket, waiting to be taken to a place from where nobody returns. Did we have time to rest? We did not know what rest was. We never turned off the engines. We were there for as long as it took to offload everyone, then we fueled the trucks and after that we turned around and went straight to the warehouses. There we loaded the trucks with crates of ammunition, picked up the fighters who had recovered from their wounds and headed back to Smrdesh or Breznitsa. Then between the time it took to offload the crates and the recovered fighters and the time it took to load the new wounded, we stole a bit of

time for a wink of sleep, to stretch our legs and relax our backs. Then we were back doing the same thing, day and night.

I knew the road like the back of my hand. Who did I talk to while I drove? I talked to myself. Okay old truck, I used to say, let's go and be careful you don't go off the road, be careful you don't flip over, be careful you don't stall. And whenever we got a chance to stop and form a column of trucks, I caressed my truck, telling it bravo you old truck, you held out. Then before driving again I would say please hold on even longer, please don't give out on the steep road, take the corner smoothly and take the hill courageously. One time it gave up on me.

I was driving uphill by a very sharp turn, somewhere close to the entrance of Kiafasan. It was a steep grade and a very sharp turn... It was winter and as soon as I took the bend an avalanche of snow broke off from up higher and poured over the truck. Heaven and earth all disappeared under snow. Mine was the first truck leading the column. I broke through the snow and yelled at the top of my voice. The other drivers ran towards me, shovelled the snow with their arms and legs and freed me. Then we opened up the road to the top of the hill, past the last curve. Unfortunately my troubles were not over.

When I tried to restart the truck, the engine growled once and died. I tried again and again but it did not want to start. I came down and asked the other drivers to come up and give me a push. We got the truck moving but still could not get the engine to start. We pushed it back and forth but the engine would not start. Then I noticed the road under the snow was icy. I asked for help to get the wounded off the truck and we laid them down on the side of the road in the snow. The wind, what can I tell you, twisting and howling blew from above bringing down snow and cold air. We pushed and pushed and brought the truck to the top of the hill.

Then we returned for the wounded and one by one we carried them to the top in blankets and overcoats. We loaded them side by side on the truck but I was missing two. We went back looking for them, yelling and calling for them but there was only silence. We began to dig in the snow with our hands and finally we found them; they were buried in the falling snow. They were stone cold, frozen... We could not help them any more... The engine too was dead but I had a solution for it. I took my overcoat off and cut it to strips with my dagger, I then placed it into a pile under the engine, soaked it with gasoline and lit it on fire. As soon as the moisture evaporated the engine started and we were off again.

The downhill road from Kiafasan to Prenies was very steep and full of sharp turns so I had to drive with my brakes fully applied all the way down. Our engines sometimes would stall under such circumstances and until we were able to start them again the wounded had to endure pain and the cold. Being in pain and cold, they often took their frustration out on us, swearing and yelling at us. Sometimes they even threatened to kill us but

when they were yelling like that we knew that they were alive...

What? You are asking me for my name again? Please don't ask me for my name. I don't want it written down. Let me be anonymous just like the two men who froze to death in the snow at the great curve before the saddle of Mount Kiasfan... When we lost Vicho Region, thousands of civilians and Partisans fled to Albania. At first all trucks were left to the disposal of the military. We loaded ammunition during the night and, over Korcha in the dark of night, we drove it to the Albanian-Greek border where we off loaded it at the approaches to Gramos. The fighters came during the night, picked it up and delivered it directly to the battlefields. I have no idea how many thousands of government soldiers were waiting for them.

The heavy battles began on August 27th. Government forces were attacking with military aircraft and artillery while our forces were fighting back with rifles and machine guns. The heavy weapons were left at Vicho and fell into enemy hands. What happened up there was not combat but a slaughter. The Partisans went into battle in open space with no trenches or bunkers to protect them. We the drivers, after delivering the weapons, were ordered to return to Korcha where we were split into two groups. One group collected those fleeing from Koreshtata who had managed to bring everything from home and were burning under the hot sun in Vrbnik and approaching Bilishcha.

The other group collected those fleeing from Prespa, who after a short stay in Zvezda and Poiani were chased out and had to travel to Pogradets on foot. There were all sorts of people young and old, livestock, sheep, goats, oxen, cows, calves and carts. We left everything behind except for the people and their bags with their most essential items. The livestock was left behind to roam in the Albanian villages, fields and meadows.

Who collected the livestock? No one, the livestock were not taken to Pogradets. Only people walked along the long and dusty road in a long and endless line. The column of trucks was waiting for them just outside Pogradets. It took a long time to load everyone, old men and old women, women with infants in their arms, sick people... The column of trucks pulled out and then stopped at the exit of Pogradets. A couple of women were carried out to the lakeshore, why I don't know. Then the person leading the column went to see what was happening and after swearing a lot ordered the column to move again. In the evening we offloaded the people outside of Elbasan and without any rest went back to take more people and brought them to the same place outside of Elbasan.

I picked up some women, one of whom had just given birth and her baby cried non-stop, continuously. It was one of the worst trips I had ever made. I was used to adults grunting and moaning but not to a baby crying. The mother cried too and I had no idea how to help them so when we got

to Prenies I stopped the truck and left two mothers and their babies with the administration.

We left the people outside of Elbasan under the naked sky and returned to Korcha where we waited for further orders. Here we found out that our Partisans were retreating from Gramos and entering Albanian territory where they were ordered by Albanian officers to surrender their weapons and hide in the shadows of a pine forest. It was August 30 and aircraft were flying along the border. We heard bombs and cannon shells explode all over the place. I knew what was happening without having to ask, so as soon as my truck was loaded with thirty heavily wounded fighters I went straight to Korcha and immediately hurried back. The roads were filled with our people and no one was singing or chanting slogans as they used to before. They had their heads bowed down, some wearing dirty and bloody bandages. Hungry and thirsty they kept walking on these unfamiliar Albanian roads. It did not matter if they were wounded or healthy; they all looked sick because their souls were suffering...

The first truck stopped and waited for the rest of the trucks to catch up so that a proper column could be formed. We wanted to form tight columns and drive fast but that did not always work. At the last corner before Prenies we had to reduce our speed because a river of men and women poured out of the barracks. The highway was crowded with people and we could not tell what they were saying from the shouting, but we knew very well what was hidden behind the yelling, crying and begging. After a few days we also collected them and took them to the meadows outside of Elbasan. They remained there, under the naked sky, for a month and maybe longer... Then we got orders to collect all the wounded from all the hospitals in Korcha, Elbasan, Tirana and those in Sukt, even those whose wounds were still open, and transport them to the Port of Durres.

We, the drivers, were the first people to learn about the move out of Albania. We knew that both the military and civilian refugees would soon be moved out of Albania. So using our trucks we collected all wounded first and took them to the Port of Durres,” concluded Stefo.

The reader can find more information about the refugees taken to Poland in the book ‘The Greek Hospital on the island Volin,’ whose author was the organizer and chief surgeon of the special military hospital, code named ‘250’, then Major, later Brigadier General, Dr. Vladislav Barchikovski. Among his valuable and worthy recorded testimony you will also find the following information:

“As can be seen from the story told by General Leszek Kshemjenj, then deputy commander of the Shlesk Military District for political and educational issues, in the beginning of the summer of 1949 he asked to see Boleslav Bjerut, the first secretary of the Central Committee of PORP. Considering the complicated international situation, he brought to his attention the plight of the Partisans from the Greek Civil War. He was

particularly touched by the fate of the wounded and sick, especially the children, women and elders. He was shaken by the prospect of their destruction as a result of the defeat of the Democratic Army of Greece. Boleslav Bjerut strongly emphasized the importance of Proletariat Internationalism as a basic ideological principle of communism and stressed that, as we were helped by other countries in our struggle comrades, it is now our turn to help and provide humanitarian aid...

The military, which was equipped with the best organizational readiness, could take care of the evacuation, transportation, treatment and rehabilitation. The civilian authorities could then take care of accommodation and adjustments to life. He said he was personally interested in giving those unlucky people not only material assistance but also friendship from the heart. As a member of the military leadership in the territory where the new immigrants were to be accommodated in the future, General Kshemjenj ordered that he be regularly informed about their situation. General Kshemjenj began to work on this project immediately but only for a short time. He was replaced by General Vaclav Komar, chief organizer and implementer of the immigrants from the Greek Civil War case in Poland.

