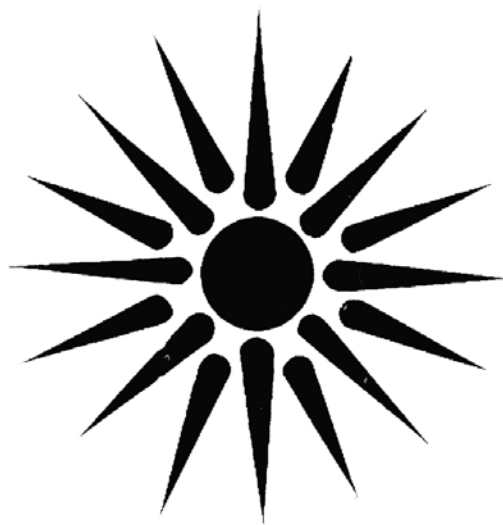


*Analysis of historical  
events in Greek  
occupied Macedonia  
Part 3*



**An interview with Risto Stefov**

Analysis of historical events in Greek occupied  
Macedonia  
An interview with Risto Stefov  
Part 3

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INTERVIEWER – In this interview I would like to ask you some questions about your family and verify some of the things your dad and uncle had said to me in their interviews.

Was your grandfather Risto involved in the Ilinden Uprising? I remember seeing a photo on someone's wall. What can you tell me about his life in the village?

RISTO – My grandfather Risto was not involved in the Ilinden Uprising because, from what my father had told me, he was not in Macedonia. He was on pechalba (migrant work) but I don't know where and for how long. He purchased a rifle and wanted to return but the borders were shut and he could not come back in time. He did come back later and brought the rifle with him and gave it to his oldest son Lazo who then used it during the German-Italian-Bulgarian occupation when he was a partisan for a brief period of time before he died in 1943.

Here is Risto's story in brief:

Risto was the second child of File and Stamenka. He was born in 1883 in the village Oshchima and died in 1951 in Zgorzelec, Poland. As a youth, Risto received no education and remained illiterate for a large part of his life. Risto's mother tongue was Macedonian but he also spoke some Turkish, then the administrative language in Macedonia (before 1912).

During his youth, Risto learned some skills which he later applied to make a living. The more prominent included house painting, bricklaying and masonry work. He was also a capable woodworker, lumberjack and carpenter.

During his adult life, Risto was a pechalbar (migrant worker) and traveled from place to place looking for work. He traveled to Prespa, Albania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Central Greece and Canada. One specific trip to Bulgaria became very important for him. Due to severe weather he was stranded where he worked and could not depart for home. During his stay, he attended school and learned the Cyrillic alphabet enabling him to read the Macedonian language. On another occasion, while working in Turkey (Anatolia), Risto lost his

Uncle Kale in a construction accident. Kale fell off the roof of the building where they were working and died.

While seeking work on long journeys the cost of travel was high. To offset some of the cost, Risto and his traveling companions begged for food while traveling from village to village.

Risto did not speak Greek and, while traveling to central Greece, depended on his first cousin Tase and other co-workers, who spoke a little Greek, to seek directions and acquire work contracts.

Risto traveled to Canada three times. He worked in tanneries, restaurants, and laid cobblestone in the streets of Toronto. On one occasion when Risto came back from Canada, an entourage of people from Oshchima came to greet him as he entered the village. There in front of him stood his wife Sofia with two young girls of the same age in her arms. She said, "You've been away so long I bet you can't recognize your own daughter". Risto, in a clever response said, "Put the girls down and the one that comes to me is my daughter." Sure enough Dafina rushed to him, proving him right.

With the money earned, in 1922 Risto built a house in Oshchima on the ruins of the Iofkova house. As payment for the plot Risto offered Bosilka Iofkova and her daughter, Sofia, free room and board for life. To expand his farmland, Risto purchased land from Tase who moved to Lerin and no longer needed the property. Risto gave some of the land to his older brother Vasil.

There is a tale told by Oshchimians about Risto's money. After returning from Canada, Risto converted his earned wealth from gold into Greek currency to purchase building materials for his house. Unfortunately, at the same time war broke out and the country's currency lost its value. Tragically, Risto lost his wealth. It has been rumoured that his wife Sofia cursed him for leaving her alone to bear the burden of looking after the children and the farm. There is also a rumour that Risto did not convert his gold to cash but instead buried it somewhere in Oshchima, never to be found. These, however, are only rumours?

For years, Risto traveled to Prespa and Albania to work as a painter, bricklayer, plasterer and, occasionally, as a carpenter. According to some of his clients, Risto was the best chimney builder in the land.

From 1920 to 1922, Risto was drafted by the Greek army and served as a border guard at the Albanian-Greek border. In 1948, during the Greek civil war, he was drafted by the Partisans to build bunkers.

In 1949 Risto, along with many other civil war refugees, left home for the last time and never returned. Accompanied by his wife Sofia and son Alexander, Risto on August 10, 1949 left for Albania. From there he was sent to Poland, where he later was reunited with his daughter Sevda. While in Poland, Risto became very ill and disabled, dependent on his wife and daughter to look after his daily needs. In 1951 he fell from a window and died. Risto's body was buried in Poland where it remains to this day.

According to those who knew him in person, Risto was a gentleman well respected by all. He was a hard worker and an honest man.

There is one peculiarity about Risto's family worth mentioning. Many Oshchimians claim that the family was continuously involved in arguments and that the children were loud and rude. These "facts", however, must be corrected and the truth be told. The children were loud, but they were not arguing or being rude. Sofia their mother, in early childhood had contracted polio which left her deaf and unable to hear normal speech. To keep her in conversations, family members had to speak loudly. Growing up under these conditions seemed normal for the children, inside or outside the home. To this day, Risto's children are still loud and the peculiarity continued with the next generation.

