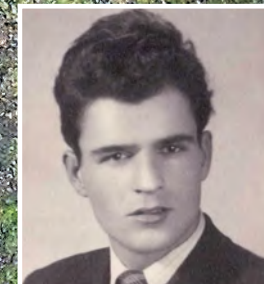


BEYOND THE MOUNTAINS

The life story of two partisans
Vasil and Elena Radis

As told to Yana Giamov



**Dedicated to our daughter Kristine (Pobetka)
our son Tom (Nasé) and their partners John and Julie**

**To our grandchildren
Alinka, Sherrylin, Sandra, Michelle,
Alexander, Robert and their partners**

**To our great-grandchildren
Melissa, Caris, Samuel,
Luca, Gianni, Seth, Leo,
Zac, Ava, Anais, Stella & Luis**

(Cover: Original painting of Village Yanoveni by David Gough)

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Foreword

When my brother-in-law Vasil first approached me to transcribe his and my sister Elena's life story from DVD recordings, I was more than a little sceptical that I would be able to undertake the task. He told me he had been recording over a couple of years and had accumulated many hours of taping. He was eager for their story to be told, as he saw it, and expressed the thought that it might not be watched in the DVD format and would be far easier to digest in the written word. He is an extremely proud family man and wished for all his family to know their background and their origins and to be aware of some of the difficult circumstances and hardships endured but also joyful times of his and Elena's life.

I very hesitantly took the discs from him (he insisted) and I truly thought that it would not happen; I could not possibly interpret his story. The DVD's sat near my computer for a few weeks and then one day I popped the first disc into my DVD player and watched and listened to him. Soon I found myself starting to write his words. I was hooked. As his narrative unfolded I became more and more engrossed in the story and I found myself rushing to the computer at every spare opportunity just to discover what happened next.

His memory of events, dates, people and places was meticulous and I marvelled that over such a long period of time he was able to recall them with extraordinary clarity. He knows how to tell a story. When we were children, before the advent of a television set and soon after their arrival from Poland, our three families lived together in a huge house in North Fremantle and we would sit around the fireplace in the lounge room and Vasil would tell us stories of their experiences in the Greek Civil War in serial form, about half an hour each evening and we would listen, captivated. Elena and my other older sister Ristana would cry recollecting the terrible, distressing events they had witnessed and the sorrow of losing comrades, some only teenagers when they fought and died.

I am very happy to have had the honour of transcribing their story because in so doing I have also learnt so much about my own heritage and how life was in the old country. I have a new found respect for the heroic men and women who fought and died for the cause in which they believed – freedom for and recognition of Macedonia, the right to speak their native tongue, to be able to use their own names and the names of their villages as they were historically known.

It has been a privilege and a pleasure for me to be involved in this story and I hope when you read it, you too will feel the same.

Yana Giamov – 2013

Introduction

I first started to record this story on video on the 5th July 2011 and I thought the best way to do this was that while I recorded my memories I would place in front of me the photo of you, my family, taken at Quinn's Rock in September 2009 when we celebrated my and Elena's 60th wedding anniversary. I found that by doing this it was easy for me to tell my story as I looked at all of you, my wonderful family.

Everyone in life has a story to tell. If you take it from the time you are born to the time you die, everyone has a history. I started this particular story of my and Elena's life because many of you, my family, have expressed a wish to hear memories and details of our life. The story is, I hope, an interesting one as it is a difficult one because we were living in the times of World War II and the Greek Civil War.

It is basically divided into four parts. The first part is the years of our childhood in the old country, our villages, the happy times and the hardships endured. The second part is during the difficult time of the war years between 1940-1950 and the third part is when we arrived in Poland, as political immigrants, where we lived for nine years. Those too were difficult years mingled with times of great happiness together with our two children.

The final part of our story is our immigration to Australia in 1958, to this most marvellous country where we have had a good life, a wonderful life and in the words of that famous Australian who I greatly admire, *a fortunate life*, blessed with a large family we love dearly and who love us. This to us is our treasure.

BEYOND THE MOUNTAINS

*“When I was a young boy,
I thought the whole world was that around my village.
I thought we were covered over by the sky
and that the sky was leaning on
and held up by the tall mountains
... that was my whole world
and there was nothing beyond....”*



***Selo Yanoveni – A Village Reborn – Original painting by
David Gough***

PART 1- Village life

Chapter 1 – VASIL’S STORY – Our family history

I was born in the village of Yanoveni in the region of Greece that we know as Macedonia. I had always considered my date of birth to be 17th March 1930, and that is what my own records have always stated. But one year, after arriving in Australia, my sister Dina (Costandina) who was about 15 years older than me told me that I wasn’t born in 1930, but in fact it was February 2nd 1929 and so whenever that date came up she would always ring me to wish me a happy birthday. It doesn’t matter to me. One year here or there doesn’t make very much difference.

My family were the Radovtsi. My father’s name was Tanas, my mother was Athina. My parents were born in 1875 and 1885 respectively.



Tanas and Athina Radis, c. 1958

In my father’s early years he, like many other menfolk from my village, left to go to America. He went in search of employment and the opportunity to earn enough and save money to provide a better life for the family. This was because our village was surrounded by very mountainous terrain and there was simply not enough land for cultivation of crops to sustain the families. Therefore, the men of the village travelled to different places to find work, to earn money to send to their families back home so

they may buy food and other necessities to make their life a little easier.

At the age of 20, my father went to America and stayed there for eight or so years. In the early part of the last century he came back to the village and married my mother. He stayed for two or three years. They had two children, Elena born in 1904 and Giorgi in 1906. Those two children died from the grippe (a pandemic influenza at the time). My father decided to go back to America and ultimately stayed there until 1912. That was the year that our village (along with many other villages) was destroyed by the Turks, burnt completely to the ground.

The women in the village wrote to their menfolk and pleaded with them to come back home from abroad and rebuild the village. Winter was fast approaching and it would soon be bitterly cold and it was imperative that the village be rebuilt before this happened. My father came back and began work with the other men to start rebuilding. He stayed another four or five years. During this time my brother Panayoti was born in 1913 and then in 1915 or 1916, my sister Costandina was born.

About 1916-17 my father again went to America and stayed for another seven or eight years. He came back once more in 1925 and my brother Pando was born. Then in 1927 my brother Vangel was born and in 1929 I was born. That was the end of his travels and thereafter my father stayed in the village and looked after his large family.

I believe while he was in America he was working at the Ford factory making wood spokes and rims for car wheels. He also worked at a paper pulp factory rolling paper and at this particular establishment the management were very pleased with his work and told him to not go back home to Macedonia. They said they would bring his family to America, but he decided against that and went back home. With some of the money he earned in America, my father purchased a parcel of land near the Albanian border which served us well at that time.

My paternal grandfather was named Giorgi. He had one brother named Nikola. Giorgi had two daughters and three sons.

The first daughter was named Rista and she is purported to have lived a very long life, dying at 105 years of age in Kostur. Rista's family comprised of two daughters and two sons. Some of her descendants are in fact today living in Perth (the Kostarelis family).

After Teta Rista, came Striko Yovan (Naki) and he was apparently disabled in some way from an illness contracted in childhood which affected one of his legs, leaving him with a severe limp and he was unable to work so stayed mostly in the village. He had two sons (Pascal and Kosta) who also ended up in Melbourne and so too their offspring still live there. There was a daughter, Vana who married in the village of Tiolishcha and died in Kostur. I do not know details of her family.

There was another brother Striko Ilo. He had two sons (Yorgo and Micho) and two daughters (Sofa and Aspasia), my first cousins. Yorgo was in the Civil War and died in Tashkent. Micho was killed during the war with the Germans in the town of Kukush.

My Teta Gina was the youngest one of the family and she married into the Kachamakakis' from the upper part of the village and she had one daughter who married into the neighbouring village of Slimnitsa and one son (Stavros) who was a partisan like me and he too ended up in Poland.

When we lived in Poland he came to see my parents a few times but then we lost touch with him. I think he was involved with some woman there. He stayed in Poland and never returned to Greece back to his wife and daughter. His wife and his daughter Argiro are presently living in Perth.

My mother's family (the Agovtsi) was a large one comprising of five brothers and two sisters, seven children in all. My mother Athina was the eldest. She was followed by Vojkovi Risto, Vasil and Tassi, Teta Sofa, Vojché Timio and Vojché Stoyan.

Apparently, my maternal grandmother died very early and as a consequence my mother being the eldest at fifteen or sixteen at the time took on the responsibility of looking after the other six

younger children. My maternal grandfather remarried and I did not know them as they died before I was born.

They all had large families of five or six children each, so I had many first cousins. Their house was just below the church in the Agovskata Mala.

Chapter 2 – My village of Yanoveni

So that you will have some background knowledge of the history of my old country, specifically the village of my birth, I will try to explain a little of this as follows.

The original country of Macedonia was divided up into three parts in 1912 after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire which had occupied and ruled for over 500 years. One part was annexed to Greece (this is Aegean Macedonia), one part to Serbia and another to Bulgaria.

My village of Yanoveni is in the region of Macedonia known as Kostursko and is situated in a little corner protrusion nestled close to the Albanian border. It is a mountainous village about 800-900 metres above sea level. The highest peak, the Mount of Gramos, is 2,520 metres high. At that height nothing grows and the snow never melts and has accumulated layer upon layer after many winter years. If you view a map of Kostur, you will see how isolated from the rest of the region my village and a few neighbouring villages are up in the mountains.

There were 80 -100 houses in the village with a population of about 550 people.

The village was divided into three parts - *Gorna Mala*, *Stredna Mala* and *Dolna Mala* (upper, central and lower areas). Our house was situated in the *dolna mala* along with the other Radovtsi houses belonging to my father's two brothers, Striko Naki (Yovan) and Striko Ilo.

Around my village in the Kostursko region were the villages of Omatsko, Pilcati, Slimnitsa and Kalevishcha. Its boundaries are mountainous. To the east is the Mount of Alavitsa, a very strategic point that played great importance in WWII and the Greek Civil War.

Another famous landmark in our region was Gramos Planina. You will read more of this landmark later in the story. Adjacent to this is the region called Lerin or Lerinsko where Elena's village of Lagen is situated. The country of Albania is to the west, over the mountains, Greece is to the south and Serbia to the north. The

central part of Macedonia was a very rich and fertile area abundant with crops and a climate that was perfect for their growth.

The main focus of attraction is the River Belitsa which passes very close to and just below my village, say about 100 metres. Along its journey, it passes a number of villages (Omatsko, Drenovo and the little town of Nestram) and continues through to a central rich fertile valley, perfect in climate where many crops were grown.

Also through this central region of Macedonia the great River Vardar flows finishing like Belitsa in the Gulf of Solun. To the east flows another large river called the Strumitsa. So, three rivers coming from different directions meet and cross through this area of Macedonia before finally flowing into the Aegean Sea and the Gulf of Solun, thereby making it an extremely rich, productive and fertile land.

Going up the River Belitsa are the villages of Pilcati and Slimnitsa, Fusha and Nalitop (the last two villages no longer exist having been destroyed many years ago). Many creeks flow from this river. The distance from my village to the mouth of the river is about 25-30kms or about 5 hours walk.

The distances between the neighbouring villages were only about a half to three quarters of an hour by foot and we travelled this by the road alongside the river.

It is interesting that the villages going up the river are all built on the right hand side, and that was because that area was drier and they took advantage of the warm sun at that aspect. These villages shared a kinship with each other in as much as whenever a wedding or other festivity occurred in one village, all the neighbouring villages participated and socialised.

The distance between Yanoveni and Kostur (the largest town in our region) is about 40-50 kms or about 8 hours on foot, donkey or horse.

The town of Kostur is unique. The majority of the town is situated on an island in the middle of a lake and there is only one entry.

When we needed to do shopping in the town, we would have to get up about 2am in the morning and arrive at the markets at 10am, buy our supplies, load up either the donkey, mule or horse that we took, head back to the village and finally arrive home around midnight.



Mount of Gramos (Gramos Planina)

Chapter 3 – Life in the village

The foremost attraction for me and my friends when I was young was the river. During the summer months we spent many happy times swimming and fishing. We would throw our rods into a section of the river where it had split and we could see lots of fish and when we brought them home to mother, she was very pleased.

Of course, we could not avoid the work that we all needed to do which was to clear our parcel of land, plant wheat in our small plot and then harvest the wheat. This was done every alternate year as the earth was left to rest for the other. We would harvest about 100 lots of wheat that we would truss into small bundles and load up onto the mule, three bundles on either side and bring them down into the village. It was quite a distance to travel back and forth, about one and a quarter hours each way, four trips a day.

There they would be placed in the *goomno* (a large area of about 10 metres diameter) with a central post to engage the animal, usually a horse or mule. The animal was tied to the post and it moved around and stamped the wheat from the straw with its hoofs. When it walked enough one way to wind up the rope we'd turn it around and it walked the other way back again, this time unwinding. It did this until all the wheat was loosened from the straw.

The wheat was then gathered up in one large pile and then with a special shovel we'd throw it high in the air. The chaff blows away and the seed falls down. This was repeated until it was all cleaned up. It was then stored in large wooden storage bins with lids called *umbari*. In the villages, everyone's *zhito* (grain) was stored in such a manner, whether it was wheat, rye or corn. After this, the grain was taken to the *vodenitsa* (watermill) to extract the flour for our daily bread.

During the summer months we chopped a lot of wood for our own domestic use. It would have been way too cold in the long winter months so this job had to be carried out in summer in preparation. We stacked it into a small shed next to our house. We needed 40 or 50 loads of wood to carry us through the winter.

Wood was also needed for the school stove. So, all the village families who had children attending the school had to donate the equivalent amount of wood, e.g. 2 children – 2 loads of wood, 6 children – 6 loads of wood. It was stored underneath the school in the cellar.

Another of our chores would be to go to the shacks where the hay was stored and bring it back to feed the animals. We cleaned the stables and helped mother to light the oven to bake bread. As my sister Dina and eldest brother Panayoti had married long before and had left the house, there was only us three brothers at home. My mother needed help, so consequently we would all knit and sew to help her out. I even learnt how to knit socks.

She would weave her own yarn and make material for trousers. My brother Pando would always get the new pants, which were then passed down to the next brother, Vangel. By the time I inherited the trousers they were full of patches and this made me quite sad. Just once, I would have loved to have had a new pair of pants. But, that was the way it was, the eldest was always best dressed.

Costandina was like a second mother to me and I was ecstatic when she bought a new pair of trousers for me once. I felt as though now at last I was a big boy and that was so important to me. I was nearly fifteen and thoughts of maybe impressing some girl or another did enter my mind.

I was very close to my sister and I loved her dearly. She was very kind and good to me when I was young and I especially cherish all the years that we spent together here in W.A. after I arrived from Poland.

Panayoti was about seventeen years older than me but I was close to my two brothers Pando and Vangel as our ages were not too far apart and we all grew up together. Pando was a slimly built boy, very clever and always top the class at school in fact I might say a perfectionist. Our father took him along whenever he went out to do carpentry work as he was very interested in that trade. He was very caring of Vangel and me and was always pushing us to do our homework neatly and keep our school books neat and tidy. Vangel, on the other hand, was a very well built strong boy

with curly hair and good looks and was very popular with the girls. He would make flutes and clarinets out of wood and then when he was about eighteen or so he bought a proper one for himself. He formed a band with another couple of boys and they played at weddings and other celebrations not only in our but other villages too. He never married and was destined to die when he was about nineteen years old in the Battle of Grevena in 1947.

During spring and summer we would go out every Saturday afternoon into the woods to chop timber. We would stay overnight and sleep in the grass by a nice fire and next morning load up and go back home in time for Sunday lunch.

On one of these outings, I remember a frightening incident that I experienced. We would leave the mules and horses out to graze in the field as we chopped the wood. When we finished and were ready to load up the animals, I couldn't find my horse. Everyone else found their mules and horses, except me. My horse was a very weak little animal, not strong at all. I looked everywhere and I couldn't find him. The boys asked me what I was doing. I told them I was looking for my horse and said they should load up and go home while I continued my search. I asked them to tell my father to come and help me. The boys loaded up and left.

As I was walking through the bush, looking for my horse, I practically walked upon a huge bear sleeping in the shrub. I stopped, petrified, unable to move. My legs were shaking. It was a huge red and brown bear. It woke up and looked at me for what seemed a long time but was probably only about thirty seconds or so and then it ambled away. I shot through and ran out of the bush and stumbled upon my father who had come looking for me. He asked me what had happened and I cried as I told him that I had seen a huge bear and that it had probably eaten my horse. He told me not to worry and said, "We'll find it." We did indeed. We found the horse a little further away – sleeping.

We loved to collect hazelnuts on Sunday afternoons. Groups of boys and girls with sacks over their shoulders would go out and collect the hazelnuts. After two or three hours our bags were

loaded with nuts. There were also very tasty wild strawberries that grew around the village.

One morning, I was with a couple of my friends when we passed by a beautiful cherry tree loaded with big delicious cherries. We shook the tree until all the ripe fruit fell on the ground and then we gorged ourselves until we could eat no more. We thought we would never want to eat another cherry again for a long time so with this in mind we all decided to urinate over the remaining cherries on the ground, just for a laugh.

On the way back home we passed by that same cherry tree and now felt like eating some more. There was one problem though, we couldn't tell which cherries had been pissed on and which were alright, and so we started from the ones farthest away and said to one another, "This cherry is alright – this cherry isn't pissed on." Of course, we found an excuse for every cherry on the ground and every one of them was eaten.

Another past-time we enjoyed was to catch birds similar to large pigeons which hung around the village and the river looking for something to feed on. We would make traps like loops, say twenty or so loops, with string between sticks and when the birds came to feed they would put their heads inside the loop and we'd pull on the sticks and trap them. We caught lots of birds like this and mother was very happy when we would bring home a batch of the *drazguni* for her to cook.

We would love to watch the timber logs as they passed down the river. They would take a day to a day and a half to make their transition through our part of the village river. Then another lot would come down from another village and we would follow their journey down the river. We enjoyed this and I remember it so well.

My memories of my childhood before the Second World War are quite happy ones. I have fond memories of our special-day occasions such as gatherings in the village for weddings or religious occasions in the church at Christmas, Easter with the smashing of the red eggs, Bogoroditsa, and St. George Day (Sveti Giorgi) that we celebrated. On Vasilovden (my name day) celebrated on 1st of January, a coin was baked into the *kora* or

zelnik and the person who found the coin in their slice of *zelnik* was said to have a very lucky coming year. Dancing the oro in the central village square was another favourite.

In the evenings, after work was finished, we would visit our cousins' houses. We had many wonderful visits particularly at my mother's sister Teta Sofa's house because she had four children (three boys and a girl) about our age and we would sit around the fire, roasting chestnuts and eating hazelnuts.

My oldest cousin Nikola was a terrific storyteller and he would enthral us with stories of princes and princesses and we could sit for hours and listen to him as he captivated our imagination.

We had marvellous times visiting all our relations and they in turn visiting us.

Chapter 4 – The timber industry and farming

Large areas south of the River Belitsa were woods very thick with pine trees that were used for timber and that's where the village labourers would work to make money to buy food for the family. They would chop the trees and cut the timber to all different sizes; depending on whatever the government requisition and specification was (the bush being government owned). The trees were not simply randomly chopped and only selected and specific trees marked by the government logging official were permitted to be cut.

There was a lot of timber logging taking place and this was done in late winter between the months of February and March. Then after the timber was cut, at about the middle of April when the water level had dropped and subsided sufficiently, the village men would throw the timber into the river. This was the most suitable time for the river to carry the timber along to Kostur. This was because at other times the river was very high, rough and turbulent and did not flow slowly. In fact it was so fierce and fast moving the timber would have broken up along its journey.

When the timber reached Kostur, the transport trucks would be waiting to pick it up and distribute it all over Greece and Macedonia. I remember at one time the timber was stopped at Nestram and picked up from there as well.

So that was the major work of our fathers and forefathers. They were timber loggers. When the timber was distributed and sold, whatever money was earned was shared and divided among the villagers who had formed a sort of co-operative and from that money the villagers would go to the markets and purchase whatever commodities they required.

One had to be 18 years of age to be a member of that co-operative and my father and brothers Panayoti and Pando were members.

There were many difficulties with the village being situated in a very mountainous area. Despite this the villagers were not living too badly mainly due to the timber logging and of course as I have mentioned many of the men would leave to find work in other places further down in Macedonia, Greece and Albania and many

went abroad to USA, Canada and Australia. Some travelled back and forth many times to earn money and provide for their families.

The logging all took place before WWII and was very successful. During the war, it all stopped when the Germans invaded. No orders were forthcoming and that is when the first problems in the village appeared.

The northern side of the river was drier. There were many different trees and bushes but not pines. There were also oak trees from which we would cut branches and leaves to bring home to feed the goats and sheep during the winter months.

As far as cultivation was concerned, there was not much of this in our village simply because there was not a lot of land to grow anything substantial, except pockets of land along the river where some corn and potatoes were grown.

We did however have fruit trees such as apples, cherries and pears, hazelnut bushes, mulberries and other wild berries. As for big production of grain, there was none.

The small parcels of land that were available were simply not enough to provide for the whole village. There was a market in Kostur and a market in Rupishcha where we would go for vegetables.

The distance from my village to the Albanian border is less than 3 kms. Land that we would farm would go right up to the Albanian border. We never crossed the border into Albania but many Albanians had portions of farms that came onto our side of the border and we would often meet up with these people.

Before 1912, while under the rule of the Ottoman Empire and because at that time there were no borders, our villagers would cross into Albania to a town called Korçë or another one called Bilishcha to shop at the large markets there.

I hope I have drawn a picture that you may appreciate and understand of my village and so now I must do the same for Elena's village of Lagen in the region of Lerinsko.

Like Kostursko, Lerin has an even larger area rich in production of wheat, corn, vegetables and many other crops. The town of Lerin is also much larger and it is surrounded by many villages. The village of Lagen is about two and a half hours from the town. There are many mountains around the village, the highest of which is called Vicho (Vicho Planina) and it is not very far from Lagen and another village called Bapchor.

To the west of Lagen is the area called Prespa. Situated there are the Lakes of Prespa, comprising of a small lake and a larger lake that is divided into parts – one part in Greek Macedonia, a larger part in the Republic of Macedonia and a small part in Albania. Around this area, a lot of beans are grown and the lakes are very rich for fishing. Lagen is a much nicer village than Yanoveni from an aesthetic point of view, mellower and is a very picturesque village with lots of farming.

Chapter 5 - Background history of Yanoveni

If we go into the history of my village I can only relate what I have heard from my father, my grandfather, and my predecessors. The teacher in the village school was a gentleman named Mr. Anastasios Shukas, who due to a childhood accident had lost his lower arm. He was my teacher up to about grade 4 and then of course, the war started and there was no more school.

Mr. Shukas wrote a book about the village and according to his studies and findings, probably with information and help of other historians, surmised that going back 300-350 years, the village was founded by people who came from different areas, e.g. from more geographically lower and better production areas, but who were anxious to escape the ill treatment they were suffering from the ruling Turks at the time. They started moving as further away from the Turks as they could.

Families started to come from the Albanian side, the Kostur side, the Lerin side and from Epirus – all directions. Many families came and settled and so from family to family our village evolved and that is how Yanoveni came to exist. In his book he explains a lot of our village history and its formation, and many of the facts I have written here are from this particular book.

According to Mr. Shukas' book, our family the Radovtsi originally came from a place called Darda in Albania. A great-great-grandfather arrived from there and established his family in our village.

Apparently, one of these predecessors of my family was a woman called Baba Rada and our name has originated from her name. I believe she might have been the great-great-grandmother of my father.

Her husband's name was Kotsé so in our village we were also known as Kotsovtsi as well as Radovtsi. It would be interesting to know what our original surname was well before Baba Rada.

As I have mentioned, my father went back and forth to America three times and I remember very well observing a piece of paper or document from there that stated his name as Tanas Radé.

This, I think, was the name on his travel papers as he journeyed to America through Bulgaria. Then of course, in 1926 the Greeks changed all the Macedonian names to Greek and so from Radé we became Radis.

In Mr. Shukas' book, there appeared a photograph of Yanoveni, taken circa 1932 when the village was still intact. During the Greek Civil War, the village was destroyed by bombardment and left in ruins. I will tell of this in detail later in my story. Today, there is nothing left of the village except for the church which is still being maintained by people living in Kostur. There are only about two or three houses that have been built there by people who go back for weekends, for holidays, hunting or fishing. Other than that, the village is deserted. No original houses – nothing.

I went back in 1997, (this time I was allowed into the country after two previous unsuccessful attempts that I will write about later) and I was finally able to go back to my village. It was bittersweet. I tried desperately to find the location of my house. It was useless. Everything was in ruins with grass and weeds growing out of the remnants of the ruins. It made me very sad, but that was the way it was. It was the first time I had gone back to the village since I had left at about 16 years of age at the beginning of the Greek Civil War.

The village of Yanoveni has actually been destroyed three times. The first time was in 1912 by the Turks when they left Macedonia. The second time was during World War II by the Germans who came and burnt it, and the worst destruction occurred during the Greek Civil War by the bombardments which left the village in complete ruin.



Village of Yanoveni after the war)

When the World War II broke out in October 1940, the winds of change were blowing ominously over our land and things would never be the same again.

Part 2 – The War Years

Chapter 6 – The Dark Clouds of War

Now I come to the second part of my story between 1940 and 1950 and this period was perhaps the most dreadful time in my life. WWII actually started on 1st September 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. Italy was aligned with Germany and in 1936 they had already overtaken Albania and the Italian troops were just over the border from our village. The plan between Italy and Germany was to attack and invade Greece and this took place on the 28th October 1940. I remember that morning with such clarity and it remains with me to this day. It was pouring with heavy rain, miserable and cold.

Every year someone in the village had the responsibility for the caring of the village livestock, tending to them, taking them out to pasture to graze in the fields, looking after them, feeding them - being the shepherd so to speak and that year was my father's turn. My brothers Pando and Vangel and I helped our father round up the sheep and goats and we decided to let them graze a little further up from the village.

Just as we were about to make our way up the hill, at about six thirty or seven o'clock in the morning, we were startled by the sound of booming cannons and shells coming from over the mountains. We were under attack and the first shell that came from the Italians fell upon our village. One of the shells hit the Mayor's house and killed an elderly woman, and some livestock.

All the villagers began running about in panic. They had no idea what had happened. We turned back with the goats and sheep and returned to the village the other way around from the other side of the river. The bombardment was frightening and ceaseless. Two double winged aeroplanes started firing upon the village. It was very clear to everyone the village had to be evacuated.

My father led the livestock to the other side of the village. My mother loaded the mule with whatever food she could find, some bread, some blankets and headed for the bush. They were both concerned for my sister Costandina, whose husband Tasé was in

the Greek Army. She had two children John and Peter (a daughter Vasiliki was to be born later in 1942) and her elderly in-laws who were both disabled, so we went to help her load the mule and get everything ready to evacuate the village within two or three hours.

We headed further up in the mountains to some caves where we would be safe from the bombardment and away from the roads where the Italians might catch sight of us. I remember that morning so clearly, the frantic people fleeing for safety. It will never leave my memory – the beginning of the war.

The bombardment and shelling continued all day. We watched from afar as our houses were burning, smoke billowing from them and we could do nothing.

In the mountains, including Alavitsa, there was a very large fortification by the Greek Army in bunkers. This prevented the Italians from invading as they could not break through them to get to the territory of Macedonia or northern Greece. But, unfortunately, they found a way in from another area called Ipiro, behind the mountains of Gramos. And so in this way the Italian Army invaded and advanced 40 or 50 kilometres into the Greek territory.

They held that territory for about four or five days but the Greek Army and the Macedonians (together at that time) fighting a common enemy (the Italians who were allied with the Germans) managed to push them back into Albania. The Greek Army started to gain territory inside Albania. They fought an intense battle and took the towns of Korçë, Elbasan and Berat and many other towns in Albania. That war lasted all winter from November to February, all the while pushing the Italians further and further back inside the Albanian territory.

Following Germany's invasion of Poland, they attacked Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria and at the end of spring - March 1941, they entered Greece from the other side of the border between Greece and far eastern Macedonia that was bordering Bulgaria. When that happened, Germany entered Greece and took Salonika and was advancing very fast further south. The Greek Army that had been fighting the Italians in

Albania realised the futility of the fight once Germany had already invaded Greece.

The whole of the Greek Army began to disintegrate and everyone tried to escape and go home any way they could. The only transport was by foot, mule or horse.

They left behind all their ammunition, rifles, bombs and war materials. They put on civilian clothes and headed whichever way they could to get home to whatever village they had come from. The bleakness was apparent as the soldiers trudged down the roads, signs of recent battles all around. The earth was scorched and the once picturesque villages were ravaged and mostly in ruins.

At the time we were hiding in the caves we did not have enough to eat as we could not gather up sufficient food having left so abruptly. We were drinking milk from the sheep and the goats that we kept near us. In the evenings, and only under the cover of darkness, some of the more courageous men would sneak back into the village to hurriedly retrieve some grains like lentils and beans and condiments so that the women could cook up soup while hiding in the caves. Some brave women would even secretly steal back into the village to bake loaves of bread and take them back up to the caves. We scrambled to make an existence.

We stayed away from the village for about six or seven weeks and when the heavy winter arrived in December we returned home again because at that stage the Army during the months of November to March had already pushed the Italians back into Albania.

When we returned we found many of the houses bombarded and so badly damaged that work started immediately to repair them, and that was during a very cold winter and the work was difficult. Sometimes all that remained of a structure was an odd wall or chimney.

In spring, the men and boys (all males between the ages of 20 and 40) that were mobilised in the Army from our village came home one by one from all directions.

I remember my cousin Sotir (Vojché Risto's son) came home with a full beard and was hardly recognizable. I also remember my brother-in-law Tasé arriving home and bringing his horse with him. Tasé was in the cavalry and had a beautiful big horse and we were very happy that there would be such a fine animal in the village. Unfortunately, two young men from our village did not return, they were killed while serving in the Army in the Albanian front.

Chapter 7 – Italian invasion and poverty

In 1941 when the Germans attacked and entered Greece from Bulgaria and the Greek Army disintegrated and fled back to their homes, the Italians were consequently free to enter Greece, which they did from our side. That was about spring/summer of 1941. Our village was inundated by the Italians, whole battalions. Every room in every house had about five or six soldiers occupying it and they wanted food. They seized whatever was spare in the village and that was the start of very bad times.

The Germans and the Italians confiscated all the crops from all the villages. We did not have much in our village, but the other villages suffered greatly by this. They would oversee the harvesting of whatever crops were ready and whatever was produced and they automatically took half from our people.

For our village which was already crop poor compared to other villages, we were in a very difficult situation. Our reserves were gone, food was scarce, there was not enough to sustain life and we were starving.

I recall the first day that the Italian Army entered our village. I was eleven years old at the time. They set up HQ in a house in the centre of the village and on the balcony of that particular house they erected a mysterious box out of which boomed a voice.

I was so fascinated by this box and couldn't work out exactly what it was. I kept wondering where that bloody voice was coming from. I would sit and watch it all the time. Many years later I found out what that strange box was – it was just a radio. I think maybe I might have become a radio technician because of my initial youthful fascination with that mysterious box.

To continue my story, my parents were home with three sons and we were hungry. My father was forced to take the two older boys Pando and Vangel to villages further down closer to Kostur and find them work to eke out a living. Pando went to a family in a village called Zhupanishcha where he worked on their farm for two years from 1941 to 1942 – to earn his keep and Vangel went to the village of Tikveni, across the river from Zhupanishcha and

here he worked as the village shepherd tending to the sheep, just for enough food to avoid starvation.

I was left alone with my parents. My father and I would go into the bush and from the old pine trees he would chop stalks of wood called *burina* which were used much like candles. There was no electricity, not even kerosene lamps, so these *burina* would serve as a light source when the tarred end was lit and burnt. We would chop this wood and load up our bags and take the *burina* down to the other villages and sell them for a kilo of flour, or oil or some bread, just to bring something home to eat.

My father would also make water containers out of wood like little urns or barrels and he would make troughs out of wood for women to wash clothes in. He would load them on his back and head off to sell them. I remember once that I travelled about seven or eight hours away to the village of Dambeni going from house to house to sell these goods, but no-one was interested.

Downhearted and disappointed, I decided I would go to another village to look for customers thinking that maybe I would find someone there to buy something.

An old lady approached me and asked me, "Young man, you still haven't sold the trough?" I replied "No Baba, I haven't sold it, no-one wants it." She must have taken pity on me because she bid me to come into her house. There, she gave me some food, she dried my wet clothes and she filled up the inside of my bag with beans, bread and other food and then she told me to go home. That old lady made me so happy; she saved me from having to go to another village and of course many hours of walking.

I had left at two very early in the morning and finally arrived back home at midnight. I bought that bag of goodies home and my mother was so happy that we would have some food to eat for another two or three days.

I had a very good friend by the name of Yani Manov and we usually went together from village to village, house to house begging for a piece of bread to eat. Some people gave us something, many didn't. In fact, some set their dogs upon us to chase us away and we were very scared. We passed through

many villages but numerous times we went home empty handed. (I was reunited with Yani in 1990 when I went back to Macedonia and we enjoyed talking about the old days.)

Our families had large glass jugs, called *dramijani* that held wine or whisky, and that were covered with knitted yarn on the outside to protect from breakage. Our parents asked us to take these jars to the village of Bozhigrad in Albania to sell them. It was winter and we waded through thick heavy snow as we went from house to house in our bid to sell them.

Finally, one family offered to take them from us and we began to barter what we would get in exchange. The woman had some fresh ricotta cheese straining in a tablecloth and she offered us the cheese. Well, it was better than nothing, so we agreed and we took the ricotta and headed back home towards our village.

As Yani and I walked home, we began to think about that ricotta and our pangs of hunger grew more intense, so we decided to pinch a little portion of it to eat. Further along, we pinched another portion and much further along yet another piece until slowly that ricotta began to dwindle down to practically nothing.

I said to Yani, "There is very little of the ricotta left, what's going to happen when we get home and show our mothers?" Yani said he had a brilliant plan. He said we should eat it all and then we go home and we tell our mothers that the Italians had cornered us and confiscated the *dramijani*.

To set the scene we both started crying and sobbing as we approached our houses and we related our big whopper of a sorry story about the Italians. My mother was so angry, she cursed the Italians and sympathised with us and told us not to worry. We felt very guilty lying to our parents, but unfortunately it was what it was.

Another time four of us boys who were friends decided to go to a few other villages near Kostur. They were the villages of Shak, Revani, Garleni and Zelingrat. Our plan was to divide into two groups of two boys and take the village at opposite ends and go from house to house, beg for food and see what we could get. We

thought this would be the way to cover more ground and collect more food.

When we finished with the first village we moved on to the next and so on. We gladly took flour, a piece of bread or whatever food they chose to give us; it didn't matter, as long as it was edible. We didn't get an enormous amount of food, yet we were grateful and it was substantial enough for us who had none.