A group of doctors, under the leadership of Dr. Bohdan Bednarski, later Minister of Health, was dispatched from Poland to Albania towards the end of the Greek Civil War. The doctors provided the Partisans with professional medical help. There was another group of doctors who worked inside the ships that transported refugees from the shores of Albania to a place near the Polish port Svinoujshe. These doctors provided assistance and emergency surgery as required. The wounded Partisans offloaded in Shvinoujshe were transported by public health vehicles to hospital "250" in Volin Island. Later ships began to arrive in Gdansk where the wounded were offloaded and taken to Szczecin and from there were loaded on buses and taken to the hospital. Basically there were four periods during which refugees were transported. The first was at the end of July 1949, the second in the middle of September and part of October, the third in November and the fourth in December. The latter ones were sporadic and very few refugees were transported.

The third batch of refugees transported from Albania took place on July 13, 1949. The ship, with a crew of 50 people, that took them was called 'Koshchushko' and carried 750 wounded. They were in bad shape and needed specialist help and fast. The partly healed patients were housed at the bottom of the ship and those who needed immediate attention and dressings changed were placed in the cabins. Each patient was issued a number written on a card which hung from their neck. They were supposed to memorize the number.

While they were still in Albania, before they were loaded on the ship, rumours began to circulate among them that they would be loaded onto a

Polish ship, which meant that they, most likely, would be taken to Poland. Some had met Polish doctors in Albania. Many remembered being treated by a Polish woman doctor in Sukt but they did not know her last name. To many she was known as sister Slava. She was constantly with them and cared for them, especially for women. The Greek nurses and health personnel were subordinate to her.

The wounded were not allowed to leave their bunks while passing through Gibraltar or during the short stay in Copenhagen. But the ship found itself in a terrible fog while traveling through the English Channel. The sirens blew for long periods of time and the trip lasted twelve days before it docked in Shvinojshche Harbour on July 25. Ochinjets and Fedina were a bit surprised when, the previous day in the morning, they received a call from Colonel Kavinjski ordering them to prepare several hundred blankets, drinks in milk cans and many pots.

Everything was then loaded onto trucks and ready to go. Among the column of trucks were also the public health vehicles ready to pick up the wounded. The column of trucks sat idle for many hours waiting for orders to depart. Everyone thought the alarm had been sounded a bit too early. Then in the evening a jeep appeared from the command building and signalled the column to move. Everyone was relieved when the column left. By then everyone was also tired of waiting. The Column of trucks passed by the Mjendzivodzhe guardhouse and then it was off on its way to the port to pick up the refugees.

While traveling on its way the column was diverted into a dense wood grove. A dark looking older man with a large moustache, wearing an officer's uniform, came out of the woods. It was Colonel Stanek. There were many people in uniforms and in civilian clothes there hiding in the woods and so were many medical vehicles. At night the entire truck column moved out and drove into the harbour where it was met by a huge ship. They began unloading the ship at dawn while it was still dark. It was cold that day. The severely wounded were placed in special baskets and offloaded from the ship by cranes. The wounded had to endure the cold and inconvenience while being offloaded but the process was quick and soon they were set on land. While this was going on a number of people, in uniforms appeared. They carefully covered the wounded with blankets, placed them on stretchers, loaded them onto the public health vehicles and drove them away.

When they were subsequently asked, all the patients said that their first impression of Poland was very pleasant. After the period of uncertainty that they had experienced before that, they found the Poles very caring and compassionate. They felt like they were in good hands. The lightly wounded got off the ship on their own and after stepping out of the ship each was issued a blanket by the soldiers standing by the bridge. After that they were escorted to the trucks and to a small number of buses. There

they were given hot drinks. The wounded who had amputated legs were carried onto the vehicles by hand. One of the men cried, not because he was in pain but because of the attention he was receiving, being carried by hand. Some, to express their gratitude, petted the metal eagles on the hats of the Polish soldiers who carried them.

The strange newcomers were dressed in half-civilian, half-military clothing wearing American looking hats. They were dirty, thin-faced, neglected and sorrowful. They kept silent and to themselves. They left the impression that they were strange and unsure of themselves. They curiously watched the Polish soldiers standing at the seashore. Some newcomers wanted to touch their military medals, signs and symbols. All the heavily wounded were bandaged in dirty and bloody cloths and rags and under the bandages the wounds were leaking pus. It looked like there was no means to look after them on the ship or perhaps those providing the assistance were inexperienced? Some of the wounded had deformed limbs and did not want them seen by the soldiers, but once in a while the soldiers took a peek but showed their compassion by bowing and making hand gestures. When the entire operation was completed the trucks left Shvenoujashte in a hurry. They passed the empty Mjendzivodzhe without noticing those who were there on vacation.

The first transport was a great experience for the hospital staff. They had been preparing for this for a long time. They were nervous due to the responsibility entrusted to them. Would everything go right? Would they be able to receive all the wounded and sick during the night and the next day? All these issues were causing them stress. They walked from corner to corner, checking whether something should be done, if something needed to be prepared or fixed. The wait was long and caused them much stress. Then the moment they saw the public health vehicles arriving and stopping in front of their building, they all came alive with excitement and laughter. Their anxiety was gone. They wanted to show the newcomers that they cared not only professionally but enthusiastically with all their hearts. They felt that the newcomers deserved all their attention.

It was obvious, generally speaking, that these poor people had survived the horrors of war. They arrived tired, weakened, sick and generally exhausted from the prolonged suffering they had had to endure. Their limbs were sore and caused them much pain with any movement. Many had high temperatures. Some of the heavily wounded were very ill and were unable to rejoice in their arrival at their destination. Generally speaking everyone tried to express some enthusiasm with only a few showing mistrust saying, "Don't touch me; I don't know who you are." That's how it seemed to some of the staff when they heard the newcomer wounded muttering words at them.

Some even refused to surrender their weapons, although it was explained to them that the weapons would be placed in storage, they still

did not want to give them up. They were attached to their pistols and makeshift Partisan guns made of cut pipes. Only a few refused to eat, the majority extended their hands and helped themselves to the sandwiches especially provided for them. They pointed at the bread and gestured if they could have more; looking for approval from their hosts. Later they said they could not believe that there was so much fresh bread. The partisans often dreamed of eating a lot of bread but here there was no limit to how much they could have. "You want more? There is plenty!" was the usual response from the hostesses who were more than happy to fulfil their wishes. And this is what the newcomers remembered the most and would never forget for the rest of their lives.

The patients lay on beds lined up on both sides of the huge hall. They were astonished to see so many clean bowls for washing, water containers, piles of pyjamas, robes and slippers, milk cans and drinks. Some took extra food and hid it under their pillows because they were not sure what might happen next. They were afraid that the food might run out as it often had during their Partisan days. But from what they saw happening all around them they could tell that Poland was a country a lot richer than the countries in which they had stayed before. A lot of them had stayed in Albania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia which were nothing in comparison to Poland. Many were also amazed at how much better organized Poland was than the other countries to which they had been.

The wounded were quickly registered, undressed from their dirty clothing and cleaned up. They were washed, shaven and had their dirty bandages, rags and towels removed and burned. Those who needed new bandages and dressings were left on the beds. The others were given brand new pyjamas, put on stretchers and transferred to their quarters. Those who could walk were given the block number and sent off to their blocks where they were subdivided into groups and then transferred to suitable quarters. Only the severely wounded and sick stayed in the beds and remained under observation until they were better. Any of the clothing that was worth saving was sent for disinfection and then placed in storage.

Later transports were handled in a similar fashion but none could compare to the first. The number of patients in the later transports was significantly smaller and there were more personnel in the hospital staff. By now they had become more experienced in handling refugee patients and had much larger supplies of medical equipment and resources. The first transport of patients arrived in Dzhivnuv in September. Among the first patients to reach the compound were 29 civilians with amputated arms and legs. Then more than 150 Partisans arrived on October 8th along with about 2,500 who were transported to Shvinoujshche on the ship "Koshchushko." The ship sailed from Albania during the night of September 27th and 28th, 1949 and arrived in Poland eleven days later.