INTERVIEWER – What do you know about Risto's wife Sofia and her family?

RISTO – Risto was first married to Kita Popovska from Oshchima, who tragically died from tuberculosis, along with Risto's first daughter Zoia. Risto later married Sofia Badzhovska from the village Labanitsa Kostur Region.

As I mentioned in his story, Risto worked in various places during his life, and one of those places was the village Labanitsa. He was widowed when he met Sofia, who was ten years younger than him, but because she was deaf and her prospects of marriage were slim she decided to marry him. Of course in those days permission had to be obtained from Sofia's family which Risto had to seek from Sofia's father. When everything was worked out, Sofia came to live with Risto in Oshchima. Other than that, I don't know much about Sofia's family.

INTERVIEWER – How did Risto die and what was his life like in Yugoslavia?

RISTO – As I mentioned in his story my grandfather Risto died in Poland. He was never in Yugoslavia. He left his village Oshchima as a war refugee in 1949 and went on foot to Albania. From there he was sent to Poland where he died in 1951.

INTERVIEWER – Your dad Nikola was interesting, he showed me his woodwork, his library and his Che Guevara poster and we had a laugh. Was he a leftie all his life?

RISTO – My father did some woodwork and did have a library of Macedonian, Greek and Bulgarian books but he did not have a poster of Che Guevara. He may have had a small picture of Che Guevara in one of his books but not a poster. I donated all his books to the Canadian Macedonian Historical Society here in Toronto and found no such poster.

And no, my father was not a "leftie". He spoke a great deal about the communists, particularly about the Communist Party of Greece, because it had influence on the Macedonian people, but I don't believe he was a "practicing" communist. Let me put it to you this way, he was never a member of the Communist Party and had not joined any communist party organizations or practiced communism in any shape or form. He was a villager with a grade three education, a land owner and, to a very small extent, a practicing capitalist. Before he left for Canada he owned a number of land plots in Oshchima and a medium size herd of sheep. He lived a simple conservative life.

He only supported the communists during the war years and only because the Communist Party of Greece was the only party in Greece that showed any interest in the Macedonian people. And from what I have learned from my own research, its interest was not to help the Macedonian people but rather to involve them in its messy war. It promised to recognize the Macedonian people as “Macedonians” with equal rights as the Greek people, which did not happen! And since then, to this day, the CPG has insisted that Macedonians don’t exist. So, my father was not only “not a leftie” but he had no reason or incentive to be a “leftie”.

INTERVIEWER – What kind of work did your father do in Canada?

RISTO – When my father arrived in Canada he briefly worked in a restaurant doing various jobs in the kitchen and afterwards got a job in a car parts manufacturing factory where he operated a punch press making bumpers for cars and trucks. He retired from that job.

INTERVIEWER – What was it like growing up with him as your dad? Was he bitter about the time he served in the Greek islands? How did these experiences affect him?

RISTO – He often spoke to me about it in bits and pieces, that is, about his personal experiences in the Greek island prisons. I found out more about his experiences from films and books which showed a more complete picture of what was done to prisoners there. One thing that he regretted was not knowing why he was sent to prison. He died without knowing what he had done wrong to deserve being sent to prison for five years. His time in prison did affect him, not because he lost five years of his young life, age 19 to 24, but also because he was tortured and abused in ways we can’t even imagine today. But, he wasn’t bitter about it. He accepted it like it was his fate. Why? I don’t know.

In my own research I did find out why he was sent to prison but it was too late for him. He had died by then.

As I said in one of our previous interviews, my father Nikola was forcibly taken from his village, along with a number of other men,

on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1947 and sent to the Greek island prison camps. He was kept in prison until January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1952, the day he arrived back in Oshchima.

On several occasions I asked my father what he had done and why he was sent to prison but until the day he died he did not know, because no one would tell him. All he knew was what his jailers told him, “that he was a danger to the Greek state”.

Later, as I began to research the so-called Greek Civil War, I found out that my father was a victim of American policies in Greece. He was a victim of Lieutenant General James A. Van Fleet’s military tactics.

On March 1, 1947, U.S. President Harry Truman announced the decision to proclaim the “Truman Doctrine” for engaging the U.S. in Greece. Greece was granted credit and advanced military equipment to equip its government army. At the same time Van Fleet, an American General anti-guerrilla specialist, was made available to the Greek government.

With Van Fleet’s strategy and tactics applied in the last battles fought in the Vicho and Gramos battlefields, DAG was defeated and ejected outside of Greece.

So what exactly was Van Fleet’s strategy and how did it involve my father... and he didn’t know about it?

Van Fleet was familiar with the concept of how to starve a guerrilla army. In order to do that, he said, you will have to rob it of the ability to feed itself and the ability to recruit new fighters.

Most of the food and recruits that supplied the partisan army came from the Macedonian mountain villages.

To stop the food supply all residents from the small villages were removed and placed in towns and large villages. These places were guarded by the Greek army and the Greek police. Curfews and restrictions of movement were then placed so no one could move



without authorization. This cut off most of the food supply to the partisans.

To stop the partisans from recruiting new fighters, the Greek government arrested basically every man, capable of carrying a gun, who was not loyal to the Greek government or was affiliated with the partisan movement. All these people were sent to the Greek island prison camps.

My father was affiliated with the partisan movement. All his brothers and sisters were partisans and fighting in the war. He was the only young person left home to look after the farm and his aging mother and father, so he became a target of Van Fleet's strategy.

So, to starve the partisans out, Van Fleet basically emptied all the small villages of their population and arrested every man who might be a potential partisan.