Before we were able to go to the last village, night fell and it became very dark. It was too far away to go to the village so we wondered what to do. It was also very cold. We decided to go to the schoolhouse near the village of Garleni and broke a window to get in. Once inside all four of us huddled together to keep warm and that's how we spent the night.

The following morning, we started up again and went to the village – again one group from one side and the other from the opposite and we ended up with our bags loaded with bits and pieces of food donated by the villagers.

We headed back home and before we reached our village, we sat down and emptied our sacks. We divided up all the food equally between the four of us and we took our bounty home to our mothers. We did this so many times, but this was what we had to do to survive.

My father was trying very hard to find work, but in the village there was not much around and no-one had any money to pay you anyway. He was, however, quite a good carpenter and he went to the village of Vidovo behind the mountains in Albania where he was paid to do some work and was able to purchase provisions to bring home to the family to keep us going.

Chapter 8 - Mishaps with a snake and our little mule

As I was so attached to my sister Costandina, when she married Anastasis Pilkadaris in 1936, I was very distressed. Being fifteen or so years older, she was more like a mother to me and I announced to my parents that I was going to go and stay with her. Consequently I spent a large chunk of my early life at her place. Her sons, John and Peter, were very young and her in-laws quite old so she did not have much help to work her farm.

Their farm was a little bit bigger than ours and they weren't as badly off as us because, I think, they had more provisions in reserve. Besides that, my sister's father-in-law had been to America and had saved quite a bit of money and, we believe, had put it into a bank. So they were able to draw on this and were considered not badly off. My brother-in-law Tasé also made a living by going from village to village buying and selling mules or bulls.

One day we went to a farm in Tsrkveno to harvest lentils. When the lentils are ready for harvesting it cannot be done during the day when it is too hot as they are brittle, break easily and everything falls onto the ground.

So we set off in the early hours of the morning, well before the sun came out and started picking the lentils by hand. My sister was next to me and my brother-in-law on the other side. Suddenly, a snake hiding in the bushes bit me on the ring finger of my left hand. It was about 60cms or so long. I screamed and started to wave my hand about frantically in an attempt to shake it off. Having served in the Army and familiar with first-aid my brother-in-law immediately knew what to do.

He took his fob watch from his pocket and removed the chain and wrapped it tightly around the middle of my finger. I was in terrible pain and the finger started to swell. He looked at the finger and told me it was not good. So then he tore pieces of material from his shirt and tied two tourniquets – one on my upper and one on my lower arm.

He then carried me on his back over the river to a small hut in the fields called the *Agovtskoto Polé* where my grandfather's

brother Jajo Kolé - an elderly man close to 100 years old – stayed most of the time. Jajo Kolé was supposed to know exactly what to do when you are bitten by a snake. He took me to the creek and he placed my finger inside the water and then with a prickly pine needle, he pierced tiny holes in the finger at the same time squeezing the blood out of it into the water. He was also chanting some strange words as he carried out this procedure as apparently this was part of the ‘remedy’. And that was it, it took about half an hour and he removed the poison and I felt much better. My brother-in-law then took me back to the farm.

Tasé had another plot of land high up near the foothills and grew rye there. We would often go there to cut the hay and bring it down to the village. Firstly we would cut it, turn it over to dry, make bales then load up the mules and bring it down to the village to feed the animals during winter.

Tasé was also a good businessman and he opened up a small store behind his house where people would go during the day to play cards. His house was very close to the centre of the village.

He sold some goods there like olives, salt, fish and other supplies we would bring home from the market. I would go to the market, together with a friend of mine to buy stock for this shop.

One particular day, we were heading to the town of Nestram and my mule slipped over in the water at one of the little creeks and fell down. I screamed when I saw its injury. One of its legs was sticking up in the air. I yelled out to my companion who was walking just in front of me to come back and help because I was so distressed at what I was seeing. The mule’s leg wasn’t broken but was completely dislocated at its shoulder and facing upwards. I told him to go on to Nestram, ring Tasé and tell him what happened and ask him come back here.

I stayed there waiting for two or three hours until my brother-in-law arrived along with my brother Vangel.

We somehow managed to take that poor mule hobbling, skipping along on three legs and sweating from the pain further up where there were some people called *Vlahsi* (a minority group in Greece

who tended to be shepherds), who we believed knew what to do in such circumstances.

They tried desperately to put that leg back into its socket, but to no avail. They told us to go to a place called Zabardeni, three hours away where there was a person who knew exactly what to do. It took about a day but we eventually got there. That man tried very hard but he too could not do a thing to help the poor mule.

Eventually little by little, with that poor animal jumping and hobbling slowly, we took him back to our village. The journey took us two days. Nothing could be done for it. That little mule spent its days wandering around the river, eating grass and then when winter set in and there was no food, we couldn't keep it because we couldn't feed it, and sadly my father killed it.

I still have a mental image of the exact spot it happened. We used its skin to make some *pinci* (moccasins). It was very sad because it had been a very strong mule.

Sometimes when I took it to the market in Kostur and loaded up its back, I too would hop on top and it was capable of carrying me as well.

Chapter 9 - Formation of Liberation Army and Resistance Brigade

Well, the war had started and the occupying forces entered Greece and Macedonia. There was no government, everything was disintegrating, and the country was in turmoil. There was no army, no defence and no law and order. The King, George II and his government officials took their families and escaped to Cairo in Egypt and hid themselves there while the turmoil gathered force. They had formed a government-in-exile which was recognized by the Western Allies.

Everything collapsed. The Germans and the Italian occupation forces set up their own sort of government and they basically did as they pleased. In the cities of Athens, Salonika and other big towns, people were dying in the streets from lack of food. It was very bad. In the country, we too were struggling hard.

In our village, because of the lack of land to cultivate to produce food, it was also extremely difficult. Some villages that had more productive land fared a little better. And that is why as I said earlier my two brothers Pando and Vangel were engaged to work in the other villages. And that was only during the spring and summer months. During winter, they too had to come home. No-one would keep and feed you during those unproductive months – no work, no food.

For some unknown reason in Albania there was a plentiful supply of salt. In our Greek side, there was none. So we would go into the bush and chop down timber. Two men would use saws, one at the top, one underneath and cut the logs into two or three metre lengths. Then we would split the timber into planks and take them to the villages in Albania and trade them for salt and beans (*fasul* or *bop*) and we would load this produce on our backs and head back to the villages on our side and sell or exchange the beans and the salt for wheat, corn, or rye so that we could make bread for us to eat.

These trips would take a whole day to get there and a whole day to get back. I remember my brother Panayoti had a large family and they suffered greatly from lack of food and many times I

accompanied him on this regular trip to Albania to take planks and exchange them for food.

In the autumn of 1941, people began to organize a Resistance Brigade against the occupiers. In the mountains and woods men armed themselves with rifles and guns and slowly the Resistance began to take shape. This Resistance formed in the rugged mountain terrain of our country simply because it would have been harder for occupying forces to fight against them there.

Slowly it spread all over Greece and by 1942 it was already well organized with thousands of people and it was called the Greek Liberation Army. The Macedonian Liberation Army was the movement aligned with the Greeks. They were fighting together against their common enemy the German Nazis and the Italians.

The civilians in the towns organised a Resistance movement in the front called the National Liberation Front (*Naroden Osloboditen Front - NOF*). All the while the Italians and Germans carried on with their atrocities in our country. They plundered everything that was produced, leaving no food for our people to eat. First they took what they wanted and if there was anything left then well and good but if not then there was not much that could be done about it. Thus were the struggles and hardships endured during those years of 1941-44. They were terrible days, months and years.

I remember one instance when I went into Kostur to get some goods or something, I noticed that when the German Army or a German soldier marched down the middle of the street, the people had to stop, stand on either side and bow their heads as a sign of respect. One elderly man whom I assume might have been deaf or even half blind didn't notice the German officer thundering down the street. When the German saw that he hadn't bowed in deference to him, he swore at the man, pulled out his pistol and fired two or three shots killing him instantly. An old man who did no harm to anyone was simply cut down on the whim of a lunatic.

Another time a couple of men from our village went to another village to chop trees for timber. When the Germans passed through the village, they saw the men and killed them. They had

accused them of being partisans or collaborators, but this was not true. Two people from our village died for absolutely no reason other than trying to carry out work to help them survive.

This is how ruthless the occupiers were and these types of attacks on the local villagers occurred frequently.

Chapter 10 – Life as a *momok* and more boyhood mishaps

In 1942 Pando and Vangel went back to the two villages they had been working at the previous year and my father decided that I too should be sent somewhere to work to earn my keep. He took me to a village called Grach (about 4 hours away from my village). I was laboured out to two old people who had no children, Dedo Gigo and Baba Gigovitsa. This was known as being a *momok* - meaning simply you worked to be fed with no pay.

They wanted someone to be with them and to help them out during the spring and summer months, so my father left me there to work and be fed.

Those two people were very kind and compassionate to me. They looked after me as if I was their own child. Baba would take my clothes after work and dry them. She made sure I was always warm in my room, giving me blankets. During the day when I went to the farm to work I always enjoyed good food like cheese and bread and other nice things she'd pack in my bag.

I was only thirteen years old at the time but I did all sorts of work, such as ploughing, harvesting and going out with the mule to load wood.

The mule was a very nasty animal and it would always threaten me with her snarling teeth and shove her head menacingly towards me. Because I was small, I was always asking the bigger boys to catch that stubborn old mule and load it up for me.

One day while we were harvesting the wheat, I sliced my thumb so badly that I still bear that scar as a souvenir of those times. Nevertheless, during all of spring and summer I spent with those two kind people I was very happy because my stomach was full.

Some of the mountain areas had already been liberated by the Liberation Movement and these front line partisans required food for their army and many times we would load the mules, sometimes 10 or 15 of them with food, materials and ammunition and go from one village to another where they had their unit bases.



Ploughing the fields

Transporting these items up into the mountains would generally take us a couple of days. This happened from our village but in particular when I was in Grach, every second week we had to go *ungaria* (the word meaning to get the load of stock from one village and take it further away where it was needed). This was repeated time and time again, from one village then another.

As I have previously mentioned, in 1941 when the Greek Army disintegrated from the front in Albania, the soldiers passed through the villages on their way home and they left a lot of different war materials, ammunition, guns, dynamite and clothes. These items were scattered everywhere among the bushes.

One family, the Parzhinkas' I believe they were called, had three sons; the eldest one was my age. They went into the bush and found a grenade. Full of curiosity they started to play around with it. Unfortunately, they pulled the pin. The eldest one died instantly. The second boy was wounded and lost his arm and the third one was injured very badly and lost the sight of his eyes. The family was devastated – three brothers killed or maimed.

We would find bullets everywhere. With youthful thoughtlessness, we'd remove the front part of the bullet, empty

the powder from the shell and the shell would be left with the detonator. We would then put the shell on a rock and hit it with something heavy like an axe or similar. It would make a loud noise as it exploded.

One day a group of boys, about ten of us, went up to the church and we started mucking about with the bullets on the church steps. One of the boys, Todoř Zhutov, said "Now it's my turn". He put the shell down to hit it with the hammer while the rest went around to the back of the shed to watch safely from a distance. I decided that I would stay and watch him and see what happens.

When he slammed down on the shell, the detonator flew out of the shell and back into my eye just below my brow. Blood started to flow. I wondered how I was going to go home and tell my parents (the thought that I was alive seemed to be secondary compared to how my parents would react).

Crying, I made my way home. My parents were aghast. They asked what happened. I told them that Todoř smashed the shell and it hit my eye. My father was so angry he threatened to kill the boy. I felt guilty, the fault wasn't entirely his, and I was also to blame. I was the one who wanted to get a birds-eye-view of the action. Unfortunately, I did. The detonator particle was lodged in my left eye area for quite a while and then one day, it just popped out.

I found out much later that this little mishap actually damaged a nerve somewhat impairing the sight in that eye. Boys and curiosity in that circumstance did not mix, I could have been blinded.

During this time, the school would open intermittently for the village children. The two teachers lived in our village. When the Liberation Movement liberated our area and it was under their command, the school continued more frequently.

I would go to school every now and again when I wasn't working in Grach, of course.



Typical Village school

Chapter 11 – Fire and devastation - Our village burns

In the summer of 1942 the Germans realised that the Liberation Movement was gaining strength. They knew that one of the strongholds was our territory up in Gramos. They decided to attack and take command of the four villages along the river (Omatsko, Pilcati, Yanoveni and Slimnitsa). Their plan was to burn and destroy these villages and disrupt the Movement's fortification in Gramos. From the town of Kozhani, three battalions - one brigade – commenced their mission to destroy those four villages. They came with tanks that ripped the earth, trucks and a large strong army.

The people in the villages had been alerted to the impending attack so knew they must evacuate. The Germans came and set fire to all the houses in all the four villages. Later, some people managed to save their houses if the fire hadn't take a stronghold, but the majority were destroyed.

From about 100 houses in the village, only about 10 or 15 were saved. A few walls were still standing and even those slowly starting collapsing. We watched the inferno from far away in the mountains and we all cried. Winter was fast approaching and everyone was wondering where they were going to live.

The Germans didn't stay for long, only a couple of days. After they burnt the village they went back to Kozhani. When we came back to village, our hearts sank at the sight of the destruction and devastation. The village was decimated, the land was scorched. We would have to start rebuilding from the beginning again. We went back into the bush to cut timber and cart stones and anything else we could get hold of to get our houses up again before the winter set in.

I remember travelling maybe an hour to an hour and half away to bring back long pieces of timber, two by two – maybe 50 in all for the roof rafters. Then the roof needed covering and we did this by using stone that we found from an area in the mountain range. This stone could be split easily into slats about 20mm thick that were quite large. These were placed one on top of the other on the roof and thus shielded us from the elements.

Slowly, little by little, we rebuilt the houses and our village.

During the war time of 1942, my brother Pando having reached 18 years of age was now eligible to join the Liberation Army in their fight against the occupation. In 1943 my brother Vangel aged 17 was also allowed to join the Liberation Army, but in the capacity of a policeman in the town, because he was not yet 18. So both my brothers were now in the Liberation Army.

I was in Grach at the time.

Chapter 12 – Work in Zheleni and malaria

In the summer of 1943 my father took me to another village called Zheleni to be a *momok* again. My time spent in this village was both an unpleasant and sad experience for me.

The family I was left to labour for were an elderly couple with a daughter, her husband and their two children aged about five and seven. They were a disagreeable family, very nasty and unfeeling. Nevertheless, I stayed there and continued to work for them even though they were very unkind and hard on me and could not reconcile the difficulty I had as a young boy carrying out the tasks they had given me.

It was a very prosperous village and they owned large farms that were long and flat. In the morning, I would harness up their two water buffalos to pull the double plough and go out and plough the fields, 35-40cms deep, turning the soil.

The man would take me there in the morning to position the animals and then leave me for the rest of day, all day, to do the work by myself. All morning I would plough back and forth over and over until mid-day.

At mid-day the buffalos would have to rest, so I would remove the harnesses from their necks away from the plough and take them down to the river nearby. Those buffalos loved the water and they would submerge themselves with just their heads showing and even though they were only supposed to be there for an hour or so, I couldn't get them out of the water and experienced great difficulty bringing them back to the field to work. That was my job, day after day.

When I came back from working in the fields, I was never invited inside the house. In fact during the whole time I worked for them, I never once stepped foot inside their home. I was simply not permitted. I slept on a straw bed in a corner of the stable with the buffalos, the cows and other livestock. The two children would bring some food out to me and I would eat my meals in the stable.

On Saturdays I would go to work in the vineyards and on Sundays I tended the sheep. I would say this was the most difficult and harshest experience for me in my youth and to make matters worse I became very sick.

I contracted malaria. In the morning I would start to feel so very cold and the chill and the shivers would set in and I shook for an hour or so. No amount of blankets could warm my body. Then suddenly the cold would dissipate and the temperature would spike and rise to over 40 degrees. The fever would send me into delirium and I wouldn't know where I was. This continued every second day or so. I felt so badly that I made a decision to go home. I thought I'm not going to stay here to die; I might as well go home and die sick and starving there with my parents.

So I decided to shoot through one Saturday morning. I was to go and tend the sheep that day, so I took them into the paddock and left them there and just took off. It was a nine hour walk back to my village. I started at ten in the morning and at about an hour and a half into my journey, the symptoms of my illness resurfaced. The chill set in and then I started shaking; I didn't know what to do. I went off the road and walked further down into a valley and sat under a tree shivering and shaking with the cold.

Then my temperature rose and I had no idea how long I was out of it because when I finally came to the sun was well into the late afternoon position. I realised it would be dark before I reached my home. I knew I had to carry on but I felt so weak. I had to pass through mountains and the woods and as it was getting darker, I became very afraid that I might encounter a bear or worse.

Slowly I shuffled step by difficult step and finally arrived home just before midnight. Our front gate was shut and I lingered there, sick and disheartened. As I sat down by the gate, I wondered how I was going to tell my parents that I had abandoned my job.

Suddenly, the door opened and out stepped my mother and father. It was Easter and they were about to go to church for the midnight mass. They were very surprised to find me sitting near

the front gate and my mother asked me what had happened. I could not stop crying as I told them all that had taken place. I said, "I'm sick and I can't stay there any more." They comforted me and said not to worry; they were just happy to see me.

Even now when I recall that particular time I have such intense feelings and emotions welling up inside me that I forget the passage of time and my recollections are just as vivid as when they happened.

That summer of 1943 I stayed home and during all that season the malaria played havoc with my health – attacks occurring every second day. I became very weak physically, lost a lot of weight and developed jaundice.

I was so sick that my mother decided to take me to the village of Tul (one or two hours away from Yanoveni) where an elderly woman was purported to have had some method of healing jaundice. She placed a shaving razor at the back of my ear and hit down on it with a wooden spoon. It cuts a certain vein there and if it bleeds and the blood runs it was supposed to be a good thing – the person would be healed. I bled.

I remember another mother taking her son who suffered from jaundice at the same time as we went and the elderly woman carried out the same procedure and apparently his ear did not bleed. The woman was not happy and remarked that it was not good thing. Later I heard that the boy, who was a little older than me, had apparently died, but his illness was much more serious – he also suffered from tuberculosis.

That summer the jaundice went away but the attacks of malaria lingered with the episodes coming every three days, then four days, then five and so on until slowly over a couple of years they eventually disappeared.

Chapter 13 – The Liberation Army and the Treaty of Varkiza

In the meantime by the end of 1943, the National Liberation Movement was getting stronger and stronger and had spread all over Greece. In the free territories that the NOF had under their control they started to establish populace councils, schools recommenced to function, they set up populace courts and some form of law and order was established by the provisional government set up by the Liberation Army. The political wing of this Movement was the Communist Party of Greece and Macedonia.

I remember attending school in 1943 and 1944. It wasn't operating regularly but, nevertheless, most of the time there was at least a functioning school during that period, although it only went to grade 6 or 7 level.

I had been a competent student and always had good results, mostly at drawing and arithmetic. We would practice map drawing of different regions of Greece and would have to colour them in and many of the students would come to ask me to help them with theirs. I feel I had a technical know-how even then.

During the time when the Army passed through the village and left a lot of their materials in the woods, I would make knitting needles for the women out of old telephone wiring that I found. They would reward me with an egg in exchange for a pair of knitting needles. I would fashion wooden guns and rifles for the boys to play with and because my father had a lot of tools and timber, they would hang around my house and watch on with interest.

This love of making and fixing and using my hands has endured to this day as I still enjoy building and putting together all sorts of things.

The older men from our village joined the Liberation Army. My brothers, Panayoti, Pando and Vangel had all joined including my brother-in-law Tasé. In fact, everyone over seventeen had joined to fight the enemy - the Germans and the Italians.

Tasé was a Major and lead a whole battalion because he had been an officer in charge of a large platoon when he had been in the Greek Army fighting the Italians. Panayoti was a supply officer for an even bigger unit, a brigade, in charge of all the supplies for the soldiers.

The whole Liberation Movement during the occupation was under British protection because at that time the great powers - the Americans, the Russians and the British had divided the front how they best saw fit to operate and defeat the enemy. Greece and Albania fell under the British protection. There were also some British officers serving and fighting in the Liberation Army.

There was a very flat area up in Vicho Planina in the Lerinsko region near the village of Precopana where beacons would be lit but only at night. The aeroplanes would fly over and drop down large parcels and supplies of clothes, ammunition, machine guns, food, etc. Every night we could hear the planes carrying out their regular parachute drops. My brother Pando would be there to take charge of the supplies and spread delivery of the items to where they were needed by the Liberation Army.

The war ended in December 1944, and the Germans were forced to withdraw from Greece because of the pressure on all fronts by the Allies and of course the Liberation Army.

[Such Liberation Armies existed in many countries such as Albania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia – the latter had the largest number of partisans at that time and the Germans needed 18 divisions in their army to counteract the partisans in that country.]

The British drew up a treaty, called the Treaty of Varkiza, between the Greek Liberation Army and the Greek government officials who had deserted the country to save their own skins in 1941 when the Germans occupied Greece.

This was when they left the people behind to face the conflict while they set up a provisional government in the safety of Cairo. They now returned to a free country and proposed a free election and said they would do whatever the people wanted. The Communist Party which was the political wing of the Democratic Army of Greece decided to lay down their arms and wait for a free election which was supposed to take place on 31st March 1946.

Signing that Treaty was the Communist Party's biggest mistake.

The Varkiza period between December 1944 and 31st March 1946, saw the most tumultuous and turbulent time in Greece and Macedonia. It was an absolutely terrible period and as a result it precipitated a turn of events that began yet another war known as the Greek Civil War.

The soldiers and government officials (who were the extreme right wing and were supporting the British policies against the Communist Party which really liberated Greece from the occupiers) returned from Cairo.

Of course, with the full support and monetary backing of England, they went into the villages and with promises of remuneration, told the people there that when the elections are held this is how to vote. I remember an Englishman coming to our home with a full bag of English gold sovereigns and offering two or three gold sterlings for us to buy a cow or a horse or whatever we needed. The villagers, suffering great poverty, wanted and needed the money and so this is how the people's vote was bought.

After the war years of 1944-45 when the Germans and the Italians had left, a short period of peace prevailed and happiness returned in the village, as people celebrated liberation after Nazi occupation, despite the fact that a lot of terrible events were still happening in villages further away. The people started celebrating events again and many decided to get married.

One of these people was my brother Pando and he married a young girl named Maria and that was a happy occasion for our family.



Wedding photo of Pando and Maria in the village of Yanoveni, 1946

When Election Day arrived in March 1946, the Communist Party declared that they would not take part in that election. They decided to take up arms again and fight against the new regime and establish their own socialist democratic government which was their political platform.

You cannot imagine the turmoil and agitation that occurred during that period of December 1944 to March 1946. A provisional government was set up consisting mostly of returnees from Egypt lead by George Papandreou (the grandfather of today's Greek prime minster – George Papandreou).

They set up a police force (funded by Britain) that came into the villages and they began to arrest all people who were in and loyal to the Liberation Army. Thousands of people were arrested and put into the concentration camps of Makronisos and Gioura and many other gaols. Greece was re-equipped with weaponry and ammunition supplied and backed by the Western Allies.

I recall the police coming to our village to arrest Liberation Army sympathisers.

In Pilcati they arrested three young men and took them over the mountains to the village of Kalevishcha where there was a police station and they were beaten so badly the young men died. I

remember those men being brought back through our village on stretchers to be buried in their own village.

Scenes like this were repeated all over Greece and Macedonia as war loomed yet again and that is why many people who were fighting in the Liberation Army against Germany and Italy were forced, so as not to be jailed, to flee to the mountains.

That is how the second arms struggle commenced and led to the Civil War in Greece and Macedonia. That war cost Greece and Macedonia ten times more in destruction and loss of lives than WWII in Greece had cost.

I was one of those people who joined the struggle in the Civil War and during that time I lost my two brothers Pando and Vangel and I ended up with one leg. Many people say we didn't know what we were doing but it was not like that. If you were in that situation at that time you were forced to do that. There was so much suffering.

During the period of the occupation that lasted four years from 1941 to 1944 only three people were lost from our village - my first cousin Micho, Yani Kachamakakis and the son of our teacher Mr. Shukas. But during the Civil War, we lost over 45 young men from Yanoveni. You can compare this statistic all over Greece and it gives you an idea of the extent of the loss and suffering endured. This was the result, as I have said earlier, of that unfortunate decision by the Communist Party in signing the Treaty of Varkiza.

Albania, for instance, which is a much smaller country, was also under the occupation of the Italians, and they too had a Liberation Army. In the end, when Italy and Germany pulled out of Albania they did not sign any treaty and told Britain (under whose protection they were) *No – go away – we are a free country now and we don't need you anymore*. They stayed strong in their decision and in 1945 they established a socialist sort of system in their country, but in Greece our result was much different and had far reaching consequences.

Even in today's parliament in Greece, they realise and admit that the result of the 1945 policies which brought on the Civil War cost

Greece dearly, the losses not being confined to only one side (i.e. the partisans) but the government forces suffered greatly as well. If there was no Civil War, much death would have been avoided.

It has taken many years for the Greek government to finally acknowledge that it was a wrong decision and the partisans of the Civil War are now afforded the same recognition, pensions and privileges as the soldiers of the government army at that time.

They recognize that the partisans as well were fighting for freedom against the oppressors.

For us Macedonians who lived as a separate nationality in Macedonia under the Greeks, in the war against Nazi Germany and Italy we were fighting together. The political platform of the Communist Party that time was that - *Yes, we will fight our common enemy together and when we win and set up a government, we will give the Macedonian people equal rights like the Greeks. Rights to have our own schools, speak our own language, have our own churches and use our own names, to be equal and not have any discrimination between Greeks and Macedonians.*

So the Macedonians were fighting alongside the Greeks with a dual purpose in their fight – firstly, to liberate against their common enemy - their occupiers - and secondly, to gain equal political and economic rights with the Greeks as minority Macedonians in Greece.

In some villages further down in Prespa and Lerin in the free areas, Macedonian culture flourished somewhat in that there were schools set up that were teaching the Macedonian language, Macedonian language newspapers were printed and so there were some signs that our expectations would eventuate if the Communist Party established a government in Greece at that time. (Later as the government forces approached, these facilities were shut down or destroyed).

Despite the fact that the official political platform of the Party was to grant equal rights to the Macedonians, there were signs that things were not exactly right. There were some conflicts and arguments occurring even within the Liberation forces. To give

an example, we had a battalion in Vicho Planina in Lerinsko where the whole battalion comprised of Macedonians and the Greek officers were resentful when the soldiers sang Macedonian songs and spoke their language among other things. There were some discriminatory remarks made.

So the Greeks and the Macedonians within the Liberation Army came into conflict. The Liberation Army wanted to disintegrate the battalion and distribute all the Macedonians amongst the other Greek units and this was wrong.

In that particular battalion the Major in charge by the name of Goché took his whole battalion and went and joined up with the Macedonian forces fighting in Yugoslavia against the Germans. So, you can see some cracks started to appear even then as early as 1944 in Vicho.

Chapter 14 – Civil unrest, persecution and rearmed again

I remember that period 1944-46, there were many demonstrations happening in numerous towns and villages across Macedonia and Greece. In our village, every couple of weeks, we would go to Kostur with large banners and signs to demonstrate and protest against the oppressive policies of the provisional government policies which were under the direction of the British.

We called for the British to go away. Our protests were in vain. We called out to the British Governor in Kostur, named Vengeŕ, “*Go away Vengeŕ, Out Vengeŕ!*” That happened in all the towns, massive demonstrations and yet nothing could be done. The oppressive policies continued.

On 31st March 1946, the election was held and the Communist Party declared their intention to hand in blank voting ballot papers and not participate in the vote. They instructed everyone who supported them to hand in blank forms, i.e. vote for no-one. As a result of that, the right wing party, supported by the British, won everywhere. They had no opposition whatsoever. They won all the seats and the Communist Party was thrown out of the government completely and declared illegal in Greece.

After the election, a government serving the British interest in Greece with George Papandreou was formed.

The atrocities became greater and more severe. More and more people were persecuted and thrown in jail. By mid 1946 there were 120,000 people – freedom fighters – thrown into jail and the concentration camps. Many thousands were tortured, imprisoned and executed by firing squad without the benefit of trial upon claims of activities against the Greek state.

The Communist Party announced that everyone should arm themselves again and go into the mountains and start another struggle against the monarcho-fascist regime, the newly perceived enemy, the extreme right wing power in Greece.

I remember they came into our village from the police station in Kalivishcha and brought a list of names of young men that had to report for recruitment into the Greek Army. Among them were

my brother Pando and seven or eight others. The men were ordered on a specific date to go to Kostur and present themselves there to be recruited into the Greek Army.

When the day arrived to present themselves at the office in Kostur, they pre-arranged with the partisan organisation (who were already established in the mountains) that on the way to Kalivishcha passing through thick woods, they would be '*captured*' and therefore not be able to report to Kostur.

That was the first group from our village in about July 1946 that actually joined the partisan force. All over Greece, the ex-fighters of the occupation took up arms to fight again.

As a consequence of the above action, the fathers of those young men were called to the police station in Kalivishcha to be questioned as to the whereabouts of their sons and why they had joined the partisans. They were treated very harshly and beaten badly.

When they had laid down their arms in 1944, all the people knew that it was a wrong decision and they cried, "We liberated our country and now we are handing this liberated country over to people who did nothing." As if by some foresight, the people knew they would be using their rifles again and they would put down one weapon but bring another to hide in the village for when the time came to take it up again.

My two brothers and I took two rifles and decided to hide them. We took them to the other side of the river and dug a hole under a tree there. We layered lots of grease over them to keep them oiled and wrapped the rifles up in tar paper so no moisture would rust the weapons and then we buried them. We knew a time would come to retrieve them and resume our fight back in the mountains.

The government forces were still patrolling the border between Albania and Greece. Along the border, say every three or four kilometres, were groups of soldiers at guard posts all the way down right around the border. These posts were numbered from 30, 29, 28 etc. going down.

The Army there had aligned themselves with the Communist Party and they had very close contact with the partisans.

One afternoon, I remember the partisans came to our village and told us they would be taking over the border guard posts. Unbeknownst to us, it was already pre-arranged between themselves and the border guards. So they came to the village and said they needed someone to take them to number 29 and 30 posts (the posts closest to our village).

Another boy and I were chosen to take the partisans to number 29. It was snowing and as we travelled right up to the mountain I was sure there would be some conflict when we reached our destination. But, it was quite the contrary. The border guards were waiting for us, it had all been pre-arranged, and even down to what time we would arrive. There was food and drink and greetings between the men, it was like a party.

All the border posts were deserted by the Greek Army and they joined the partisans. Even their commander who was further up

in the village of Pilcati (the headquarters) patrolling the border was captured and they brought him and all the Greek soldiers into our village.

Our village was full of government forces soldiers still dressed in their uniforms. They were happy and dancing in the middle of the village because they were about to join the partisans. Even their commanding officer eventually joined the partisans and from memory I believe he was even training them before they set out to fight.

This was happening all over Greece where many soldiers were deserting the Greek Army and joining the partisans. This occurred around the end of 1946 and early 1947.

As a consequence of the disbanding of the border guard posts, a large area of northern Gramos along the border with Albania became completely free. The government forces could not penetrate it as the partisans were controlling the whole mountain area from Nestram to Alavitsa and an area 40-50kms by 30kms west of the river and so that pocket became a free zone. The partisans began to build their stronghold there and were guarding and defending their fortification very strongly. They built a hospital and stored all the supplies received from Albania and other democratic countries there.

The government forces were firing their cannons from the north 25kms or so away, but because the village was nestled down in the hollow behind the mountain, the heavy artillery shells came well over the mountain and did not hit the village but exploded over the other side of the river.

There were, of course, the aeroplanes that flew over and bombarded the area many times. We built bunkers under every house and when we heard the aeroplanes coming we hid in the bunkers until they had gone.

This happened two or three times a day, and they did do a lot of damage and reduced many houses to rubble.

Chapter 15 - Village exodus and work in Albania

In the spring of 1947, the government forces started a serious offensive to penetrate and capture the area of Gramos and carried out numerous attacks to push the partisans back and secure the area of Alavitsa along the border. The partisans, however, were fighting very strongly during the months of April and May and the army could not break through.

The situation became critical. The intensity of the bombardment, the shelling, the artillery and the aeroplanes was so heavy, the partisans decided to order evacuation of the villages and so the children and the shell-shocked civilian population of the four villages along the river were evacuated. That day in July 1947 marked the exodus from our village. No-one was to return ever again.

The village population divided and some went towards Albania, others towards Kostur. Some had families working in Greece in Sveta Gora and others had husbands in Australia and were hoping to be able to join them.

My parents went towards Kostur. They were looking after my brother Panayoti's four children (Sotir, Urania, Pasco and Tomé) as Panayoti's wife Efrosini died in 1946 after giving birth to Tomé.) My brother Pando's wife had also given birth to a boy Pavle in July 1947 and he was only six days old when they took him and the other children to the small village of Dobrolishcha near Kostur and spent the whole winter there.

Most of the villagers went to Albania as did I. My cousin Giorgi told me if I go to Kostur the Greek army would recruit me so he convinced me to go with him and other families to Albania. We left the village, crossed the border and went into Albania as refugees.

We thought we would return very quickly when the Greek offensive had finished, but unfortunately this was not to be.



***Maria (Pando's wife), Vangel, cousin Aspacia
c. 1947***

In Albania there were many refugees from numerous villages and they took us to a place just outside of the town of Korçë and they brought food to feed us. It was a very difficult soul defeating feeling to be a refugee. We were given work to do in groups. One group went to harvest wheat, another corn and so on in the farms and we were working again just to be fed.

When harvesting finished they took us to another place called Përrenjas further deep down in Albania where there were barracks left from the Italian occupation in that country and those barracks were burnt and destroyed with only crumbling walls standing. They told us this would be where we would stay.

It was September, approaching October, and in autumn there is a lot of rain in Albania and winter was ready to set in. They bought us two old trucks, tools, saws and axes and we headed out into the woods, which were quite a distance away, to cut down trees and make them into planks to cover the barracks so that we would not freeze. We did this everyday, despite the heavy rain, cutting the wood, loading the trucks and making the planks until the barracks eventually had a roof.

Within a month the job was complete. Every family living inside had about five or six square metres to themselves and they would huddle around their own fire. There might have been 20 families in each barrack.

We slept and lived there and they would bring us food. The conditions were so miserable, in fact unbearable, that quite a few people died. My cousin Sofia died there from hyperthermia.

Another woman gave birth to a child and died soon after from the chill she'd caught and so did many others. We were fed on leek and water soup. It is hard to describe the appalling conditions.

Yani Manov (who had also come to Albania with his family) and I'd had enough and decided to leave, so illegally without permission of the people in charge, we shot through and walked along the road and finished up in one town called Elbasan. It took two and a half days.

We were very careful as we went along and if we heard a truck we would scamper off the road and hide in the bush until it was clear because we knew if we were spotted they would bring us back to the camp.

When we reached Elbasan we found there was some youth groups organized who were carrying out voluntary work digging canals or channels to redirect the river to reticulate the area. So we joined this Albanian youth brigade, boys aged about 19 or 20, who were basically working just for their food. But here, we had really good food. They cooked a lot of spaghetti and it was delicious. We were there for about a month or so.