From what we were told, among the Greek crew there were also three Greeks translators.

The third transport arrived in Gdansk on October 26th, most likely on the Romanian ship Transylvania (some however argued that it was the ship Carolina). The Transylvania was a luxury ship, which, before the war, was intended for the personal use of the Romanian king. This ship reportedly left the Albanian coast in the middle of October and carried 2 to 3 thousand passengers. The crew was Romanian, among whom were also some Polish nurses and doctors. This ship was followed by an English warship all the way to Gibraltar until the Romanian captain convinced the warship captain that he was carrying tourists.

The hungry and starving passengers, during the trip, were given as much food as they wanted to eat. Unfortunately the consequences from this were dire which, in addition to the seasickness, had caused many to vomit violently and have bad diarrhea. As a result more than 500 became very ill and suffered from exhaustion, especially after they were put on trains and transferred from Gdansk to Szczecin. After eating too much and being sick, the patients then refused to eat or drink at all despite pleas from the nurses to do so. To add insult to their pain when they arrived in Dzhivnuv, instead of being issued pyjamas, because the hospital had none, they were issued long white nightgowns. This was too much for the men as they refused to wear the funny white women's dresses. Finally, after much pleading, they were convinced that this was only temporary and that they would soon be issued proper pyjamas and they would look like men again. Later they all forgot those initial small misunderstandings.

The last transport to arrive was in December. It did not carry many wounded but because the hospital was almost full to capacity it was only able to take 50 patients. When the patients from the first transport were all healed and began to leave more vacancies were created and a group of 30 was admitted. Then in early 1950 very small groups of Greeks arrived from other Eastern European popular democracies. In May of the same year, 50 people from Budapest arrived and were admitted. They had been treated in the Hungarian hospitals but many had unhealed wounds despite their previous treatments. This hospital had a good reputation so that is why it was highly recommended, mostly by word of mouth, among the Greeks.

They took their time treating patients in this hospital and used multiple procedures. Inflammation of bones unfortunately complicated surgeries and rehabilitation procedures. Of the 1,175 patients admitted, 215 had fractured bones. The Macedonians also played a special role towards mutual understanding between the Poles and the patients. The Macedonians spoke a Slavic language. They lived in Greece as a national minority but their mother tongue was Macedonian, a language they were

not allowed to speak, a language that they said was prohibited from being spoken in nationalist Greece.

During the struggle, on the communist side, hostilities between the Macedonians and Greeks had weakened but were still active. The Macedonians had a strong sense of national identity and had not forgotten that Alexander the Great was one of them. Because of that and because they were mistreated by the Greeks they did not feel good being among the Greeks. The Macedonians had their own national ambitions and in confidence would say that all Macedonians must unite. The Macedonians living in Greece felt that they too should have their autonomy like those living in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. In talks with Greeks, the Greeks also admitted that the Macedonian problem had not been solved and agreed that it should be solved.

The entire refugee population, be it wounded fighters, civilians, or children, was accepted in Poland as Greek. But many Poles quickly realized that among the newcomers there were differences in language, customs, songs and dances. These differences were not only appreciated but were supported by the Poles.”

In September 1996, I personally met with Professor Dr. Major Vladislav Barchikovski, now a retired Brigadier General. As I mentioned earlier he is the author of the book ‘The Greek Hospital on the island Volin’ from which the information above was obtained. In those days he was chief surgeon of hospital ‘250.’

I invited Dr. Vladislav Barchikovski together with the Vice Minister of Culture of the Republic of Poland to come for a visit to the Embassy of the Republic of Macedonia in Warsaw. The first thing the doctor did was excitedly ask about his Macedonian patients and how they were doing. He even remembered some of their names. He knew that most of them had returned to the then Yugoslavia and were now living in the Republic of Macedonia. He said that he still corresponded with some. He also told me that two years and three months ago he had stopped off in Greece after being invited for a visit by his Greek patients.

The same day that I met with Dr. Vladislav Barchikovski I sent a note to the Republic of Macedonia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposing that the doctor be invited by the Alliance of Veterans of the Second World War to visit the Republic of Macedonia in order to meet with his former Macedonian patients. I never got a response from the Ministry or the Alliance. During my short stay in Skopje for consultations with the Foreign Ministry, members of the Main Board of the Association of Veterans who during the Greek Civil War were in high positions in NOF (National Liberation Front) and the AFZH (Women’s Anti-Fascist Front) told me that they had heard about my meeting with Dr. Vladislav Barchikovski and about my proposal.

“And, yes,” one of them said, “the Ministry for Foreign Affairs did send us your proposal, but we at the Board assessed that he was not well known to us, hence we judged that he had done very little for our fighters, so we decided not to invite him...” Now what can I say about that?

“Once we had transported all the wounded we were ordered to transport the entire refugee population to Durres,” resumed Stefo, but his story was then picked up by Stoina who said:

“At night the road was lined with trucks. Everywhere there were bulletins and people calling out for us to collect our things and gather together near the trucks in groups by villages. So we did as we were asked and they told us that we were leaving Prenies. Naturally we all thought that we were going home. But the moment the trucks pulled away from Prenies along the flat road we knew that we were not going home. It seemed that we were on the road for a long time as the trucks drove very slowly, stopping often to pick up more people along the way. Some of these people, hiding in the forest, were there for days and even weeks under the naked sky sleeping on the bare ground. They were bitter, scared, dirty, thirsty and hungry but kept silent and to themselves.

We were packed tight against one another in those trucks as they took us to a city called Durres. Finally they offloaded us on the sides of the road and told us to wait there until the rest of the refugees arrived. The trucks kept bringing more and more people all day long and the next day. They offloaded them all along the coast in and around the swamp. The place was a sea of people. The grounds all around us were a garbage dump and had an awful stench. This was where the coastal waves brought and dumped the garbage from the sea. There were thousands of people packed together standing person to person on the bare ground near the smelly swamp. And we constantly asked ourselves, ‘Where will they take us?’

More and more people continued to arrive some transported on trucks, some on foot. It seemed like the entire country was gathered here in this bare, swampy meadow by the sea, overgrown with thorns and with tall sharp barbs and smelling rotten. It seemed that there was no end to the day, to the night and to the cold winds that carried cold air and droplets of brine from the sea. The sea was active, thundering day and night with its high waves beating the shore. I don’t know which day it was when they arrived with their notepads, calling us each by name and placing us one behind another in a line.

They asked us for our names and, along with our places of birth, registered us in their notebooks again. They asked us many times for our names and places of birth and many times they wrote them down in their notebooks and not just our names and places of birth but also how many sheep and goats, horses, calves, oxen, cows, chickens, blankets, woollen blankets, socks, sweaters, chairs, spoons, knives and forks we had given to

the struggle. How many days we had spent digging trenches and building bunkers, carrying rocks and logs uphill, carrying wounded, how many of our children big and small they had taken, how many were killed and wounded and how many were crippled was also written down in their notebooks. They had all that information in their notebooks. Everything that we had given them they wrote in their notebooks. What they had not written in those notebooks was the amount of pain we had endured and the tears we had shed in our agony; nobody had written that down because nobody wanted to know about it. And so, lacking in those notebooks was our pain, our tears, our loneliness, our waiting for our children to come back ... and for us to go home again...

After being registered we picked up our bags with our last meagre possessions and, bent over from the weight, we left on foot. We walked very slowly keeping pace with the old and sick people who could not walk fast. We did not have far to go. We soon passed through a large iron gate and entered a huge courtyard. We were astonished by the size of the vehicle we saw at the end of the courtyard. It was huge... Those who had been on such a vehicle before said it was a ship. It was huge and black and they told us to go towards it and climb up those narrow ladders hanging from it.

Those who could walk went up the narrow and unsteady ladders fearing they would fall and be consumed by the black water that boiled beneath them. Those who were sick and old and could not navigate the unsteady ladders were put inside big baskets and hoisted up by the chains and ropes that hung from them. People were crying and yelling, afraid of what was going to happen to them. Some whispered that they feared they would be thrown into the sea...

Past the stairs at the top of the ship we were greeted by young women, dressed in white coats, who took us by the arm and escorted us down another set of stairs. Inside the ship they put us in large granaries, that we later came to call 'barns', with many rows of beds. The barns were warm and we were very tired and cold so we had no problem lying down and resting on the beds. All the doors or lids above the barns were closed but it was not dark, they turned lights on inside. We could feel the ship rock gently, that's when some men who had been on ships before said that the ship was moving.