The people from the small villages were moved to the large ones because the Greeks didn't have enough policemen to send to every village. The move, of course, was done by force.

All the villagers were moved. They moved them into already occupied houses and told the people that they had to share the space and the food. Then the Greeks went looking for and hunted down partisans who were on the move.

The civilian people had limited mobility and curfews were in effect, even in the large villages where the people were guarded by the police.

INTERVIEWER – You are doing a lot of work for the Macedonian cause online. How much of this do you think was instilled in you from hearing your father's stories and those of others from Oshchima?

RISTO – I was twelve years old when my father left Oshchima for Canada and all I knew by then was that we were not Greeks, and that we were Macedonians, something that had to be kept a secret. My parents told me that we were not Greeks in order to shut me up

from singing Greek patriotic songs about the so-called Greek heroes who fought in the so-called Greek struggle in Macedonia. Those so-called “Greek heroes” were the “cut throats” that terrorized the Macedonian population and killed a lot of Macedonian people in order to make Macedonia Greek.

It was after we immigrated to Canada that I began to discover the wider picture of who we were and what was done to us over the ages. Most Macedonians, who were aware of the various struggles and conflicts in which we had been involved, were able to tell me what happened and who did what to whom... but very few to none could tell me “WHY” these things were done to us. That I found out on my own, through a great deal of research.

What I discovered I published on the internet in various forums. After that I began to develop a growing list of readers who demanded more and more information. Of course I didn’t know any more than what I had learned from reading books and from what the old people had told me, but that seemed to resonate with my readers.

I had to learn to read Macedonian in order to read Macedonian books and access the Macedonian archives, initially for my own interest, and later to translate material for my readers. Eventually I began to translate entire books.

INTERVIEWER – Some parents chose not to tell their children about what happened to them in the war as a way of shielding them and preventing them from inheriting traumatic memories. Do you think it’s a good idea to do that – just forget after immigration?

RISTO – No! Absolutely not! In my opinion it would be a crime to hide the truth from those who are most important to you. Children can’t and won’t inherit traumatic memories from a bygone era that they themselves did not experience. But they can certainly appreciate it... or not... If they know the truth of what their parents have gone through... then it would be their choice to do what they want with that knowledge...

Ask yourself this; is it a good idea for the Jews not to tell their children about what happened to them during the Nazi occupation? I

don't think that you will find a single Jew who will agree with hiding that information, especially from their own family.

One way or another the children or grandchildren will find out from other people... that is about what happened to their parents or ancestors and they may find themselves in precarious situations. Like a Jew, for example, who did not know what happened to the Jews, showing sympathy for the neo-Nazis...

How would a child or descendant who had supported the Nazis feel if they discovered their parents or ancestors were gassed to death by the Nazis... and their parents neglected to tell them that?

I am of the opinion that parents should not keep big secrets from their children. Those secrets one day will come out.

INTERVIEWER – What drives you to find Macedonian stories and translate and publish them?

RISTO – Basically growing up in a western society, I was under the belief that the Macedonians in the Republic of Macedonia had no books and the books written by Macedonian authors were not worth the paper they were written on. This, by the way, is a belief of many people here in Canada. The credentials and experiences acquired in non-western countries are not recognized in Canada because of that. Doctors, dentists, engineers... etc... are required to have a Canadian education or “Canadian experience” to be considered for employment because many people here believe that somehow “we have higher standards here”. But that's not always true.

I did not find the true value of Macedonian books until I started reading them for myself. Let me put it another way. I was left with no choice but to turn to Macedonian books to find out things about us Macedonians. I knew that the Macedonian people had a Macedonian national uprising against the Ottomans in 1903, they participated in driving the Ottomans out of Macedonia in 1912, they fought in the Albanian front against Fascist Italy, they fought in the Greek Civil War, they were evicted from their homeland... etc. But none of this was recorded in western books.

These were experiences in which even my own family had taken place. Yet, I could not find a single book in western libraries that mentioned anything about that. Was it because we do not exist? Westerners, including countries like Greece and Bulgaria, which occupy Macedonian territories today, say “YES! MACEDONIANS DO NOT EXIST!” So, which is it? Do we not exist or not? Who should I believe, my own people or strangers who don’t care if we live or die... and only care about their own interests?

So, now you can see why I turned to Macedonian books. I consider myself lucky to have learned to speak and read Macedonian but most Macedonians born in Greece, now living in the Diaspora, and their descendants, can neither speak nor read in the Macedonian language, even though they consider themselves staunch Macedonians. I translate the books for them. This, I hope answered your question.

I should also mention at this point that the reason why Macedonians born in Greece cannot speak or read Macedonian is because the Greek state has banned and made the Macedonian language illegal. The Macedonian language in Greece has been banned since Greece occupied Macedonian territories in 1912, 1913 and made it illegal to speak in 1938.

INTERVIEWER – A Greek academic wrote in an academic paper that you promote “irredentism” on the internet. Can I get your response on that?

RISTO – You can call it what you want... Everyone is entitled to their own opinion. It may be “irredentism” that I am promoting to the Greeks; but it is human rights that I am promoting to the Macedonians...

But the academic is not far from the mark. After all “irredentism” is “nationalism advocating for the regaining of a culturally or historically related region”, in my case Greek occupied Macedonia, “now under foreign rule”.

Let us face the facts: the Macedonian territories which I call home have been occupied by Greece since 1912, 1913 when Greece

invaded Macedonia, occupied it, partitioned a large chunk of it (51%) and annexed it for itself. Then it did everything in its power to destroy everything that was Macedonian, including its people. After that it made every effort to assimilate the Macedonian people into the Greek fold. Those who refused to be assimilated it exiled, jailed, tortured and downright murdered. It then changed all the people's names from Macedonian to Greek, renamed every place name from Macedonian to Greek and erased every trace of everything that was Macedonian. On top of that it banned the Macedonian language and made it illegal to be spoken... even by people who could speak no other language. And if by asking to have a small semblance of what was once mine, like to be able to speak my own mother tongue in my own homeland, is "irredentism" then I am an "irredentist"!