When that work was finished, we wondered where we'd go from there. We found out that in another town of Berat, a lot of the boys from the same brigade were going there to redirect the river through a large flooded area where they were growing rice. They took us along with them.

We were digging with shovels – no machines. The channel was about 4 metres wide and 4 metres deep. They had two bulldozers pushing the sand further away at each end of the tunnel. There were hundreds of us working there.

Work soon finished here as well. Where do we go now? We found they were building a train tunnel between Elbasan and another town called Durrës through the mountain and decided to join the work detail.

This would be the first railway line in Albania. The Yugoslav brigade was working from the Durrës side and from the Elbasan side was the Albanian brigade. These two were supposed to meet in the middle of the mountain. It was hard pushing trolleys full of rubble in and out of that tunnel. We were there five or six weeks and we had no pay but they fed us well. I remember the day when the tunnel was completed there was a big celebration.

On opening day we lined up just inside the entry of the tunnel. On one side of the railway line was the Albanian brigade and on the other side the Yugoslav brigade. When the first train came from Durrës to Elbasan it brought the two leaders, Marshal Josip Broz Tito from Yugoslavia and the Albanian leader Enver Hodža.

When they exited the train, Tito went to the side of the Albanian workers and shook everyone's hand and Enver Hodža did the same to the Yugoslav workers. There were maybe 600 or 700 hundred young men in each brigade who had laboured on this tunnel.

This was very exciting for me and I remember I stood in awe as Marshal Tito shook my hand. He was a big powerful looking man resplendent in full military regalia complete with embellishments.

He exuded an aura and inspirational presence about him. I recollect it was the first time that I had actually seen someone dressed like him and it was quite an inspiring experience to shake the hand of someone who was one of the most powerful figures and revolutionaries of that time.

He led the Yugoslav partisans in what was the strongest and most effective anti-fascist resistance movement in Yugoslavia during 1941-45.

For our next job, we found out that in the town of Durrës, there was work in a wood yard chopping wood for household fires. The owner of the wood yard would bring in the wood from the forest

and we would cut one metre lengths into three pieces and split the timber. Here, the man in charge was actually paying us. We were only earning a small wage but we were at least able to buy ourselves some food. Yani and I spent most of our money on cakes. They were selling the most delicious little cakes there.

Yani and I also went to the picture theatre and at that time they were showing a film of the partisans fighting the Germans and I remember how exciting it was to watch this film. We sat through one film session at four in the afternoon to six and then we stayed there and watched it from six to eight and then again from eight to ten.

When the people left the theatre between sessions we would hide behind the curtains and when the lights dimmed again, we snuck out. We watched the same film three times, just about every day. Yani Manov was my very close friend and I have many fond memories of him.

We stayed in Durrës until about the end of January - early February and that was my life in Albania from July 1947 to January 1948.

Chapter 16 - I join the partisans

While we were in Durrës working in the wood yard, we met a couple of men who were from Slimnitsa who had family in Përrenjas. They too were working to earn money to feed their family. We subsequently learnt from them that a commission was coming to Përrenjas to recruit more partisans, so Yani and I made the decision to go back to Përrenjas and enlist with the partisans.

We took the new train from Durrës passing through the tunnel to Elbasan. From Elbasan, to get to Përrenjas that was 70 or 80 kms further up we had to travel through area that was mountainous and along a river and our only transport was our own feet. The road went upwards and walking took us a couple of days. On occasions, we hitched a ride on a truck or two that passed us by. We reached Përrenjas and enlisted in February. The weather was still cold and the area was thick with snow.



They took a group of about 60 or 70 young men, (Yani and I had just turned 18) in a truck and drove us to the border in Albania to a place called Kuteza just behind the village of Pilcati and from there onwards the road ended, there was no more road to go further up. So, we walked to Slimnitsa and then to Pilcati and then through my village of Yanoveni. Of course, there were no people in the villages. Since 1947, they were all but abandoned save for some partisans. We proceeded southeast to the village of Zherma, where there was a training camp for new partisan recruits.

We joined many other men there and were armed with rifles and machine guns and trained how to dismantle, clean and put the weapons back together. We attended lectures and intensive training which took only about three weeks. We slept in the

houses in the village of Zherma and during the day carried out our exercises, lectures and training in the fields on the other side of the river.

Following this, we were divided into units, and after all this time together, I was separated from my friend Yani as he and I were sent to separate units. I was sent to the youth battalion which was comprised of men less than twenty three years of age. We were stationed in the village of Pefkofito and from there we had missions down towards Rupishcha and Kostur and carried out attacks at certain places.

At times, our nightly mission also was to cross the river and go close to Kostur and Rupishcha, obtain food and supplies and come back again. We did this quite often. This was in the second half of March. This was how our youth battalion operated.

In 1947 the partisans had pockets of Movements that were operating all over Macedonia and all over Greece right down to the Peloponnese.

In Aegean Macedonia, the largest concentrated pocket of area operated by the partisans was called Gramos and our villages are in the top section of this area.

Another area was Vicho, known as Vicho Planina and also other pockets along the border like Kaimakchilan and Paiko and further up more pockets in the mountain area and in Mount Olympus. These were all numbered in divisions.

As time passed and the partisans were expanding, in the spring of 1948 the government forces decided to lodge a strong offensive against the partisans in an attempt to clear them up.

That time the leadership of the partisan movement decided that if they were in small units all over Greece, they would be more vulnerable to be attacked and destroyed, so they decided to concentrate on taking the smaller pockets and bringing them all to Gramos and Vicho, the two largest free areas held by the partisans.

The partisans had plans to make bunkers and fortify themselves in those areas and defend themselves against any attack.

Our slogan then was '*The enemy will not pass in Gramos and Vicho*'. So, consequently, they pulled all their forces and concentrated them in Gramos and Vicho. In retrospect this was the wrong decision, because the enemy now only had to concentrate on two areas whereas before they had to deal with 50 or 60 areas. We would have done more damage had we stayed separated into smaller units all over Greece.

Before the offensive started, it was Easter, we had a mission to go down further into the villages to get food, because we were thinking once the offensive began we would need abundant supplies. We gathered up a lot of cattle, sheep, goats, mules, wheat and corn and other food supplies and brought it back to our territory.

In Elena's unit in Vicho, they sent the 18th brigade on a mission south to other pockets to collect thousands of partisans and many civilians who were ready to bear arms and join the Movement and bring them to Gramos. It was a huge mission then to get these people and make a passage way. They encountered a lot of resistance going down to those places and equally the same making their way to Gramos.

They bought three thousand unarmed people stranded in Thessalia to the Gramos area. That mission back and forth took the whole month of April. They were called heroes and that passage was known as the *Heroic Passage*. I remember when the 18th brigade came through a village called Dotsko a group of about three thousand people were marching through.

Later another youth battalion unit that had been formed joined with my battalion and we became a brigade. It was called the Youth Brigade and we set an example of being well dressed and well armed and we were supposed to be the best unit of the partisans.

Chapter 17 - The exodus of the village children

In March 1948 when there was talk of the impending massive offensive by the government forces to clear Gramos, the leadership decided to gather the children from the villages (there were maybe 100 villages or more) in the Gramos-Vicho areas and even further down and to take these vulnerable children into the socialist republics to keep them safe from the bombardment and the burning once the offensive had begun. The mission was to save the children from being harmed or killed, although the Greek position would be that these children were forcibly taken to the Eastern Bloc countries to be brought up under a socialist system.

The children were hungry, some barefoot, crying and so afraid of what was happening around them especially the planes that were flying low and shelling. (There were about 28,000 children evacuated during this time.) Many died from hunger, disease or injury. My brother Panyoti's offspring were amongst these children. They were escorted by women who were widowed when their husbands were killed in WWII and acted as surrogate mothers to the children. Some were so small, they were carried and clung to the necks of these women, crying and confused. It was chaos everywhere and many partisans perished in their endeavours to open the way for the mass evacuations.

It wasn't an easy straight passage through to safety for them. We were opening passages to remove the children through the enemy lines, and in one particular area just outside Grevena in the village of Sveti Giorgi, we were bringing about 80 or 90 children from other villages further down. We had to pass through there and hand them over to other units who would then take them to the border because the border was quite far away, maybe two to two and half days walk.

(Those refugee children - known as "Begaltsi" - that were evacuated and ended up in the eastern European socialist republics were very well looked after; they grew up there and were highly educated. Later, many joined their parents in countries such as Australia, Canada and America. Many of them are still not permitted to return to their birthplace.)

The enemy had blocked the road and we fought a heavy battle there to re-open the road to allow the children through. In that battle I was wounded. A bullet passed through the underside of my hand through my fingers and it was quite a severe injury.

I was taken to the local field hospital which just happened to be in my village of Yanoveni and co-incidentally my parents had returned from Kostur (where they had fled in 1947) to plough up the fields and plant some wheat and corn. So, they were home and my mother looked after me very well. After fifteen days my wound had healed and I had to return to my unit.

My superior, the second in charge of the Youth Brigade had also been wounded and when he too had recovered was ready to rejoin the brigade and resume leadership. Ten or fifteen of us went back together and during that time we got to know each other very well. My mother had packed a bag full of food for me and of course I shared that with him. He said to me, "When we get back to the unit, I will keep you. You will be my personal courier and look after my horse."

Of course I was very happy with that position and that is how I came to always be next to the second in command of the Youth Brigade. I was his courier and my job was to run messages to and from the other units.

Chapter 18 – The Battle of Gramos

We arrived back in the region of Samarina about the middle of May. The government forces commenced their offensive against the partisans in Gramos on the 20th May 1948 the purpose of which was to clear up the partisans. They estimated it would only take two weeks and it would all be over.

First the overhead aeroplane bombardment commenced. Then came the artillery and finally they attacked. The partisans defended very strongly within the bunkers. Despite the morale of the partisans being very high, the government forces started to advance slowly on all fronts.

The partisans who were concentrated in the rugged, mountain range area of Gramos were attacked from four directions. The main attack was to break through the Mount of Alavitsa, just above our village and along the border to encircle us. That would have been a very strategic point of entry if they could have broken through and carry on through the border.

There were six divisions in the Greek Army, each division consisting of 3,000 men. The attacks came from many directions. Each attack consisted of two or three brigades, totalling more than ten or twelve brigades in all, over 60,000 army personnel. They were heavily armed with artillery, machine guns, tanks, plenty of ammunition and aeroplanes and all the latest military equipment and modern weaponry courtesy of the Americans.

After two months or more of combat, the Greek Army could not break through because the partisan stronghold was very effective.

The offensive continued and the government forces started to advance along the border and they pushed through, but still they could not break through the area held by the 14th brigade. It was held very strongly by the partisans and it was very vital that it not be taken as the partisan military HQ lay just behind it and this would have been catastrophic for the partisans.

In the lower left hand area of Gramos, the partisans had two brigades, the 102nd and 103rd. In the central area was the Youth Brigade in which I was serving and the 116th and in the upper

area was the 108th and 114th Brigade. There was, in all, six or seven brigades consisting of say 2,000 or so partisans and the whole force was no more than 15,000 men. The balance of power was 10 to 1.

As I was a courier for the Commander I had to continuously deliver messages to the Commanders of the battalions. Of course there were many other couriers who delivered messages from the Commanders of the battalions to other units further along detailing orders, or vital military information or whatever strategic moves they were contemplating making. By the time I came back from delivering one message to a Major, I would be sent back out with another from the Commander. So I was up and down all day continuously walking long distances from one mountain to another.

The casualties were very heavy. I saw many partisans wounded and I helped carry a number of them away further up to safety. I was also transporting food, supplies and ammunition by mule. Consequently, the casualties from the Youth Brigades started to mount day by day. In the first two or three weeks of battle, from two Youth Brigades of about 1000 men, the casualties were so severe, there were not very many left and the battalion was reduced to only about 150 or so men.

The government forces broke through the front and we were pushed back. Because there were no other men to replace us, the partisan headquarters decided to dismantle the Youth Brigade and send all the soldiers to other military units. I was sent to the headquarters of the 16th brigade.

When I and other fellow Youth Brigade partisans arrived, to my astonishment, I found my brother Pando there. He was the two-way radio man in the 16th brigade.



Partisans – Pando (left) with two-way radio, 1947

When my brother saw me he had a few words to the Commander and I was allowed in the quarters of the 16th brigade of 30 or 40 soldiers consisting of couriers, cooks, nurses, night guards etc.

At the 16th brigade they brought in new portable two-way radio communication equipment and the Commander now had a connection with not only the HQ of the partisans but with other battalions of the brigades.

The two-way radio my brother operated was a very large heavy battery operated piece of equipment and when they moved from one place to another, they had to load it in sections on two mules, but this new one was now small and portable.

We were given the task of testing its range to see how far the signal would travel. I remember I was testing it for about a week, walking from HQ to a distance which we found to be about 12 kms. Therefore, if the brigades or units were less than 12 kms apart they could now communicate with that equipment.

I have no idea where it came from, probably from one of the democratic republics like Czechoslovakia, Poland, Rumania or maybe Hungary.

The fighting continued and a very vigorous defence was launched by the partisans. When the government forces realised they could not break through, they changed their strategy and began to launch a large scale attack from the south along the Albanian border. As a result they captured two very strategic points, the Golio and Kamenik Mountains, which would have enabled them to surround the whole of the partisan forces in the Mount of Gramos.

This area was controlled by the 103rd brigade, whose commander was George Yanuli, from the village of Eftahori. He was one of the older and one of the first partisans to fight in the mountains of Gramos from July 1946 and he was an extremely experienced commander.

The government forces went through Albanian territory and they went around and they reached those vital points in the mountains. Sadly, the partisan high command at HQ decided that Yanuli did not defend his region very well and he was court-martialled, found guilty and executed in Gramos in August 1948.

Yanuli was the one who disagreed with HQ's original decision to amalgamate all the pockets of partisan units all over Greece and Macedonia and concentrate them into two areas.

He told them then that this was not a good decision and it would leave the partisans vulnerable and exposed in one area.

Eventually in hindsight, when the partisan movement lost they realised that George Yanuli was correct. He had given them the right advice at that time. The best plan would have been to operate all over Greece and not concentrate on those two regions. They could have done a lot more damage that way.

Consequently, it was a crushing defeat and we lost a large area of Gramos. Our territory had diminished to approximately 80 square kms. So, a decision had to be taken and that decision was to exit Gramos and move to Vicho. The general hospital for the

partisans was in Gramos and that area had been held by our 14th brigade and 107th brigade in Charno since the beginning of the offensive.

As a result of this action, the partisans were forced to go back to the northern part of Gramos.



***I join the partisans in February 1948
At Officers School -December 1948***

Chapter 19 - Journey to Vicho

Now we had to evacuate all the hundreds of the wounded to Albania and the partisans who were concentrated all along the river were ready for this evacuation. Our exodus occurred on the night of 20th August 1948. The partisans fought heroically and defended Gramos for two and a half months but in the end defeat was inevitable, they could hold it no longer and finally had to withdraw from Gramos.

On the eve of the 20th all the partisan heads of the columns came from the Pilcati side and travelled along the road to the Albanian border to Ginova, just above my village.

We could not continue because we came just under a place held by the Greek forces (number 30 border post). They also held the strategic point of Alavitsa and we had to pass between the two of them.

I remember General Gusias came over to inspect the partisans and talk to the heads of the column. Our 16th brigade was the first one there. He asked if any one among us was from the surrounding area and was familiar with the territory. Well, I was not very far from him when he asked the question and I quickly answered that I was from Yanoveni a village not too far away from here. "Ah," he said, "that is exactly who we want."

There was a section along the border that should we have continued along, we would be completely exposed to the enemy forces and it would be very dangerous and detrimental to the partisans. He asked if there was any other way around so that we could avoid that section of the border and proceed along the road that led to Kalivishcha and further on.

I told him, "The best way to avoid border post 30 is to follow me, we will not be detected and we can avoid that particular point." He instructed me to go to the head of the column and show them the way around as I had described. I knew all the little tracks and we followed the path.

We could see men at the number 30 border post only about 150-200 metres ahead. It was evening around ten or eleven o'clock

and their lights were lit. The Commander gave an order to one battalion of partisans and they attacked the border post which was in our way and within fifteen minutes it was destroyed and the partisans walked through freely on the road to Kalivishcha along the border to reach the area of Vicho.

It took about four and half hours to reach our destination. Even though Alavitsa was held by the enemy, we still managed to pass by and we travelled north over two nights. We camped in the woods near Krchishcha and Papratsko for one night, hidden in the bushes and under uprooted trees. As we proceeded to Vicho, we passed the villages of Krchishcha, then Kosinets and Labanitsa and finally reached Vicho Planina area.

The other large column of 15,000 partisans followed the same route all night. It was now day time and the aeroplanes from Kostur spotted the large exodus of partisans leaving Gramos and heading to Vicho area and they started bombarding us. We did suffer losses, but the column continued and the next day they went through and all the partisans congregated in the Vicho area.

This was one of the largest operations undertaken at that time, so much so that even the government forces were surprised that the partisans had survived. They were sure they would surround them in Gramos, but the partisans escaped and moved onto Vicho. The operation was so organized that the partisans were not permitted to cross the border into Albanian territory on their way to Vicho. All the forces from Gramos went through Greek territory.

In Vicho Planina, most of the villages were populated by Macedonians and also as many as 80% of the partisans at that time in Vicho were Macedonians. These Macedonian partisans came from the villages of Lagen, Neret, Krapeshina, Bapchor, Mala, Turié and many more that were situated within the Vicho area.

Elena had joined the partisans in late 1947 and during the offensive with government forces in Gramos in 1948 she was wounded very badly after continuous bombardment in the village of Furka, in the Mount of Taburi, a very strategic place in the

battle. At that time she was in the 103rd brigade. From there she was taken to hospital in Albania and then on to Poland.

You will read about this particular chain of events with Elena further along in our narrative.

Chapter 20 – Malimadi and the Battle for Kostur

Now that we partisans had moved to the Vicho area, we joined up with the other established partisan forces there. Some reorganization formed within the partisans. Instead of brigades, now they had created divisions with two or three brigades. I was in the 16th brigade, the Commander of which was Paleologu (a pseudonym - his real name was Dimitri Ziguras). He was from a village further down in Kostur called Chachista and he became a Brigadier-General and in command of the 9th division.

His division took possession of a mountain area called Malimadi surrounded by the villages of Kostenets, Lebanitsa, Smrdesht, Bresnitsa, Gabresh, Drnoveni and Dambeni. This area was called Malimadi Planina. The Malimadi was a large region about 60 sq. kms. and on top of that mountain is quite a large area.

Only two weeks after they had taken Gramos, the government forces started a new offensive to clear the Vicho area. One of the most important positions they wanted to take was Malimadi. This would be a vital strategic asset because a great deal of stock and material that was supplied to the partisans from the socialist democratic countries via Albania was passing by trucks on connecting roads through this area. They wanted to take control of that mountain so they could cut off the vital artery of supply to this key area, thereby halting all provisions going to the partisans.

From the first week in September the offensive commenced immediately and the fighting began. Three brigades, the 14th, 16th and 108th took position with the HQ just above the village of Smrdesht. That month took very heavy fighting.

I was again in the general quarters of the division and my job was in communications which entailed putting telephone lines between the quarters of the division to the aforementioned battalions and other battalions further down.



I carried large rolls of wire and lay them from tree to tree and installing the lines underground. That was a hapless job for me, the reason being that by the time I made the connection between one brigade to the battalion, the line would be cut because of the continuous mortar shelling that occurred.

The aeroplanes, of course, were bombarding continuously. The 8th division of the partisans under the command of Pando Voinata (the only Macedonian General) was holding the region of Pozdivishcha, Bapchor, Lisets among others and the 11th brigade were holding Mala Bigla, Golema Bigla, Bela Voda on the other Lerinski side.

The enemy put a lot of attention into that particular mountain and as they had certain advantages they launched an attack and began pushing and gaining a lot of ground.

Their artillery would reach over the mountain and explode there but not on the road and that was because the mountain was very steep and the shells could not penetrate the mountain - only over.

I saw a lot of the Malimadi partisan casualties as I was criss-crossing all over the area. There were many partisans killed because the mountain itself is comprised of very hard capstan stone and when the mortar shells exploded, the exploding stones would kill the partisans more so than the shells themselves. Death was everywhere. That whole area smelt because we could not even bury our dead, bloated and reeking.

The partisans at that time were desperately trying to fortify the whole area with bunkers in the ground, covered with timber logs layered row upon row with one opening to rest their machine guns and hold their particular position.

All that work was carried out by the Macedonian women and girls, some only in their mid-teens, who were taken from the villages and ordered to cut the timber and dig the holes. With one in front and the other behind they would cart large logs of wood and to look at them it was very sad and demoralizing. The strain and fear was etched on their faces.

The women were also in charge of lifting and carrying the wounded and the dead. The wounded would then be transported to Prespa hospital and from there to Albania or Yugoslavia. I relive these scenes as they play out in my mind so often.

I remember it was in the month of October and there was very heavy rain and the terrain was very slippery. Groups of women, four by four, were carrying stretchers loaded with the wounded, slipping and sliding in the mud, losing their stretchers, helping each other to pick up the wounded who had fallen out. That scene too is emblazoned in my memory never to be forgotten.

A group of about 15 or 20 women who were carrying out this work were resting somewhere near a small lake that had formed from water runoff around the mountain. That area belonged to the village of Dambeni and it was called *Lokva*. They had been washing their clothes and putting them on rocks to dry and that is the first time I saw Elena's sister Ristana. (Much later when we were in Poland and had received a photo from Australia from Elena's parents I looked at the young girl in the photo and said to Elena, "I remember that girl at the lake – a very beautiful girl with dark hair and two thick plaits.")

The second time I saw her was when the government forces were advancing and I was running messages. We found that the enemy had already taken up position and we crossed each other coming up as a group of girls were going down. I asked them where they were going and they said, "Down there to pick up some of the wounded." I said "No, don't go there, the enemy has already taken that area." I remember Ristana so clearly at that particular time, a very pretty young girl.

I was at a place just above the village of Breznitsa and Commander Zara of the 108th brigade was also there and he was talking on the telephone with, I assume, the HQ of the partisans telling them he had a lot of casualties and saying he could not hold the mount anymore.

He told them it was dangerous and it would fall and there were not many partisans left to defend it. Whoever he was talking to was telling him, "No, you must hold it and defend it even if you must die. *It must not fall.*"

But the general HQ of the partisans had another plan. They took partisan units from other divisions to counter attack and recapture Malimadi which was in danger of being controlled by the government forces. In one night, the partisans attacked from two directions and when the government forces saw these two advancing lines, they panicked because they thought the partisans would surround them.

In one night the government forces withdrew retreating and escaping the area.

From that operation, the partisans retook the whole area again. The government forces left a lot of war materials, machine guns, rifles, ammunition and food and many other things in their haste to retreat. That was at the end of October 1948.



Partisans gathering

Another large operation planned by the partisans was to take the town of Kostur. For this to happen, they would need to take a mountain called Bukovik. That was in late November and it had already started to snow. Partisan forces came from everywhere and joined together to take that mountain.

The government forces were holding that mountain very strongly, because the moment it fell, Kostur would fall and they would have to evacuate and then that would leave the whole area around Kostur and further up under the control of the partisans.

I was on that particular mission and my unit left from Malimadi and I remember we crossed the river in Tsarnovishcha. Due to the snow and freezing cold conditions, the river was frozen and we walked across the top of the ice.

We commenced fighting around midnight and although we fought an increasingly strong and desperate battle to take that mountain, the government forces were so heavily fortified, we were not successful and the operation failed. As defeat loomed, we withdrew.

Of course the government forces continued fighting around the Vicho area but they could not break through. Winter arrived with a vengeance and at this time the fighting subsided and we were left alone. So during the latter part of November, December and January, things went quiet as a cease-fire settled in.

Chapter 21 - Officers School and the Battle for Lerin

The Commander of the 9th division, Paleologu decided to send me to the School of Officers to train as a cadet. He took me from the division quarters and I went from there to the village of Breznitsa where I spent two or three days together with selected young partisans from other units for our initial introduction and intensive tuition to become officers.

From there we finished up in the village of Rabi in Prespa situated in the *free* area and it took us six or seven hours to walk there. About 800 selected partisans (men and women) attended the School for Officers. The training commenced in November and continued on into December and January. We learnt war theory and practice and exercises and we were taught by experienced teachers. We were called the 6th series of the School for Officers. This was a common practice and already series 1 to 5 had gone through this systemic exercise for the purpose of acquiring these very important skills to become officers.

In the beginning of February 1949 at the Officer's School, the general HQ of the partisans formed a plan to take over Lerin. That was a very serious and ambitious plan because in the mindset of the partisans, it was very important for them to take one town. They felt that when this had been accomplished, they could set up a provisional democratic government in Greece and that provisional government would be officially recognized by the other socialist democratic republics (the reasoning behind it being that no-one would ever recognise a government that was in the mountains). The partisans controlled much of the rural areas but had yet to achieve support in the cities. So this was the purpose of the mission. Of course, if you remember, that was the purpose of the battle in Kostur and the battle to take Konitsa in 1947 and they were both unsuccessful.

On the 2nd February 1949, while at the Officer's School, they equipped us with a large quantity of food, personal items and ammunition. In fact we were completely loaded up and we knew we would be sent on some operation but only the Commanders knew where.

We travelled from Rabi upwards to the village of Ćerman, up the river until we finished up in the village of Buf. We had walked all night (this was in the free area held by the partisans, so we were safe) and from that position we could see Lerin only one or two kilometres away. There was a lot of snow around.

Then, for some reason or another we received the order to return back. We immediately withdrew and went back to Rabi. The operation was not carried out and we had no idea why, what had happened – nothing. A week or so later on about the 12th February, we set off again, the same route as before and we knew this would be the real battle now to take Lerin.

The partisans went through the villages of Neret, Krapeshina, Mala and Nevoleni and the main attack was from the Mala and Nevoleni side. The partisans were fighting to get into Lerin. Our brigade was on standby as reserves but had not yet participated, we were waiting to get the order to attack Lerin from the western side.

We saw a group of about 30 or 40 troops ahead of us, about 150 metres away, and we feared they would see us and launch an attack. They had set off a flare to signal their position to their own and our officer in charge gave the order for us to shoot. I was, as were the others, armed with a machine gun and as we fired we could see bodies flying everywhere. It was a terrible sight, but it was war.

The battle for Lerin commenced at ten or eleven at night and the fighting was heavy. They launched large scale attacks, provoking massive resistance and counter attacks. The plan was to get to the houses in the town of Lerin. However morning dawned and they were completely exposed to the enemy in aeroplanes and tanks. In Lerin there was a lot of force and the information was that 2,000 strong were protecting and holding that town – we found it was double that. At that moment the attacking partisans suffered many casualties and huge loss of life.

Later eye witness reports and documentation purported that 800 alone are buried near Nevoleni. When the partisan HQ realised they had suffered so many casualties and the operation had failed, they decided to pull back their shattered units and we did

not even get an order to launch an attack from the western side. The Battle of Lerin was a terrible defeat with many thousands of partisan lives lost.

When we were waiting on the western side for the order to attack, they discovered us and started attacking us with tanks shelling us continuously and we sustained many wounded casualties as well. We carried them back to Rabi. For the remaining hard hit partisans, grimy and embittered with devastated expectations of success, the wages of war were posted like a sign and defeat resonated crushingly.

When we all discussed the reasons for failure of the mission, we were told that an informant/informants had committed treason against the partisans and imparted crucial information to the Greek forces of our impending attack and consequently they were ready waiting for us. They knew everything down to the last detail.

The Greek Army brought a lot of force from Solun and the train brought in extra government troops and reinforcements and they had prepared themselves very strongly. That was the reason the Battle for Lerin failed. It was a catastrophic result for the partisans and many perished.

Chapter 22 – Back to Gramos

Following this failure, the partisan's general HQ prepared themselves for the arrival of spring which promised to bring (according to publicity in the radio transmissions and newspaper reports) a new offensive by the government army to clear the partisans from the Vicho area. Vicho was not a very large area (being about five times smaller than Gramos) and it would not be difficult for the government forces to annihilate the partisans there.

Unbeknownst to us, the partisan high command made the decision to re-open Gramos again as it was in 1948 and for that purpose they decided the first unit to go back would be the sixth series of officers that were training in Rabi. We, in the brigade of the School of Officers, did not have full knowledge at that time of what the plan would exactly be or what was going to happen. Great secrecy was maintained. Once again we were given food, personal ammunition, two mortar shells each and we were preparing to go somewhere only we didn't quite know where. In mid to late February, we received the order to go back to Gramos.

We left Rabi on foot through the free territory of Vicho. We picked up more supplies from the village of Vambel. Then in one night we travelled through the Kosturski areas that were held by government forces but we ducked and weaved around the enemy. We fought three battles during the night, one of them being in the village of Grach where I was working in 1942, and I knew the roads very well.

We had to cross the road that went from Kostur to Nestram and the enemy were guarding the bridge there. We battled fiercely and broke the enemy and entered the river which at that time of the year was very high. The Commander ordered one partisan on a horse with a long rope and he crossed the river pulling the rope along behind him. One by one, we followed suit across the river with our weapons and equipment held high on outstretched arms and our feet never touching the bottom until we reached the other side.

From there, we went to another place called Gurusha and battled again with the government forces that were holding that mount. We then proceeded to the village of Ezarets.

In one night we travelled an enormous distance between enemy lines and so next morning when the government forces realized that a large unit of partisans had moved through they didn't know what had happened. The operation was designed in such a way as to surprise and confuse them. They had no idea what the partisans would do next.

We hid in thick, snow covered vegetation during the day as the aeroplanes circled above us in an endeavour to find out how many we were, and where we were.

They could not find us and eventually they sent troops to look. We observed them very close to us in the next village and we knew they would be advancing toward us and would soon find us. The Commander of the brigade sent one unit out to surround the village and as the enemy rested momentarily, we seized upon them by surprise and took them prisoners. There were about 45 of them.

From there the next day we carried on to Gramos and passed many places I was not familiar with. After a couple of days walking we came upon the village of Samarina and we were now in the Gramos area – one unit from the School of Officers – about 800 strong. Another officer took over command of our mission. He was an extremely experienced officer named Brigadier Ipsilanti, and he knew how to penetrate enemy lines and do exactly what was needed to be done.

In the village of Samarina there was a secret organization waiting for us with prepared food and supplies.

The government forces were holding certain strategic points and mountains in Gramos during the winter of 1948/49. Our orders were to capture these points and restore that particular zone back to how it was in 1948.

Prior to our attack at Kansko, there was another strategic mountain called Taburi near the village of Furka that was also

being held. (This is where in 1948 Elena was wounded) The government forces here dispersed and fled.

The first village to be attacked and freed was the village of Kansko. This village was situated down below in the valley and had three small hills in a row to the side. The army forces were fortified in that area surrounded by rows of barbed wire, bunkers and machine guns. There would have been about 250 men holding the village. It was a central point for the area in that it was where large supplies of food and ammunition for the enemy were received via aeroplane parachute drops and they in turn supplied other areas in Gramos. That was our reasoning behind this attack, to capture the food, supplies and ammunition for ourselves.

The first night we attacked and took the one hill above the village. The second night we took the second hill. The enemy were holding the last hill very fiercely, and it was heavily fortified with bunkers and surrounded with barb wire on which hand grenades hung ready to explode at the slightest movement. On the third night we attacked and one of my comrades advanced forward holding a panzer on his shoulder ready to shoot towards the bunker to break up the barb wire.

When he pushed the trigger and the panzer exploded into the bunker, I was right behind him and the escaping gases at the back of the panzer pipe whooshed into my face. Suddenly, I was blind and could see nothing. The partisans began throwing dynamite into the barbed wire trying to break through.

We lost many partisans that night. I remember a friend of mine named Stavro, with whom I had spent a lot of time, cut down by machine gun fire, calling for his father as he lay dying. I had heard people in such dire situations usually cry out for their mother but maybe he didn't have one. He finally died in my arms. So many comrades died that night and very many were wounded as well.

I went to the first aid area and they put something into my eyes to clear them up and bandaged them and after about a day or so, they eventually healed and I could see clearly again. We took that village and found a lot of food and supplies.

Chapter 23 – Taburi na Furka

The other units that were left up in the Taburi mount were very hungry, their rations had gone, and so they left their position on the mount and descended down into the village of Kansko to replenish their food supplies. As a consequence, however, the government forces reclaimed Taburi Furka. Now we had to go back and carry out yet another attack to retake the mountain.

The night of the attack was a terrible one. As some of our soldiers headed up, others kept behind, rifles and machine guns firing to enable the soldiers to get into safe positions. Two of us were crouched down; I was firing the heavy machine gun whilst the other partisan was belt-feeding the bullets when suddenly my companion was hit in the leg. Blood and bone flew everywhere. The mortar attack was continuous with constant bullets and shells whistling over our heads. I had to move to a safer place and I took my wounded comrade to safety.

That time I was lucky. I had witnessed another tragic death as we were preparing for our attack. There was still a lot of snow then and a bomb exploded and hit a young partizanka, instantly decapitating her. The blood gushed out of her neck as she was left as she stood, motionless like a statue in the snow. We did not, however, take the mountain that night.

We prepared to launch a second attack. That night we restocked our supply of ammunition. They were shelling from far away constantly with heavy artillery and one of the shells fell and exploded three or four metres from me. A piece of shrapnel hit my back between two ribs and lodged itself there. It pushed my clothes inside the wound. I was in terrible pain and I could not move.

I was taken to the first aid area and a male nurse cut the clothes around the wound so that when I moved it would not shift the shrapnel that was lodged inside my back.

Many other partisans joined us in the rescue in our endeavours to recapture Gramos. I am not sure from where they came, maybe through Albania but they had already re-taken Alavitsa and reopened the hospital. They took me to the hospital there.

Quite a few government forces areas were starting to become free zones with the taking of many regions. Gramos was starting to be as it was in 1948. However, one very strongly fortified point with underground bunkers and 300-400 government forces was Patomata. That was the only one that was not cleared from the area of Gramos.

I was admitted to hospital and they operated and removed the shrapnel from my back. In the area of Gramos many other troops had come from Vicho, including the 9th division and among them was my brother. I remember I asked the nurse in the hospital if I could contact the headquarters of the 9th division and this was agreed to.

I spoke to my brother Pando by telephone and he told me he wasn't very far away and would come to see me for a couple of hours. Pando was very concerned for me because I was wounded. He gave me advice and told me to be careful and to take care and said all the things an older brother would say. He told me he was not concerned for himself as he was in the headquarters of the division but was worried for me because I was in the front line and in constant danger.

We wept together for our beloved brother Vangel whom we lost in 1947 at the Battle of Grevena. We heard from a partisan from the village of Pilcati that Vangel was very heavily wounded with two broken legs. The partisan from Pilcati was carrying him to safety, but at the same time the government forces soldiers were descending upon them and they were in danger of being captured. My brother Vangel told him to leave him hidden in the bushes and to go on ahead to avoid capture. He told his comrade, "You can come back to pick me up during the night when it is safe." With this agreed the partisan set off but then suddenly after a minute or so, he heard a huge explosion. Vangel feeling he would be captured had pulled the pin of his personal grenade killing himself to avoid the severe torture he knew he would suffer when taken prisoner.