After a while the women wearing white handed out plates and spoons and later brought baskets full of white bread and pots filled with sweet smelling stew. They filled our plates to the top and gave us plenty of bread and said we could have more if we wanted. Then came the doctors who examined us from head to toe. Patients were separated. They also separated the women with small babies and small children. Then the women in white began to spray us with a white powder. They said the dust would kill both the lice and their eggs.

The women dressed in white were good to us during the trip. They fed us well and looked after us and when they spoke to us we could understand some of their words. We were so surprised that we figured they were ‘our’ (Macedonian) people pretending to be different people. So I asked one, ‘Dear girl, let me ask you something, are you one of ours?’ ‘Yes, I am one of yours,’ she replied. So then I thought to myself, look at her pretending and to check if she was pretending I pointed to the mouth with my finger and she said, ‘Mouth, nose, eye, head, teeth, leg, foot, knee...’ ‘She is pretending I am sure she is pretending,’ I said to the other women. Then I pointed at my tongue and she said, ‘Tongue.’ I again said to the women ‘I am pretty sure she is one of ours but she is pretending...’

The next morning they opened up the lids above and told us we could get out. We got out and being afraid of falling, we held each other by the hand, by the shabby dress, or by whatever else our hands could grab. And what was there to see? Water, more water and the sky above it... A few days later we all became seasick. Our heads were aching with pain. No bread and no water, we could not even look at food without violently vomiting and having bad diarrhea. It was like that...

One day the sea all around us became covered with dense fog. It seemed like the water and the sky had all turned into milk. The fog was so dense that we couldn’t see one another. The ship roared and roared as we all sat huddled together crying and shaking with fear, thinking that our end was near and now that nothing was visible, they would toss us into the sea. Then a strong wind blew and disbursed the fog and some time later we heard the siren of another ship in the near vicinity. That’s when they told us to quickly go down into the barns and keep quiet because an English warship was approaching. They told us that if the English heard any noise they would open fire on us with their big guns.

We covered our mouths and noses with our hands and kept quiet. We were afraid. We had this great fear that any second now they would fire on us. But they didn’t... Later we found out that our captain had told the English captain that he was carrying tourists... Were there any dead? Yes, many of the old people that could not endure the hardships of the trip died. Their bodies were wrapped in blankets and they were tossed in the sea. That was it, no ceremony, no prayer, no nothing. All we heard was the splash. There was a person and then there was no person. I wondered what would happen to the souls of those people. Would they aimlessly whirl around the water? Most often they tossed the dead bodies overboard at night so that we didn’t see them...

Were there many sick? Yes there were. The sick were looked after by the doctors and nurses. Did I leave anything in Prenies? A few days before they took us from Prenies, my husband died. He was burdened for months and unable to get up. His back was full of sores and he was rotting. The doctor saw him a couple of times and said that his liver was failing and

there was nothing that he could do. He died during the night and was buried in the dark in a shallow grave in the cemetery on top of the hill. The ground was stony and it was difficult to dig a deep hole. There was no priest at the funeral. We had a priest but the Communists had shaven him. They were cruel and they did cruel things. I went to the cemetery and lit pine sticks for nine days in a row, to give him and the others some light. We had no candles.

The pine sticks smouldered over my husband's grave and over the other graves giving them some light until the sticks burned out. God bless his soul, I left him there under the hill and who knows whether there will ever be someone to light a candle for him... and will he and those beside him remain in darkness for centuries? Perhaps a traveller will someday find his or her way to the Prenies cemetery and will light a candle. My husband will lie there and, God willing, if I survive, I will go to visit him. I will light proper candles for him and for all of them... And who and where will they light candles for those who were tossed overboard, off the ship and into the sea?

We spent twelve days and nights in the water traveling in the sea until we arrived in a big city with many ships and what seemed to us like very bright lights. Where was all this brightness coming from, we wondered? Then we overheard people saying that we had arrived in Poland, but where was Poland, was it near our homeland? We got off the ship down steep stairs one behind the other. The sick, the old and the women with babies were lowered to the ground in baskets. Then they told us to go to the other side and board a train waiting for us... When we walked inside the cars we found many people crying. A woman was running around like crazy from the train to the ship and back yelling at the top of her lungs crying, begging, looking for her baby that was missing. 'Please people my little girl is missing, please help me find her, my child is missing, my little girl is missing...' she kept yelling.

Other women, mothers, also began to cry repeating that a child was missing and could not be found... (The child was later found. For those who are interested to learn more about this episode and about the fate of the girl as an adult please read the news article by Ivan Andonov printed in Nova Makedonija in 1973 and in Vecher.) Unfortunately for the poor mother and for all of us, the train left without the little girl. The little girl's mother and father were crushed and broken hearted. The train left and travelled all day along a never ending long flat plain. There were no mountains, not even a hill, the land was flat like a pan everywhere with sown fields and forests to the left and to the right of the train tracks... The only rough terrain we saw was in the small town where the Poles moved us but there were no mountains, not even sizable hills. I do not know why, but I got a lump in my throat and my chest became tight. I became grief

stricken missing my village and those damn desolate and bloody mountains that I had left behind...

After they cleaned us up with hot water and soap, boiled and washed our dirty clothes, dressed us in warm clothing, fed us well and housed us in warm and clean houses, we began to take inventory of ourselves and to ask about our living and about our dead. We began to take inventory of the maimed and crippled and of those lost. We gathered together and began to mourn and honour our departed. We began to come to the realization that we were exiled from our homes, villages and homeland and we were now living, as some would say, in the houses of the Germans who used to live here but were driven out.

Even though a lot of time had passed, three years and forty-nine days, we continued to practice our own customs as we had practiced them at home. We quickly weaved baskets and placed boiled wheat, bread and a bit of fruit in them and went from house to house, from person to person to dispense some for the souls of those lost. Again and again we gathered in these strange and abandoned houses to mourn the dead and the living and our own fate. We had no priest to perform ceremonies and the churches and cemeteries around us were all Catholic..." concluded Stoina. Lena now took the opportunity to tell her story:

"Our disarmed fighters were also taken to the Port of Durres where they waited for a Russian transport ship to take them. We were lined up in front of the unsteady narrow ladders military style, in one great big column organized in battalions, brigades and platoons and climbed on board the ship. We were then taken down into the ship's bowels, packed together and told to keep silent. There were many levels. On top and below us were nailed boards creating several levels in a single holding tank. They kept loading us and packing us all night. We took our place inside the ship and kept silent, we did not even ask where they were taking us. We were soldiers, right? Soldiers are trained to keep quiet, obey orders and not ask questions. We thought that they would take us somewhere and then give us our weapons the same way they had given us our weapons at the approaches to Gramos after our withdrawal from Vicho. Our ship called 'Michurin', which had its name written in the Cyrillic alphabet, suddenly moved and began to leave the coast. In the distance we could see the road and the trucks that had brought us here and as we moved away into the distance we could hear the trucks blowing their horns. The sound of truck horns became one with the ship's sirens...

We later learned that the drivers had synchronized blowing their horns as the ship sailed out in order to say 'goodbye' to us. We were only allowed to come out of the 'barns' and go on deck at night. It was good to be out, to breathe clear air and watch the stars and the moon. The stars were not as large as we were used to them over our mountains. We were told that at the sound of the ship's sirens blowing three times we were to

quickly return to the barns and keep silent. On the left side of the ship we could see land with barely visible trembling lights in the distance. Someone said that the land beyond the coast was Greece so many of us thought that they were going to offload us somewhere, arm us and send us into battle to bring them new victories. But the ship kept going and never stopped and we continued to look for lights from both sides of the ship. We had a sailor among us who was able to tell the direction we were going by watching the stars.

We were going north he used to say, after passing by several islands one after another as we approached Constantinople. At this point we were locked in the barns and forbidden from venturing out or talking because Turkish ships were sailing beside our ship. We were sailing but we had no idea where we were going. Others knew and assumed we knew. A seaman said we had entered the Marmara Sea but none of us knew what that was, never mind where it was. All we knew were our mountains; that's all we knew. Then the seaman said that we were entering the Black Sea. That's when they allowed us to come out of the barns in the morning.