INTERVIEWER – I was afraid to meet your Uncle Vasil because I had heard so many stories about him; that he killed a Pontian (a Christian Turk colonist settled in Greek occupied Macedonia by the Greek state) in Mikrolimni in the first communist attack against the Greek police. Was he that high ranked in DAG and then in Tashkent?

RISTO – This is news to me. I have known my Uncle Vasil for almost my entire life and I have never heard him say such an outrageous thing.

Here is my Uncle Vasil's story:

Vasil, son of Risto and Sofia was born in the village Oshchima on August 15th, 1925 and currently lives in Toronto, Canada (he is now deceased). Vasil attended school up to grade 6 and was proud to say he graduated with a mark of 90%.

After completing grade school, Vasil went to work on the family homestead on a full time basis. After the death of his brother Lazo, Vasil being the eldest male living at home assumed responsibility for most household activities. His father Risto worked outside Oshchima, sometimes abroad, and was unavailable for household duties for most of the year. Yields from the land were not sufficient to support a family of twelve so Risto had no choice but to seek

employment elsewhere. Before Lazo's death, on many occasions, Vasil assisted his father with his projects. This included many trips to Prespa and Albania, which sometimes lasted for months.

With the outbreak of the Greek–Italian war in 1940, like many young men, Vasil found himself in the middle of a brewing controversy. At that time the Greek communist party was growing in strength and recruiting young Macedonian men and women into their ranks with promises of freedom, human rights, and equality for all Macedonians. Organizers frequently came calling on the young to join. In 1943 Vasil, along with other idealists from Oshchima, signed up and became a party member. In June of 1944 Vasil was drafted by the Partisan police force and sent to Lagen near Vicho where he served as a police officer from July to September. When his service ended, Vasil joined the youth group and was allowed to go home provided he returned to service on short notice. His leave lasted until March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1947 when Vasil was recalled to fight in the Greek civil war. He, along with about five thousand Partisans, was trained, armed, and sent to serve at various posts between Vicho and Gramos. After two years as a courier Vasil achieved the rank of second lieutenant. During his career as a Partisan, Vasil saw much action and experienced pain and suffering. One time after a bomb exploded Vasil was knocked unconscious. Thinking that he was dead, his comrades, hurrying to avoid capture, buried him by piling stones on his body. Hours later, Vasil awakened traumatized and confused, dug himself out of the rock pile and went wandering the countryside. The trauma had left him with short-term memory loss, which took hours before he was able to comprehend his predicament. He recalls his chest being bruised and having severe pain and difficulty breathing. His chest trauma subsequently re-occurred for six years, each year on the anniversary of the episode.

After his recovery, Vasil was assigned to lighter duties delivering information between commands. This lasted until mid 1948 when once again fate dealt him a different hand. It was a rainy, fog filled morning when Vasil was ordered to deliver mail to a nearby battalion. On his way he ran into enemy fire and was almost hit by mortar. He was not directly hit but a spray of rock and sand lightly injured his leg and temporarily blinded his eyes. Under the cover of fog, however, Vasil was able to slip out and escape enemy detection.

He arrived at his destination intact and successfully completed his mission. But as luck would have it, a battle was brewing and men were needed to fight. In spite of his injuries and inability to see properly, the local commander detained Vasil and ordered him to take part in the fight. This was an important fight defending a strategic position. The men were given strict orders to hold onto it no matter what happened. Soon the enemy engaged them and the battle lasted until dusk. When it was over, eight out of the fifty-six Partisans who took part were killed. Vasil was wounded in the back, but the enemy advance was repelled.

Vasil was taken to a nearby field hospital and had his wounds looked after. His recovery, however, was brief and prematurely interrupted by a courier who delivered orders to evacuate. Because the Bourandari (Royal Greek forces) were fast approaching and the hospital staff needed time to evacuate, all available able hands, including the wounded, were ordered to fight and stall the advance. Vasil remembers it was a fierce battle. The Partisans fought with mere guns against the onslaught of mortar and machine gun fire.

Being unprepared the Partisans ran out of ammunition. Those able to move escaped while the rest fought to the end. Only five made it out alive. During his retreat, Vasil spotted a supply man in the distance, but before he could get to him, a mortar fell killing him and his mule. Vasil picked up what he needed and continued his retreat. He was on the run when a Bourandar, hiding behind a rock, fired at him. It was a loud burst of machine gun fire. Vasil with his automatic rifle in one hand and gear in the other ran into the woods for cover. He realized that his diversion would take him away from his destination, but what choice did he have? His escape route was in the open and dangerous. As he contemplated his predicament, Vasil heard a woman's voice in the distance crying out for help. The woman called out in Macedonian, then in Greek. It appeared that she was wounded and could not move. He quickly went to her aid and as their conversation ensued, he found out she was from Nestram, a Macedonian village. He picked her up, put her over his shoulder and carried her through the woods. His effort, however, was in vain as a mortar fell in close proximity instantly killing the woman with a severe blow to the head. Vasil was devastated, dropped the woman's body and ran. Unable to properly see, he lost his bearings and did