Within ten days my wound had healed sufficiently enough and I had to go back to rejoin my unit.

Our unit took a position in the front line close to an area that the government forces were still holding. We were on one mountain a little higher and they further down in the next. The distance between us was only about 500 metres. There was a little valley in between. We were even talking to each other through megaphones and one day, ever desperate for peace and endeavouring to establish some understanding between us, we agreed to meet in the middle of that valley but that was a foolish decision because as we started to walk there they immediately began to shell us. It was a stupid thing to do but we had believed them.

The mountain was called Patomata. It was so strongly fortified, they had three rows of barbed wire and on the wire hung grenades and before the barbed wire, the ground was rife with mines.

In Athens the word was - *Athens may fall, but the Patomata will never fall into the hands of the partisans.*

Chapter 24 - The Battle of Patomata

The partisans made the decision to take the Mount of Patomata. One day I noticed a group of high ranking officers from the other commands had come to our unit. There in front of me was General Paleologu the Commander of the 9th division under whom I'd served in Malimadi. We had formed a close friendship and he had considered me like a son and I was able to speak quite freely with him.

He seemed very happy to see me, and said, "Vasilaki, it is an excellent thing that you are here serving in this important place." He expressed the opinion that the partisans needed to get much closer into the mountains to see which way would be the best way to attack. He said, "We must take that mountain. We cannot leave it in the middle of Gramos running interference with us. It must be taken."

I had been there many times before and I had somehow traced out a certain way to get close to the enemy's position safely.

I said to the General, "I can take you there, but we must be careful. I will walk ahead first and you can all follow after me." I told him to not go beyond the track that I would lead them along because there were many land mines.

The operation was going to be a monumental one, to plan an attack from many different directions in order to take it over. The General agreed and gave orders to ten or fifteen partisans, some commanders of the other units and some explosive ordinance specialists to proceed. I began walking first and they followed as we moved slowly from the side. It was after midnight as we progressed closer and closer to their position advancing 300m then 200m.

Suddenly, an explosion! The last man on the line misjudged his step, walked over a mine and it exploded. It blew his leg off. There was blood everywhere.

What were we to do? I said to the General I would take the wounded man back to our unit. I stressed again the importance

of not moving a step. I said, "I will come back and then we will continue." General Paleologu agreed saying they would stay put.

I took the wounded partisan to safety and returned back to the group. However, they for some reason or another, had moved further down and before I had even reached the original spot I had left them, I heard a huge explosion. They had walked into another mine field.

There are many different types of land mines but these ones were connected to one another with a fine thread of nylon and a small trip would cause a simultaneous explosion of many mines around within a twenty five or thirty metre radius. Those types of mines when they explode jump about 80cms high and all the shrapnel hit you chest high. Five of the twelve were killed and many wounded.

I ran up towards them and cried out, "What happened?" One partisan approached me in a panic. "Quick," he said, "Brigadier Panika is very seriously wounded and we need to pick him up." I left hurriedly to locate him and with my mind racing and preoccupied with getting to the Brigadier quickly, as I ran between two large trees ahead of me, I stepped on a land mine triggering an enormous explosion.

I fell down and at first I didn't know what had taken place. Time seemed to stand still as I tried to take in what had just happened. I sat up in a daze and looked at my feet. I lifted one foot and saw the boot was twisted in a very strange way so I ripped the boot off. My foot was bleeding. My uniform and clothes were shredded to bits. I lifted the other leg up. It was bootless and I was shocked to see it was a mangled mess. It was completely destroyed and spurting blood. I said to myself, "I've lost my leg."

I don't know what happened after that or who picked me up. The dark was closing in, my pain was so severe and I was bleeding badly. The darkness finally swallowed me and I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I found I had been taken to my unit and the male nurse who lived in a neighbouring village and knew me, attended to my injury, talking to me, giving me encouragement,

telling me I would be alright. He was trying to put the toes and the heel back into position, in some way trying to reassemble the impossible, cutting some parts away and bandaging the rest.

I was stretchered to the battalion and given a tetanus injection and from there they carried me to the hospital. It took about five or six hours to get there. Four people carried me and they were government soldiers who were either prisoners or defectors. I wasn't the only one going. There was a column of maybe 50 or 60 wounded all heading to the hospital.

The aeroplanes flying overhead saw the column proceeding below in open space and started shelling us with machine guns. The four people who were carrying me dropped the stretcher, shot through and left me to hide in the ditch. I found myself lying on the stretcher in the open area with shells flying and bullets whistling around me. I was lucky – none of them hit me. The aeroplanes finally disappeared and the four men came back, picked me up and eventually took me to the hospital.

They operated on my leg and carried out what was needed to be done at that time. I was devastated to lose my leg. I thought the whole world was finished for me, my future gone. I was a man with one leg, what would I do? It is hard to describe the feelings I had at that time at only twenty years of age to lose a limb and in such circumstances.

I asked the same nurse as before permission to telephone my brother. She connected me with the headquarters of the 9th division and I spoke to Pando. I told him I had lost my leg and he was crying on the other side and I remember him telling me that I would be alright, I would go to hospital and to not worry about anything.

He said he was at the partisan headquarters of the 9th division and didn't know what the future held for him. He said. "If I happen to be killed I would like you to look after my son." He hadn't seen his son Pavle who was born in July 1947 when Pando was with the partisans. I promised him I would. That was the last conversation I had with my brother. Sadly, he too was killed.

The following day, the battle of Patomata commenced at ten o'clock at night and finished at midday the next day. It lasted fourteen hours and at the end the partisans took the Mount. I don't know what would have happened if I had not been wounded the day before. Our unit was in the front line of the attack and I wonder if I would have come out of it alive or not.

Many of my comrades lost their lives in that battle. The Greeks had said *Athens can fall but not the Patomata* - but it had indeed fallen. In the end it had cost me my leg. I remember a couple of days before I lost my leg I had gone to a little creek further down from our holding position and I washed my clothes and bathed my feet and I feel quite sad when I think about that. I have been walking with an artificial limb now for over sixty years and have almost forgotten that once upon a time I had two legs.

That is how things finished up for me as a partisan in the Battle of Patomata – 30th May 1949. The Civil War left Greece in ruins and great economic distress. The political, economic and human losses were inestimable. This conflict saw brother fighting against brother – where one sibling may have been forcibly recruited to the Greek Army whereas the other volunteered to join the partisan movement.

**(The Greek Civil War 1946-1949 was essentially a conflict between the partisan movement disillusioned with and against the right-wing monarchist government of Greece. The Macedonian peoples' participation and support of this movement was promises of independence and recognition of their Macedonian cultural and ethnic heritage.)*

**(Journeys of Hope – Maryon Allbrook 1994)*

Chapter 25 – Hospitalization in Albania and journey to Poland

The following day I was transferred from the field hospital to a large hospital in Korçë, Albania. For my journey to the hospital I and another injured partisan were loaded into box type cradles balanced on either side of a mule. (This was the common mode of transportation of the heavily injured). The path was steep, wet, muddy and slippery and the mule was slipping and sliding with its load and we were tossed about like rag dolls and eventually thrown out of the cradles.

My bandages had come loose and my injury began bleeding badly and by the time I arrived in Korçë I was barely alive. However, specialist surgeons operated on my leg and did what they needed to do and I survived. I was there for about two weeks.

Following the operation I was taken to another hospital in the town of Elbasan where I had been in 1947. I was there for about a week and then I was transferred to yet another hospital in a town called Suk.

Albania started to overflow with the influx of so many wounded partisans. They could not cope any more. All the wounded since 1948 in Gramos and Vicho were dispersed between three or four hospitals (Korçë, Elbasan, Moscopole and Argirocastro on the Ipiro side). There were simply too many wounded for Albania to contend with.

Consequently, they created another sort of camp for the wounded and these were the partisans who, due to their serious injuries, many with missing limbs such as me and heavy wounds, would never return to the front. This was the place called Suk. There were about 1200 of us. I spent about a week there.

Around this time, in the summer of 1949, all the surrounding socialist countries such as Bulgaria, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia had decided to take some of the load of wounded from Albania to their own countries. Of course, even before this, a lot of wounded partisans were already going to some of these countries and these were generally the ones with severe head injuries which could not be properly administered to in Albania as they did not have the expertise there.

The camp in Suk was rather large (about fifty metres long by twenty five metres wide) and had apparently been built by the Italians during the occupation of Albania and used to house their horses and mules. In this particular block all the wounded amputees, about 300 of us, were housed.

We lay on hay mattresses on the concrete floor. Through the middle ran three passages with men in rows on either side of these. Around our block were five other blocks and a large kitchen/dining block. Further up was another block that housed partisans who were mentally affected with fits or emotional and psychological problems and were considered aggressive or dangerous and that block was surrounded by barb wire.

When they decided to send us to Poland, the Polish government sent a ship to the port of Durrës in Albania. Firstly they loaded us into trucks which took us to the port and from there we were hidden in large crates about 25 men each and then with a crane loaded onto the ship. We travelled through the Mediterranean on to Poland.

The ship was a cargo ship, quite large, about 100 metres long by 25 metres wide and it was transporting timber from Albania to Poland. The top of the ship was stacked with timber and down below it was prepared especially for the transportation of the wounded.

There was a long passage from one end to the other and a sectioned area meant to hold cargo. But in one section at the forward right of the ship were the amputees. There were a couple of large areas for the female quarters, another area for yet more amputees making a total of all the wounded to about 1,200. We were strictly forbidden to go on deck, though at times when the ship passed through certain safe parts, we did tentatively venture upwards.

When we came to British Gibraltar, we were not allowed to talk. We had to keep very quiet when the English authorities came on board to enquire what the ship was carrying and inspect the cargo. They saw the timber and didn't come further down to make an inspection and therefore had no idea that we partisans were all hidden below deck.

On the way to Poland, my wound had still not closed up and the bandages needed to be changed every second day and my injury dressed. On one particular occasion, heading towards the first aid room so the nurses could change my bandages, and hopping along the way because I had no crutches, I saw a young female partizanka, very active, walking with small, fast steps. She was wounded in her arm. I had seen her before, always walking up and down, helping any of the partisans whenever she could.

As I hopped along she came up to me and said, "Comrade lean on me, you might fall down, I will take you to the first aid room." I was very glad for her help.

When the nurse undid my bandage she told me my wound was healing very nicely and it didn't need to be re-banded again.

I left the first aid room and headed back to my quarters but there was no-one to help me so I hopped back on one foot as usual. On the door between the compartments was a steel block on the ground and as I tried to jump over it my toes caught on the block and I instinctively stepped down on my wounded leg to stop myself tripping over and immediately crashed down. When you are an amputee, the phenomena of feeling your foot still intact often occurs. It feels as though your missing limb is still there, you feel the nerves, you think you still have a leg.

It had jammed right into the steel, my wound reopened again and the bone cracked and broke a further three inches up. The pain was unbelievable and indescribable. It bled so badly and it was worse than the initial injury when I'd lost my leg. They took me back to the first aid compartment to tend to me and re-bandage the wound.

The journey to Poland took ten days.

Part 3 – Political refugees in Poland

Chapter 26 – The ‘250’

Finally we arrived in Poland at the port of Szczecin and we were unloaded by cranes and put into army trucks and buses that took us to a place at a secret location that was called ‘250’. It was a camp built by the Germans during the war consisting of eight blocks of two-storey buildings and each block could house about 100-150 partisans. When we arrived there, the Polish people and doctors greeted us very warmly and we were overwhelmed by the kindness and care we were given. To this very day I feel such gratitude and find it very heart warming to remember what the Polish people did for us at that time.

Hospital ‘250’ was so codenamed because we were actually placed there in great secrecy and illegally in the country - the international community was not supposed to know that the partisans from the Greek Civil War were now in Poland. It was a very well set up hospital with each block having its own speciality, e.g. arm injuries, leg injuries, psychological disorders, the women’s block and amputees with open wounds such as mine and invalids with amputations that had healed.

There was a large kitchen/dining facility and centrally situated between these blocks was a sporting ground. There was also an operating theatre where many of the partisans’ injuries were re-operated on simply because the original surgery performed in Albania was not correctly carried out. Every injury was assessed and if it was deemed not suitable, it was redone. Everyday dozens of surgeries were carried out by dedicated doctors.

We were not known by name, we all had a number. My number was 226 in block 6. There was a sound system attached to every block and every room had a speaker and when your number was called you were summoned to the surgery block.

The first day we went to the huge dining area (it seated about 300 people) to have lunch we saw tables set up with tablecloths, knives and forks and we had never before seen such a sight. We were summoned block by block at staggered times to have our

meal. We sat down and waited, not eating. The service staff asked us why we weren't eating. We had a bowl of nice soup in front of us and one of the translators asked, "Where is the bread?" We were told in Poland they did not eat much bread, mainly potatoes. "No, no," said the translator, "these people are Greeks and Macedonians; they don't sit down to a meal without bread." Thereafter there was always a plentiful supply of baskets of bread for us.

During all this time, the fighting in Gramos and Vicho was still in progress, and we were very anxious to find out what was going on and hear news of what was happening at the front and we kept in touch with the developments in our old country. Also in one of the rooms in the central block we were still learning military techniques and listening to political lectures. These happened mostly in the afternoons and sometimes in the morning before lunch in groups of about 100 people.

At these gatherings, I noticed that same young partizanka that had helped me onboard the ship to Poland and she would always come and sit next to me and I wondered why. She was a very beautiful brown eyed young girl with thick, wavy, golden brown hair and a lovely figure and she was very popular. She was in charge of the cultural entertainment for the partisans and organizing the choir and the dancing. She would run around carrying the accordion or whatever musical instrument a partisan was unable to manage. She was so active and always busy doing something.

She began to get closer into my heart and I started to think quite seriously about her but I didn't say anything to her. I didn't think I would stand a chance with her because I had only one leg. She could choose from so many others who were far better than me. I kept her close in my heart but still I didn't say anything. When we started making notes at some lecture, because I was very neat and fussy and somewhat of a perfectionist in the writing of my notes, she asked me sweetly if I could write the notes in her notebook. I was bowled over and immediately agreed and so I began to write up her notebook as well.

I was called up to the surgery to re-do the operation as my wound would not heal. The bone was so badly broken, months had

passed and it would not close up. They took x-rays and realized that it needed follow up surgery and the leg was cut a further three inches up and the muscles and skin stitched up properly.

In block 6 there were about twelve in our room including a man called Risto Pluka and he was from Pozdivishcha. He was a little older than me, also an amputee with his leg cut above the knee. He noticed at night I was not sleeping well – I was tossing and turning all the time. My sleep was very fitful and restless. He asked me, “What is bothering you Vasil, will you tell me what it is?” I was very reluctant to confide in him but he persisted and so I eventually told him about that girl I was attracted to. In fact, I confided that I was in love with her and I told him that I didn’t know how to approach her and tell her of my feelings. He said, “Don’t worry, I will do it for you, I know her well.” I felt suddenly encouraged.

The next day Risto said to the girl, “My room mate Vasil has strong feelings for you and in fact he is in love with you, what do you think?” Risto came back and said her answer was, “If he loves me, he should come and tell me himself and not send other people.”

He told me he felt my feelings for her would be reciprocated and that I should take the next step and approach her and declare my feelings to her. I felt very happy, this was good news.

It took a few days to build up my courage and one day I bit the bullet and told her. I said, “Elena, remember that day on the ship when you helped me, well I have been in love with you ever since then. You are stuck inside my heart and I love you, will you marry me?” It might not have been the most eloquent declaration of love but it was exactly how I felt inside about her. She didn’t give me an immediate answer and told me she would think about it. I had high hopes because at least she didn’t reject me – that, to me, was a good sign.

At the same hospital there was a woman who was Elena’s aunt, also from the village of Lagen and Elena went to seek her advice. Her aunt reassured her that she knew of me, we had been in the same block (she was being treated for cancer) and that I was a good, decent young man and she told Elena if she loved me, then

she should marry me. The next day, I asked Elena for her answer. She told me she would marry me and with those words began the beginning of our life together which has endured for over sixty two years.



On the day that I lost my leg, I had wondered what would happen to me. I really thought that my life would be over and that no-one would want to marry a man with one leg. Which girl would marry me, I would ask myself. Well, I am happy to say for me the most beautiful girl in the world, did. She accepted me and that day was the most important and happiest day in my life and with this beautiful woman I have lived a very happy life and together have been blessed with a wonderful family. If I had to, I would do the whole thing all over again.

Nowadays, it is hard to believe the strong social stigma and prejudice that existed in the small villages against anyone who suffered a disability or infirmity. You were considered second class and somewhat not worthy enough because you might not be able to work or get married. Certainly, if you were a female, the best you could hope for was that a widower with half a dozen children wanted to marry you so that he might have someone look after the kids. As for males, they couldn't work in the fields so were useless.

Chapter 27 - Marriage

A group of about five of us were producing and publishing a handwritten weekly newspaper filled with news from the camp, news from the front, anything interesting that had occurred. It was displayed in the dining room and everyone could read the latest news.

In the newspaper they all insisted on making our engagement announcement a newsworthy item. The article read – *Eleni Geli will marry an amputee Vasilis Radis*. Everyone was anxious to find out just who was this Vasilis Radis.

I never authored the articles in the newspaper; my job was to do the writing, because I had an excellent penmanship – very clear and precise.

The following Saturday night was 27th September, 1949. That date celebrates the formation of the National Liberation Front in Greece and Macedonia. At the camp, we were all together in the huge dining room and we were celebrating that particular day, when the committee members made the announcement of our engagement. We had to stand up because everyone knew Elena but not many people knew me and they wanted to see us together. Everyone clapped and cheered.

The other amputees (more than 300) aged between 18-24 were in the same position as me and most had lost all their confidence and hope but when they found out that Elena, who was the most beautiful and most popular girl in the group had announced her intention to marry an amputee, they were curious as to who this person was – not many knew me. They came and congratulated us and were so happy and because Elena had chosen a less than perfect man to marry, it gave many of them the courage to follow suit and ask a young girl to marry them as well. Among the amputees, she was very respected and appreciated. They looked upon her as a sister.

We celebrate our wedding day on the 27th September because on that day, after our announcement, we were officially registered as husband and wife by the committee at the camp. We were however still separated. I was in block 6 and Elena in block 1

and even though we were married, we were not permitted to be together.

We saw each other quite often. Everyday she would visit me in my block or I would go and visit in hers. One day I thought I would ask her why she still always kept her left arm bandaged. I wondered whether it had healed or not and what sort of injury she had sustained. She told me it had healed but that was how she kept her arm together. I asked her to unbandage her arm and take the dressing off. She did and then her arm just flopped down because the wound was so serious, both the bones in her forearm were shattered causing her arm to hang down limply.

Shortly after, the doctors decided to operate on her arm and grafted a splinter of bone from her leg and transplanted into her forearm and tethered it with screws so she could hold her arm together without assistance. The fingers were, however, still paralysed – the nerves were irreversibly damaged except for her last two fingers and this caused her palm to fold into itself.

When they took the bone from her leg, it weakened that leg and Elena was in a plaster cast for months until the bone had regrown in the leg. It was winter at that time and she would come to see me in block 6 across the field and one time she broke the plaster and it damaged her leg and it left a small dent-like impression there which is still obvious today.

The operation was performed by Doctor Bardzikowski and he was one of the best surgeons there. During her recuperation, I would sneak in to see her. She was on the bottom floor and she would open the window and I would climb in

One time I was caught out by a nurse and all hell broke loose. She admonished me sharply, this was not permitted, and I certainly didn't tell her I had come in through the window.

Elena shared a small room in block 1 with one other girl named Donka and I would often visit with Elena there. Donka was from the village of Buf and she suffered a terrible injury where her shoulder was completely mangled and her arm was paralysed. Although she was wounded heavily, she was always happy to see

me when I visited and she would cheerfully refer to me as '*bratko*' (brother) and she was very nice to me.

When we were at the '250' a large team of professional prosthetic designer/ manufacturers from East Germany arrived and took measurements from the below-the-knee amputees and prepared plaster casts for artificial limbs to be made in Germany.

Above-the-knee amputees were taken to Germany. In about November and December they came back and we were fitted with our artificial legs and we were so happy. The legs were very heavy and made of thick leather with straps above the knee and metal hinges to enable us to bend. I was walking quite nicely now with the help of my artificial leg.

Chapter 28 – Bitter defeat - The fall of Gramos and Vicho

In the meantime more of the wounded arrived because the fighting was still ongoing in Vicho and Gramos. In the month of June 1949, the Greek Army launched a new offensive in Vicho to clear the partisans out and within a month to a month and a half they successfully pushed the partisans out of Vicho. So, by the middle of July they had completely taken over Vicho (including all the area of Prespa, Belavoda, Buf etc.)

After Vicho, their attention was turned to Gramos and this was about the middle of July. They pushed and pushed and at about the end of August early September, they had forced all the partisans out of Gramos.

There were about 150,000 strong in the government forces. I don't know how many divisions, armed to the hilt with tanks, machine guns, latest models of artillery and aeroplanes there were. Even some of the officers of the Greek Army were Americans.

In fact in Gramos, General Van Fleet was directing the offensive himself and commanding the operations from his high observation point that afforded a clear overall view of the whole of Gramos. He was the Commander of the Joint US Military Advisory Group and provided operational advice to the Greek military.

For the partisans, these were impossible odds and it was unfeasible to defend against this force. The partisan force was minimal and in the end they were defeated. In September 1949 the partisans were pushed back into Albania and the Civil War ended. The partisans from Vicho fled to Albania or Yugoslavia and the partisans from Gramos retreated to Albania.

Many more wounded partisans flooded in from these battles. We had been the first mission but after two or three months more arrived, then a couple of months later, yet more. We had to transfer another half a kilometre up to another barrack, Block 15, so as to make room for the newly injured coming in.

At the '250' besides the wounded, there arrived some partisans who were uninjured. They were camping next to our Block 15 but we were separated by a tall fence. We were not permitted to be together. We were still being kept in the dark. We had no idea that Vicho and Gramos had fallen, the partisans had been pushed out and the Movement had finished. I suppose they did this to allow us not to lose our confidence and morale, but then when we saw these able bodied partisans, they told us the Civil War was officially over.

It was then that I found out from a compatriot from the village of Pilcati that my brother Pando had been killed. He had died on the last day. The headquarters of the 9th division were surrounded and they had to get out quickly to avoid capture. My brother went to Albania, but unfortunately he made the fateful decision to go back to retrieve the two-way radio. Their departure was so hasty; he hadn't had the chance to load it onto the mule and take it with him.

On the way back, my friend told me that he frantically implored him to not go back. He said he told my brother that everything has been taken by the government forces. My brother insisted that he needed to retrieve this equipment as he feared he would be court-martialled.

He didn't listen and finally when he went back, he was shot and killed by the government forces. He was only 24 years of age.

At the '250' as much as the circumstances of us being there were calamitous, we did not suffer too badly. We had lots of food and plenty of rest. When the snow had melted and during spring Elena and I would take a blanket and go outside the blocks and sit down by the beautiful green parks on either side of the river, surrounded by many fruit trees. We would go out in the morning and come back for lunch and then go out again and come back for dinner.

We had an unforgettable time, being together and enjoying each other's company at the '250'.

Elena's Story

Chapter 29 – Family history

I was born Elena Gelina on 5th May 1930 in the beautiful village of Lagen in the Lerinsko region. My father was Chrste Yovan Gelin and my mother was Vassilka Markova and they were both born within months of each other in 1912.



Village of Lagen

My village is situated below Vicho Planina with two rivers and many natural springs. We had green valleys and beautiful fields where we grew many crops and vegetables like piperki, leeks, onions, potatoes and garlic to name some. The village had about 115-120 houses with a population of around 450 people. Following the war many people migrated to Canada, Australia and America because of the trauma, the conflict and poverty that remained and the village was deserted and became derelict.

Around 1912 when the Turk was ousted from our land, the Greeks took over our part of Macedonia and started to treat the Macedonian people very unfairly referring to them as *Bulgarians* or *non-Greek citizens* and many people protested and tried to flee

from the villages to escape this harsh treatment and further trouble.

There was one young man, Pavle Asprov, who was the first person from our village to become a teacher. He went to Kabasnitsa to work as a teacher whereupon the Greek authorities decided he was not sympathetic to Greece and they arrested and jailed him and eventually killed him. He is written in our history books as one of the first heroes in our struggles. He was only about 22 years old and unmarried when he was executed.

My mother's family was a large one. Her father was Risto Markov and her mother, Sveta Pandova. They had eight children – Yana, Tanas, Lazo, Koté, Spiro, Vassilka, Dosta and Fania.

Only the youngest one, Fania, was sent to school in Lerin to learn reading and writing. Spiro was made a shepherd. The only problem was that he was so soft hearted if any calf or lamb became sick and died or was bitten by a snake (of which there were plenty), he himself would get sick for two days crying his heart out. Dedo Risto decided to send him to Lerin to become a carpenter. The rest were eventually married.

Poverty was a problem with such a large family and two boys, Lazo and Spiro, migrated to America and Koté went to Australia. Dedo Risto was a very clever and kind family man, quietly spoken and extremely wise. He would buy stock from surrounding villages and go around to other villages re-selling it. He kept his family fed this way.

My father's parents were Yovan Petre Gelin and Dosta Kostadinova. He had a sister named Todora and a brother named Vasil, an invalid, who had unfortunately broken his back at age fifteen lifting a bag of heavy pumpkins and died young at age eighteen.

The Gelin name evolved after my father's great-grandmother Gela was left a young widow following the death of her husband Naumé Lazorov. As she became head of the family and took control of the work, laboured the crop fields and reared her children, people referred to the family as 'Gela's' family. Her son Petre Naumchev (he took his father's Christian name as his

surname – a common practice in those times) came to be known as Petre na (of) Gela. He was the father of Yovan Petre, my grandfather.

The Greek authorities arrested Dedo Yovan as an active political dissident with outspoken views against the Greek government and he was taken with another man, tethered back to back, all the way to Lerin and belted with a truncheon along the way for good measure. From there they were taken to Solun to the largest jail called Edikulé.

Dedo Yovan was jailed for a considerable time and when finally released he had no desire to return to the village, instead went to America but after some time and dissatisfaction there he went to Bulgaria. He left my grandmother with his parents, Dedo Petre and Baba Petritsa, so my grandmother raised her two children in the village, husbandless, with the help of her in-laws.

Some time later my grandmother received word to join her husband in Bulgaria and very reluctantly she took my father who was around nine years old at the time and went to join Dedo Yovan there.

She was very unhappy leaving her invalid son with her in-laws and soon her concerns were realised as life with my grandfather proved to be unsatisfactory. She felt very unsettled and after some time decided to go back home and left my grandfather in Bulgaria. She was, however, heavily pregnant and she didn't wait to give birth there.

While passing through Sofia, on her way home she gave birth to a girl. She wrapped her baby in a cloth and started to walk home with my father via the railway line. She reached a small town near Sofia and a Bulgarian woman approached her as she sat tired and weary by the side of the road.

She asked my grandmother where she was going. Baba explained her situation and the woman felt very sorry for her. She asked Baba if the child was christened and when she was told no, the woman beckoned her to come to her house. She said, "I will christen the child for you, it is not a good thing to have her

unchristened, just in case anything happens to the baby.” The woman christened her Todorka which was her own name.

When Baba returned home she found Vasil in very poor health and the poor boy died soon after. He was eighteen years of age.

Chapter 30 – Marriage, family and seeking a better life

When my father was sixteen years old, it was decided he should get married so that someone could help work the fields. They heard that Risto Markov in the village had four daughters and decided to send a *stroinik* (someone who represents the potential suitor and who was a cousin of my father's) together with my grandmother to enquire about a union with the second daughter, Vassilka.

My mother, also sixteen at the time, had never even heard of, nor knew anything about my father. Baba apparently said to my mother's father, "You have four daughters, best that you marry one of them off at least." (She was the closest in age).

The deal was struck and my mother was informed she would now be getting married. They made a wedding dress of sorts for her and my father borrowed a suit and some shoes from a friend (they were very poor) and within a short time they were married. Now there was someone extra to help with the work in the fields which was the whole purpose of the marriage.



Chrste Gelin and Vassilka Markova - wedding photo, 1929

I was born in 1930 when my parents were both eighteen years old and began to talk very early. I am told that when I started to call my father *tatko* (father) he apparently objected to this and requested I call him Chrste. I suppose he felt strange being a father at such an early age of eighteen.

Ristana was born in 1932 followed by another little girl Kata. I don't remember her very well. She was christened but died very soon after being born. After her came my brother Vané and then another brother named Vasil.

I remember once my father came home from the coffeehouse and had bought me some little green sugar sweets and I ran around and told whoever would listen, "My father loves me, look what he bought for me."

We had a little *telé* (calf) that I was supposed to look after in the fields. I tethered a rope around its neck and took it out one day but soon lost interest in it as I sat underneath a walnut tree cracking shells and eating the walnuts. I came home without the *telé* and my father asked me where it was. I cried and said to him. "I don't know - I didn't lose it, it ran away." He grabbed me by the ear and ordered me to go out and find it.

My father never saw his youngest child Vasil born because in 1937 while my mother was still pregnant he left for Australia in search of a better life and to earn money to send to the family. He promised my mother he would only be gone for five years and then would return to us.

Of course, like many others, earning and living and saving in Australia during those times was very difficult and my father did not ever return to his family in Macedonia.

Later on in his life, he certainly made up for it. He had such a love for his birthplace; he made many trips there and stayed in one of the little cottages that had been renovated. He loved working with his hands and helped with the task of renovating whenever he made a trip back. Because he had not been present during those turbulent times of the Civil War, he had only good thoughts, happy recollections and lovely memories of his birthplace.

My father, among others, was involved in organizations that were protesting against the Greek government in their acts of terrorism against our people and I am told that after he had left for Australia, police came to our house to arrest him. Luckily for him by this time he was in Port Said, well on his way to Australia.

Many people at that time were arrested, jailed and tortured and their houses burned down for simply protesting and speaking out. They called the Macedonians *Vulgari* (Bulgarians) - Macedonians did not exist for them.

My father went first to Melbourne and worked many jobs. He was cutting timber, clearing bush, laying sleepers and clearing land for farms. He went from farm to farm looking for work carrying an axe and a saw on his back. Many times when he asked for work, he was ordered out of people's property and when he did earn money it was usually only about ten shillings per week.

It was very difficult for him to save money to send back to us in the old country when he could barely support himself and still save enough to pay his debt to the person who had lent him the money for his fare out to Australia. During that time, work was scarce.

My father had cousins living in Perth so he decided to join them there to find work with his relatives. Those cousins had businesses and my father always managed to earn a bit of money to send out to us. He never forgot us and he always sent us a little something.

When my father left to find work in Australia, we were very young. We were five females (following the death of my brothers) - my mother, Baba Dosta, my father's sister Teta Todora, Ristana and me, left alone to work our gardens and fields, cultivate our land, plant and harvest and tend to the livestock. We simply had to take over.

During those times, many women were left in charge of the household as their husbands travelled abroad to find work and earn money to provide a better life for their families.



***Montage of Gellin family of Lagen, including:
Back: Chrste & Vassilka (1929), Elena, Ristana, Todora,
Chrste's brother Vasil
Front: Baba Dosta, Vané, Dedo Yovan, Dosta & Chrste
(c.1920), Baba Petritsa, Dedo Petre.***

(This photo was compiled by my father while he was in Australia from five or six separate photos. It was his unique way of reuniting the different generations of family members (alive and deceased) in one photograph.)

Chapter 31 - Village life and personal tragedies

Following the period the Turks left our land, in the village of Mala where there had been the most productive fields and vineyards, Dedo Risto, together with a few other men from the village, decided to buy property in that village. He built a house there and brought his live-stock over as well and thus spent a great deal of time in the village of Mala while the rest of the family were in Lagen.

We grew up in poverty in our family, but during that time, although there were no luxuries we still managed to produce enough food to live. From our *umbafi* we would take some corn and rye down to the *vodenitsa* (watermill) for it to be ground into flour and we baked our own bread and ate that which we grew in our gardens. As young people, we toiled very hard in the fields with the oxen, the horses and tending the cattle. We ploughed, sowed, reaped and gathered, and because we were relatively poor we would often go to Dedo Risto's fields to work.

In our *keral* (storeroom), we had pickled foods - piperki, cabbage, wine, cheese in barrels and salted pork from the pig that would be slaughtered around *Mitrov Den* in Autumn, so that we could enjoy meat over the cold winter months. Our mother would use the lard for cooking and sometimes she would fry up *juberinki* (little bits of pork with fat) for us to take to eat with some bread while we worked in the fields.

The village was small but a happy one. When we left to work the fields we didn't think of our poverty, we tried to enjoy ourselves as much as we could and when we were young our days were joyful. We would play hide and seek and other games with our friends. There was a young boy in the village that played the flute and we would dance the *oro* (national dance) in the village square all the time.

One year my Baba Dosta, as usual, took me out with her into one of the fields to help her prepare it for sowing of *chenitsa* (wheat). We toiled for a very long time and managed to plant the wheat and were looking forward to harvesting it when the time came. Unfortunately after some time a very heavy rain and hail came down and flooded the fields completely, taking all our crop away

in a river of mud, leaving nothing. All that hard work was for nothing.

My mother was an extremely capable woman. She did not have the benefit of formal education, but she was astute and knew everything that needed to be done at home, in the fields, everywhere. She also inherited from her own father a very sharp mind, common sense and wisdom. A small woman, she had beautiful thick dark hair braided in two plaits, solemn brown eyes that had cried many tears and a simple but attractive face. For us she was the most beautiful woman on earth and extremely protective.

She was also a very honest person. At the markets, many would be tempted to sample an olive or a cherry, but never my mother. She would go into Lerin to buy supplies, olives and seasonal fruit and we would always get excited when she returned with some sort of treat for us like sultanas, sweet halva, dried figs or a little bit of white bread.

One day when she was shopping in the markets she was accused of stealing something from a store. My mother would keep her hands clasped together under her apron (everyone wore aprons in those days) as she strolled around and the storeowner made his accusation. She told him, "I have not stolen anything, if I have you may punish me, but if I haven't I will slap you so hard across your face your head will spin." "Come on, come on," said the storekeeper impatiently, "show us what you have hidden under your apron."

When my mother lifted her apron only to reveal NOTHING, she raised her arm back and walloped the storeowner's face as hard as she could. He didn't know my mother. One thing she could never abide was theft and would always teach us – *don't ever steal or do anything that would bring disrespect upon yourself or our family*. She always instilled the lesson in us that everybody has a *perdé* (an old Macedonian proverb - metaphorically speaking - an invisible veil over your face behind which lies one's integrity, dignity and self respect). This *perdé* is like your own conscience that prevents you doing wrong or bringing shame to yourself and if it should be pushed aside, figuratively speaking, then a person would have neither shame nor sense of right or

wrong. She made sure we never lost our *peídé*. The storeowner certainly learnt a lesson that day.