From time to time our ship roared its siren greeting other ships passing by flying red flags with the star, hammer and sickle. We knew they were Soviet ships. Finally we arrived in Odessa where they offloaded us and loaded us onto train cars. By now we knew that we were far away from our homeland and when the train pulled out, we realized that we were going even further. The train ride was long, very long; we could not have imagined that there could be such a great wide desert with no end. But it had an end; everything has an end, but what kind of end? They offloaded us at the end of the station. The sign read 'Tashkent', it was written in Cyrillic letters. But where was Tashkent? Was it near to or far from our homeland?

We were moved into barracks just outside of Tashkent. The higher-ups were given numbers and by those numbers the barracks became known as towns. There were the first, second, tenth, twelfth and so on town. They were called towns not because they were towns but because they were camps. Yes they were camps... This is where they had held the Japanese captives who they had released earlier in the year... or maybe earlier than that. Now they put us there in their place, the fighters who had fought against Anglo-American imperialism. The fighters who had fought for freedom and democracy were now housed in the barracks where they had held Japanese prisoners. Well, that was life. You never knew when you were up and when you were down.

When we arrived they bathed us and gave us clean underwear on top of which we wore our old army clothes. Every day we were soldiers but we were clean and fed. We were present and accounted for every morning after which we did gymnastics and after that we were sent to the military mess hall, following the same schedule as we were used to before, along

with the same commanders and political commissars. After some time they freed us from our military uniforms and allowed us to dress in civilian clothing. We felt uncomfortable and strange suddenly being dressed in civilian clothing without our military shoes, pants, shirts, hats and without orders and commanders. At the same time we were happy, very happy to be still alive... Yes...

What about the lice? We left most of the lice in Albania. They kept cleaning us in Bureli for an entire month until we were almost free from lice. It was not easy to get rid of all the lice so we brought some here to Tashkent. Lice with two legs and with informing and denouncing voices.

Did we work? Yes we did... We did all sorts of jobs that required a shovel or a pickaxe. Not that we were educated or anything, so that they could give us office work. We mostly worked in construction. We carried bricks, concrete, hardwood, iron bars, etc., all on our shoulders. From villagers to soldiers we now became a construction force. And here in Tashkent, our leaders, those from the political side, shed new slogans upon us: 'We will defeat imperialism by building socialism!'... and that's how they moulded our minds in the same manner as we kneaded dough... Do you know how dough is kneaded?

In Tashkent we built our nests, created our families and kept our language, rituals, songs and dances alive. For many, Tashkent was part of our youth which we left in the factories of distant Uzbekistan, part of our freedom. For some Tashkent was the last station in life. Many waited for their wives and children to come from other countries. The ones that waited the most were the ones who had wives and children in Yugoslavia. These people were not even allowed to correspond with their families until later in the fifties after Stalin died. When Khrushchev came into power he declared war on Stalinism. In Poland the workers caused an insurrection and a revolution was started in Hungary. And we in Tashkent rebelled against one another. Tito and Khrushchev made peace with each other and all sins were forgiven. Even after the great damage that was done to us!

Those responsible for the damage were identified but the only punishment they received was their expulsion from the Party... Then, in those days, being removed from the Party was a serious punishment. It meant that you were locked out of everything, you were excluded from everything and you remained alone and nothing existed for you and all around you. The responsible were named by name at the plenums and congresses and that's when we realized and understood that we were ruined, dispersed, let down. We were a people without a crumb of a chance of repatriation. We had become a people without roots and without veins, a homeless people. The thieves had robbed us and the liars had led us astray. We had become a displaced people... And to think that in the past these very same people had thought of themselves as the brightest heads, they held that the highest wisdom lay in the deepest kindness. Not only did they

not have any wisdom but they also had no kindness whatsoever. They only sowed and planted evil...

All those who had passed through the vice of time before and after the defeat, with my greatest desire I want to leave them with their thoughts, memories and pains that are not only part of them, but part of their life. But I just can't free myself from the questions that constantly haunt me: 'Who is to blame?' For every crime there is always a perpetrator. Who is the perpetrator of this crime? Has this crime expired? Is there anyone who feels remorse? And until when will they lead our people astray, until when will they ill shape their fate and destiny? Until when will they make our people's misfortune their fortune? And how long will they divide us?...

You ask me about those in the NOF leadership? They were arrested and taken away from us. Like they say, they were 'isolated' from us. Moscow condemned them and jailed them in the camps in Siberia. Zahariadis had taken a hand against Macedonian organizations before but this time he used the opportunity to completely crush them along with the Macedonian alphabet and the Macedonian language. He alleged that they, our language and alphabet, were Tito's creations. He found a semi-literate person, who I believe was from Bapchor, who attempted to create a new patchwork Macedonian language of largely Bulgarian and some Russian words.

In the southeast of Poland, in a vacant Ukrainian village called Kroshchenko, they established a kolkhoz and called it 'Nov Zhivot' (New Life) and there they settled two or three thousand Macedonians and Greeks. They turned the Ukrainian Orthodox Church into a cinema and named it 'Partizan' which was famous not so much for showing Soviet war movies, but more for gathering all of Zahariadis's Eastern European worshipers and forming the 'People's Liberation and Revolutionary Organization of the Slavo-Macedonians' called 'ILINDEN.' One of the main goals of this Organization was to work against Tito and Kolishevski's clique and against the Association of Aegean Macedonians in Skopje, which worked against Zahariadis's clique. Now as I tell you about this, a bug buzzes near my ear:

What was going on in the minds of those migrants and displaced people who obviously were the same people with the same roots? (Meaning what was going on between the Macedonians from Greece living inside Yugoslavia and those living in other communist countries?)

On one side we had the Aegeans and on the other the Slavo-Macedonians. Were they called that because someone did not want them to be Macedonians? Then and now, after more than half a century had passed, there are still many unanswered questions.

Why did the Macedonian fighters not come to the rescue of the twelve NOF and AFZH leaders? Why did they not speak in their defence? Surely there were many Macedonian fighters and, in terms of strength, they had

the upper hand. Why did they not oppose the charges the Greeks levelled against them? Why? Whom did they believe more, the Greeks or their own people? Why did no one stand in their defence in Bureli when Zahariadis and his cohorts pushed them onto the stage and one by one named them traitors and spies, each by name? Why not then and why not afterwards, while they were in the Siberian camps, did no one say a word in their defence and no one asked whether they were dead or alive? And why after they were released from the camps did no one ask where and how they had spent their lives?

Now that they had been released from prison and rehabilitated as they say, why did none of the twelve go and speak with the former fighters and the people, whom they had gathered and sent into battle, telling them that not a single Macedonian man or woman should be left out from the battle lines? Why did neither side take the initiative to air out their differences and cleanse their souls and say whatever happened, happened; let us put the past behind us? Why did the battle continue in Tashkent, Macedonians fighting against Macedonians? Did no one in Tashkent ever stop for a moment and wonder why the twelve were discharged from the Siberian prisons? And on the other hand, did none of the so-called leaders find the courage to appear before the ex-fighters, now workers in the Soviet Union Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Poland and say something to console them? Why did they allow Zahariadis to manipulate them all? Why did the twelve return to Skopje before everyone else did? If they were good leaders they should have returned last!

The twelve settled themselves in Alma Ata, capital of Kazakhstan and all the time they looked for opportunities to return to Skopje. They were the first to immigrate to Skopje where they were awarded high positions in the state. Lazo (Kolishevski) did not forget them and neither did Belgrade and they in turn did not forget Lazo or Belgrade. They were back with old friends who remembered and did not forget them. That's exactly how it was.

Here in Skopje the opponents clashed again one calling the other defector and the other calling the first traitor, thus invigorating their mutual hatred. They appointed themselves defenders of the Aegeans and began pointing fingers at each other without accepting any responsibility or feeling any remorse for their involvement in what had happened to our people. Lazo personally had to keep a careful balance between the two parties making sure that their mutual dislike did not turn into a nightmare.