not know where he was. He realized he had left the woods when he heard the dreaded roar of a fighter plane overhead and watched the dust ripples of bullets running by. He ran as fast as he could, watching the ripples come and go again and again as fire from the sky rained down on him. It seemed like an eternity as the two planes circled around from above again and again, mocking him and playing with his life. Finally he was in the safety of the woods. He was still running when he encountered the cliff of a sinkhole and almost fell into it. It was one of those phenomena that naturally occur in nature due to years of limestone erosion. Vasil was lucky he stopped in time. He paused for a moment looking down when he heard a man's voice softly muttering something to him. The words were Greek and beckoned him to come closer with promises of ending his misery forever. He slowly looked up in the direction of the voice, coming from the other side of the cliff. As Vasil's sore eyes began to focus he saw a man and recognized his uniform, that of a Bourandar officer. During his ordeal Vasil must have somehow circled back and was now in the hands of the enemy. Too many things had happened that day and Vasil was in no mood for mockery as he opened fire. He doesn't remember how his rifle got into his hands, but he was grateful it was there. He thinks it came off his shoulder during his abrupt encounter with the sinkhole. Figuring him for a deserter, the unexpected burst of automatic fire surprised the enemy. As Vasil continued to fire, fearing an ambush, the Bourandari quickly retreated.

Vasil tired, wounded, and hungry made it back to Breznitsa where he came upon a stream of water. Being thirsty and watching the water trickle down the stream made him want a drink badly. Vasil knew that in his condition he couldn't have any water, he had seen wounded die after drinking water. Vasil succumbed to his thirst and had only a sip. After that, he reported to local command and asked them for transportation to the hospital. He was refused, as there were too many other priorities. Vasil left, disappointed, and spent two days in Rula (Ano Rulski) before walking to Preol where he, along with one hundred and fifty other wounded, boarded two trucks destined for the Yugoslav border. The first truck was allowed entry but the second was refused and turned back. Vasil made it in and was taken to a hospital in Koutlanovo to recuperate. After fifteen days of hospitalization and daily baths in the thermal springs, Vasil



fully recovered from his wounds. It was now time to leave so Vasil, along with sixty others, was ordered to report to Pozdivishcha for re-assignment. Vasil was re-assigned to the fourteenth brigade at the village Kazani in Kostur. His new commander was an old acquaintance who recognized Vasil from a previous meeting they had had in 1945 at the village Papratsko. Vasil was campaigning there for the Partisans when he met the man for the first time. The new boss gave Vasil command of twenty men and put him in charge of guarding Kolomnati. Vasil remembers this day well, as he ordered his men to take up position inside a patch of tall ferns, behind some stones. It was the same day that Georgi Boglev from Oshchima was captured. With four machine guns on standby, the men hid in the ferns and kept silent for most of the day. This went on from dawn until about four in the afternoon when a guard noticed movement from the direction of Bapchor. It was a band of Bourandari coming. Vasil ordered his men to take their position and hold their fire. After a brief firefight, feeling the sting of the ambush, the Bourandari retreated. In other parts of the battle, however, Partisan units did not fare as well and many men and women lost their lives during the fight. When it was over, all able bodies, including the lightly wounded, were ordered to retreat and regroup. At the new camp, combatants were separated according to education and technical skills with military equipment. The more educated were made officers and given command positions regardless of their combat experience. The rest were assigned to lower ranks. Having over two years of combat experience and being a trusted courier, Vasil was not happy with his demotion into the lower ranks. He complained to the commanding officer and asked for his rank to be reinstated. The officer was unmoved by his plea and ordered him to either pick a weapon and stay where he was, or leave and join another command.

Vasil chose to stay and took his case to the battalion commander. The top boss heard Vasil's case and gave him command of a guard unit comprised of three men and a woman. After spending ten days at camp, Vasil's unit was sent on assignment to guard a work crew of sixteen women and several mules, responsible for picking grapes and apples. When they arrived at their destination, the group encountered several rotting human skulls propped up on wooden stakes. The heads belonged to the guards of a previous work crew

ambushed by the Bourandari. Hesitantly, the crew began picking grapes while the guards, certain of an impending ambush, took up defensive positions. True to expectation, before they were finished, several shots rang out sending everyone for cover. The Bourandari came back with high hopes, but the guards fought fiercely and repelled the attack. The crew, fearing for their lives, fled the scene. Vasil, along with the other guards, assembled the mules along with the grapes and left for Posdivishcha to pick apples. There, to their surprise, they found the missing crew hiding inside the village. In spite of their desertion, no charges were laid against members of the crew. When Vasil returned to camp he heard from the news wire that his skirmish left one Bourandar dead and one wounded.

After that assignment Vasil was transferred to a battalion near the village Boukovik to prepare for battle. The frontline was ordered to penetrate a triple barrier of barbed wire, laced with activated grenades. When they reached their target, a man experienced in mine removal breached the first and second barriers but discovered a land mine and could not penetrate the last barrier. As a result, the advance was halted and the combatants refused to continue until the area was de-mined. The unit commander disagreed with the assessment and called the men cowards for not proceeding. In spite of the danger he went forward to show them how it was done. Unfortunately, he stepped on a mine and was blown up. The force of the explosion shook the fence and triggered activated grenades causing them to explode. As the startled men retreated in panic, Vasil remembers taking a glimpse of a dying woman lying on the ground with a large hole in her back. After the danger passed, Vasil felt severe pains in his head. A quick examination revealed wounds to his head, leg, and hand. Vasil walked back to command and was taken to a nearby field hospital. He lost a lot of blood and went into shock before he passed out. Next he remembers hearing a voice and opening his eyes to bright sunlight. It was almost noon the next day and he had slept through the night. The voice that woke him was that of an old man whom Vasil knew. The old man advised Vasil to leave at once because the Greek forces were advancing quickly and his life was in danger. The field hospital was evacuated in the dark the night before and the camp was abandoned. Vasil was unable to walk on his own so he asked the man to fashion him a crutch from a tree branch. Before he could get too far, however, the Bourandari