During the time my father was in Australia, tragedy struck our family. We never would have expected that which was to befall us. My little brother Vasil was in good health for about three months or so but soon after he contracted some illness and could not walk, talk or do anything. He would look at us with his little eyes recognizing who we were but there was no physical response from him. My mother would take him to the fields with her when she worked, she would have to carry him everywhere. He lived for just under three years and passed away on a holy day we call *Den Lazara*.

Six months later just before Christmas, Vané became ill. He began to develop difficulty breathing. Within a period of twenty four hours his condition deteriorated. My mother was at her wit's end, she didn't know what to do. She decided to go to her sister Yana's house to ask for advice.

She set off with Vané in the thick snow and my young brother had apparently said to her, "Mamo, pick me up, I can't walk anymore." He was nearly eight years old and she told him he was such a big boy, how could she possibly lift and carry him. He must have felt so weak and tired and he pleaded with her, "Please lift me, I am not able to walk anymore." Teta Yana always had something nice and sweet to eat at her house and my mother thought that when she got there, this might make him feel a little better.

So my mother lifted and carried Vané to Teta's and once Teta Yana saw him she could see he was very ill. They tried some old-fashion old-wives' remedy with a freshly killed chicken on his chest (this was supposed to keep that area warm and to help him breathe) and of course this was ridiculous and did not help at all.

The little boy's breathing became more and more laboured and my mother realised that she needed to get him to a doctor quickly. She went to her cousin's house nearby and begged that he lend her his horse to put Vané on and accompany her to the doctor. When they reached the doctor's house, he took one look at Vané and said – "Woman you surely have no luck." He gave the

boy an injection and then told my mother to go to her father's house in the village of Mala. "If he is still alive by five o'clock," he told her, "give me a phone call and I will come to see him. But, if he is not, then phone me again because if I come to Mala it will cost you money."

At exactly five o'clock my little brother passed away. (In the year 2000 when my mother was in her final hours of life and my sisters and I stood vigil by her bedside, listening to her laboured breathing, I told them. "Mum is waiting to die at five o'clock because that's the time Vané died." She died at exactly five o'clock on the dot).

Moments before he died, I am told Vané was calling out for us, his sisters, my grandmother and my Teta Todora. He wanted to see us. My mother loaded his little body onto the horse and brought him back to our village at midnight. For us this was the blackest day of our lives. To this day, we do not really know the actual cause of his death, or that of our younger brother Vasil. Death was an all too common occurrence during those times in the village. Many families lost one or two children somewhere along the way, and probably from illnesses that today would be quite curable.

I could not believe he was gone. My mother had laid him out in the centre of the room (exactly as he had been transported on the horse on a makeshift stretcher) and as I looked down at him I thought that I would go out of my mind. We had left him healthy and now he was dead. Two children, both dead within six months of each other, my mother was broken both mentally and physically. Her health deteriorated.

She threw all her love and energy into us two girls. She was forever fearful that having lost her two boys, we would be next. One day when she was out in the fields she came home and found me lying on the floor. I'd had a temperature and was not feeling very well and had sprawled flat out on the *rogozina* (woven mat) with my eyes open and lying very still. When she came in and saw me, she screamed until she realised I was not dead only sick. She lived in panic for a long time.

On the day of the funeral, his casket was escorted to the graveyard by all the young boys and girls from the school. It was such a sad day. They were all crying as he was buried.

Ristana and I were both attending school but we could not concentrate. I would go over to his grave, lean down and tilt my head and place my ear close to the ground. I was sure that Vané was calling out to me. I could not reconcile myself to his death. I told my mother, "Vané is still alive, get him out, dig up the grave." I told myself he was alive so why would we have buried him if he was alive? My thoughts were irrational.

At school, we were supposed to sing but because we were mourning our brothers, Ristana and I could not. We were heartsick and simply did not have the desire inside ourselves to sing. We told the teacher the reason we didn't wish to sing was because we were mourning the loss of our two brothers.

The teacher said, "If you don't sing, I will cut your hair off." Ristana and I had the most beautiful hair in the village, thick shiny and lustrous. Another young girl jumped up and said, "Can I get the scissors?" We told our mother when we came home and she went over to the school and said to the teacher, "If you ever dare touch one hair on their heads, I will kill you." Our teacher never said another word to us again after that.

We would come home from school and find our grandmother crying for her son Vasil who had died many years before and for her two grandsons. My mother would do her work in the fields and her home duties, baking bread, cooking us food and then go to the grave and cry over it. Many months passed with tears and we watched them weeping all the time. There was little happiness then as we all grieved the loss of our beautiful boys. The atmosphere was sombre as sadness reigned in our household.

Chapter 32 – War looms - life goes on

It was now 1940 and I remember it was autumn and we were gathering the wheat and rye from the fields and working in the *goomno* separating the husks from the grain with the horse first trampling it and us hitting it with sticks.

An official from the village came and told us we had to give up our horses. They would all be required by the Army for military animals as war had broken out in Albania between the Italians and the Greeks. They took our horse and we had to finish our work in the *goomno* with the oxen. In the coming seasons, we had great difficulty carrying out work, bringing in *shuma* (oak branches) and wood without our animals, but thankfully my mother's sister Teta Dosta loaned us her animals to help us to do what needed to be done.

Life as we knew it was swept away by the gale forces of change. War had well and truly settled in. My Vojko Tanas was recruited into the army. Many young men had already been killed and we were afraid for him. Then Germany entered the war and the Greek Army disintegrated. Young soldiers could be seen coming down from the mountains, bootless with frozen legs and arms, no ammunition, tired and hungry, passing through the villages and grateful for a morsel of bread.

We thought that since Germany has entered the war, it being a big country, we would be free and they would help us. We were mistaken, because then more conflicts arose as we fought to get rid of Germany from our land. That war lasted for around four years.

During this time, Ristana and I reached our early teens and as young girls began to take an interest in things around us such as friends and social events and even though war was ongoing we in our village were not too badly affected by what was happening. Gradually, with respect to our bereavement, our days started to lighten up and when our mother saw we were happy she too began to shake her melancholy and feel some joy with us.

There was a group of us girls who were friends, Tsila Kirina, Ristana Masina, Kata Popova, Olga Masina, Kata Gelina, Todora

and my sister Ristana and only one boy named Giorgi Markov, a mischievous trouble maker who would grab my plaits and tug them and say to me “Don’t walk past my house!” We all grew up together and we would sing songs play games and dance the oro and we couldn’t wait for the festive days to come. We tried to make the best of the situation around us.

We celebrated our Christmas and Easter days with great enthusiasm and enjoyment. Because Christmas was in winter, Easter was always a joy in spring. We loved to dress up for this occasion and our mother would comb and put flowers in our long thick hair. If we were lucky she would have new velvet dresses and pretty aprons sewn for us or sometimes she would buy little inexpensive plastic bracelets or rings to make us happy. The festivities would start on Good Friday and then we would wait for late Saturday evening to hear the church bells ring out to announce that we should go to church for midnight mass. We would meet up with all our friends and hold our candles as the service progressed. The following day we would enjoy a delicious Easter lunch with the last born lamb of the season especially slaughtered for Easter. Near the church was a field called *Mankoa Livada* where we would assemble after lunch and give out and receive our red eggs and have egg fights to see whose red egg could smash someone else’s. Our mother would always say, “Remember who gave you a red egg so that I can give them one back.” The livada had beautiful spring flowers and lovely green grass and we would dance the oro to the music that would be played by a band. The next day our mother would cook a chicken and make cora and we would eat the *pogacha* (a special soft round loaf of bread of rye and wheat baked for Easter) as our Easter celebrations spilled over the next day.

Our mother was very protective of us. At school, during lunchtime, we were made to go and have a nap and rest under the shade of the acacia trees. While there, we asked the teacher for permission to drink some water from a nearby tap. She refused. We were so thirsty by the time we got home. Yet again, our mother marched up to the school and told the teacher “When they want water or the toilet you will let them go, otherwise I will kill you myself.”

I recall one incident at school that occurred with a male teacher who was also very strict. We sat in rows of chairs and had to keep our heads straight looking at the back of the head of the person in front of us. My eyes kept wandering over to the fields as I was concerned that the bullocks would stray into the crops and ruin them, and the teacher saw me and came up and whacked the side of my face as hard as he could. I went home with a red swollen face and when my mother saw me and asked the reason why, she took me straight over to Dedo Risto's and told him what had happened. Dedo took a little hatchet and marched up to the school and brandishing his hatchet, confronted the teacher telling him if he ever lays a hand on one of his grandchildren ever again (and there were many in the village) he will drive the hatchet into his head.

My mother was very like her own father – extremely protective.



Dedo Risto and Baba Tsveta with some of their grand children (Markovi family) in Lagen - Easter 1947 (most of the male cousins had already gone abroad)

Chapter 33 – Dedo Yovan arrives in Lagen and a girlhood romance

During the time of the war, in 1943, I was thirteen years of age. Germany and Bulgaria were allied and Dedo Yovan decided to come back from Bulgaria to the village, we believed, to see the family. He had not been home for a very long time since about 1926. My mother's cousin told her that her father-in-law had arrived in the town of Lerin. We had not even known at that stage whether he was dead or alive. My mother could not believe it but she was assured he was alive and well and waiting to be picked up in Lerin.

She took the new horse we had bought and covered the animal with a red *velentsé* (blanket) and went off to Lerin to collect my grandfather. She had never met him, nor he her. In fact none of us had ever seen him. As they made their way home, he asked her to drop him off at the *Dimovdol Cheshma* (a natural spring tap not far from Lagen) and told her to continue home. He said he will walk the rest of the way home by way of Bapchor.

At home, everyone was fussing around in excitement. Food was prepared, *zelnik* or *kora* was baked and everything was in readiness for his arrival. He made his entry wearing a long army type coat and looked very dashing and spoke in a thick Bulgarian dialect which we found more than a little difficult to understand.

Dedo Yovan had an absolute loathing of the Greeks and when partisans ever came by along with Russian soldiers that had escaped the Germans and had defected to the partisans, he would warn them to not trust the Greeks, he told them. "They will betray you."

From his suitcase, Dedo pulled out a number of photos of the entire Bulgarian royal family and he lined the inside wall of our house with them. Whenever partisans passed by our village and came into our house, they saw the photos and branded Dedo a fascist and threatened to do away with him in one way or another.

He apparently saved the lives of twenty or so young boys from our village who were facing inevitable execution by firing squad

because of untrue allegations of being or collaborating with the partisans. As he had been in Bulgaria and spoke the language well, he decided he would help. He brazenly entered the compound in Turie of the Bulgarian fascist soldiers (they were allied with Germany at that time) where the young men were imprisoned, his arms laden with meat, cheese, eggs, wine and whisky that he had rounded up from the entire village. Whatever he said or whatever paperwork he produced, he impressed them and convinced the officers in charge that their prisoners were not *shumkari* (that was what the partisans were called by the Bulgarians) but only innocent frightened young boys and should be released. His mission was successful and he returned to the village a hero and was greeted with cheers and gratitude by the parents of the youngsters.

However, a relative of ours warned my mother to tell Dedo to go back to wherever he came from because he had heard that his life was in danger, he was viewed as a royalist/fascist by his continuous negative talk and outspoken criticism and views of the partisans and, of course, the photographs displayed in our house. *He will end up tossed into the river*, my mother was told.

My mother spoke to her father-in-law of the danger he faced and amid his protests, she helped him pack his clothes and took him by horse back to Lerin and we never ever saw my grandfather again after that.

I had not been on good terms with Dedo during his stay with us because he was always arguing with my Baba and Teta Todora. I once spoke to him about the Bulgarian royal family, when I asked a question regarding the death of the King and how his son would have felt losing his father and I said to him, "Did the young prince cry?" he snapped back at me, "Well, of course, he did, what would you do if your father died?" He had answered me very sharply and I was so embarrassed at having asked the question and then being snapped at so rudely. As I left, I turned around and said to him, "I hope *you* die!" And that was it; he didn't like me from then on.

He loved Ristana who never talked back to him and whom he constantly praised, and my mother who went overboard in trying

to make him comfortable in our house but spoke very disparagingly of me.

His objective for returning to the village was not to see us, his family, but to come back and sell up our fields and livestock and use the money to support his new family in Bulgaria. This did not eventuate because a relative of ours told him to do such a thing to five women would be absolutely outrageous and there would be no-one in the village who would even buy the stock and oust five women leaving them with nothing. He left us empty-handed and we heard he went back to Bulgaria to his other family.

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As young girls we all looked forward to one day getting married in the village and raising a family of our own. We didn't aspire to greater things; we were content with what we had.

As I grew older that troublesome boy began to get older himself and started to look upon me with different eyes. I admit that the attraction was mutual. My mother said, "Don't rush into marriage. He is as poor as we are. We will try to find someone for you a little better off." The boy's parents apparently gave him the same advice.

I had a secret concern that I had not shared with anyone. As I was getting older, I noticed that I could not run around like the other girls did as my leg and hip were giving me a lot of pain (I have since discovered this was a congenital problem). I feared that unless I married early I wouldn't get married at all if my hip problem worsened. If a girl wasn't married by about seventeen years of age in the village she was considered an old maid, and if she had any sort of physical impairment, then her marriage prospects would greatly diminish and this was a dead certainty.

Giorgi began talking to my mother and expressing his affection for me and at one stage our two families were even sharing our field work and stock. My mother was willing to relent on her advice but found out that his parents were not all too keen on the union as they wanted to marry their son off to a wealthier family with more stock and made their opinion quite obvious.

My mother was so angry she told Giorgi, "Don't ever walk past our house again, because if you do I will break a piece of wood over your head." He tried to talk with her and offer explanations but my mother was adamant. She said, "I don't have a daughter for your parents to say is not worthy enough for you." She cut him off and we were both disappointed. That was the end of that.

Chapter 34 – Unrest and Upheaval

When WWII ended, we sighed with relief that it was the end of fascism and we were liberated, but propaganda was already circulating that something else was brewing. There was unrest in the country.

The royal family and government officials, who had abandoned the country during the war years and held up in Cairo for their own safety, were on their way back to Greece with the full backing of England.

Demonstrations started and everyone wanted the British influence out. The people who were partisans were slowly being picked out and dealt with harshly. Thousands who had been fighting against the Germans were now jailed and mercilessly tortured. Many fled to the mountains.

In our village we had a strong youth organization of young men and women who would appraise the political branch of the partisans on what was generally going on in and around our village. In 1946 the partisans started slowly regrouping again. Firstly sixty or so of them gathered in our village, and then it rose to eighty and kept climbing. We had to look after them, feed them, clothe them and the younger ones from our organization would run messages to neighbouring villages and keep watch to warn the partisans whenever the government forces were nearby.

The partisan movement became stronger. Unrest and rebellion resonated and the fires of war ignited again and fighting began everywhere. Heavy losses occurred on both sides. The people were so frightened. Partisans came into the villages. They took away girls and women to carry the dead and the wounded through the snows back to the villages.

There were people in the village (*shpioni*) who were helping the government forces by spying and reporting via two-way radio anything and everything that happened in the village when the partisans came through. They were eventually discovered, lined up and executed.

Our mother would go into Lerin to shop for rice and sugar and other products that we could not provide from our land. Soldiers told her and others to not go via the usual way, but they were directed to an area where the livestock auction was held. Barbed wire prevented people from going into the town. There, on the barbed wire grotesquely displayed for all to see were the severed heads of people who had been arrested and killed. They wanted the villagers to witness this ghastly exhibition to serve as a warning and to convince them not to do or say anything against the Greek government dictatorship.

One of our relatives was killed for some obscure act of disloyalty against the government and several women were ordered to carry him on a stretcher to the town and leave him there to be displayed as warning propaganda. Our mother heard of his death and went to see the body. When she saw him, she gasped his name in shock, was overheard and brusquely asked, "What?" "Nothing," she quickly replied, not daring to claim him as a relative, "I can't look at this sort of thing anymore." No one could say or do anything; we all had to just shut up.

My first cousin, Para was arrested along with 27 other men and women, accused of collaborating with the partisans and having relations who were in the partisan movement. They were imprisoned and beaten every morning. She and the others were belted across the soles of their bare feet with a piece of wood. Some were ordered to kneel on beds of nails. Only she and a few others of the 26 people survived. The man she would ultimately marry had been a government policeman and he had been so disgusted at the treatment he had witnessed meted out to innocent people, he resigned from the police force and went home. (Para is 87 years old as of this day and is partly crippled from the beatings and punishment endured in her youth).

As the partisan movement started to gather momentum, the Greeks decided to put a police station in our village in an endeavour to stop the partisans from coming to the village. The police station was opposite my Vojko Kote's house. One night the partisans came into the village and attacked the officers in the police station. There was a bloody battle with many wounded.

The Greek police from the neighbouring village of Neret retaliated because of the attack and came into our village armed with rifles. They did not discriminate in their revenge. They swore, they screamed, they belted and hit and shoved around anyone and everyone who got in their way. We hid behind our furnace and heard the bullets hammering against the walls of our house. We five women were still hiding when the police reached our house and forcefully dragged us out, screaming and swearing obscenities at us.

They accused us of hiding Bulgarians. My Teta Todora said defiantly, "You should have come sooner there is no-one here now." One of the policemen stepped menacingly towards us and I happened to be the one in front of him. With anger, he turned his rifle over and butted the top of my head. My mother grabbed a piece of wood and ran over to him yelling, "How dare you hit my child," and in turn whacked him over his back a couple of times. Surprisingly, he didn't retaliate.

We heard about four young men who were singled out for singing Macedonian songs. They were made to dig their own graves and then blindfolded. They were then told to sing their song one last time so that they would know why they were dying. The soldiers in the firing squad couldn't do it. They expressed the opinion that those men were innocent and so they fired over their heads. The government informer who gave the command to shoot pushed one away, angrily grabbed his weapon and fired. The bullets cut them down as they dropped into their own graves.

After some time they disbanded the police station from our village and we thought we were free of them. But they decided our village needed to be evacuated as they suspected we were sympathising with the partisans and helping them in their fight by supplying food and services to them. The police descended upon us and took us out of our house. Villagers who had supplied the partisans were immediately denounced and punished as communist sympathisers. Some villages were evacuated by the Army under the pretext of direct threat, but this was their way of depriving the partisans of supplies and recruits.

We were told to grab what we can and abandon our village of Lagen. We wondered where we would go. Many people had

relatives further away that they went to. Luckily, my Dedo Risto in Mala took us in. My Baba Dosta was very stubborn and refused to leave the village and so stayed on despite the danger and all that was happening around.

We were so many people squashed together in his two room house. We took our livestock with us as well. We knew, however, that at some time we would have to eventually return back to our village and as it turned out, we didn't stay away very long.

There was conflict between my mother and my grandmother in that my mother had been warned to keep away from the village, especially to keep us, her daughters, away in safety because there was the ever present danger of Ristana and I being recruited into the partisans. But, my grandmother kept saying. "If you don't come back who will work the fields, who will plough, who will plant, who will do all the chores that need to be done?"

We went back just after Easter.

Within a short time, the aeroplanes came and the bombings started, relentlessly blasting the village. From the mountains the cannons exploded. There was no safe place as the terror attacks continued with indiscriminate bombing and the village was devastated. There were many casualties, including many old people and also the livestock. Our village was cut off from everything. We were not permitted to travel to Lerin and we were even without a basic item like salt for our food and bread.

The partisan movement became stronger and stronger and whenever the government forces would pass through our village we would hide ourselves because they were very fanatical in their harsh treatment of us and would do as they pleased. Whoever crossed their path was made to suffer.

Chapter 35 – Mlada Partizanka – Young partisan girl

*A sho mié milo i drago
Mlada partizanka da oda
Na taia Vicho Planina
Zbogum vech proshtavum rodé moi
Yas otivum vo
boi! boi! boi!*

(The song is sung by a young girl who tells of her wish to join the partisans and to fight on Vicho Planina. As she bids her family farewell she tells them she may never see them again as she is now off to war)

It was 1947 and I was seventeen years old when I made the decision to become a partizanka along with my cousin Tanasa (Vojko Kote's daughter) and Kata Kostoa my dearest friend. She was a very beautiful girl with fair hair and blue eyes. We grew up and worked together and shared a close friendship. Kata loved a young man named Vane Asprov but somehow that union failed to eventuate and he'd married someone else. Kata was inconsolable. She decided to join the partisans, her thinking was if she didn't she would either kill him or kill herself. When she joined, so did I as did Tanasa. (Kata was killed at Gramos in 1948 - her brother Kolé in 1947).

This decision was also based on our desire to flee the village and get away from the terrorism that was occurring there and to fight for the ideals that we felt we could achieve. The Macedonian people had been prohibited from speaking their own language since 1913 when our region of the country had been partitioned off to Greece. Names were changed, towns and villages were renamed and people were forced to learn and to speak Greek otherwise faced repercussions. In the town and village square where they might be overhead and reported to the government police, people spoke Greek, only to revert to their own language in the safety of their home. It was for these reasons that we joined and fought with the partisans – to achieve the freedoms that the Macedonian people had been stripped of.

We dressed in our partisan uniforms and I went to see my mother who was at her sister, Teta Dosta's house. My mother was shocked to see me so attired and questioned my decision to become a partisan. I assured her that I would be alright, not to worry and the war would be over very soon.

I told her that the word from our comrades was that within three months this war would be over and we would be back. We would be free. We would be able to speak our language without fear; we would be able to conduct our lives as we wished with no-one to tell us what to do. I had a very strong ideology of why we would be fighting and what we hoped to achieve.

My mother's eyes reddened as she fought to hold back her tears, but she didn't cry in front of me. She sensed my determination and I suppose she knew it would be futile to try to discourage me.

She spoke to me stoically, "I will ask three things of you. You are very young, you will be around many young men – do not forsake your morals. Keep yourself safe from danger and thirdly return home to me safe and well." I gave her my promise and assurance and I said my goodbyes and left my family. I heard years later from my Teta Fania, that after I had left she had broken down and wept mournfully.

Apparently, much later, about 400 government forces soldiers descended upon our village – including 30 or 40 '*special volunteers*' of the government who would, with full approval, carry out the burning and pillaging of villages. They had no qualms about stealing and plundering anything they wanted. It was even known they had raped certain women. We called them '*Lokaji*' as some were local people who were informers who supported the government forces and they were more of a terror to us than the Army was.

It was Christmas Day and my mother and Ristana had been staying at my Teta Yana's house when they came. They started searching around the house for anything that the partisans might have left behind. They found some wire and batteries that had been discarded by them and started to accuse my mother and

question her regarding two-way radios, my involvement with the partisans and my Teta Todora's involvement. They might have even thought there was a two-way radio hidden in the house. My mother told them she knew nothing of what the partisans had been doing. She explained they had lived upstairs when the partisans had occupied the lower floor. They didn't believe her and one of the *special volunteers* took a piece of heavy wood and started to repeatedly bash my mother over her head. (She was to suffer intolerable migraines the rest of her life).

Ristana had overheard them talking on their two-way radio to their superiors, requesting instructions on what to do. She clearly heard their order come back – "Burn everything to the ground." Upon hearing this, Ristana frantically rushed down to the *avur* where the animals were housed, to free them. She struggled with their leashes and managed to get them outside but then came up against a retaining wall to the next house. The horse reared up in protest but somehow, with great difficulty, she managed to lead it and the oxen around to safety.

The government forces soldiers were in this instance quite sympathetic and helped them to evacuate and advised everyone to not make the *special volunteers* angry. Seventeen houses were burnt to the ground and everything valuable was confiscated by them. Hidden gold coins people may have had, clothes and in our case a nice cutlery set that Dedo Yovan had bought from Bulgaria and had been hidden in the *senduk* (a large wooden chest) were taken.

My mother had hidden most of our clothes and nicer things in a trench outside the house, covered over by bush and dry sticks. The government forces soldiers helped them save most of the clothes, but a 'glory box' for Ristana and myself that our mother had been adding items to since we were very young, such as dress fabrics from Australia, wool for knitting, aprons, socks, towels and woven blankets among other things had been looted. It was customary in those days to present the relatives of your intended spouse gifts of socks, shirts and other items and to also have a certain amount of things that you would then take with you to your new home. This was called '*ruo*'.

They also took our horse.

At a later time, our brigade passed through my village and we stayed a day or so. I saw the still-smouldering smoke of the hay and dried wood that we used for our furnace. When I saw my mother I asked her if she would make me some *kora*. I told her I was dying to have some of her *kora* once more. She said, “Eleno, I have only this little bit of flour left in our house,” she demonstrated with cupped hands, “and I am saving it because if you should get killed, then I won’t have any flour to bake some buns.” (An old custom to mark a death, bread buns are taken to the church).

When I came to Australia, she told me that every time she made *kora* for the family, she would go into another room and begin to cry. My father had asked her why she was crying all the time and she told him the story of her sadness when I had asked for *kora* and she had not enough flour to bake some to give me at that time when I was at the crossroads of life and death.

Chapter 36 - Battle commences – The Heroic Passage

We joined up with the partisans and we went to the Kostursko region and made our way through the villages. There was a monastery there called Sveti Vraché where my mother used to bring my little brother Vasil when he was very sick to be blessed in hopes that he would be cured.

We were separated with my friend Kata, both having been sent to different battalions. I kept enquiring after her and would ask other partisans from time to time if they had come across her anywhere. Everyone knew we had been close friends. It seemed they all avoided telling me the truth, until one young partisan told me that she had been fatally wounded. He said she had not bled much when she lay dying. He told me they buried her in a little *livada* (field) near Gramos. I was heartbroken with grief, asking myself why she had to die. I moved into the bush to cry privately (crying was not allowed because it would be demoralizing to the other partisans. We had to keep our spirits up and were told that when someone died, we should think of them as heroes who died for the cause).



Elena's best friend, Kata Kostoa, killed in Gramos, June 1948, with her niece, Fanka

I had so much pain with my leg even then, but I never told anyone and kept on going because that was what was expected of us. No-one was interested in your own personal pain and there were battles to fight and I had to go and do as I was ordered.

We were told that if we were captured, we should be prepared to die because there would be no mercy shown, only torture and rape.

The partisans were very strict in their own disciplines and operation and did not tolerate any breaking of rules. For operations and missions to run to plan, rules had to be strictly adhered to otherwise the punishment was severe. There was zero tolerance with regards to immoral behaviour, unsatisfactory conduct and especially dereliction and desertion of duty, and the penalty was death - firing squad at six metres. Fraternisation between male and female partisans was strictly forbidden, as was consumption of alcohol and drunkenness.

This was the way they could ensure battles would be won and success would prevail.

On the 6th March, our 18th brigade received orders that we were to go down to central Greece where we would collect around 3,000 unarmed Greek civilians stranded in the villages there and bring them to the free area of Gramos. These people were to become partisans. Our commander, Aminda, issued the order that there would be no fighting or conflict; we were simply required to pave the way and bring these civilians safely back to Gramos. We were given rations of some semi-boiled meat to put in our backpacks so we knew we would be travelling for a long time.

We set off and went through Kostursko and then down through the Siniachko area, but someone had betrayed us because the government forces were waiting for us. A battle ensued for three days and many young partisans died during that time. When we knew the dead, we mourned, but at times we had to hide underneath and behind them to avoid being killed ourselves. Tanasa and I dragged the wounded from the front and took them on horses to a field hospital in one of the villages and then went back to rejoin the brigade.

Then an order came through from the high command that the 18th brigade was to return back to the village of Olischcha. Too much time had been lost, and everyone should have been in Gramos three days before. We returned to Vicho and they removed our Brigade Commander and replaced him with a Macedonian from Strebreni called Pando Voinata. Then the mission was reinstated once more. We set off as we had done before and we reached that same area where we had battled previously.

It was the 25th March and because that was the date the Greeks celebrate the ousting of the Turk we were under the assumption that there would be no bombardments as we thought they would be too busy celebrating in their camps and towns. We thought we would go via the main road and came to a large hill where the shepherds kept their sheep. They kept water in troughs to feed their animals and we too drunk from those troughs.

But, we were wrong. They were expecting us yet again. From one side the armoured division tanks approached and from the other the mounted cavalry came towards us and surrounded us on the road. We scattered and fled up into the mountains and Tanasa and I kept calling out to one another in an attempt to not lose sight of each other.

The bullets whistled around our heads. We had no water and we ate plant buds to moisten our dry mouths. We dug ourselves into foxholes in the snow and stayed concealed until nightfall with just enough of a gap to breathe in our endeavour to keep safe as the bombers buzzed overhead and missiles and explosions thundered around us.

In one instance during this mission, the bombers detected us and commenced shelling very heavily. Bullets rained down and I hid in a hole that had pooled with water, crouching down behind a comrade who was the cook in our unit as we both waited for the planes to leave. Eventually they did and I shouted out to him to get up but did not receive any answer. I said "Why are you sleeping now, we need to move?" I gave him a shake and his head rolled back on me. I had not realised an exploding shell had hit him in the neck, almost decapitating him. We did not even

have time to bury him; we threw some snow over him and left him there.

When night fell, we started to move again. We reached the River Belitsa which at that time of the year was swollen from the winter rains and the heavy clumps of snow that had come down from the mountains. A couple of strong young partisans entered the water and carried a rope which they strung across its width.

The rest of the men followed and crossed the river, holding on to the rope, rifles held high. For us young girls and there was about ten of us, the water was well over our depth and so we mounted the Commander's black horse and that poor animal made twenty trips back and forth in that freezing water carrying us over. I was the last to cross and as I mounted the horse, something spooked him and he reared his front legs and I fell into the water. I was somehow quickly scooped up by someone before I was swept away in the fierce river.

I was soaked to my skin and freezing cold and we entered one of the villages which we found abandoned by the *Vlahsi* who had occupied it. We went inside one or two of the houses and removed our clothing and spread them out to dry.

Our mission had been successful. We had caused enough of a diversion to the enemy, so that those 3,000 people would have a safe passage, and we headed back to Gramos. Everyone was cold and hungry and many barefoot with threadbare clothes, it had been a long trek, lasting about three weeks.

Later we went to a village in Gramos called Hrisi for rest and recuperation and I met up with an uncle of mine, Risto Matin, who had been seriously wounded in battle and was there at that time. He had been a heavy artillery fighter and he spoke of the hunger during his brigade's battles. They had been so hungry they had eaten their mules and hidden their ammunition in the scrub under branches and leaves.

"Have you any bread to spare," he asked. "I am dying for just a crust of bread." I told him, we were in the same position, hungry and malnourished ourselves. Tanasa said she was going to do a search around the houses in the village to see if she could find

any food. I didn't go with her because I felt embarrassed as if I were begging.

But, Tanasa had no qualms about asking for food. We were given soap and cigarettes while with the partisans that we would exchange for food in whatever village we passed. And this was what she did; she would swap a pack of cigarettes for a slice of bread.



Elena's first cousin Tanasa

One time, however, suffering extreme hunger I resorted to the same thing. My pride completely depleted, I approached a Greek villager woman in Ipiro. She asked me what I wanted and when I asked for a portion of bread, she took one look at me and raised her broom in the air, waving it around wildly, and threatening to break it over my head. The irony was not lost on me. Here I was, armed with a rifle and she was the one frightening me off brandishing a broom. She sent me away without food.

We had been given orders that we were not to ever offend or harass the villagers. I was so embarrassed that I made a vow to myself that I would rather die starving than ever again beg for food.

Tanasa was never a big eater and she always had something leftover in her bag. One day, we went down into one of the villages and she traded her soap for some food. The villagers were probably as hungry as we were and all they could spare was a few crusts of bread that their children had not eaten and an onion so old it had started to sprout, its once green leaves withered and yellow. She kept encouraging me to keep up with her and said she would reward me with a surprise if I did. Slowly she gave me the 'surprise' from her bag and it was the withered onion with a couple of crusts of bread.

On Christmas day we were in Posdivishcha and we felt that since it was Christmas we would have a day to rest. It was snowing and the unit cooks had made a big pot of fish and potatoes. A urgent telephone call came from Dambeni that the fascists were there and were burning the village and a great amount of fighting was taking place with another partisan unit, so we had to get up immediately and go by foot to give them a hand. The big pot of steaming potatoes and fish was tipped over in the snow and we were left hungry. That was the first time we would have had something hot to eat and even then it was not to be and it was tipped out in a hurry. Later, we went to the village of Kosinets and there they gave us a little something to eat.

The partisans each had their own *billy-can* type of food container but Tanasa and I would always eat and share from the one. She was always generous and forever making sure I was not hungry. I on the other hand was continually hungry.

Sometimes we tore leaves from the nettle bush and rubbed them between our fingers and ate them raw and we ate other wild thorny plants generally not considered food, such was our hunger.

We did what we could to survive.

Chapter 37 – Officer's School

Next, we set off for the area around the town of Yiannena. We didn't know what our mission was to be, but that large town was occupied by the government forces. The poor horse that had carried us over the river had been exposed to the elements and was frozen and sick and he eventually died. We came to a village called Samarina in Gramos on our way to the Yiannena area. We were always on the lookout for any discarded ammunition or food or anything that would help us. From there we trekked for quite a few days until we reached the main road to Yiannena. Some went through; others kept watch at the passing government tanks and troops.

During our patrol, we captured ten government forces troops heading towards us, sweeping the ground with mine detectors. We took them and went to a village in Ipiro that was deserted though we did find some food to eat.

We began singing songs and dancing the oro and our surprised captives remarked how although we were starving and wearied from fighting we still managed to sing and dance to boost our moral. They were astounded and wanted to know from where we managed to get our energy and strength.

We finished up there and headed back to Samarina and they dissolved our 18th brigade. Some went to the Saboteur battalion which had a special unit that planted mines in enemy positions or removed mines so that we could pass safely through. I was sent to Officer's School for six weeks.

We were now separated from many good and dedicated comrades. As for me, I was separated from one of my closest friends at that time, Risto Pirovski, who was sent to the Saboteur battalion. Risto was one of the first partisans from the village of Kosinets, Kostursko. He was the courier of the unit when the first partisans came to our village in 1947. When I joined as a partizanka in the same unit and we were together for nearly a year, he was very protective of me as a 17 year old girl, always looking after me, giving me food as he always had something in his backpack. He would forever be advising me to take care and treated me like I was his sister.

When we were separated, we were very sad and thought we would never see each other again.

- *After our arrival in Australia, we attended a Macedonian dance at the Unity Hall one evening and I noticed a man there resembling Risto. This was sixteen years after I had last seen him. I thought this can't be true, what is Risto doing here? I then asked another lady if she knew that man. She told me his name is Risto and he is from Selo Kosinets. It was unbelievable to meet up again in Australia after all those years. Both of us cried from happiness and sadness. Risto was married to Tsana Noleva from Selo Dambeni and they had three daughters. They, together with Tsana's younger sister Mary and her husband Lazo became our firm friends and for the next 50 years we three couples became so close we never missed a week of seeing one another. Our friendship gave us a lot of enjoyment in our lives in Perth. We care for each other immensely and our life long friendship is still going strong. Sadly, Risto passed away recently and we will never cease to miss his smiling face, friendship and company.*

The heavy battle in Gramos had commenced and following my stint in Officer's School, I was sent to the 103rd brigade under the command of Ipsilanti. The bombings were unrelenting; the aeroplanes not only strafing but also dropping benzene bombs from the sky. The land was burning and so were the partisans. The air was acrid from the smell of war. We were told that we should arm ourselves with two or more rifles now, machine guns and hand grenades, so that when we fired continuously the enemy would think there were more of us than there actually were. Many partisans had died and we took up their arms. It was a tumultuous time. The government forces were determined to drive us out of Gramos.