Who had created this strife and why? Both parties attracted supporters with promises of better jobs, finding an apartment faster, better choice of residence etc. Anyone refusing to join one party or the other found themselves alone on the sidelines... Neither side could find common ground to stand on at the national table until judgment day when their division became permanent. Instead of working for the good of the

thousands of destitute people they both chose the path of destruction and continued to throw personal insults at each other. Each group believed that they were going 'in the right direction' and they constantly quarrelled without even the slightest gesture of reconciliation.

Until judgment day they vilified and spat at each other from the distance and never reached out and extended a hand... Their loathing for each other was deep seated and festered in their thoughts and their behaviour boiled with strife, hatred, intolerance and disunity. Each in their own way shared some truth but no one wanted to openly share the 'entire real truth'... And now that we are on the subject of 'Aegeans' I don't want to forget this. This is what they called themselves at first when they were still soft. I am thinking of those who became Yugoslavs. So that they could be distinguished from the others they decided to call themselves 'Aegeans', not Macedonians from that part of Macedonia, but only 'Aegeans.'

Was it by their own will and conviction, or by necessity that they requested from the central and local governments to register the 'Association of Aegeans' and to publish the newspaper 'Glas na Egeitsite' (Voice of the Aegeans)? They gathered in the club for the 'Aegeans' and cared for the 'Aegeans' located in villages around Skopje, Bitola and Kumanovo, even for those located in Vojvodina. Then one day Paul, the Greek king, decided to take a train to Belgrade through Skopje. Since conditions were perfect, Paul decided to visit friendly Yugoslavia, the famous Marshal, his friend, but he wanted no part of the 'Aegeans', their newspaper, or their clubs and societies. He wanted them all gone.

So while the train rumbled from Gevgelia to Belgrade and from Belgrade back to Gevgelia the 'Aegeans' were put in prison, some in Idrizovo, others in Matka and yet others in Solunska Glava further away from Skopje. Those who were not imprisoned and who remained in the villages around Skopje were ordered to stay home and sit still until the train with their precious guest and friend King Paul completed his tour. Was this done because this is what King Paul wanted or were the authorities fed up with the 'Aegeans' and wanted to teach them a lesson? Perhaps a bit of both? What do you think?

And Lazo, a clever man, held the balance by flattering both sides. For him neither side was more important or less important. I believe the hardest thing for him was to watch the 'Aegeans' continue to divide themselves in spite of the damage they were doing to their Aegean brothers and sisters. That's how it was. And look what happened next. Both sides quickly became 'patrons' to the 'Aegeans' who came from the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Hungary. The day they arrived and the next day they were put in prison. They spent their time in prison instead of relaxing from their long trip. They were put in prison so

that the authorities in Yugoslavia could question them and rout out the 'spies' and 'agents' among them.

When we were in these countries they intimidated us looking for Yugoslav spies amongst us. There they wanted to rout out Tito's spies. Then when we arrived in Yugoslavia they put us in prison looking to rout out the Soviet spies among us. Did they find any spies? No, but they certainly found informers, many informers; a proliferation of them. There were informers in the popular democratic countries and there were informers here in the prison. When I was questioned by the investigator, I said: 'Well, comrade, the ones who criticized and badmouthed Tito and Kolishevski the most, you welcomed with open arms and you let them in first...' And do you know what he said to me? He said: 'It is true that they yelled against them there but they are yelling for them here. You, on the other hand, kept quiet there and you are going to keep quiet here..., but we are questioning you anyway to uncover the agents amongst you.'

Some of the higher-ups amongst us were employed by UDBA (State Security Bureau), perhaps because of their experience or because of their beliefs; they thought that everyone who came to Yugoslavia was an agent. Whether they themselves believed that or they were told to believe it, I don't know. In the prison in Idrizovo more new arrivals were telling the investigator: 'Well comrade, the ones who criticized Yugoslavia and swore at Tito the most, you welcomed with open arms first...' And he said: 'It is true that they swore and yelled against him there but they are yelling for him here. You kept your mouth shut there so you will keep your mouth shut here...' After hearing that again, I became a permanent mute...!

That's what he said to me so I gathered that every government all the time and everywhere has its own reasons for doing what it is doing... That's how it was... And we, crippled, some with one leg, some with one arm, many with two and three huge scars on our bodies from wounds received during the Greek Civil War, went with one side and with the other so that they would sign our statement proving that we were participants in the Second World War and in DAG and they with their signature would decide whether we got a veteran's pension or not. That's how it was... Am I lying? Let someone else prove that it was not like that..." concluded Lena.

On the Road of Time – Chapter 20

The storm has passed. We have a few that survived. On the roll call of friendship many do not... S. Esenin

V. left yesterday. D. was sent away today. We said this for those with whom we were together in the formations, in the long night marches in the rain and snow, in the trenches and bunkers, in the wet and cold underground hangers and in the battlefields. We said this for those with whom we were together for many years, with whom we swallowed the bitterness of defeat and with whom we found ourselves on foreign shores. We did not say they had departed, we did not say they had died; we simply said they had left... So if we said that they had left then there was always a chance, hope, that they would one day return...

I listened intently to a speech given by our friend from the Veterans Council. It was a very nice speech full of praise and big words. And while he was talking I couldn't help myself but think that when a man dies and disappears from this world should we always say nice words about him? How many times did we gossip about him, swear at him, inform on him and make his life miserable while he was alive? Are there no sinners amongst us and amongst those who left us? Why in the five minutes of waiting for him to be buried, to be put underground, to be covered by soil can't we say something other than that he was a good person? Then when the funeral is over and after we return to our homes we begin to unfold our memories only to find out that he was not all good and that he also had a bad side to him. What prevails? There was no goodness in N. because all his life N. was an informer. He was an informer in the battlefields, in the countries abroad and back here again. He was an informer spying on people, he was good at it and he enjoyed it. And what government can survive without informers? The informers are the pillars of the establishment.

I would say that I knew G. very well. We were sent to Gramos together and were deployed in the same platoon. He was given a German machine gun and they loaded me with a rifle; an English rifle. We charged, ran, hid, took up new positions and ate together with the same spoon from the same portions and covered ourselves with the same blanket. Yes, we did many things together. For God's sake, does a man need to die for his close ones to uncover and reveal his character and the emptiness that remains? A few days ago I was back at the cemetery. The funeral passed quietly, without much talking, without crying and almost in silence. Although cursed, this person was one of us. We kind of tossed a handful of soil on the coffin in a hurry and we left even before the coffin was lowered into the ground.

He did not come to the last meeting of the municipal board, even though he was always among the first to be there. On his way to the club

he felt a pressing pain on the left side of his chest. He bent over looking for something to lean on but as he slowly bent down he slumped over and fell onto the frozen pavement. Passers by took him inside the closest door and put an urgent call in for an ambulance. Death was instant. He was gone. We sent him away with the blessing of many big words. No word was said about his sins, not a single word. So he went underground clean. Clean as a crystal. And before what did we not say? And everything we said was bad!

Now we often meet at the square in front of the chapel. Look how things have turned out. A long time ago it was the village church bell that announced the death of a person. It did not matter whether the person was a relative, a friend, or an acquaintance. Now the telephone rings and you get the bad news through the receiver. Or you open the newspaper and you see a picture of a relative, a friend... And I tell you we often gather together at the chapel square and every time we gather, there are less and less of us. At one time we were healthy looking, standing erect and proud. Now we are bent over, we have grey hair, we are bald, shaking and leaning on a crutch. We greet each other and then we go off to our own groups. It now has become a custom for us to gather together here at the chapel and go off in groups.

And on the road to our last resting place, there too, we stand in groups. But no... those are not groups. Those are the remnants of the lines of companies, battalions, brigades. Our conversations too are always about how we spent our time in Gramos, in Vicho, how we fought battles and went on marches. How we were wounded and how we lost our friends. Our conversations were about how we passed our time on the road to Tashkent and from there to here. We often talked about how we had spent time in the hospitals in Yugoslavia, Albania, Poland, Romania, Hungary and Germany. We also talked about where there were good places to have our dentures adjusted, the time we spent in sanatoriums and infirmaries in those countries, how we worked there and what we did to earn our living... This is how we unwound the spool of our destiny from youth to old age.