arrived and started shooting. Vasil made an effort to hide but was spotted. The next thing he remembers was a sharp pain in his leg and rolling down a steep hill. He was wounded in the same leg again. One of the Bourandars went looking but would not risk going down the hill so he abandoned the search. Vasil passed out and when he came to he remembers feeling very cold, fists clasped tight, and teeth clenched. He had fallen into a sandy pit and was now trapped. He was lucky, however, because soon after the Bourandari left a deliveryman came by and found him. Vasil convinced the man to take him to the hospital. He went to another camp by mule and from there to Posdivishcha by horse. On their way the men heard the roar of a bomber which sent them scurrying. Vasil urged the man to run for cover while he slumped off the horse and rolled into an irrigation ditch. The horse took off down river and disappeared. The water was running fast and felt cold as Vasil submerged himself out of sight when a bomb fell nearby, temporarily rendering him deaf.

When the danger was over, unable to walk, he pulled himself out of the ditch and waited. Another man came by and helped Vasil to his feet. Fearing more encounters from above, Vasil asked the man to help him hide in a nearby garden, close to the river. The garden was fenced in and its foliage provided good cover. Soon after, the first man came back with the horse but refused to go any further because he felt it was too dangerous. He helped Vasil mount the horse and left. Vasil's latest wound was high up on his leg impairing his riding and causing him severe pain. Having no other choice, Vasil rode to Posdivishcha.

The doctor there examined him and recommended that he be taken to the hospital at Kolomnati. Vasil was very hungry and asked for some food. Given a choice he asked for fried red peppers. While riding through Posdivishcha, he had noticed a bunch of red peppers hanging on the windowsill of a house. As his hunger grew, the image of peppers remained in his mind. The good people of Posdivishcha obliged and fried some peppers with feta cheese for him. When he finished his meal, he was put on a stretcher and carried by a team of six field medics from Posdivishcha to the field hospital in Kolomnati. From their conversations, Vasil concluded that all the women were Macedonian. Two pairs of women carried the stretcher and the third pair was relief. Vasil was a big man, over

six feet tall, a burden for four women to carry at the best of times. For most of the trip, he kept to himself as the women conversed and complained about his weight. Their tranquility, however, was broken when the roar of a bomber came from above.

Suddenly, Vasil was dropped to the ground flat on his back in the middle of the road as the women scurried for cover. When the danger passed, the women came back and asked Vasil if he was all right. Vasil did not appreciate how he had been treated and kept to himself saying nothing. Thinking that he was Greek and didn't understand Macedonian, the women continued their chat and complaint until they reached the bottom of a hill. They were already tired and now had to carry him uphill on narrow footpaths. Being upset, they started the climb with Vasil upside down, his head lower than his feet. The constant jolting and blood pressure from being carried that way caused Vasil severe pain and headaches. The women were struggling as they continued the climb. One of them suggested that they toss Vasil down a ravine and leave him there to die. Surely he was not worth the effort? Another objected and scolded the first for having such thoughts. "What if he was your husband or brother, would you still do that?" she asked. Vasil was in too much pain to listen to the moral dilemma or care about what happened to him. When they finally arrived, a familiar face greeted Vasil. It was Rina Bogleva from Oshchima. Rina told Vasil that his sister Sevda was also there. When Vasil asked for her, Rina ran through the camp looking for her to give her the news. Hearing that her brother was in the camp, Sevda, was thrilled and ran back as quickly as possible asking people on the way, "Where is my brother, where is my brother?"

One of the women who carried Vasil heard her and answered, "Here is your brother you silly woman, you call everyone your brother." But after a hug, tears, and a long conversation in Macedonian, the woman was convinced Vasil was Sevda's real brother and the women apologized for their behaviour. While in the hospital, Sevda cared for Vasil until his wounds healed.

Vasil was summoned to Gramos once again and from there (after the defeat of the Partisans) he left for Albania (Bureli camp) to escape capture. In his career as a Partisan, Vasil experienced much combat

and was wounded four times, with twelve entry wounds. It was August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1949 when Vasil saw his homeland for the last time. With an uncertain future he boarded the ship, Vladivostok, at the port of Durrresi in Albania and headed for Russia. From there he was sent via train to Tashkent in the Republic of Uzbekistan.

On April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1950 Vasil married Sofia from the village Trnava. Vasil met Sofia for the first time in 1948 at Gramos and again in Albania. Sofia was also drafted by the Partisans and served from 1947 to 1949. Initially she was sent to Gramos for training and was taught to use a rifle. After that she was sent to school to train for communications (telephone). Then she was sent on combat missions first to Voden and later to Lerin where she fought the final battle of the civil war. Sofia also escaped to Albania to avoid capture and was sent to Tashkent.

In Tashkent, Vasil and Sofia found jobs in a textile factory where Vasil worked as a cotton loader and Sofia as a painter of cotton combine equipment. In 1951, Vasil was accepted into the military academy and after 38 months, graduated as an artillery officer equivalent to 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant. After graduation in 1953, Vasil went back to work in the textile factory for another year and a half. For the next eleven years before coming to Toronto, Vasil worked as an insulation worker, producing roofing shingles, and insulating hot water pipes and boilers.

Sofia continued to work in the textile factory until the birth of her first son Vasia in 1952. She spent the next five years at home with Vasia. After that, she worked in construction for a while and later in a leather factory assembling wallets and purses. Her second son Alexander was born in 1962.

On November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1965 Vasil, Sofia, Vasia, and Alexander permanently left Tashkent, destined for Toronto, Canada, which remains their home today.