Chapter 38 – Taburi na Furka – Wounded

At Taburi na Furka, we were hungry and thirsty, too afraid to fill our water canteens from a nearby slowly dripping spring, for fear of being cut down. That day was a black day in our battles with many deaths.

I saw so many die in front of me and many more injured including our superior officer. He was a very brave partisan who always led the way in front. I saw a chunk of shrapnel slice through his lower torso and he fell down screaming for help. I held onto my rifle as I ran up to him and tried to hoist him over my shoulder. I started pulling and dragging him and he tried to help himself up as well but it was very difficult as I was so young and small, but somehow I managed to drag him to safety and immediately returned back to my fighting position.

Much later, when I ended up in hospital in Albania I saw the officer there and he was being fed through a tube into his stomach. I went to see him and he said to me, “I don’t know what my life will be like with these injuries I have, but I am here only because you saved me by lifting me out of the gunfire and flames.”

I would visit him often and enquire about his health. He kept saying he was alright.

I picked up two rifles again and starting shooting first with one then the other as we watched the steel helmets, the sun glinting off them, advancing towards us. We were shaking with fear for we were only a small band of partisans in that brigade. A heavy battle ensued that day and the government troops were determined to take that mount.

The day was one of diversity. One moment the government troops would advance, next we would. One of the enemy soldiers was wounded and one of our partisans went towards him. Unlike the partisans, the government troops were never hungry or wanting for food. We knew they were always given hearty rations of food, even conserves, chocolates and biscuits and their water canteens were always full. Their directive was always - *eat and drink what you like, just be strong enough to fight and defeat the partisans.*

They dug around in his backpack looking for any food, so intense was their hunger. They did find bread but it was soaked in blood. One of our partisans, a young Greek boy from Thessalia took out the bread and squeezed the blood from it and said, "Come and eat some of this – there is nothing else." When I saw that bread, I thought to myself, even if I die from hunger I can never eat that bread. The others shared it.

Suddenly, a bomb exploded about ten metres away from me, either from a plane overhead or a cannon and a piece of shrapnel slammed into my rifle, breaking it, and from there it ricocheted into my left arm. The blood started flowing and I watched in shock as it drenched my uniform and ran down into my shoes.

I realised I was very seriously wounded and I called out to the nurse (a Greek girl) who had arrived that day to help the wounded. I kept calling out to her but she was hidden in the trenches where the machine guns were. She popped her head up and made a comment acknowledging that I had been wounded. I told her I need help to bandage my arm. We all carried bandages on us to use in case we were hurt but it was in my right hand pocket and I couldn't retrieve it. I cried out for her to come out and help me, but she didn't and there was no-one immediately around to bandage up my arm.

I had a white scarf on me that I had brought from home and would use to wrap around my long hair. Somehow with this I fashioned a sort of sling to tie around my arm. I felt no pain but the blood was pouring from my wound. I also had an intense thirst and I was waiting for someone to come over to help me. No-one came; they were either wounded themselves or dead around me. I set off by myself to find help.

I thought if I kept walking in a right hand-direction I would eventually reach the headquarters of my battalion. As I walked slowly along, my shoes were sloshing with blood. I was dying of thirst and I came across a small pool of water that had accumulated from the melting snows and it was yellowed and dirty and infested with god-knows-what. I shoved my head into the water and drank and drank until I felt as though my stomach would burst.

When I reached the camp, the first aid officer cut away the sleeve of my coat and looked at my tattered arm. I begged him for water and he gave me a large cupful. He bandaged my arm. He told me I would now need to get out of the front and go further up to a place where there were people who took care of the wounded and transferred them to the combat hospital.

There was a woman named Katina who was the spokesperson for the women partisans and she and another woman named Eleni said they would take me to the place where I would then be transferred to hospital.

The bombardments and artillery rounds were so heavy; trees that had been standing for hundreds of years were razed to the ground. They fell across roads and trying to walk through the tangled mess of strewn trees and branches and mud in the dark - we lost our way. They told me they didn't know where they were and decided to go back.

They asked me if I wanted to go back with them to where we had been and try the next morning to come out again. I told them they could go back but I wouldn't. The numb feeling had worn off and my arm was starting to hurt now, it stung like fire, and after they left me, I found a spot somewhere to lay down and finally either from exhaustion or pain, I fell into a somewhat fitful sleep fading in and out of consciousness. Sometime during the night the pain was so intense it woke me and I wondered what to do. I couldn't just stay there and I decided to get up and start heading for my original destination once more.

I travelled across the countryside, tripping over broken trees and branches, falling down into mud, picking myself up time and again. Eventually I saw a light ahead. It was a fire. By this stage, I didn't care if it was our side or the enemy; I just knew I couldn't go on any further.

I was stopped by a person on guard duty who asked for my identification. I told him I was a wounded partizanka and he welcomed me. He said they had people to transfer the wounded, but at that moment they were not available as there were many wounded partisans and they had not come back from transferring them to hospital.

I sat on a rock and waited. My arm was still bleeding. Come the morning, a group of wounded partisans were brought through. One of them was my leader. He had no legs. He told me there was no-one left. The government forces had taken Taburi na Furka. We could hear the sound of the artillery. The bombing was getting closer.

We set off from there by foot. My feet stung. I had not taken my shoes off for two weeks and they were filled with blood and mud. We reached Kansko where doctors administered chloroform to put me to sleep to repair my arm. Just as I was going under, I shouted repeatedly to them – “Don’t amputate my arm.” They were Greek doctors and they didn’t understand what I was saying as I was speaking in Macedonian. I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me to speak in Greek. I underwent the operation and because there were no spare beds, I was placed under a tree to recuperate with my head under the shade and my body in the sun. I ripped off my shoes to rest my feet and put them near my head.

Whilst I had dozed off, someone had come by and taken my shoes. When I awoke, I wondered how I was going to walk around shoeless. The bottoms of my feet were bloodied and raw.

Because the fighting and bombing was getting dangerously closer, a decision was made to evacuate the main field hospital. They lifted us up and put those of us who couldn’t walk on horses and mules and headed for the main large hospital in Gramos. On our journey there, I noticed something strange happening to my arm. Beside the pain, it felt all fuzzy and I sensed a crawling sensation inside the arm. I asked them how long before we get there, and they told me about five hours.

Finally, we reached the hospital and they undid the bandages. My arm was riddled with maggots. Following the operation when I had been placed under the tree to recuperate, my arm had become flyblown. The doctors gathered around and offered opinions and options. I was told that my arm would never heal. Some suggested amputation to avoid further infection travelling to my heart but some women in the commission said, “No we will send her to Albania, they can decide there what to do with her arm.”

Fortunately for me, they didn't amputate and that same day, we were bombarded at that hospital. I met a young girl there, by the name of Tinka, who was a relative of my Teta Dosta's husband. She asked where I was from and when I replied Lagen, she said so was she. I told her I knew everyone from Lagen and I didn't know her. She said she had been living in Bulgaria when her parents had gone there during the German occupation in 1941. She had come back to join the partisans. She told me that a fellow villager by the name of Vasil who had joined the partisans and had been badly beaten by the Greeks was gravely ill and he was here. She said, "Let's go and see him. Maybe he'll live, maybe he won't." (He was to die later).

She went to get something to take to him, when all of a sudden the aeroplanes loomed overhead. They started bombing. People were screaming and running around in confusion as explosions thundered all around. The injured were killed and there were bodies everywhere. I just stayed where I was and thought to myself, I am not going anywhere. Whatever happens, happens. But soon I was picked up and taken away.

I did not see Tinka again that day and I had assumed she too had been killed. She hadn't though and in 1990 when I went on holidays to Lagen, she learnt of my arrival and eagerly sought me out to meet up and talk about our lives in 1948.

Chapter 39 – Hospital in Albania

I was then taken to the major hospital in Albania by mule and we were put into an army truck with a canvas canopy, packed like sardines in the back. People were moaning and crying from the pain of their wounds. The lorry rattled along until we reached Korçë. At the hospital in Albania there were many doctors from different countries like Bulgaria, Poland, Germany – everywhere, and so I was sent straight to the surgery to check out my arm. (I met a nurse there at that time that I still see here in Perth to this day. Her name is Kostandina Adamos).

In the army truck on the way to the hospital in Korçë, I heard a familiar voice screaming with pain. I knew this was Risto Koiov from Pozdivischcha. We had been together in the same unit during the mission with the 18th brigade. I shouted out to him, “Ti si Risto? (Is that you Risto?). What happened? You are wounded too?” He recognised my voice and replied, “Ti si Leno? You are wounded as well?” It came to be that both of us went to many hospitals in Albania. He was very severely wounded; his leg was broken in many places. After a few months, he returned back to the front to continue fighting. At the end, when the partisans withdrew to Albania in 1949, he finished in Tashkent in the Soviet Union. From there he came to Manjimup in Australia and then moved to Perth. I met up with him again twenty years later and it was a very emotional moment for me. Here in Perth, to the Macedonian people, he is known by his nickname “*Tashken*”.

When they placed me on the operating table and unravelled the dressing on my arm they were confronted with a sickening sight. The wound was crawling with maggots and my arm had turned blue. “Comrade,” they said to me, “you will have to give up that arm.”

“No, I won’t,” I told them. “I didn’t give my arm back there and I won’t give it up now. You *will* help me.” They cleaned it up and dressed and re-bandaged it and they put me in a room with another ten or fifteen female patients.

The nursing staff had cleaned up the outside of the wound, but some maggots were still inside the bone area and it was still badly

infected. I was thinking that tomorrow when they unravel those bandages again, how am I going to bear the pain? The dressings would stick to the tattered flesh of my wound and I would scream in agony. I always begged them for anaesthetic to put me out before they redressed my bandages but was refused.

There was a small cabinet in the room with all sorts of medicines and I noticed a bottle of clear liquid. When they used to change my dressing they would bathe the wound with distilled water, so I thought I will undo my bandage and soften the area with this water so that when they tend to my dressing tomorrow it won't be so painful. I poured the contents of that bottle, thinking it was distilled water, all over my arm. It was white spirits.

My arm was on fire, it felt like a flame was consuming it. I screamed and wailed. The pain was excruciating. The other women wondered what had happened to me. I didn't tell them. I stuck my head under the covers and screamed to the heavens.

The next morning, the stinging pain had somewhat subsided. When the doctors came to change my dressing, instead of a blue infected arm they saw a bright red one, somewhat swollen. "What happened," they asked. "Who tended to your arm?" "You all did," I replied. "This isn't the same arm we saw yesterday," they said suspiciously. All the maggots died with this procedure so in one way this might have actually saved my arm.

I didn't tell them what I had done. Had I not been so afraid to tell them, perhaps they might not have re-bandaged my arm but let the fresh air start to heal the injury.

The Bulgarian doctor decided they were going to put the arm in plaster and with tin snips made holes in the plaster for drainage. That procedure too was unbearable.

From there I was sent to Moscopole to a large rehabilitation hospital. My skin was yellow and I was so thin I felt weak; all my strength was sapped out of me. Pain, hunger and exhaustion had taken its toll. I walked around like a wraith with my long lank hair. I stayed there for three days and during this time my arm was weeping blood and pus under the plaster which had by now rotted. It smelt badly.

We went back to Korçë. This time, they put metal rods in a couple of places around the plaster to keep it intact. Slowly, after a couple of months in the plaster, my arm looked as though it was starting to get better.

From there I was taken to Elbasan. I couldn't put my arm down so I carried it in a sling around my neck. There were so many wounded partisans there, hundreds of them with missing arms and legs, head injuries and all manner of terrible wounds. These partisans would no longer be able to be sent back to fight.

They fed us with boiled leeks in water. In the second storey of the hospital, partisans who had injuries to their torsos and stomachs were tended to and they were given slightly better, more delicate food in hopes of recovering quicker.

I was given the job of being the spokesperson for the women there. The woman in charge would say, "Eleni pick five women and get some apples from the storeroom." We would peel the apples to make compote for the patients.

Those of us who went were very happy. This meant an apple in the basket and an apple in our own mouths.

Chapter 40 - A chance encounter with a loved one

One incident has always stayed in my mind and stirs up memories of those turbulent times. When I had been in Officer's School, partisans in our company had to transport mortar artillery to the village of Kansko. It was a very large piece of equipment and it had to be taken in sections by about five of us. When we entered the village, loaded with this equipment, I noticed a woman sitting on the corner holding a bag similar to the type that we had woven in our village.

That village was devoid of civilians, they had all fled. It had a field hospital and was occupied by the partisans. So, I was very surprised to notice a civilian woman there. As I walked closer to her, I wondered who she might be. I would never have expected it to be my father's sister, Teta Todora, as the last I had heard of her she was married and living in Lerin. When recognition set in, my tears started to flow.

Suddenly, she started shouting "Eleno, Eleno, where have you been? I have been sitting here at this corner every day waiting to see if you would come by. I have some bread in this bag. I have asked everyone that has passed by about you."

I told her I was on duty and asked how she happened to be there. She had married and went to live in Lerin and told me that she had left her husband as he was involved with a paramilitary organization against the partisan movement. When she discovered a rifle of his hidden behind the door she had thought to herself, "*He might use that rifle to kill my Elena,*" (as I was a partizanka) and she left him secretly and went back home to Lagen. She had found my grandmother (her mother) alone in the village and because there was nothing else for her to do there she too had joined the partisans as a worker in the military hospital. She had also worked in Albania tending the livestock that were intended for slaughtering and supplying to the frontline partisans.

She reached into her bag and took out the bread she had been saving and offered it to me. I never saw Teta Todora again until we met up in Poland after the war. That encounter with her in the midst of our most tormenting times makes me very emotional.

Chapter 41 - Gramos falls – Retreat to Vicho – Civilians assisting Defence

During the time I was in the hospital in Albania, the battle in Gramos continued for another month or so. The government forces, with the assistance of America and Britain exerted great pressure and power upon the partisans. The land was burning; the bombardments were relentless with huge losses. The stench of the dead was overwhelming. The partisans realised the futility of defending Gramos and so retreated back to Vicho.

Gramos had fallen in eighty three days and it was not just Gramos Planina but the whole large region. The government forces wanted this region captured before the impending winter. Their mission was to block the roads to and from Albania in an endeavour to stop all ammunition, food and supplies coming from that country helping the partisans.

In Vicho, the partisans fought heavily and bravely. The situation was grave. The partisans descended upon the village and forcibly took many young girls, some as young as fifteen and sixteen, and women aged up to thirty five years old were recruited as helpers to carry the wounded and the dead, dig graves and bunkers and throw dynamite to build trenches. Twenty five or so young girls would be responsible for 500 partisans.



Young girls and women stretcher wounded partisans.

During that time they took my mother and my sister Ristana. I had no idea they were in Vicho all that time during the battles and bombings. I thought they were safe with my grandmother back in the village going about their daily tasks. But they had been all over the place with the partisans.

There were many hundreds such girls as my sister Ristana and young women from many villages who were taken as workers, carrying logs and sandbags, digging trenches, building bunkers, carrying the wounded and burying the dead. In many cases, they were in a more dangerous situation than some of the actual partisans as they would have to criss-cross all over the battlefields, sometimes finding themselves between opposing gunfire, desperately trying to avoid treading on landmines. Many times they would be detected by the aeroplanes when they would be carrying out their duties and many of them were wounded or killed as they scuttled to hide underneath fallen tree branches.

I found out much later that from her group of twenty five girls, only eleven survived. Ristana witnessed so much death - partisans without faces, some who were cut in half by the flying shrapnel. Most of the girls were very young and too afraid to touch the dead and they would look to Ristana for help. She herself narrowly missed being killed when shrapnel took a log she was carrying on her shoulder. In another incident, again she avoided death by a hairsbreadth as a bullet whizzed past her ear.

The contribution to the partisan movement by these girls and woman in the spring and summer of 1948 in the building of defensive bunkers and other duties in the Vicho area was extremely valuable and cannot be praised enough. The government forces failed to take Vicho, the partisan resistance was very strong, and as the harsh winter and snows approached, they retreated and the partisans were left in that territory.

The war was somewhat put on hold as a short cease-fire truce took place during the winter months. At this stage, they began to send the older women and younger girls home for a rest and issued them with passes. They were to return back to duties in the spring of 1949 when the cease-fire period ended. During the winter months, there was shortage of food and they could not afford to keep workers on when nothing was happening, so my

mother was sent home but she had no contact with my sister Ristana who was still out in the war zone. She could not rest easy in the village knowing her daughter was still out there and so she set out again to look for her.

After both serving for six or seven months, my mother finally located Ristana and they made their way to Lerin. Our house in Lagen had been demolished. They made contact by telegram with my father in Australia who had already been preparing the necessary papers to bring them to Australia.

My mother and Ristana were subsequently shunted from one government office to another and subjected to intense interrogation by the authorities. They tried to extract information from them and told her that they knew I had joined the partisans voluntarily, as had my Teta Todora. She was asked many questions regarding the partisans – “Where is your older daughter? Where did you go, what did you do? How many partisans were there? How many died? Tell us,” they said, “or you will never get out of jail.”

The questions were endless and my mother pleaded ignorance. She told them she and my sister were only helpers – workers, nothing more. They were not privy to any military information and knew nothing of any strategies or plans of the partisans. Whether believed or not she was, nevertheless, jailed for a week. This was her punishment for having a daughter who had voluntarily joined the partisans.

Ristana stayed with distant relations (a couple called Leta and Niko) who had moved to Lerin to live after our village had been destroyed.

My mother’s father, Dedo Risto, somehow managed to scrounge up a thousand drachma that was required to have my mother released and she and Ristana stayed in the safety of Lerin with those relations until my father’s arrangements for their journey to Australia came to fruition.

Every time they saw a policeman, Ristana would shake with fright. Our mother told her, “Don’t worry; they don’t know where we have been.”



Ristana 1949

Chapter 42 – More hospitals - Suk - Smuggled to Poland

I spent a whole year in Albania, and while I was in Moscopole, there was an influx of young people (male and female) wounded from Vicho, that had been taken as partisans from the large factories in Negush (Nausa). It was heavy winter and by the time they had reached Albania they suffered severe frostbite and most had their feet amputated and fingers missing. Although I was wounded myself, I felt much stronger than those who were now coming in, their dried blood still splattered on their bodies and clothes. I was with them every day and did what I could to help. They were so young and my heart broke to see them. I would leave what I had to do and go and help them dress, bathe, feed them and give them encouragement. I looked upon them as my own brothers and sisters.

In the hospital in Elbasan, the more able and recovered partisans were eventually sent back out to fight, the war was about to resume in Vicho.

A friend of mine who had been a roommate was sent out as well. She apparently met up with my mother who had been scouring the countryside looking for me. She told my mother her name was Latsa and she was from Nestram and had just come back from the hospital in Albania. My mother told her who she was and that she was looking for her daughter (me) but no-one could tell her if I was alive or dead. My mother told her my name and village and described me and Latsa said, "I know her, she is in Albania, severely wounded, but she is safe there and wont be coming back to fight anymore."

My mother was relieved. She thought even if I only had one arm, at least I was alive. She had then begun to search for Ristana.

I also later found out that while I was in the hospital in Albania, Ristana who was with the partisans in Vicho had also been looking out for me. Whenever she heard any partisans singing, she would run up to the group to see if one of them was me because she had heard that I and a couple of other girls would sing songs when we were between battles.

Our paths were never to cross while we were with the partisans.

The partisans who were well enough were sent back out to fight. The others, including me, were sent to another hospital in Suk. There were thousands of us. They didn't tell us what they were going to do with us but we found out later that they were coordinating groups of people to be sent out by boat to Poland. Albania, a poor country, was overflowing with the wounded partisans and was not able to cope any longer. The other neighbouring republics of Bulgaria, Rumania, Poland and Russia started to accept into their countries some of these wounded partisans.

On about 15th July, we were taken from Suk to the port of Durrës where we boarded a boat, not a passenger but a cargo vessel, carrying timber from Albania to Poland. One thousand two hundred (about 950 men and 250 women) of us wounded partisans were herded into and hidden in the hull, while the top of the boat was stacked with timber.

In great secrecy, and illegally, we were smuggled out of Albania. As we passed through British Gibraltar, we had to stay hidden below deck, unable to move out, with a couple of our people on guard at the top to keep an eye on what was happening. No-one could know we were smuggled out from Albania in this fashion. Had we been caught in our concealment, the countries involved would have been in serious international strife because, during the years 1946-49, we were technically also fighting against England (they were supplying full military aid and financial support to the Greek Government). England would never have allowed such an evacuation happening in their waters.

When officials came by to inspect the vessel and ensure it was carrying the cargo stipulated, a whistle would blow, and we would stay down below quiet as mice hardly daring to breathe and without even so much as a whisper or a cough, until the danger had passed.

When we were loaded onto the boat, we had no idea where our journey would take us. Later we found out that our destination was Poland.

During our journey, many tasks needed to be undertaken below deck. The wounded had to have their injuries dressed, their

bandages refreshed, bathed and fed. We that could help did just that to the ones who could not tend to themselves. I kept myself busy helping whoever I could at this time, especially the young girls who had no legs. Wounds had not healed and after all it was just a cargo ship and the sections below were built to cater for transport of supplies and animals, not humans.

I had much sympathy for my fellow partisans and did not waiver from helping whomever I could. These people too became my brothers and sisters. If I saw anyone hopping along on one leg, I would give my arm and shoulder to help. One of these young men turned out to be Vasil. I noticed him moving about by hopping on one leg. I spoke to him and asked where he was going.

He told me he was having his dressing changed and felt happy that his wound was slowly closing up and getting better. I said to him, "Lean on my arm, the passages are narrow and you might fall." He did that and I helped him to the nurse's station, left him there and went back to help other partisans.

He had gone to the nurse and was told his wound was getting better but on his way back, hopping as usual, his foot caught on the steel threshold of the steel door and he tripped and landed on his stump, cracking the bone even further up.

I found this out much later in Poland, and Vasil has remarked to me if I had stayed with him and helped him back, perhaps this would not have happened. The pain in this second injury gave him more grief than his original injury.

Chapter 43 – Arrival in Poland and the ‘250’

We reached the port of Szczecin in Poland and we were hoisted out of the ship by a crane, ten at a time, put into buses and taken to a secret destination called Międzyzdroje meaning: *Between the rivers*. Only at that time, we had no idea where we were. It was a beautiful spot with a beautiful river flowing into the sea and lush greenery. It had been a holiday place for the Germans during the war, when they would go there for rest and recovery. There was an airport nearby as well. It comprised of eight buildings, two stories high.

Men and women alike were allotted to whatever section according to their particular injury. Although housed together we had separate rooms with hot water and it was very comfortable. We were looked after so well and treated respectfully as Greek and Macedonian partisans. They bought in the best doctors, the best nurses, the best cooks and they bought out lazy-boy type lounges for us to rest. They gave us coffee, they gave us bread and we thought we were in paradise. We settled into our quarters and they brought us clothes and those who needed it, crutches. There was a large operating room there and they did their best to help all of us.

It was a secret hospital, codenamed 250. We had no names only numbers. My number was 419 and if they needed to call you for any duties, they would announce over the loudspeaker - number so and so, report to wherever for whatever.

We rested for about a week or so and then slowly the doctors worked their way through the injured, carefully inspecting their wounds and assessing what needed to be done.

The medical treatment we had received in Albania was mostly only temporary to stop bleeding or cleaning and suturing wounds. This was where major decisions were finally made whether a limb was to be saved or needed amputation to prevent further problems.

This continued for about a year. There were happy days but there were also sad days. We lost many comrades who succumbed to their wounds on the operating table or others

whose injuries developed into something more serious. When it was my turn to go before the medical commission, they looked at my arm and decided to operate again to repair the damage.

The bone from my lower arm was gone and it hung limp and useless unless I put it into a sling. Eventually, they made the decision to graft a bone from my leg into my arm in order to stabilize it. When the transplantation of bone was completed, they secured it in two places with screws, but the tendons could not be repaired and my arm remained paralysed with movement in only two small fingers.

I didn't care. I was alive and I was grateful for that. I had saved my arm from being amputated in Gramos and so my disability now seemed to not be that important in the scheme of things. I didn't look ahead to worry how I would cope, getting married, raising children.

During that time we became very friendly with all our comrades in that hospital. We had a mutual respect for one another, all of us injured in battle. I was like their sister and I would help as many of the people there as I could. We had a little committee organizing social events and I would help to carry the instruments for the members of band – they were all amputees.

I became very friendly with Vasil. He had no leg, I had no arm, so to speak and I felt comfortable with him. He came to see me after I had my operation on the 28th October and then it was his turn to have an operation to cut the bone further up.

We knew we would never go back to our old country again and we realised that these people who were here were now our family.

Vasil decided to ask me to marry him. He considered I was healthy enough to be asked for marriage by any number of men in that hospital and he thought that as he had one leg I would refuse him, yet he persisted.

At that stage, so many young men had one or both legs missing and their sense of a good future, marriage and a happy life seemed a distant dream and certainly not a reality. Who would want to marry an invalid, many thought? Vasil was thinking

along these lines and when he asked me to marry him; he probably thought I would refuse him.

I have always had a soft heart for the less fortunate, the poor, the lonely and the broken. At home in the village, if a beggar ever came by the house, I would not tell my mother but would secretly go inside and get some bread. I would cry as I handed the food over to him.

My thoughts were - I am an invalid and so is he, maybe we can have a good life together if our characters are compatible. An aunty of mine who was being treated at that hospital for cancer was in the same block as Vasil. I sought her advice. I told her I knew nothing of this young man, who he was, where he came from – nothing.

When I told her his name, she told me she knew him from her block and he was a very good person, he didn't talk very much but seemed to have a good character. "Marry him," she said, "you will not be sorry, he is a good man."

When Vasil asked me for my answer, I told him I would agree to marry him. We were formally registered as husband and wife and everyone congratulated us. I am not a vain person concerned with my looks, but I was told that I was attractive and I do admit I was popular and I suppose when Vasil and I married, it gave many of the amputees encouragement that they too could find someone to marry and not to give up hope of a good life. They said, "If Vasil has found a beautiful girl, then we will too." Well many did get married after us, so maybe we helped start the ball rolling.



Our official wedding photo in Poland, 1950

The year slowly passed and the patients were recovering from their injuries. Soon the authorities began to send the ex-partisans out to resettle them in places in Poland.

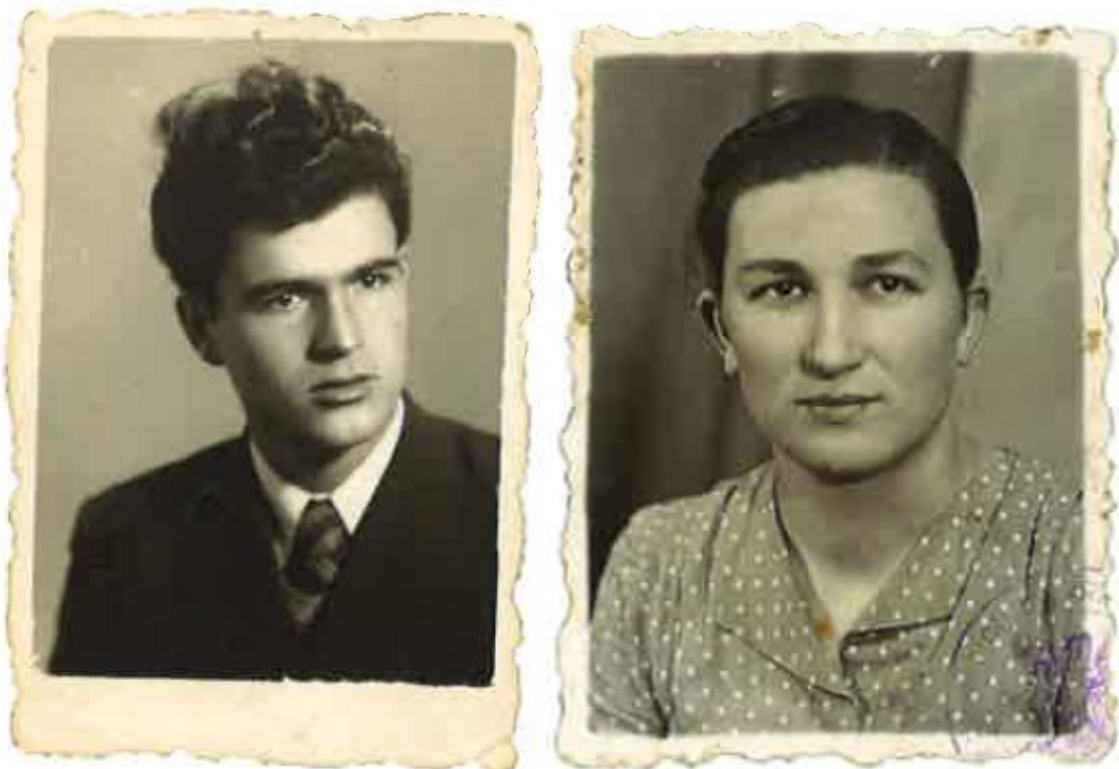
My story now meshes with Vasil's in the following chapters, as he describes our life together in Poland.

Vasil's Story continues

Chapter 44 - Life in Poland

We stayed at the '250' until the middle of July 1950 and it was one year since we had arrived. We were now political immigrants and the Polish government, together with the partisan movement, decided that we should go into Polish society and commence work and start to look after ourselves. The government did help as much as they could, and they were still helping, but they were anxious for us to blend into a normal life in Poland.

They took a group of about 200 of us from the hospital by buses to the town of Szczecin. From there we went by train to the town of Zgozelets, situated in the south western part of Poland. Before the war it was German territory but after the war Poland reclaimed some of the territory. The town of Zgozelets is a large town (formerly known as Gerlich) and it is separated by the Nysa River passing through the middle dividing the two sections of the town. Part of the town, the smaller section, belonged to Poland and a larger part belonged to Germany.



Our early years in Poland

They gave us a little room in a building in Dashinskiego Street, that was about 2½ metres square, containing little more than a bed. In that town, there was a large group of immigrants, not only partisans but civilians, and thousands of the children who had been evacuated for their safety to socialist countries in 1948.

There were many schools there as well. Amongst those children, I found my brother Panayoti's four children (Sotir, Urania, Pasco and Tomé) who were taken in 1948 to Poland. I was also reacquainted with many children from my village, including my cousin's children Apostoli and Micali Agovtski.

When we met them we enjoyed a very happy reunion and joy to find some of our family alive and well after being separated years before. One of my first cousins Aspacia, also a partisanka, was there too and she was married to a man named Argiri and was pregnant ready to have her baby. We frequently socialised with them as well as other people from the village.

At the same time, a government commission arrived and started to sort the people out, where to go, what to do. This commission informed us there were many places where one could go to learn a trade, like a shoemaker, a suitcase maker, a watchmaker or go into the building industry. Many of the towns in Poland had been completely destroyed in the Second World War.

One town in particular, Wroclaw, was completely destroyed and many people found work picking up bricks from the ruins, cleaning them up to be reused to build other buildings. Many of our fellow partisans went there to work.

Among the other trades offered was a radio technician course. I noticed that the course extended over a couple of years and entailed travelling to the town of Poznan. It came to my mind my curiosity in the village with the box in the balcony placed by the Italians so many years ago and my fascination upon learning it was a radio.

I now felt that I would like to be a radio technician and so I enrolled in that course. There was a group of 35 of us. That was in December 1950. We could not take our wives with us; they had to stay back in Zgozelets.

So, we decided to separate, Elena would stay behind and I would go to Poznan.

During this period Elena had a very difficult time because, like others, she was assessed by many different commissions and after having undergone a variety of medical examinations, she was passed as a fit person and told to work in the farms. Somehow, they completely overlooked her injured arm which was partially paralysed and therefore would have great difficulty carrying out the type of work required.

Food coupons were issued to use in the common kitchen and they cut her coupon out because they considered her fit and able to work. She went to the office to discuss this but was treated very unkindly and unfairly. She had a very difficult time after being wrongly assessed by the commission as being able-bodied.

Her first cousin Tanasa (who was also in the '250' and had arrived together in Poland) was an invalid and still had food coupons, so both were eating from that one shared portion of food. Elena was very close to my pregnant cousin and she would often go and help her.

Aspacia was very sick from tuberculosis. Later Elena contracted TB and I fear that her close contact with my cousin resulted in her own infection. In fact, when we came to Zgozelets, Elena was also two or three months pregnant.

We were separated in two towns during this time and we would see each other only once a month when I would go back to Zgozelets. I would take the train Saturday afternoon, because of early morning lectures, travel eight or nine hours and get to Zgozelets about two in the morning. I would stay for a few hours and then get the train back to Poznan that evening. Seven or eight of us who were in the same course and who had been separated from our wives did this every month.

Chapter 45 – A precious new arrival and hardships

Our daughter Pobetka – from the word *Pobeda* meaning victory (and later renamed Kristine by Elena in honour of her sister Ristana whom she thought she might never see again) was born on the 15th March 1951 and Elena immediately wrote me a letter telling me that we had a girl. I didn't believe it. I must have been expecting a son and when I saw her at the end of March, I was very happy; we now had a third person in our little family, a precious little daughter.



With our new baby Pobetka 1951

On Sundays, when I was in Zgozelets, we would go to the Zahariadis School for boys and girls, named after the leader of the Movement and see Panayoti's children and other children from the village of Lagen who were evacuees from the Civil War zone, including Elena's first cousin Tinka. Besides Tinka the little group of children from Lagen were: Tsana Filea, Lina Asproa, Ristana Kirkoa, Dotsa Matrakoa, Tanas Siderov, Mitre Spirkov, Risto Gelin, Risto Masin and Vasil Pandov. They would be eagerly waiting to see us as they had no-one else there at that time.

The first time we went there with Aspasia's husband to see my niece and nephews, we were in an open park and the eldest three Sotir, Urania and Pasco remembered me from the village but the

younger one who was not even two years old when he was taken, didn't know me. Argiri called him over, "*Tomé, Tomé*" as he was running around.

He stopped running and came over because he knew Argiri from before (he used to give him sweets) and stood in front of us. He looked at me, then he looked at Argiri and a sort of confusion covered his face. Slowly, he came over towards me. Even though he was so young, he must have felt some sort of connection to me. He grabbed me and hugged me.

Tinka was a very pretty petite young girl of around 15 or 16 and she worked at a textile factory. While at school she had met a young man named Mlado Alexovski from the village of Shestevo whose family were in Czechoslovakia and they fell deeply in love. Everyone at the school had remarked how obviously in love they were with each other. Mlado was a handsome, very intelligent young man, also studying to be a radio technician at the polytechnika. Before Tinka was brought to Australia by her parents, they had made certain promises and commitment to each other.