Then you heard someone raise their voice and talk about another person 'leaving' their company, their battalion, their brigade. In those days, up there in the mountains we did not speak the words 'killed' or 'was killed', we said he or she 'fell heroically'... If we said they 'fell' then there was always the hope that they would 'stand up' again... Yes... In those days we defied death with our vast and boundless faith in victory. We truly believed that we were winning and could not even imagine that we might be beaten, even though we were losing battle after battle with great losses. We were young and confident.

Were we coaxed into believing? For sure! Soldiering was an exercise in how to kill and on how not to be killed. We grew up practicing the art. Each burial in the mountains began and ended with a call to victory and

the person being buried was not perceived as being dead but as missing from the line, from the trench, from the bunker, from the hanger, from the food line standing in front of the cauldron. And now standing in front of the chapel waiting for them to carry the coffin, we are reminded of those stormy times. Now every funeral, I would say every time a friend goes, he or she summons us here to send them away but the 'sending' is not just 'sending' it is a reminder and an awakening of many memories and considerations.

In those memories there are many dark and gloomy spots. The days and nights seemed to get darker, gloomier and more painful. Anxiously we gathered together in front of the chapel and we stood in groups of 102, 103, 105, 107, 18 and 14 Brigade and all the other units. The darkness appears more often now like a shadow of light that lasts. It cannot be seen but it is here and it can be felt. And again you will hear 'here, another one of us from 102, or 103 or 105 or 107 or 18 or 14 Brigade has left us.' Slowly they are all going. The telephone rings again and the receiver whispers to you, 'P. has left us.' And you reply, 'I will see you at the chapel.'

One by one we go and less and less of us grandfathers to Marian, Angelina, Maria, Zhaklina and Johnny remain here. And those who have left have taken with them the names of their grandfathers and grandmothers. Zhaklina, Maria and Marina, Valentina and Marian and Johnny and Victor will cry a little... Now there are less grandchildren named Kire, Krste, Traianka, Petranka, Traiche, Velika, Sevda, Florinka, Tsveta, Dushanka...

We come back frowning. If the weather is nice and it is not raining and it is not winter, we sit on benches in front of buildings and talk. And in our discussions we return to our youth, which we left in the Greek Civil War and in those distant countries. We bring back the youth of an entire crippled generation robbed of its hopes and aspirations and as we speak we feel bitterness in our throats with every word that comes out. All around us our grandchildren run and play, some fight, some cry and others laugh. Then after a few days or so another spot on the bench becomes empty. The telephones become active again and the next day we are summoned to the chapel. Here again those of us who are still left from 102, 103, 105, 107, 18, 14 Brigade... will approach someone and say, 'One more went from our company.' And then will ask, 'How is so and so?'

Every time we go to the chapel we count each other and every meeting is the last meeting for someone. This will be the last time we see them. This seems to be very similar to our returning from combat when we were counted and accounted for. This many dead, this many wounded and this many remaining in the line. And as it was then so it is now, there are less and less in the line with every count. Slowly, silently, quietly, we become fewer and fewer, as we are leaving to go with our friends...

After the coffin was loaded in the hearse we silently followed behind. Along the way to the final resting place the squeaking of the brakes became louder. Some had to stop to catch their breath while others held hands to give those who were tired some support. And while this was going on, new conversations were started; conversations about our youth and about our stormy past. Clap, clap, clap, clap, Pavle's prosthesis was heard clapping. Clap, clap, clap, clap, Lina's prosthesis was heard clapping and squeaking. And while this was going on we revisited our past through our memories which howled and set off storms in our heads and fire in our chests.

Things went dark before our eyes. This was a day of mourning and there was no good light to cheer us, we were dragged into the gloom. Bent, twisted, sickly, we marched along behind our friend from 102, 103, 105, 107, 18, 14 Brigade.... He, on the other hand, lay there straight but somewhat shrunken. None of us at that moment thought that tomorrow or perhaps the day after we too would be sent this way and maybe this quiet walk behind the hearse covered with flowers would be our last march of many marches.

Quietly, slowly, carefully we limped along; seeming like each person was in formation taking part in one of those long night marches in the rain, snow and blizzard. That is where our thoughts were... in the long marches over the mountains that led to nowhere. Now we are not in formation but we take steps like we were... And quietly someone will ask, 'Do you remember?' 'I remember,' will echo another quiet whisper... And as such we take steps knowing that nothing has been forgotten...

Like a flash the days are strung and we return to our memories of the battlefields and of the foreign shores, we return to our existence there and here, in our yesterday and today and we are reminded of the question, 'Whose picture will appear in tomorrow's newspapers and whose name will we hear on the receiver of the telephone?...'

Did you say my voice is shaking? It is shaking not because it is weak, quiet and barely audible but because it is strong, mature and smarter. My voice must be and should be more understanding. Do I go to the cemetery? Yes, I do go. And while I am there I think of and remember Kopanche, Haro, Buhetsi, Orleto, Polenata, Lisets, Baro, Iamata, Chuka, Charno and every other place where the graves of our fallen are indistinguishable from one another. Now after all these years, who will be able to find those places? If you want to find them you will need to go to those mountains. Our fallen were buried in shallow graves covered with a little earth and mostly branches.

They were buried without lighting a candle, without a cross on the grave and without their name engraved in stone. But their names are remembered and will live on in the memories and in the pain of their relatives. Their names have been written down in the notebooks which

now rest on the archive shelves collecting dust every day. Everyone there is the same. And here, in this cemetery they are different. Each marble slab whiter than white, blacker than black, thicker than thick, brighter than bright that has a wreath larger than large and bouquets of flowers more beautiful than beautiful, is distinguishable from the other plain concrete slabs. But the soil and the worms are the same...

I go there only sometimes because my health is not that good. Not as often as I want to because of the time, the years ... but when I do go to the cemetery I buy candles and inexpensive flowers, with part of my pension, and I sit beside the graves of my friends from the detachment and we have conversations. We talk about today and about yesterday but mostly about yesterday. I ask them, 'Do you remember the terrible snow storm we had to endure? Do you remember having to stand in a long row, one behind another, stepping on the snow under a shining full moon? Do you remember the time when we heard a loud rumble above us and a pile of snow the size of a cloud descended down on us?' We ran as fast as we could and when we came back into our formation six of us were missing. We left them buried under the snow and we continued our march. We marched all night...

I interrupted our conversation, then I kept silent for a while and in the silence I got my answer. Then I asked what is there? Well, there is a bit of everything; pain, strength, joy, happiness and sadness... And again I went back to asking the same kind of questions, 'Do you remember?' Yes, we need to remember, we need to remember because in our memories we are those people who we used to be... If we don't remember it means we never were... please write that down, that we were as we were... just don't write that we were faint-hearted because we were never faint-hearted. Write down that we were very loyal and very deceived, but always persistent and strong... That's what you should write down...

We conversed about our youth and in those conversations we found a couple of our people who had lost their lives for nothing. They paid with their lives for their flirting, laughing and winking at each other because it was prohibited for a boy to want a girl and for the girl to like the boy back. They were tried in a church, a trial that lasted all night and in early dawn the next day the two were taken outside of the village and shot to death. They were murdered because of their love, because they were in love. They murdered the love so that our morale would be stronger! And is there anything stronger than love? Do you remember, I said to them, when we passed by the place where they were shot? Do you remember how some of us stopped, collected flowers and put them at the place of their death? For whom were those flowers, for the dead people or for their love?

Silently and secretly we defended our love from a bullet. Do you remember, I asked, how the lady from the public house in Kostur was killed? Those from there sent her here to our unit to inform on our boys, to

say that they liked her, wanted her and made suggestions to that effect. Our people from command summoned some of us to night trials and sentenced us to death because of her. But the lady could not endure the hunger and cold being out there with our unit so one day she split and hit the road. We grabbed her while she was escaping and after that she confessed to everything. I personally had to unload an entire clip of cartridges before the bitch was dead.

The next day you had to shoot a young man convicted of stealing a chunk of bread. Don't deny it, I said to him, you did what you had to do, those were the orders. We were ordered not to express love and not to steal because we were the people's army, born out of the people. That's what they told us. And as a people's army we were prohibited from taking bread from the peasants and as such we endured much hunger. Do you remember, I said, the spring of 1848, when the grass was green and the trees were budding, how we ate grass and buds? I waited for an answer but all I got was silence... That's how it was.