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As you can see, my Uncle Vasil was an ordinary man, and not a murderer. He fought for the rights of the Macedonian people like

tens of thousands of others like him... And as a result was permanently exiled from his homeland and place of birth by the Greek state.

INTERVIEWER – I love Vasil’s library under the stairs with volumes on Stalin, Marx, Lenin. Was he dedicated to the communist cause?

RISTO – No! Like my father and thousands of other Macedonians like them, my Uncle Vasil was sold on the idea that the CPG and their Marxists ideas were going to solve our Macedonians problems with Greece... But, as you know, that never happened! If he was so “dedicated” to the communist cause he would have stayed in Tashkent or in Moscow for that matter! In other words, he would not have come to Canada! And NO he was not a communist!

Both my father and my uncle had umpteen books on all sorts of subjects, mainly on history, but from your questions, I see that you are only interested to know if they were “dedicated” communists or not. Why is that? Non-communists can be Macedonians!

INTERVIEWER – What about figures like Gotse Delchev and others of his era, what importance do they have today in the Macedonian community?

RISTO – Delchev and the other leaders of the 1903 Macedonian national uprising against the Ottoman occupation led the way towards the formation of a united Macedonian state and laid the foundation of which we are building on today.

Here is Delchev’s story:

Gotse Delchev (1872-1903)

Gotse Delchev, the son of Macedonian patriots Nikola and Sultana Delchev, was born on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1872 in Kukush, a town 35 km north of Solun in now Greek occupied Macedonia. His parents had been instrumental in raising rebellions directed against the Patriarchate (Greeks) and had been active in the Razlog and Kreshna uprisings in 1878.

Gotse completed his elementary education in Kukush, then attended high school in Solun where he studied literature and social studies. He then entered the Sofia Military Academy in July 1891 where he furthered his knowledge in military and scientific discipline. He was expelled from the Academy for his social tendencies and returned to Macedonia in 1894.

He was always keen to learn and kept up with Macedonian national affairs. He played an active role in the political clubs of Solun and Sofia and kept in close contact with others like himself, especially the socialists. They greatly contributed to Gotse's involvement in IMRO and helped shape the course of the Macedonian national liberation movement. The years 1894 to 1903 represented the final revolutionary stage of Gotse's short life. His career as a teacher took him to Novo Selo (near Shtip) and Bansko from 1894 to 1896. Later he became involved with the revolutionary cause, preparing the Macedonian people for the armed uprising. While teaching in Novo Selo he met Damian Gruev the leader of the IMRO central committee. The two men shared similar ideals and became close friends. In 1895 Gruev convinced Delchev to join IMRO. It wasn't too long afterwards that Delchev became IMRO's undisputed leader.

Gotse was a realist as well as an idealist who loved people, hated tyranny and saw the world as a place of many cultures living together in peace. The international and cosmopolitan views of Delchev were far ahead of his time and could be summarized in his proverbial sentence: "I understand the world solely as a field for cultural competition among nations".

As a realist Gotse knew that in order for a revolution to be successful it had to be a "moral revolution" of the mind, heart and soul of an enslaved people. They needed to feel like people with rights and freedoms, not like slaves. With that in mind Gotse set out to build a revolutionary conscience in the Macedonian population, thus setting the revolutionary wheels in motion.

The inclusion of rural areas into the organizational districts contributed to the expansion of the organization and the increase in its membership, while providing the essential prerequisites for the

formation of the military power of the organization, and had Gotse Delchev as its military advisor.

The primary question regarding the timing of the uprising in Macedonia implicated an apparent discordance among the representatives at the Solun Conference in 1903, with Delchev opposing the uprising as premature. Since then he tried to oppose an early uprising. He met with Gruev in Solun and convinced him to delay at least long enough to get organized and prepare for it. He would have had a chance to speak to the entire leadership during the Smilevo Conference, scheduled to start on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1903, but he never made it.

Delchev was killed on May 4, 1903 near the village Banitsa, Seres Region, now in Greek occupied Macedonia, in a skirmish with Turkish forces. Delchev's remains were transferred to Bulgaria in 1923. Then, after the Second World War, on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1946, they were transferred to the People's Republic of Macedonia. The following day they were enshrined in a marble sarcophagus, which to this day is displayed in the yard of the Sveti Spas (Holy Saviour) Church in Skopje.

Delchev will be remembered as the undisputed leader, strategist, ideologue and diplomat of the original IMRO. He was a man who almost single-handedly sowed the seeds of resistance amongst the Macedonian peasantry, through foresight, popularity, tactical skill and enormous enthusiasm.

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INTERVIEWER – Has the Alexander the Great debate and ownership of ancient Macedonia as an emblem of identity distorted history?

RISTO – No! Not for me! Clearly Macedonia belongs to the Macedonian people, to those who were born in Macedonia and were there for many generations and not to those who invaded, occupied



and annexed Macedonia for themselves or to the colonists deposited there subsequent to Macedonia's annexation.

Alexander the Great was a Macedonian king but he was also a self-imposed king on many other peoples and because of that Alexander could be considered as the king of many of the ancient people... However, no one, except for the Greeks, has laid claim to him or considered him to be their king... Not the Turks, Egyptians, Syrians, Afghanis, Iraqis, Iranians, Indians, and so on...

In any case, it is the Greeks who want to claim ownership to the past and to Macedonia's history. It is the Greeks who have distorted ancient history by making outrageous claims that it exclusively belongs to them... and they exclusively are the "descendants of both the ancients Greeks...and now the ancient Macedonians..." leaving no room for the existence of others.

What is more outrageous is that the Turkish Christian colonists and settlers deposited in Greek occupied Macedonia after the 1920's are now the "real Macedonians" and descendents of the ancient Macedonians... while we the indigenous Macedonians are the "newcomer" Slavs who came to Macedonia around 600 AD. And Alexander is their king and not ours?