Tinka and Mlado in Poland

One Christmas he came to see us as he was to go back to Czechoslovakia with his family. He told us - wherever she goes, I will find her. I will do what I can to be with her. When Elena suffered her sciatica he was very helpful to her, assisting her with the dressing and feeding of the children. Meanwhile, Tinka was refusing all other offers of marriage in Australia, her heart was set on Mlado and eventually after some time, Mlado kept his promise and joined her there and they were eventually married. We have enjoyed a close relationship with both of them.

In July 1951, at the school in Poznan, we decided to ask the director of the school and the council of the town that, because we had wives and children, we wanted our family to come to Poznan to join us. They said they would help in finding accommodation and work for us. So during the July/August school holidays, we filled a suitcase that I had constructed out of some thin boards at the '250' and put what meagre possessions we possessed and made the move with Elena and Pobetka to Poznan.

They accommodated us in some portable barracks. They were on wheels, maybe old train carriages, and it was divided into many small rooms. This was temporary accommodation for our families. We, as students, were living in quarters at the school where we were learning and we had access to dining rooms and everything else and were quite well looked after.

I recollect an incident once when Elena wanted to warm some milk in a little pot and she went down to another barrack where there was a kitchen. When she came back she couldn't find six month old Pobetka. Frantically, she started looking everywhere for her and calling out for her. The other mothers alerted by her cries started searching. Everyone thought she had been kidnapped. They finally found her under the bed in the corner. She must have fallen out of the bed and was now sitting quietly there, unhurt, waiting to be picked up.

Finally they found accommodation for us in a building in Ulitsa Grotkera. It was a large old-fashioned building with large rooms, stone constructed and very cold. The ground floor was cement and there were about seven rooms off the passage and connecting doors between the rooms as well. (They were formerly German

offices). The people who had wives and children were accommodated there. They put the wives to work in the cigarette manufacturing factory which was situated within reasonable walking distance.

Autumn faded and winter set in and the weather was bitterly cold. Elena had one narrow bed and she slept there with Pobetka to keep her warm. I fared better as I was living at the school. I would come home on the weekend as during the week it was not permitted to visit. Unfortunately, when winter set in there was only one heater in the room that was 8m long by about 5m wide and this heater was supposed to heat up that whole area. We couldn't light the heater, it needed coal and even when they brought some up, we still couldn't light it. The living conditions for families were absolutely dreadful. It could not be better, because this was in the years after the War and many families in Poland were living exactly this way.

The wives were working at the cigarette factory and they would take the children with them and leave them at the day care crèche at the factory. The children would be fed there and then would be given a little bit of food to take home. They couldn't buy any food at that time. Meat, eggs, butter and bread could only be bought in rations by coupons. Even milk was rationed by coupons. The wives suffered terribly, they did not have good food to eat.

As a result of this Elena started to feel weaker and weaker and that, together with the freezing cold winter of January and February took a great toll on her health. She told the staff at the factory that she was not feeling well and needed to see a doctor. She was told, she was alright and nothing was done and so the days passed like that.

After some time she insisted she was still not feeling well and asked that she be sent for an x-ray. They finally agreed and Elena went for a chest x-ray and this revealed she was very seriously ill. The doctors admonished her. They said to her, "Were you waiting to die at home before you went to a hospital?" She was instructed to go into hospital immediately. She sent me a message to the school to come home. I did this and found out she was very sick with a diagnosis of TB. Her left lung was

nearly completely destroyed with holes and her right one was going the same way.

Immediately, that same day, she was taken to hospital. They said Pobetka must go to an orphanage/childcare facility. She cannot be with Elena. It was a Saturday and I took her to the city of Ostròv Wielkopolski three hours away. Pobetka was only eleven months old. That was in February 1952. It was a terrible time.

Three doctors took care of Elena - Dr. Radajewski, Dr. Westvalowa and Dr. Jankowska. They told her she was very sick but would do their best to try to heal her. They gave her medicines, took x-rays and did everything they could to lower her temperature. She dropped to 47kg. During this time she was pregnant with Nasé. Elena was concerned and questioned whether the baby would be safe. The doctors advised her that the baby would actually help her and she need not worry.

She kept begging me to look after Pobetka. Elena kept saying, "If I die, don't give her over to another person to take care of her." I chastened her. "You won't die, you will see, you are going to get better and live." I was so afraid for her, yet I had to stay positive so that she would stay positive as well.

Chapter 46 – Elena battles illness

Elena had, however, lost all her courage and was convinced she would not pull through. I kept telling her over and over to not give up hope that she would be alright, that she would pull through. A lot of partisans, men and women had contracted this disease. People were weak and had endured great hunger and cold and being a very contagious disease many suffered. Then again, maybe she contracted the disease from my cousin Aspasia. We would never know.

She was at that hospital for about two or three months. The doctors told me Elena needed good food to stop progression of the disease so I would go to the market, buy a couple of eggs and a bit of butter and take it to the hospital.

I was running around during my school lunch break. The people in the kitchen knew of my dilemma and would have my food ready. I would eat quickly and then run to the market, buy the eggs and butter, go to the hospital, stay there for about 20 minutes, making sure Elena ate the raw eggs and butter and then run back to the school. I did this daily.

We wrote a letter to Elena's parents in Perth to see if they could send us a medicine called streptomycin that the doctors had told us could possibly stop progression of the disease and cure Elena. Her father exhausted every pharmacy in Perth searching for but unable to find that medication anywhere. He then wrote a letter to Elena's two uncles in America (her mother's brothers Spiro and Lazo) and explained Elena's dire situation in Poland. He asked them if they could possibly find that medication in America. The uncles were successful and they sent us twenty 20gram bottles of the medicine. Later they sent us some more medication in tablet form.

The doctors immediately commenced her on the injections every day or second day and following the course of the medication, daily x-ray test results showed that the illness had stopped and was not progressing. When she was ill, her temperature had sky-rocketed but was now back to normal – a good indication that things were getting better.

The medical team decided she now needed to recuperate and the best place and climate would be up in the mountains. They believed the fresh air and trees there would be beneficial to her recovery. She was prescribed a three month stay at a sanatorium in the town of Zakopané about 500kms away from Poznan in the Carpathian Mountains between Poland and Czechoslovakia.

In the meantime, Pobetka was still at the orphanage and I would go every Sunday morning to see her and spend time with her. On the 20th May, 1952 Elena was to leave for the sanatorium and she desperately wanted to see Pobetka before she left. The day before, a Sunday, we caught the train together to see our daughter. We arrived about ten in the morning and went to the orphanage.

The nurses forbid us to have contact with our daughter. They said the disease was highly contagious and therefore Elena could have no contact whatsoever. We both looked at her through the glass window because now they would not even let me take her. We watched her for quite some time.

The nurse momentarily left the room and Elena called out, "Pobetka". The little girl stopped what she was doing. She had recognized her mother's voice and she started crying and the nurse came back and had to finally take her away to stop her distress. It was very heartbreaking for Elena, firstly to leave Pobetka crying and then to have to leave her completely at that establishment. We both felt as though we were abandoning her and we were so distressed.

While at the sanatorium Elena could not get the mental image out of her head of leaving our crying little child unable to be comforted or picked up.

We went back to Poznan and next day caught a very early train on our way to the sanatorium. We took a little bag with a small amount of bread and a couple of boiled eggs; we didn't have much more to take. Along the way, we ate our bread with a little bit of egg dipped in salt.

We travelled for several hours until we reached Krakow where we changed trains. Our food supply had run out and we bought a little something extra to eat, I can't remember what.

The journey to Zakopané took a further five hours or so. The railway track goes upwards winding through the mountains and the train travelled very slowly. So slowly, in fact, it is said if you jump off the train you can easily run and catch it again.

Snow had started to fall along the way and when we reached Zakopané we walked through 10 or 15cms of thick snow. We arrived at the sanatorium late about ten in the evening and it was very dark. We showed the administration office all the necessary papers and I was told I could stay the night and leave the next morning as the snow fall was very heavy.

Next day I left Elena at the Nauczycielski sanatorium inside the town and headed back to Poznan. Apparently after three or four weeks, they moved her from that sanatorium to another called Gurniczki surrounded by fresh pine trees.

I was now alone and attending the school. The room was abandoned. I remember I was writing two or three letters every week asking Elena how she was. She was returning letters to me as well. If I could have those letters now, they would amount to one big bundle.

Elena told me she was getting better and gaining weight. She was pregnant with Nasé and we knew this when she was diagnosed with TB and were very concerned about the health of both her and the baby but the doctors reassured us that this pregnancy would be just what she needed to give her the incentive and encouragement to get better. The baby would be alright.

Elena became better day by day. I continued attending the school every day and the highlight of my life was going to see Pobetka every Sunday. The journey was a tedious one and to keep myself from getting bored I would count the telephone line poles along the way. I can tell you, funnily enough, that between Poznan and Ostròv Wielkopolski they number 930.

At the orphanage, I would take Pobetka out in the morning and play with her for an hour or so outside. Then I'd take her back for her sleep, wait until she woke up and spend time with her again and then finally about three o'clock head back to Poznan.

She was very close to me, very receptive and waiting happily to see me every Sunday. I remember her first steps at the little park near the orphanage. She was maybe a year old and I put my arms out and she took her first tentative steps towards me.

It pained me so much that Elena was not able to witness this important event in our child's life.

Chapter 47 – Examinations, employment and a not-so-happy reunion

In June 1952 I sat for the course examinations. I passed with good results and I was very lucky that I didn't have to study very much. Somehow, I had a pretty good ability to absorb everything that I was taught and retain the information and remember it without difficulty. My fellow students were amazed and would ask me how I remembered everything. "Oh, it just comes naturally for me," I would jokingly boast.

July and August were regulated holidays and it was required that for one of these months we had to do work experience. It was arranged for me to go to Warsaw at the radio station there to observe how the programmes were produced, use the technical equipment and learn about transmission and recording and servicing the equipment - the technical side not the artistic side. I decided to go in the month of August.

In the meantime my steady stream of letters to Elena continued. I was sending her the money the cigarette factory was paying her. She was still receiving 70% of her wage in the form of compensation because of her illness and I would go twice a month to collect the money and send it to her. I would tell her to spend all the money on good food to help her get better. That was the only advice I could give her.

At the end of August, Elena would have completed her three months at the sanatorium and I asked the director of the radio station if I could possibly have a week off to greet my wife who would be coming home. He gave me the authority and I went home before I finished the month.

In the meantime, however, the council in Poznan gave us another residence in Dzerzinskiego 91. That was an apartment on the first floor and comprised of seven rooms on either side of a long passage with a common kitchen. I shifted our small possessions during the last week in July to one of these rooms in the building. There were another six or seven families living there as well.

I went to wait for Elena at the railway station. She was very worried when coming home as she knew I was in Warsaw with

work experience and I had also told her we had been relocated and she was concerned as to how she would find the address. When she came out of the train and looked above the bridge, she saw me there waiting for her. She was so happy to see me. I took her home to our new place. That was a very happy day for us. No longer physically weak, she was about seven months pregnant and showing a lot and her face was glowing.

She asked what we would eat. I told her we would buy something. We walked to the local markets at Rinek Wildedski, a couple of hundred metres away. We bought some fruit and vegetables and bread and she was waiting for me to pay for them. I said to her, "I haven't got any money." She said, "What are we going to do?" I told her, "I sent you all the money, I have none." Slowly, with a sheepish smile, she took out her little purse and retrieved the money I had been sending her. She had spent some of it, but she always knew to save some as well.

Sunday arrived and I had to go and get Pobetka. Elena was continually undergoing saliva tests while she was at the sanatorium and thankfully they were coming back negative for the TB. From that point of view, the doctors declared her fit and she was allowed to take our daughter home. I went to the orphanage and dressed Pobetka in a very pretty little dress, shoes and socks that Ristana had sent us from Australia. She was so happy to see me and now being a year and a half she was excited we were going home. She sang little songs in the train along the way.

We went home and Elena immediately wanted to run up and hug and kiss her, but Pobetka was reluctant to go to her. She started crying and turning away towards me. She had forgotten her mother. Elena was so upset, she too started crying and then Pobetka cried even more. I tried desperately to console them both. Elena wondered how her little girl would ever get used to her as her mother. She would cry all night. I would go to school and Elena would have to look after a very unhappy little child. Pobetka barely ate or drank – only cried. When I came home in the evening, she was so happy to see me.

Slowly over the course of a couple of weeks, she realized that this lady would be here forever. Elena would hug and kiss her, sing

songs and talk gently to her telling her she was her mother and she would never go away again and slowly the child began to get used to her.

After that I couldn't separate her from Elena. She wanted to sleep with her mother and we three would all squash up together in our tiny little bed.



Our relatives in Poland: Vasil, Elena, Tinka, Tanasa and her husband Niko, Pobetka, Teta Fania and her baby Dionysi and husband Tetin Andrea

Chapter 48 - The birth of a son and heartbreaking dilemma/Another reunion

Time passed and Elena was still attending the hospital and undergoing tests and the results were fortunately still negative for the illness. The scarring in her lungs was starting to heal and all was progressing well. The doctors at the sanatorium prescribed a method of treatment whereby they pumped air into the lung cavity of one of her lungs to compress and prevent that lung opening and closing when she breathed, thereby allowing the damage on the lung to heal. Every week they would inject units of air with a large needle between the ribs and after one week the air dissipated. They kept this up for months, every week. She felt like a pin cushion.

Finally in October just before the baby was due to be born we wondered what we would do with Pobetka when Elena went to the hospital to give birth and I would be at school. We decided to take her to a hospital/monastery run by nuns who looked after children for short periods of time.

We didn't know the location of this monastery, so about a week before, in preparation of the time when we would need to take her there, Elena and a friend of ours Dita and her husband Stavro, a childless couple who lived in the same building and loved Pobetka very much, accompanied her to find the location. They lost their way and went outside of town into the countryside. They were completely confused and disorientated and asked someone for directions and were told they needed to go the opposite way. Eventually they found the place.

When the time came for us to take Pobetka to the monastery, we went together and when we were ready to hand her over and she saw the nuns in their long white robes, she started to howl, she must have thought we were deserting her again. She screamed so much, clinging to Elena's neck, three of the nuns had to unclasp her from her mother. Our hearts wrenched once more as we just had to turn around and leave her, yet again.

It was a Sunday morning and Elena started experiencing labour pains. We called the ambulance and they took her to the hospital. At about 7.30am they took Elena away to the labour

room and I started to gather her clothes to take home. Husbands were not permitted in the birthing suite in those times.

As I was leaving the main entrance I saw a nurse running after me. She called out my name and told me that I had a son. I was so surprised, it had all happened within fifteen minutes or so. Elena gave birth to our son, Nasé at 8am on the 12th October, 1952 and I was such a happy man – on top of the world, first a beautiful daughter, now a son. The hospital was not very far from my school, in fact, just around the corner. I went back to the school and I announced to everyone I had a son and everyone cheered and toasted a drink to his good health. It was a very happy day for me.

At the hospital the nursing staff noted that Elena had been treated for TB so the baby was not allowed to be breastfed by her. She had an ample supply of milk but the baby was being fed from other mother's milk. That was a sad thing for Elena but she had to abide by the doctors' instructions. She stayed in hospital for about ten days.

The market place was full of beautiful yellow grapes from Bulgaria and I would buy her some and sneak them to her through the window on the ground floor.

Because of Elena's medical history, Nasé would not be allowed to live with us. After ten days, she came home to 91 Dzerzinskiego by ambulance. The ambulance stopped at the front door of the building and she asked the nursing staff if she could hold Nasé for half an hour or so. They reluctantly agreed for her to take him up to our apartment for a short time while they waited below. Shortly thereafter, she had to bring him back down again and the ambulance took Nasé away to a children's home in the town of Poznan.

We were heartbroken, we had a son, but our son was not with us and we were not permitted to go to see him daily. Every Sunday we would take tramway number 2 to go to the Roosavelta Ulitsa and from there tramway number 7 to go and see him. Again, we had to watch our child through a window. Neither Elena nor I were permitted to have any contact with him. The health

authorities were very strict in Poland at that time, although thankfully Pobetka was now home with us.

The days turned into weeks and the weeks into months and for the first six to nine months the child didn't thrive that well. He didn't seem to be getting very much bigger and we were so worried, but we kept on going.

The Red Cross and the governments of the surrounding republics had drawn up lists of refugees from the Civil War that were scattered everywhere in different countries. I looked at these lists for the names of my family and this was how I eventually discovered where my parents, including my sister-in-law Maria (my dead brother Pando's wife) and her child Pavle were. They were all in Hungary.

Up until then I had no idea where they were and they in turn were oblivious to my whereabouts. The governments arranged family reunions for people in our situation. I wanted to bring my parents to Poland instead of us going to Hungary (which was another option) because I wished to complete my studies there, not to mention, Nasé was still in the children's home. So after seven or eight months, my parents arrived in Poland from Hungary in April 1953 and brought Pavle with them.

Upon reuniting with my parents, I was shocked to see two old people, run down, completely frail and we thought that possibly they would not live for long. They were grieving the loss of two sons and when I met them, I began crying but my mother said to me, "Don't cry my son, I only wish your two brothers were alive even if they were amputees such as you." She was a very courageous woman and didn't want to see me upset.

After they had settled down with us, things started to get better. They were very happy to have their grandchildren around them. My father was 78 years old and my mother 68 at that time. After we came to Australia, both of them lived long lives – my father died at 97 years of age and my mother was 94.

My parents accompanied us on our visits to Nasé, and the months slowly passed and our son was now one and a half and was walking and physically improving.

However, while at the children's home, Nasé contracted diphtheria and he could not shake that illness. They transferred him to a nearby hospital where he stayed for another three or four months. The doctors then informed us that while the child was in hospital he would not get better as there was a continuous influx of new patients with contagious diseases and they advised us to take him home.

We gave them Elena's latest saliva test results which showed negative for TB and they agreed that it would now be safe for him to go home. They said the boy needs a lot of fresh air and nurturing.

It was now February 1954 and very cold when we took Nasé home. We would wrap him up in warm clothes and blankets and put him in the pram outside to breathe the fresh, cold air as we had been instructed. Everyday, we all took it in turns to sit outside for an hour or so with him while he inhaled the fresh air.

Slowly he became better and eventually the symptoms of his illness disappeared.

My brother's child Pavle was six nearly seven when he arrived in Poland. We took him to school with my eldest brother Panayoti's four children in Szczecin.

Here the children of immigrants were schooled. We visited him periodically every three or four months and all the children would visit us whenever they had holidays.



Sotir, Urania, Pasko and Tomé

We started a sort of normal family life this way and we were quite happy. In the meantime, my own family (including my parents) were living in two small rooms, and it was very cramped.

Chapter 49 - More studies and enduring poverty

When I completed my studies in June 1953 and received my certificate of qualification as a radio technician, I commenced work at the radio station in Poznan and at that time the government was building and giving houses to needy families.

I had registered us as people in need, considering we were now a family of seven and as four apartments had been allotted to workers at Polski Radio, I was given one of these. We shifted from 91 Dzerzinskiego to 75 Koszńskiego. It consisted of two bedrooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. It wasn't very big but was very much better than our previous living arrangements.

While I was working at Polski Radio I decided to further my studies. I wanted to become an electronic engineer but the level of education that I gained at the technical school was insufficient for me to enter the *polytechnika* (equivalent to university) to continue my studies to become an electronic engineer.



Students at the Polytechnika in Poznan, 1954

Fortunately, there was another year long course that I could complete and it was running every day Monday to Friday between four in the afternoon until eight or nine at night.

This course was designed for people like me who had not come up through and completed the schooling system. A large number of people went through this preparation course. Also, many people were already working as engineers and they had lots of practical experience but lacked that piece of paper that gave them their degree and qualification and therefore were fearful that they would be replaced in their positions by younger people who had gone through the proper university courses.

I, therefore, decided to take the course. If you are involved with study in Poland you are eligible to work only six hours per day and are given two hours off for study. I was working from eight in the morning to two in the afternoon and then in the afternoon I had an hour to get lunch, catch the tramway and go to school. I was learning only technical subjects like mathematics, physics, chemistry, trigonometry and analytic geometry. I continued for a year.

At the start of that course, we were about seventy students and every three months there would be examinations. If you failed along the way, you had to drop out. At the end of the year there were only seventeen of us. The final exam was the entry examination for the *polytechnika* and I did well enough to pass.

It was a very tiring time, between running to work and then the course, I didn't go home at all until after nine at night. It was hard study but during this period I was encouraged and supported by Elena.

On the 1st September 1954, I commenced at the *polytechnika*. Here we had a choice of when we could attend – daytime from eight to three or you could work and go from four to nine. I decided to do the day time course and not to work.

The government paid us a stipend of about 700 złoty per month. Elena was working but my parents were not receiving any pension. It was hard to look after and support our large family

and sometimes my brother's family who would go back and forward on holidays from Szczecin.

The money was very short and we tried doing this for the first term. (The whole course was eight terms of six months each - four years). I decided to get another job.



Physics class at the Polytechnika

When I finished my schooling at three o'clock I went to a place called *Domculturi* (House of Culture). There were young people who had finished primary school and were learning different trades. I taught the class with children who wanted to repair radios and this way earned a little bit of extra money. I did this for a while but the hours were difficult and I was coming home late every night again. At the end I gave up the day time *polytechnika* for the afternoon one and went back to work.

This was the time that I changed my job from Polski Radio to Okrengowe Warsztaty Telecommunicatčiné (O.W.T.) - the district workshop of telecommunications in Poznan.

We carried out all the repairs, reconditioning and servicing of the telephone exchanges for the whole area of the Poznan area. So I was back to working six hours with two hours off for study.

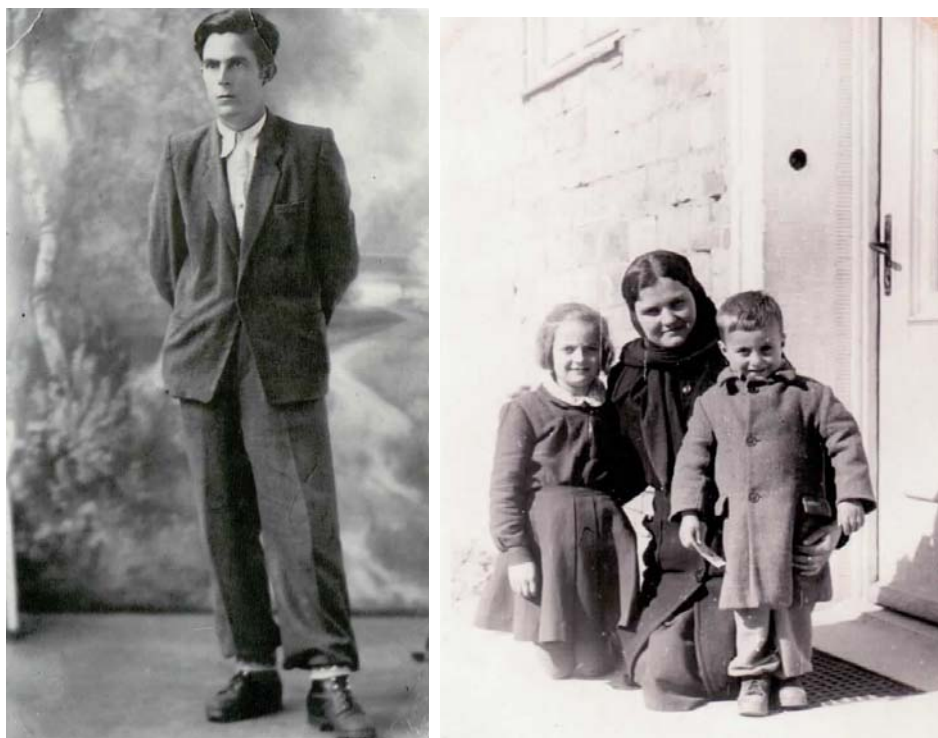
When we moved into our new apartment, Elena changed jobs from the cigarette factory to Stalina (before the war and after the war it was known as Henri Tsigelski) a large corporation that employed 24,000 people. They manufactured all sorts of machinery, trains, wagons and aeroplanes. It was close to our apartment and Elena could walk to work from there.

Continuing during this time, Elena would be given a day off to attend the hospital where the treatment was carried out on her lungs. This therapy continued for about two and half years. Dr. Jankowska and Dr. Westvalowa were her attending physicians and following this treatment they felt her lungs were now quite improved and it stopped.

Economically, things still weren't the best for us. I was earning 1,200 złoty, Elena was earning 800 złoty per month and my parents were now receiving a small pension of about 150 złoty per month. It was difficult to keep up with the bills particularly the cost of the central heating and if we weren't careful, the money did not stretch very far.

Elena was a very good economist. She would divide our money meticulously into a very strict budget to pay for our bills and living expenses but she would still manage to squirrel away a little something in the bank for a rainy day.

One day we decided to go to Politsé during the holidays to visit my brother's children and we stayed with Vojna Giorgitsa in one little room. She was a widow with two children. Her husband, a partisan, had died in hospital in Poland after being heavily wounded in the Civil War. Elena's best friend Kata who was killed in Gramos was her niece.



Vojko Giorgi, Vojna Giorgitsa, Fanka and Nasé

She would get food from the central canteen where she was working with the refugee children and instead of eating her food herself she would bring it home and share her plate with all of us. She admonished us for not telling her that we were so short of money. I remember we didn't leave very much money with my parents, just enough to buy milk and bread, so that we could have a little extra with us.

At the district workshop of the telecommunications I began to get more and more experience and I started servicing telephone exchanges, manual and automatic, by myself – sometimes outside of the town. Once I was working in the small town of Gurnik Wielopolski and it was at the time there were some political disturbances and strikes in Poznan. Prisoners had revolted, escaped and caused huge problems and I couldn't come home because the trains had stopped just out of the town. From there I walked for a couple of hours to get home. There was fighting in the streets, about twenty people were killed and many injured.

Elena was supposed to come home that day from another sanatorium. She had a problem with her leg. When she was working at the Stalina, she'd caught a chill and developed sciatica in her left leg and suffered a lot of pain. The doctors prescribed

for her to go back to the sanatorium for special bath treatment and it was on this day she was coming home and I was very concerned for her safety.

When she arrived at the station, there was fighting and she witnessed someone killed there as well. She was very afraid. When she finally got home I wasn't there but then after half an hour or so I arrived and she was relieved as was I that all was well.

While working at the telecommunications workshop, I joined and became a member of the Polish United Workers Party in Poland. I was sent as a delegate from our town to a conference that was being held and finally I was elected to become a member of the town committee in Poznan. I became very interested in politics from then. I had to carry out policy and decision making explanations and resolutions that were taken by the central committee and relay this information to the factories and other workplaces. That was in 1955.

During 1955, Elena, Pobetka and Nasé were still getting tested periodically for TB and during one of these times there was a positive reading in Pobetka's test. They said she must go immediately to a sanatorium not far from Poznan - about three quarters of an hour. She was there for a couple of weeks, and after they carried out follow-up testing they told us there was some mistake, there was nothing wrong with our little girl.

At Elena's place of employment there was a children's crèche that catered for the working mothers and we would take the children there and when Elena finished her shift she would bring them home. Because she worked at the factory she was entitled to have food coupons and she managed to secure coupons for all of us, including my parents, and so we would all go there for lunch and produce our coupons and not have to pay very much for our meals.

Many times, Ristana and her parents would send parcels of goods and dress fabrics from Australia and Elena would sell the fabric to neighbours to prop up our monthly income to help us get through. As the fabric was from Australia, it was very sought after.

Chapter 50 – A Christmas mishap and our social life

On weekends we would take the children down a little street to the river. It was only about ten minutes walk and there were lovely parks there and small gardens where people could cultivate tomatoes, chillies and other vegetables in small parcels. My father wanted one of these gardens and I had an application for him but we never did get around to use it.

The Christmas before we left Poland, the children wanted to have a Christmas tree. During that festive season, they would bring in real pine trees for sale at the markets. A friend of mine decided we should go out into the bush in his little truck and cut down some trees for our families and friends. It was a couple of hours out of town and the weather was bitterly cold with heavy snow.



Elena, Nasé and Pobetka, c. 1956

We came off the road and into the bush about 200 metres where we found some nice pine trees and chopped down about seven or eight of them and put them in the back of the truck. As we prepared to head out of the bush, my friend couldn't get the truck started. We tried all sorts of things to get it going to no avail. It was the type of truck that housed its engine between the passenger seat and the driver, right in the middle.

My friend lifted up the cover and exposed the engine. He filled a bucket of petrol and got a hose and placed it in the bucket. He sucked on one end of the hose until the petrol started flowing and then he fitted the hose somewhere into the engine. The truck started rumbling and spluttering to life and we thought if we could at least get ourselves onto the main road we could then ask someone for help.

The truck swayed and bumped all the way out of the bush and the bucket of petrol I was holding splashed all over me. We moved slowly, but just before we reached the main road, he changed gears and from somewhere a spark ignited the engine, the truck and me.

I immediately opened the door and fell out of the truck. My friend tried to extinguish the flames by rolling me into the snow and throwing a blanket on top of me and the flames finally died down. The truck, however, was still on fire. My hands were burnt, but we both started throwing snow at the truck to try to put out the flames. Finally after five or ten minutes the fire was put out. I happened to be wearing one of those Russian style fur hats and my face around the hat was burnt, as were my hands. That stupid truck actually then started up properly and we were able to drive home.

Elena wasn't home when we arrived. My parents were though, and when they saw me they were very distressed. Finally Elena arrived and she took me by tram to the city hospital where I received treatment for the burns. They painted my hands and face with some purple type anti-bacterial wash and then covered me with gauze. This was repeated time and again. Burnt flesh would stick onto the gauze and reveal fresh skin underneath thereby continuously cleaning the wound. This went on that night and all the next day. They would change the dressing under

a huge fan that would blow cool air down upon my burns. The pain was so excruciating I would actually faint from agony.

I spent Christmas day and the following few days in the hospital. The children, however, still wanted a Christmas tree at home. So, Elena and my parents took one of the trees we brought home and they decorated it with little sparkling candles and other festive decorations. When they lit the candles, they started sparking and the tree caught fire and started burning. The curtains caught on fire and that was the end of the saga of our Christmas tree.

Incidentally, on our way home, we were caught by a ranger, who noticing our loaded truck, confiscated our trees except for two and we were made to pay a heavy fine.

Elena came to the hospital and told the nursing staff she would be taking me home and she would tend to my burns herself. I had second and third degree burns on my hands which still bare the scars today. At home I put my hands into shoe boxes with holes cut out, so that I wouldn't injure them further and give them time to heal. After about three weeks, the *crackling* on my hands started to fall away and underneath the skin was new. My face wasn't as badly burnt as were the hands.

The moral of the story is it is far better to go out and spend a bit of money to buy a tree than face the misery and suffering of severe burns, not to mention a heavy fine.

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On Sunday mornings we would take the children to a picture theatre for the children's shows. They really enjoyed these, Pobetka more so than Nasé. There were quite a few theatres in Poznan and many catered for children. We would come home for lunch that my mother would prepare and then Elena and I would go out and spend some time together. My mother would tell a little white lie to the children saying that we had to go to the hospital and that way they would stay with her while Elena and I went out together and enjoyed an afternoon or evening out at the movies at one of the two larger theatres, the Apollo or the Baltic. That was our entertainment. Also, we had a little club in our previous apartment. One of the bigger rooms in the building was

allocated as a club for the refugees to gather, talk and pass the time. There were not many refugees in Poznan, about 60 or 80, as opposed to other towns.

Elena, however, continued to suffer with the sciatica pain so badly that we at one stage considered her undergoing an operation to block the leg joint rigid, not to move just so that she would not experience the intense pain. We sought the advice and opinions of Elena's Teta Fania (her mother's sister) and first cousin Tanasa on this drastic action we were contemplating. They both came to Poznan and advised us to not do anything. So, we didn't. It was the right decision of course.

One of the screws on Elena's lower forearm had started to rust and it developed an open wound that would not heal. We went to the hospital and Elena's arm was examined by Dr. Bardzikowski. He looked at her arm and he said without hesitation, "This is operation 419". That was Elena's number in the '250' hospital so long ago. He was the person who performed the operation and he even remembered her number. He took an x-ray and told us that the bone had now fused nicely and then without the benefit of anaesthetic he made a small incision, unscrewed the screw and pulled it out from her arm and the wound eventually closed and healed.

It was about this time that after continuous contact with our relatives in Perth we started to entertain the idea that we would not be staying in Poland, but would eventually immigrate to Australia. The idea of immigrating to Australia took a deep hold on us and this affected my studies at the *polytechnika* and my results were not always very good. In the fifth term I failed one exam in dynamics taught by Professor Lipinski and if you fail one semester you cannot go to the next term, you had to repeat the semester.

Professor Lipinski was an amusing person. When he lectured he would not stop walking back and forth in front of the class while someone else would be frenetically scribbling his lessons on the blackboard. I had been elected by the other students to count how many times he would pace across the lecture theatre stage and when the class finished we measured the distance across and multiplied it by the times he paced and came to the conclusion

that during any one lesson he would walk anywhere between four or five kilometres.

In another class, we were asked to put to memory and recite a poem. When it was my turn, I stood up and pretended to speak. I waved my arms about in the most dramatic fashion, but the voice that recited the poem so perfectly was coming from another part of the lecture theatre by someone else. Of course, it was read out exactly word for word and the professor teaching us the Russian language was an elderly man, semi-blind with thick glasses and couldn't see very far and so he was very impressed with what he heard. He had no idea that it wasn't me and praised me for having done such an excellent job of remembering it and reciting it so well.

But finally I decided to not go any further and I didn't sit for any other examinations. This was 1957. I handed in my resignation.

Chapter 51 – Thoughts of Australia

My father-in-law Chrste Gellin was busily trying to organize visa papers to bring our family to Australia. One lot of papers reached us in about 1956/57 and we were called by the British Embassy in Warsaw to undergo medical examinations. After six months or so, we were informed that we were rejected and we would not get a visa.

Dedo Chrste tried again and according to what he since told us, he was working, carrying out stone work, on the residence of the Lord Mayor of the City Council of Nedlands. In conversation, he told him he had a daughter and her family in Poland that he was desperately trying to bring out to Australia but was having some difficulty.

The Mayor encouraged him to try again and with his help and assistance, Dedo Chrste organized further application papers and yet again in early 1958 we were called in to undergo medical examinations. This was not an easy task going all the way to Warsaw 300-400kms away, taking ourselves, two children and my parents. My brother Panayoti who at this time was also in Australia was doing the very same thing to bring out his four children – Sotir, Urania, Pasko and Tomé and my parents.

The fares for so many people for that distance would have been very expensive and so we travelled together in a truck driven by a friend of ours, Stomati, who was going from Poznan to Warsaw and back with stock and deliveries. We squashed in between the loads in the back of his truck and this was how we avoided paying so much in expensive travel costs.

Another problem at that time was that if any political immigrants wanted to leave Poland or any other democratic socialist country and go to capitalist countries, the local expatriation organization and authorities were not in favour of this. We kept it a secret that this was what we were planning to do. Even our local organization would have been against this plan. We did everything in secrecy.