I tell you, I rarely go to the cemetery now because of the pain in my legs and hips. But in spite of my pain I still go there visiting my friends and spending time talking to them, asking them about the past and telling them about the present. After that I tell them that yesterday we brought so and so here. So and so are in the hospital. So and so rarely get out of bed and that everyone else is okay, at least for now.

Do we get together? Yes we get together for our grandchildren's birthdays and after the men bring the presents, they leave and go to cafés where they talk politics until the next morning. They talk about their experiences in the mountains, constantly looking for the culprits who made them lose their arm, leg, gave them large scars, devastated their villages, destroyed their houses and crippled and killed their friends. They talked about their beliefs, the false promises they were made and the slippery slopes they were put on... Then they came back frowning and angry, swearing and cursing, praising and making accusations about who was worthy and who was worthless. I told them about many things, things that they already knew, but some couldn't seem to see these things or hear what I was telling them.

And as such all the commanders left. Those from our side (Macedonians) with lower ranks are still here and those of higher ranks, who had never been wounded in battle, left for home and went back to Greece. They established themselves well there; the state against which they fought did not prosecute them. It accepted them as soldiers and recognized their ranks by only a single rank lower, even though they were not educated in military affairs. Some even published books about their experiences in the Greek Civil War. In those books they spat at each another and slandered one another claiming everyone was wrong except for them and if the others had done the same as they did, victory would

have been ours. When they commanded us, if anyone had said that they were idiots and worthless, I would have shot them between the eyes. We trusted them. We trusted the Party and we trusted our leader (Zahariadis) the most.

The Party abandoned us. The Chief said that we did not exist. Parliament voted declaring that in order for us to return to our homes we could not be who we were. And what could we be? We could only be what they wanted us to be. Our leader hung himself in Siberia and his dead body was returned to Athens. Before that, someone appointed by Todor Zhivkov signed an agreement to move us Macedonians to Bulgaria. Some went to Bulgaria but were quickly disappointed. They sent us letters explaining the situation. If we went to Bulgaria we would be dispersed throughout Bulgaria. We would be asked to sign a statement declaring that we were Bulgarian. Those who would not sign such statements would find it difficult to get an apartment and a job that suited their profession and education.

We told them not to go, to wait until the situation was sorted out and we then would move to the Republic of Macedonia. We were sure we would find difficulties there too but there no one was going to make us not be Macedonians. After every war people return home. Our war ended sixty years ago and we still we have not returned. Every people, even those exiled and kicked out of their homeland, are eventually allowed to return home. Home is where they crave to be, where they long to be, where they belong. But not our people, year after year they gathered, counted their numbers, waited, hoped and wished, healed their wounds, nursed their pains, looked at old photographs, thought, dreamed and talked about home but that was all they could do. The only choice left for them was to start life all over and build on the cracks of the old foundations...

Only we the Macedonians did not go home after that war... they took our homes, they took our fields and meadows, they took our vineyards and our gardens... and they gave them to the foreign settlers and colonists... Those were crazy, foolish and unreasonable times. Those were times when some people profited from the pain of others. Those were times when some people made soft beds for themselves from the difficulties, horrors, devastation and breakdown of others. Those were times when some people made great gains from the uprooting of others... That's how it was and that's how it should be remembered...

It was our time, our pain, our suffering, our belief, our defeat ... Yes, ours, difficult, terrible defeat that destroyed us, that crushed us, that eradicated us, that exiled us... Who can and how can this mindlessness be judged? What can save you from this blind recklessness, from a bowed head before others, which led its own nation to its eradication? As for the defeat, however difficult, we need to talk about it and remember everything... At least for the sake of remembering...

Did the telephone just ring? Yes. The person on the other side said that J. from 105 Brigade had left us. I told him I would be in front of the chapel at 12 noon tomorrow.

On the Road of Time – Afterward

On our return to Macedonia we unavoidably took the road that led us through Perenias and in our notes we made mention that the present Prenies is not the same Prenies from sixty years ago; a place of pain and tears, a place of daily existence, a place of anticipation and hopelessness...

The new Prenies, or Perenias as the locals call it, has grown into a small, modern, living and bustling city. It has a way station for hundreds of trucks, buses and passenger cars, a place where passengers can stop and rest, even for a short break... Today's Prenies is not the old mouldy Italian military barracks, warehouses and horse stables. Today's Prenies is a modern town with a meshwork of paved streets, new residential buildings, newly built private houses, running water and sewers, restaurants and cafés, taverns, banks, a post office, a clinic, a pharmacy and a railway station. Prenies is no longer on appendix attached to the surrounding periphery, it is a wide open gate, a well-lit conduit for trucks, buses and passenger cars to pass through, day and night. It is an open artery that leads to the rest of the world.

The life that is now lived in Albania, day and night flows through Prenies in both directions from Kapeshtitsa, Bilista, Korcha, Pogradets, Elbasan, Durres, Tirana and Sukt. No one runs out to meet the trucks and no one waits at the side of the road any more. There is no crying, no wailing, no cursing and no swearing. The barracks are gone and all that remains of the old place are the warehouses and stables all empty, gaping and worn down by the passing of time. Beside them there are new houses and new people. The streets are filled with children and laughter...

Young men spend their time in cafés or wait for the day when they can go to work abroad. Among them are also those who have just returned from abroad and are here for a visit and to dream new dreams of how they are going to spend their earnings from abroad. At the exit on the way towards Elbasan there is a chromium factory. It is silent now, it has been closed down. So the chromium in the surrounding mountains will have to wait.

Life through Prenies flows non-stop like a river and no one here, in this new life, coming and going on the same road, knows about the terrible fate that befell our people. No one seems to know about the anguish and the pain, the cries and the tears, the suffering and the horrors and the hopelessness our people (Macedonians) experienced here. And what should we call this road? Should we call it the road of pain, tears, suffering and hopelessness? The road of no return? We cannot forget our tears and human suffering from the time when we travelled along this road, from when we passed by the dark of darkness. Our travel on the dark side, on the road of no return, was very difficult and full of tears, tears of suffering

and of lost hope... So what is there left for us and for the future generations?

My only wish is to leave you with the message that what happened on those roads must never be forgotten, must never be erased from our memories...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Petre Nakovski, a novelist and translator, was born on July 17, 1937 in the village Krchishta, Kostur Region, Aegean (Greek occupied) Macedonia.

Dr. Nakovski studied at the Pedagogical Literary Institute in Poland and at the Faculty of Philology in Skopje. He received his PhD from the Institute of Political Science at the University of Wrocław in Poland. He worked as a journalist for the newspapers “Večer” and “Nova Makedonija”. He also worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was the first Ambassador of the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of Poland.

He has been a member of the Macedonian Writer’s Association (MWA) since 1989.

Dr. Nakovski has authored numerous articles published in Macedonian periodicals as well as a number of books including the books “Postela za Chemernite” (A Bed for the Sorrowful) (novel, 1985), “Makedonski Detsa vo Polska 1948-1968” (Macedonian children in Poland 1948-1968) (doctoral thesis), “I Kamenot e zemija” (And the Stone is Soil) (novel, 1988), “Golemata Udolnitsa” (The Great Decline) (novel, 2003) and “Golemata Izmama” (The Great Lie) (novel, 2007). “Makedonskite Begalci vo Polska 1948-1975” (Macedonian Refugees in Poland 1948-1975) (selected papers 2008), “Na Pat so Vremeto” (On the Road of Time) (novel 2010).

Dr. Nakovski has translated and published over 40 literary works and many songs and stories from Polish to Macedonian written by Macedonian authors in the Polish language. Among the translations included are the drama “Tsrnila” (Darkness) by K. Casule which on 18/7/1971 was staged at the Wyspiańskiego Katowice Theatre in Poland, “Pesni od Ohrid” (Songs of Ohrid), an anthology of Macedonian contemporary poetry published by the Wydawnictwo Literackie Publishing House in Krakow in 1975, a selection of poetry entitled “Tragi na Vremeto” (Traces of Time) by Rade Siljan published by the Adam Marszałek Publishing House in Torun in 2010.

He is a recipient of the “Golden pen” and “Kiril Pejcinovic” (translation of opus) awards (awards for Polish authors). He was also awarded the Gold Medal of Merit for Polish Culture and the Gold Medal of Command.