INTERVIEWER – The first President of Macedonia after the fall of Yugoslavia said they had nothing to do with Ancient Macedonia but were descended from Slavs. What has changed?

RISTO – Gligorov was right. We are descendents of the Slavs. You asked me this question before and I explained to you that the people who today we call Slavs, were the first Europeans. The Slavs, by their many ancient names, were the oldest strata of people in Europe. You should read the books "The Making of the Slavs" by Florin Curta from the University of Florida and the "VENETI First Builders of European Community" by Jožko Šavli, Matej Bor and Ivan Tomažič. These authors have a different view of who the people the west calls "Slavs" are. But, unfortunately the view and understanding of the real Slavs is skewed by our so-called "western science" which has false beliefs about them. For more information on this see your notes of our previous two interviews.

But let me be straight with you, Gligorov was a politician and his concern was less with what our relationship was with the ancient Macedonians and more with our survival as Macedonians today. Gligorov said what he had to say, and I personally know this for a fact. He wanted to “save” Macedonia from the Greek onslaught in a critical period of time. The Greeks were looking for every opportunity to nail us Macedonians to the cross because at that time they had the upper hand on history with the lies they spread about us for over a century, but Gligorov did not give them that opportunity. Gligorov backed off and did not fall into the Greek trap. He did this because he was a shrewd politician and the lives of his people and the survival of his country was more important to him than who was who in ancient times.

But what the Greeks are doing is both shameful and sad because Macedonia and the Macedonian heritage belongs to the Macedonian people and not to the Greeks, who we consider occupiers of Macedonia. Even a person that knows nothing of our situation will tell you that! But, then as we all know, might is always right and when you have the might you dictate what is right. Gligorov knew that very well and that is why he chose to be “wrong”... in order for us to survive. I know many Macedonians who feel that Gligorov was a traitor for saying what he said, but then they need to ask themselves: “What would have been better: to put Macedonia in jeopardy by sticking to his principles or to back down and risk being called a traitor while saving Macedonia? He chose the later... putting the safety of his people ahead of his own reputation and principles...

What the Greeks are doing to the Macedonians is truly sick because we the Macedonians are the victims here, and while we are fighting for our survival as a nation, the Greeks seem to enjoy seeing us suffer...

Here is Gligorov’s story in brief:

Kiro Gligorov (1917-2012)

Kiro Gligorov was born on May 3, 1917, in Shtip, Kingdom of Serbia (then controlled by the Kingdom of Bulgaria) and died on January 1, 2012 (aged 94) in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia. He was a Macedonian and belonged to the political party Socijal Demokratski Sojuz na Makedonija (SDSM). He was an Atheist.

Kiro Gligorov was the first President of the Republic of Macedonia, serving from 1991 to 1999. He held various high positions in the political establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, including as Secretary of State for Finance in the Federal Executive Council, a member of the Yugoslav Presidency, as well as President of the Assembly of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from May 15, 1974 to May 15, 1978.

Gligorov graduated from the University of Belgrade's Law School and was a participant in the National Liberation War of the ethnic Macedonians from 1941 as a secretary of the Initiative committee for the organization of the Antifascist Assembly of the National Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM) and a finance commissioner in the Presidium of ASNOM.

After achieving parliamentary democracy in the Republic of Macedonia in 1990, he became the first democratically elected president of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia on January 27, 1991. On April 16, 1991, the parliament adopted the constitutional amendment for removing the "Socialist" adjective from the official name of the country and, on June 7 the same year, the new name Republic of Macedonia was officially established, hence Gligorov continued his presidency as the President of the Republic of Macedonia.

He served for two terms, from January 27, 1991 to November 19, 1999. He was re-elected for his second term in office on November 19, 1994. He led his country to independence proclaimed after the referendum held on September 8, 1991, and tried to keep it out of the Yugoslav wars, a task made difficult by disputes with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria and Greece who all faced separate issues with the Republic of Macedonia.

On October 3, 1995, Gligorov became a target of a car bomb assassination attempt in Skopje. While en route from his residence to his office, the vehicle carrying Gligorov was blown up by an explosion from a parked vehicle, killing his driver and injuring several passers-by. Gligorov was seriously injured above his right eye and was immediately conveyed to the hospital.

Since the incident there have been no suspects brought to book and no progress has been made in the investigation of the case. However, there have been short-lived speculations as to who could be the culprits. Shortly after the bombing, the Minister of Internal Affairs Ljubomir Frchkovski publicly claimed that “a powerful multinational company from a neighbouring country” was behind the assassination attempt, with the Macedonian media pointing at the Bulgarian Multigroup and the Yugoslav KOS as possible suspects. During a meeting between Multigroup head Iliya Pavlov and Gligorov in Ohrid, Pavlov assured Gligorov that his organization was not involved. All investigations were futile.

Gligorov was incapacitated until November 17, 1995. He was permanently blind in one eye as a result. Stojan Andov was acting president during Gligorov’s recuperation.

Gligorov died in the early hours of January 1, 2012, in his sleep. It is known that his request was that the funeral be private with only his closest family in attendance. He was buried in Butel Municipality, Skopje.

Kiro was the father of Vladimir Gligorov, a re-founder of the Serbian Democratic Party.

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One more thing! Of all the questions you could have asked relating to Macedonia and the Macedonian identity, why did you have to ask "what Gligorov had said". Why not ask a question about what millions of other patriotic Macedonians have said? You claim to be Macedonian, and I know by DNA you are three-quarters Macedonian and perhaps one-quarter Albanian, but, judging by your questions, you seem to lean towards the Greek side. Is that true?