In about 1957 one of the central committee men of the Communist Party of Greece came to Poznan to visit the

immigrants there. He happened to be the Commander of the 18th brigade of the partisans. His name was Pando Voinata and Elena knew him personally and he also remembered her from the Civil War ten years previously. Elena thought that he was a very reasonable man and we should ask his opinion on the dilemma of us migrating or not. He told us that we had both contributed greatly to the struggle that we were involved in, we were now invalids and that we should not hesitate to immigrate to Australia and meet up with our family over there. That gave us some hope. He said, "Wherever you go, you will continue to work in the struggle for freedom and rights of the Macedonian people."

For us immigration was a very good thing. All of Elena's family were in Australia. She had her parents, her paternal grandmother, her sister Ristana with all her family, and she had three new siblings born in Australia, Yana, Vera and Johnny. I too had my family living in the same state – my sister Costandina and all her family, my brother Panayoti and his new family, wife Elena, two daughters Athina and Mary and his children from Poland, plus my parents as well would be there. So this was an excellent proposition for us.

I found out that in Australia, a government school certificate obtained for Radio Technician Tradesman such as I possessed would not be recognized. They would, however, recognize a trade's union certificate and in Poland the Tradesmen Association were awarding a Certificate of Master of Radio Technician. So I sat for that examination and obtained the Masters Diploma which was recognized in Australia. (When it was translated from the Polish language to English I was finally recognized as a radio technician here in Australia without having to sit for another examination.)

During the year, Pobetka was six years old and we went to enrol her in primary school. They asked us for our marriage certificate. We produced the official certificate that was given to us from the organization in Zgozelets. They told us this was not recognized as an official document from the government and was therefore not valid. According to them, we were not officially married. They said, "You can enrol the girl but not in the name of Radis, it will have to be Geli."



Pobetka, Elena and Nasé, c. 1958

What do we do? We thought we had better get married again, so Elena and I went to the town council in Poznan, grabbed a couple of witnesses and married again officially in 1958.

Soon our papers were approved and in July 1958 we received visas and passports in readiness to come to Australia.

During the last couple of years of our stay in Poland, Elena had managed to save about five or six thousand zloty which was enough to pay for our fares from Poland to Genoa to board the ship that would take us to Australia. Elena's father had put twenty pounds in the bank at Genoa for us to withdraw as pocket money for our three week boat journey out to Western Australia. My parents and Panayoti's children had left Poland one month before us.

It was an issue at that time that Pavle was not our child but my brother's, as we had put him down on our papers to immigrate with us. His father had been killed in the Civil War and his mother was in Hungary and she had in 1953 given permission for him to be placed in the care of my parents in Poland.

Now the decision to leave Poland and go to Australia was a major one and we wondered what we were to do with Pavle. We wrote a letter to his mother in Hungary and told her of our plans and

asked for her intentions regarding her son. We said if you want him back in Hungary we will arrange that, but otherwise we intend to take him with us. For some unknown reason, we received no reply.

We were in a very awkward position. We had no intention of leaving the boy alone and since there was no answer from his mother with regards to her wishes, we made the decision to add him as our child in our passports and take him with us. He was only eleven years old at the time. We wrote to Elena's family and informed them that there would be another child with us and we explained the circumstances and my father-in-law did not hesitate to pay his fare as well as ours. On the very day of leaving, I purchased two full price tickets for us adults, one three-quarter priced ticket for Pavle and two half priced ones for Pobetka and Nasé.

We told our friends in Poznan that we would be leaving only two weeks before we actually left as we were fearful that somehow our plans would be disrupted. We had kept it a secret and fortunately it all went well.

So the era of nine years of living in Poland came to an end and in July 1958 we left Poznan to come to Australia.

Chapter 52 – We say goodbye to Poland

Elena packed sufficient food for our train journey from Poznan to Genoa in Italy. The journey took about two and half days with a lot of train changes and waiting. We travelled from Poland to Czechoslovakia to Austria and then onto Italy.

When we finally arrived in Genoa, it was dark approaching evening and our food supply was depleted. We weren't sure where to go and we noticed people branching off everywhere leaving until finally we were left at the railway station alone, two adults and three children.

A man who was working there approached us and I supposed could see we were floundering and didn't know where to go. We told him we were Macedonians from Greece and as luck would have it he was also Greek and soon we were able to explain that we were on our way to board a ship called the Neptunia to journey to Australia. The ship would be leaving the following afternoon and so he directed us to a hotel to stay overnight and this we did.

The only problem was we did not have enough money for sufficient food but were able to scrounge enough to buy two bowls of soup with a couple of bread buns and we divided it among the children. The following morning we went to the nearby bank and withdrew the twenty pounds that Elena's father had deposited for us. Elena bought some food for us and some nice figs as well, that we all heartily enjoyed.

A bus took us from the hotel to the large port of Genoa and we saw the Neptunia. It was a beautiful ship. To us it seemed so luxurious. We were given a cabin and in the evening we went to the large dining room with tables set up beautifully laden with food. Pobetka and Nasé took a plateful of olives mistakenly thinking they were cherries. They got stuck into them and then felt very sick. Pobetka cannot stomach olives till this day.

The ship slowly moved out of the port and then the seasickness came upon Elena. All the way from Genoa to Fremantle she and Nasé were very sick. Elena still maintains that if she had travelled another day on that ship she would have died.

While we were travelling from Poznan to Genoa, in Geneva Austria we had met a woman with three daughters (Dosta, Elena and Tomka) from Czechoslovakia also on their way to Australia to join their father and we struck up a good friendship with them on our journey on the ship and still have contact with them to this very day.

Our years in Poland will stay in our thoughts forever. That was the place our children were born, the difficult times with Elena's illness and my schooling and those memories are cemented vividly in our mind and even though it was only nine years, it was a very important stage of our lives.

We were satisfied in Poland. The people there did everything they could after the Civil War to take us in, give us a place to live and give us work. I appreciate very much that which was done for us and our time there will remain in our hearts forever, but that chapter was now closed as we looked forward to what lay ahead for us in Australia.

Part 4 – Australia

Chapter 53 – Arrival in a new country and a new life

We arrived at the Port of Fremantle on the 22nd July 1958, on a cold winter's day pouring with rain. (This day also happens to be the date of the National Day of Liberation in Poland from the Nazi's in WWII).

All of Elena's family were waiting for us. She hadn't seen her father for twenty years nor her mother, grandmother and sister Ristana for about twelve years and she was very eager to see her siblings that had been born in Australia.

Elena was overjoyed to meet her two little sisters Yana and Vera and little brother, Vané (Johnny) named for their long dead brother. Also, my family was there to greet us as were many friends from my village and they were all happy to see us. It was a very exciting day for us as we set foot in our new country.

Our baggage was loaded from the trolley into Pavle Kristoff's ute (Ristana's husband) and they drove us home to a very large house at 36 John Street North Fremantle. This house once belonged to the Lord Mayor of Fremantle. It had many rooms. Three kitchens, seven bedrooms, huge lounge room and one large passage running down the centre of the house and it had a beautiful view of the Swan River set up high on a steep block. They had been waiting for us for many years and everything had been set up nicely in expectation of our arrival in Perth.

Elena was happily welcomed by her mother and grandmother, sister Ristana and her younger sisters and brother. Her father was not there. He was at work that day driving a large 15-ton truck that carried limestone from the Spearwood quarry to the Portland Cement Company. Elena had to wait until six o'clock that evening to see her father.

She finally met him when he came home and in her mind she expected to see the same man who had left so early in her life to come to Australia as a young man of twenty four or twenty five. He was now forty six and even though not old, he had been a very

hard worker and he was quite thin and wiry and not like the father she remembered.

My in-laws looked after us very kindly as did Elena's sister Ristana and her husband. Ristana and Pavle had a fruit and vegetable shop in Adelaide Street Fremantle and would supply us with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables. Dedo Chrste had converted one of the rooms into a kitchen and we were able to have our own little kitchen in that big house.

Three families lived together in John Street – my in-laws and the three younger children, Elena's grandmother Dosta, Ristana, Pavle and their two children Helen and Victor and Elena and I with our two children.

Pavle chose not to live with us, instead went to live with my brother Panayoti to be with his four cousins whom he had bonded with in Poland.

Chapter 54 – Searching for employment

We started to establish our life in Fremantle. We met numerous people from our respective villages that came to visit us and saw many relations and friends we had known in the old country.

Our children commenced school together with the other children at North Fremantle Primary School and Pobetka started off at grade one but was quickly promoted to grade two. Nasé repeated grade one again.

After settling in to our new living arrangements, I knew the time was passing and I should start thinking of our future, what we were going to do and where to find work. I thought I should start looking for a job in my trade as a radio technician or something in the telecommunications industry. I had gained good experience working in Poland carrying out all sorts of repairs, maintenance and building telecommunication equipment and exchanges associated with this.

Next door to us in John Street was a family by the name of Payne. The head of the family, Cyril Payne, was an old gentleman who had two sons, Eric and Jack. Eric was a member of the Electrical Trades Union and when Dedo Chrste told him of my qualifications, Eric advised me to get in touch with that particular union to see if they would recognize the qualification papers I had from Poland.

He took me to the Secretary of the Union, Bob Fletcher, and I could not speak any English, but through an interpreter he agreed to have my papers translated to English in an endeavour to seek employment. With that done, my diploma for Master of Radio Technician was recognized here and I commenced to look for work.

I went to different companies that carried out radio repairs, one being Rowleys in Wellington street, opposite the old fruit and vegetable markets. The manager of Rowleys was a German named Mr. Klenna and he looked at my diploma and decided to employ me as a radio repairer.

I worked a few days carrying out repairs that ultimately needed to be entered onto a job card but this I could not do. I didn't even know how to ask for any particular part I needed for the repair. I would take the whole radio chassis over and say, "I need this valve, or this capacitor or resistor." I was doing this all day, every day, until the manager told me he didn't have the time to spend with me translating my job.

Finally after a couple of weeks he told me to go away and learn English and then come back and he would give me my job back again. He sent me home. I was both jobless and disappointed.

Next I applied for a position in government telecommunications and I was taken by one of Dedo Chrste's partners, Stoyan Dondules, to a man in Fremantle who was working for Telecom. Stoyan advised him of my past experience but a couple of weeks later I received a letter telling me that they could not use me, they had their own training centre in East Perth and they were employing their own trainees. As a sideline to this, Stoyan told me that the interviewer had told him I should not have put *Orthodox* for the question asking my religion on the application form. He said to him, "If he had put *Catholic* he would have got the job."

Mr. Payne was a maintenance man for the Salvation Army Ladies Eventide Home situated next door to his house. One time he was making awnings for the windows and he offered to give me some work so I started cutting timber with him and he paid me a small amount of money. Elena became a cleaner at the same Home and she was getting paid £4.10s. a week for that job.

The work with Mr. Payne finished. Next, I applied for a job at a meat abattoir in Spearwood where they were looking for temporary workers during the lamb season. I was successful and soon started work there. After the lambs were slaughtered, the carcasses were passed through on overhead chain hooks to be cleaned and bagged and tied and from there the chain link passed down to the cool room. They would then be sent out to wherever they were required. It was pretty hard work to do that constantly.

One day the boss called two or three of us up and he took us down to the huge refrigerated area. He gave us rubber boots to put on so that we could work inside the area where the lambs were stacked. I put one boot on and I was struggling with the other, I could not put it over my artificial leg.

The boss yelled out, "Quick, quick." I said "I am sorry, but I can't put it over my foot." I showed him my leg. He saw that I had prosthesis. He said I should have told him. I replied that I was worried that I wouldn't get a job if I did. "No," he said, "it will be alright."

He went to tell his superior who immediately gave me the sack with the comment that because of my disability, I was not permitted to work in the factory.

Dedo Chrste and his two partners, Risto Trendos and Stoyan Dondules decided to give me a job at the quarry driving the loading tractor. They taught me to operate the caterpillar loader and I began to load up the trucks for them to transport the rubble to Portland. It was a huge machine with chains and it turned out to be a good job. I worked there for a year and I was paid £11.3s. per week and for that time it was good money. During that period, I had a lot of time to learn to speak English. In between the time it took to load the trucks and see them off to Victoria Park and then come back for the next load – about an hour and a half with four or five trips per day – I found Greek-to-English and Polish-to-English dictionaries and I slowly started little by little to understand some English.

Finally, I felt confident enough to apply for a position in my trade. There was a business owned by a Greek man called Anthony Michaels. He had an electrical goods shop in William Street in Perth with a radio workshop at the back and I went there looking for a job. He took me on.

Sometimes he didn't have work to give me, it wasn't always busy. He spoke to me in Greek. He said. "Vasil you are a good worker but you can see there isn't always work for you, but I will find you another job in the same trade." I was happy with that. He knew many people in the radio and television trade and he found me a job with his brother who owned a business in North Perth called

Clearview Television Service repairing radios and televisions. I worked for him for a couple of months until that business folded up.

Anthony Michael came to the rescue again. He phoned a very large company called Vox Adeon Howards that had many retail outlets and a huge repair workshop in West Leederville. The manager was a gentleman called Bert Whitney. Tony recommended me to Bert, guaranteed my work and as a consequence I was given a job. I started in the small electrical section and worked there for about six months.



Vasil and work mate at Vox Adeons, c. 1960s

With the advent of television in 1958 and subsequent repair work needed for this medium, the workshop was divided into two sections – one part for the television repair and the other for radios. In my lunchtime I would go over and watch the servicemen working on the televisions.

The manager noticed my interest and asked if I would like to do television repairs. I did and so he transferred me to television repairing and I caught on quite well, because I had two and half years of background knowledge in electronics/radio techniques and theory from full time schooling in Poland. I supplemented this by studying and reading a lot and I began to gain very good

experience and eventually became leading hand in the workshop with seven or eight other technicians. The company was renting out thousands of televisions at that time and we had seventeen technicians working out of vans travelling to homes for repairs, doing ten or fifteen jobs per day. The black and whites were very temperamental tellies (colour TV was not available until about 1975) and if there were major repairs they would be brought back to the workshop.

I had a very good memory and when I found a fault in the television, I would remember that brand, that model, and I knew exactly where and what that fault meant, what component, resistor or capacitor was faulty.

I would get calls on the two-way from the field technicians and they could describe to me the fault they were looking at and I knew exactly where to direct them to begin the repair. I gained a lot of experience in the television field there.

That was the start of my permanent career. It took about a year and a half and I was now very happy. Before that time we had mixed feelings about coming out to Australia. Sometimes we discussed saving money and going back to Poland. That was the extent of our frustration during that first year and a half in trying to find employment.

Every day I would catch the train from North Fremantle to West Leederville and that became my routine. I was supposed to start at 8 o'clock but I was always there at 7.30am.

Mr. Howard (the son of Harry Howard – the Lord Mayor of Perth City) would also arrive early and he would come to my bench and give me English lessons. He was a good man, I believe he had once been a Colonel or higher in the army during the war.

I was now earning £14.10s. in my weekly wage and we started paying back to Dedo Chrste the money (about £700) he had outlaid for our fares to Australia as he was interested in buying some property in Fremantle at the time.

Chapter 55 - Spreading our wings

We had no problems living in North Fremantle, but soon we came to the conclusion that we should branch out as a family and buy ourselves a house. One day while strolling around the Leederville area during my lunchtime, I noticed a house in Harbourne Street that was up for sale. I rang the agent listed on the for-sale sign.

He came and picked us up one evening to go look at the house and upon inspecting it we decided to buy the property for £4,500. We didn't really put a lot of thought into this, I might add. The next day I decided to take a better look at the house that we had signed up for. I noticed it was a weatherboard house, sitting on stilts and the gutters were old and rusty. The agent had told us it was only twenty five years old but we realised he had mislead us.

I went home and told Elena and the following weekend we went with Dedo Chrste, Pavle and Ristana and they all agreed it was not a good buy. We rang the agent and complained, and finally (he must have been an honest man) said if we had changed our minds he would refund us our deposit. We fortunately managed to get off the hook on that one.

We didn't socialise very much while in North Fremantle, apart from visiting my brother and his family and my parents who lived with him in Scarborough on some weekends. We would catch the train to Perth and then a bus out to Scarborough. Also we would go to Victoria Park and visit my sister Costandina and her family.

On weekends we would do work around the house or help Dedo Chrste with his newly acquired property at Queen Victoria Street in Fremantle. The property was very old, consisting of three shops, and the timber floors were rotten and needed to be removed and replaced with cement. The roof was rusted iron and that needed replacing as well. Practically every Saturday and Sunday for a long time we would help there.

Because we were continually visiting my brother in Scarborough, we started to look around for a house in that suburb. We came upon a house in Duke Street. It was brand new recently built, three bedroom house, brick and tile and we thought it was lovely.

We had a look inside the house and we noticed that even the laminex kitchen counters were identical to a laminex dining room table that Elena had picked out for our North Fremantle kitchen. It was blue laminex with little squares and Elena decided this was an omen, this house was meant for us.

With the extra money we were able to squirrel away a decent deposit to buy a brand new house. Following the disaster of the Leederville house, we thought this would be a far better option. We started negotiating with the builder and the cost was £4,200. This seemed very reasonable to us. We decided to go to the bank and borrow £2,500 and get a second mortgage from the builder for £800 and the balance we had saved ourselves.

We went and saw the bank manager and sat down for the interview for the loan. He asked us how much we wanted to borrow and we told him. He asked for our savings book. We said, "What savings book?" He said, "How do you expect us to lend you money if you don't have a savings book and haven't saved any money?" We told him that my father-in-law would be returning about £900 that we had saved and lent him in his recent purchase of property. He said, "When you get your money back, put it in the bank for three months and establish a banking history, then you will qualify for a loan." And that is what we did.

We deposited the money into our new bank account in the morning and that evening there was a loud knock on the door. We opened it to find the bank manager standing there. He wanted to see our bank book because apparently the bank had deposited an amount of £300,000 into the account. He was so nervous until he took the book off us and amended his mistake.

We had our loan approved and that's how we bought our first lovely little house in Scarborough. In April or May 1961 we moved in. It was a very happy time for us. It was a new house but it didn't have floor coverings, curtains, lawns – nothing. But, we were happy. We covered the windows with newspapers and we started living. We began to clear up the backyard, cut the big trees at the back and plant lawn. While I was working at Vox Adeons, Elena was busily working very hard at home making our house comfortable. On weekends Pavle my brother-in-law and other friends would also come over and help us to get established.

Chapter 56 – Settling in our new life

Many Macedonians and local people came to know me and I was offered private work repairing their televisions. I was very happy to do this as the extra money I earned supplemented our income. Before we bought our car, Les White who also worked in administration at Vox Adeons and who lived in the area would offer me a lift to and from work, as did Alex Jardine a salesman at Vox.

Many times I would be picked up after work by someone who wanted their television repaired and that person would then either drive me home or take me to the next house where I would carry out the next television repair and then be taken home. Eventually, I was able to buy a car, a two tone blue 1964 EH Holden station sedan in 1966. I became even busier working after hours.

Our loan repayment on both mortgages was £37 per month and that didn't leave very much for us to live on. Elena did some babysitting work looking after two children in the area and was paid 10 shillings each for these jobs. Somehow with the extra work that I was doing, we managed to save some money to buy linoleum and carpet for the house.

Elena established a beautiful vegetable garden in our backyard and this was very helpful in saving money. We lived quite frugally but this was the only way we could do it. Elena, yet again, budgeted very carefully and always put my private repair work money aside and managed to make extra re-payments towards our mortgage every now and again. Our aim always was to pay off our home loan as quickly as we could.

Elena had a fear that the taxation department would pounce upon us making these extra repayments and would ask how we acquired the money. (We did not declare any of our extra income). She had a preconceived plan that she would say she had a vegetable garden and chickens and was managing to save money by living off this home produce. Also, she was going to say her sister owned a fruit and vegetable shop in Fremantle and we received handouts from her as well.

One day Elena received a fright. A man who worked as a parking inspector came to the door to pick me up to fix his television. When Elena opened the door and saw the man standing there dressed in an official uniform and cap asking for Mr. Radis, she freaked out. She thought this is it. When he eventually told her the reason he was asking for me, Elena was highly relieved.

Eventually, within a short space of time, maybe four or five years, we managed to pay off our mortgage and it was a very happy day for Elena and me when the bank manager, Mr. Paige, announced to us that our home was fully ours as he handed over the certificate of title to the property. He congratulated us, saying although the bank didn't make much money out of us as we were so regular with our repayments; he wished he had more customers like us that paid on time without any trouble.

Our socialising was still mainly with family. Some weekends we would catch the bus and then train down to North Fremantle and the children would be very excited to be spending time with the other children there at the big house. Also at that time, the Macedonian Community was organizing dances in Main Street Osborne Park at the La Villa Hall and we would take the bus there and we slowly began socialising with our fellow Macedonians.

In the meantime Pavle and Ristana were also thinking to make a move north of the river and they purchased a block of land in Wembley Downs and started building a house. Elena and I helped them, as they had helped us, in clearing their block, cutting bush and trees and planting lawns.

The children went to primary school in Deanmore Road in Scarborough. When Pobetka finished high school and received her Junior Certificate, she went on to secretarial college to learn shorthand and typing. She did in fact gain a position at Vox Adeons in the administration department, upstairs from where I was working.

Nasé continued on in school but was not interested academically and had a strong desire to become a motor mechanic. Even as a youngster he would build go-carts and run up and down the

driveway in a machine he had built. He was very mechanically minded. The teacher called me to the school and suggested that before the year even ended, to avoid the rush of end-of-year students looking for employment and apprenticeship positions, I should take him out of school and find him a job as an apprentice motor mechanic. This we did at John Milentis' garage in Grantham Street Wembley where he became a brilliant motor mechanic and completed his apprenticeship.

We took Pavle in to live with us after two years when my brother Panayoti's two sons had left home. He was now 13 or 14 years old. He commenced work at the City Case factory in Osborne Park. Elena had special feelings for him and endeavoured to nurture and treat him exactly as she would our own two children, so that he would never feel any different growing up without his mother or father.



Radis family and Paul Radis in the mid 1960s

I had never forgotten my last phone conversation with his father, my brother Pando at the main field hospital in Gramos when he was crying with me for the loss of my leg and when he had implored me to always take care of his son should anything happen to himself. I had promised my brother I would do so and I was determined to fulfil my promise to him. Pavle was like our own son. He grew up together with Pobetka and Nasé and

all the other children, Yana, Vera, Vané, Lena and Tsilé and became one of our extended family. When he was old enough to get his driver's licence, he drove all the younger children around everywhere. He stayed with us until he married.

Chapter 57 – Happy events

The months turned into years and the years rolled on and our life continued steadily.

In 1968 Pobetka met and married a wonderful young man, John Milankov. In 1969 Pavle Radis, who I always considered as our third child married at the age of 23 to a girl named Anne and he has a daughter and a son and four grandchildren. In 1971 Nasé married a beautiful girl, Julie Patman. They were both very young but loved each other immensely.



***Left: John & Kristine (Pobetka) Milankov, 1968
Right: Tom (Nasé) & Julie Radis, 1971***

After Nasé and Julie were married, they moved into Julie's grandmother's house in Newcastle Street. It was a very old home and they lived down the stairs on the lower floor. The conditions were not good in that house. It was very damp, dark and musty and as they were expecting a baby, Elena and I were very concerned for them. After talking with each other, we started to look around for another house. We found our house in Balcatta.

It was fairly new only about a year old, established with curtains, carpets, lawns etc. We purchased it for \$22,000.



Tanas, Costandina and Athina Radis, 1968 at Pobetka's wedding

We told Nasé that we had bought another house and gave him the option to choose. He used our Duke Street garage to carry out car repairs and so decided that given a choice he would prefer to have the Scarborough house.

He took out a loan to pay us for the house and that together with what we had saved and a small loan by us from the bank, we moved to Balcatta. Nasé and Julie, together with their little daughter Sherrylin moved to Scarborough. They are still there today and the house has undergone such renovations that it has become a beautiful, comfortable home for them.

We lived in our first house in Scarborough for twelve years and our children were married from there but we were happy to move knowing the house would still be in the family.

Chapter 58 – The Macedonian Community

In Perth we have a very large Macedonian Community, with fellow countrymen and women that settled here from all over Macedonia. It was during the time I repaired televisions that I began to get acquainted with many of them.

Elena and I were both involved in the Community and we enjoyed this involvement very much. We both became members of the Macedonian Community in the sixties. There were many events happening and Elena and I frequently socialised and this was even well before the Community Centre was built.



Macedonian Orthodox Church of Sveti Nikola, North Perth

We would load all the children, Yana, Vera, Pobetka and Helen, Vané, Nasé and Pavle in the car and take them to the local Macedonian Community dances. Tsilé was still much younger then. The dances were held at the North Perth Town Hall, the Trades Hall in Beaufort Street and other places like La Villa in Osborne Park.

Everyone thought we had four daughters and three sons, because they were always together. The girls became involved in the first traditional dancing group in the sixties and even performed before Prince Phillip at the WACA and many other occasions and events.

I became a member of the committee of the Macedonian Community. At that time there was a lot of controversy between the Community and the Olympic Soccer Club which were running as two separate entities. A lot of people were not happy with the discord and thought we should be united.

This was finally achieved in a meeting at the North Perth Town Hall, whereby it was agreed the soccer club would be the sporting section of the Community called the Olympic Macedonian Soccer Club and form its own committee. I became the vice-president of that committee. The social events were very successful and we would have a turnout of around 700 people.

It was not long before disharmony settled in again with regards to distribution of proceeds derived from social events. No-one could agree with anyone and as a result, a separation occurred again. I remember walking out of that meeting followed by a few other committee members. We showed up at a meeting of the full committee and advised them of the unreasonable demands made by the soccer club side and with that we all voted to set up another sporting club which we would call the Macedonia United Sports Club within our Community. This happened in 1969 and I became the first president of that club.

For the next six or seven years from 1971-76, I was also vice president of the Community and worked with Sam Christie who was the president. We worked very well together and shared a mutual respect and co-operation in the work we did. He was an excellent person for the Community and I was really enjoying my work.

When the Community Centre was built in Albert Street North Perth, I helped to raise the money for equipment and voluntarily carried out all the electronic sound system installation in the hall. Sometimes I would get calls at eight or nine in the evening to come out when the sound system for the bingo evenings had failed.

During 1973-74 plans had been underway to build a club upstairs of the hall and there were many rules and regulations that had to be abided in order to obtain a liquor license and this meant a separate membership from the Community had to be formed.

Therefore a new committee was organized for the W.A. Macedonia Club and I was elected president of the first committee in 1973 where I served until 1978.

The club was officially opened in April 1976 by Ian Viner, representing the Prime Minister Mr. Fraser. (Gough Whitlam had been invited to open the club when he was Prime Minister in 1975, but subsequent political events which transpired saw him dismissed and therefore was unable to do so. He was, however, present at the opening because of his original invitation. He was also made a Life Member of the Community at that time). When the bar and club were completed, I again raised the funds to install the sound system there.

Because of my continuous voluntary work for the Community, I was awarded the honour of becoming a Life Member in 1983.

In 1985 on land purchased by the Macedonian Community in Balcatta, clubrooms were built and playing fields were established for the Community sporting club and named Macedonia Park. It was a very successful and strong club that quickly climbed up the division ranks. Hereto I carried out all the maintenance, repairs and fixing of the sound system.

A large project in the Macedonian Community was the building of the new church, opposite the Community Centre in 1996. During construction, I installed the sound and speaker system there and raised about \$15,000 towards the funding of this. My work was again voluntary and I feel very proud of my contribution. It is a beautiful church with ornate paintings of religious icons and biblical scenes on the walls and ceilings and is a popular tourist attraction as well due to its intricate architecture and elaborate interior.

Chapter 59 – Political interests

I also had many contacts outside of the Community. I became a member of the Electrical Trades Union (as far back as 1958 with Mr. Payne in North Fremantle who helped me obtain my diploma). I went to many meetings and in this way I came to know a great number of people in the unions which in turn influenced me to become a member of the Labor Party.

I began doing a lot of voluntary work for the Labor Party, beginning with Harry Webb in Scarborough helping at the polling booths in his campaign for the Federal electoral seat of Stirling. I did the same for Brian Burke in the State elections and was involved at the polling booths for both the Hawke and Keating elections. I became well known in the local Labor circles and Ron Edwards would jokingly call me “The General of the Macedonian Army” as I would organise all the rosters for the polling booths in the Stirling electoral.



Ron Edwards, Bob Hawke and Vasil, 1985

Ron Edwards, (the Federal Member for Stirling in the eighties and early nineties) and I were very close and this connection helped and resulted in many benefits to the Macedonian Community. The Macedonia Park sporting complex was a result of the close

connection with the Labor Party and Ron Edwards who worked hard for us to gain a grant for its establishment. We were awarded \$360,000 and if not for this connection, we would not have received the grant.

During the Brian Burke era, the Labor Party decided to organize ethnic groups or sub-branches within the Labor Party, e.g. Italian, Greek or Macedonian Friends of Labor and the cost was only \$2.00 for membership. Brian Burke was the Member for Balcatta at that time. Most of the Macedonians were supporters of the Labor Party. I was elected president of that particular group. During election times we were able to supply one hundred or so people to man the polling booths within the Balcatta, Osborne Park, Girrawheen and Wanneroo area. The Friends of Labor group is now defunct but proved to be beneficial for us to build the friendship we now enjoy.

In 2007 when Kevin Rudd came to W.A. during his campaign for election, he visited us at Macedonia Park. I was the president of the Community at that time and had made a concerted effort to bring him to visit our clubrooms during that very busy time of his campaign. He made a pledge that should his party be elected he would grant the Community \$1,000,000 for the development and improvement of the facilities for the Macedonia Park complex. He kept this promise.

I have had the honour of meeting with many of our Labor Prime Ministers – Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, also some Liberal ones and state politicians who have visited our club such as Sir Charles Court, John Tonkin, Peter Dowding and Brian Burke. I have always used the positivity of these meetings to benefit our Community and my association with the Labor Party has always been for me a good one. I was also on friendly terms with Ron Bertram another Labor stalwart who was the Member for Mt. Hawthorn. He nominated me to become a Justice of the Peace in W.A. and following the necessary investigation of my character, this eventuated in 1983, working a roster Monday to Friday at the City of Stirling for more than twenty years along with other JP's. I met many people and had a good relationship with many of the councillors and the Mayor. Many of our Macedonian people would come to my house for JP work and this too gave me much satisfaction.

Chapter 60 – Return to our homeland and disappointment - then “A Village Reborn”

In April 1977, Elena and I decided to go back for a holiday to our old country to see our birthplace in Macedonia. Dedo Chrste came along with us as did Pobetka's in-laws and her father-in-law's brother and his wife. Our itinerary was to first visit Russia, then Poland, and then finally meet up with Dedo Chrste in Bulgaria (he had not wanted to go to the first two countries we visited).

Moscow was a wonderful experience for us. It was the 1st May and we saw the May Day celebrations. We went to Leningrad, a very old city full of history of the Czars, then onto Minsk in Belorus. From there we went to Poland, then Warsaw and then onto Poznan, the town where we lived for nine years. It was a memorable experience. We went to the house we had lived in and met up with many Macedonian friends who were still living in Poland and were happy to see us after seventeen years. We visited the hospital where Elena was treated for TB. We stayed in Poland about four or five days and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.

Then we went onto Bulgaria and met up with Jim Siderov – Elena's first cousin - (Baba Vassilka's sister Fania's son) and his wife Tanya. We stayed with them in Sofia and from there we visited other relations in Russé – Dedo Yovan's brother (Dedo Chrste's uncle) who had been living and settled there since the twenties when he had fled the mistreatment of the Macedonians by the Greeks. I also met my Vojko Stoyan, my mother's brother, and his family.

Finally, we went to Skopje in Macedonia and met up with some friends and distant relations. From there we were to go to Aegean Macedonia in Greece. When we reached the border, the unexpected awaited us. The border guards checked our passports and we thought all was well until suddenly the border guard/policeman called me back. He said, “Give me back your passport.”

I asked what the matter was. He gruffly asked for it back a second time and we waited outside of the office. Looking through

the little window we saw him climb a ladder and retrieve a file from one of the top shelves. He put the file down on the table and starting flipping pages and reading something there. It was taking such a long time but eventually they called me inside the office.

They said to me, "*Mr. Radis, you are not permitted to enter Greece.*" Shocked, I asked why. He said, "We cannot say why, if you want to know why, you should apply to the Ministry of Interior in Athens and they will tell you. We have orders here not to let you pass through to Greece."

I pleaded with them, I said, "I haven't done anything wrong. Is it because I was in the Civil War?"

"No," they replied, "that has nothing to do with it." I told them, "I have done nothing to be penalised so severely, to come from such a distance, to be so close as to see from here the mountains of my village and yet not be permitted entry to visit my birthplace."

The swarthy dark haired border policeman was not interested in talking to me at all. He said, "You cannot step even one foot in this country." I asked if it was because I was a member of the Macedonian Community. He told me if I thought that was it, then it was only my opinion.

During this time Elena was waiting outside and after a while she began to wonder what was going on. She stepped inside the office and the officer waved her off with his arm and told her if she wanted to go into Greece she could go, but "*your husband is not permitted.*" Elena was so distressed she told him she was not going to go anywhere without me. "In that case . . ." he said angrily, grabbing her passport and stamping '*prohibited entry*' all over it. That was the end of that. We were so disappointed. To be so close and not be allowed into the country was devastating.

We didn't know what we were going to do. Dedo Chrste was with us; he had bought a car and was driving us around the place. He suggested he would take us back to Bitola and then from there back to Skopje and then maybe back to Bulgaria. There was nothing else we could do so we agreed. He took us back to Bitola in about twenty minutes and dropped us off there and headed

back to the border. He was allowed entry with no problems. It was a very sad and disappointing day for us.

Dejected, we backtracked from Bitola to Skopje, stayed a night at a friend's place and then headed back to Bulgaria. We were so disappointed. Jim and Tanya asked what happened and, heartbroken, we told them. In an attempt to salvage what was left of our holiday and inject some happiness in our misery, Jim who worked at the office of the Slavonic committee in Sofia organized through them a small holiday for us for a couple of weeks at a place called Kustandil in Pirin Macedonia. Following that, we stayed another week in Sofia and then made plans to go back home.

Our return ticket was to go back through Athens airport. We made enquiries and were again told, we could not go through Greece, so we were forced to buy new tickets and fly out from Sofia to Rome and then on from there back to Australia. It cost us a further \$700 per person. It was such an unsuccessful holiday, full of disappointment.

Upon our return to Australia, I was completely shattered, having looked forward to travelling back to my village and birthplace. I had such enthusiastic expectations to see where my ancestors had been buried, walk the roads and paths of my youth and take in the memories of days gone by. I kept looking at a little black and white photograph my sister had given me of our village of Yanoveni. It was old and crinkled up and saddened me so much I truly could not shake my disappointment and despair at having gone so far and still not have seen the place of my birth.

I went back to work at Vox Adeons, and told my story to a work-mate by the name of David Gough (a gifted artist). David empathised with what had transpired and during conversation I decided to ask him whether he could possibly paint me a picture of my village so that I may have something to remember it as it once was.

David told me it would not be an easy task. The little photo was black and white and devoid of a lot of detail, in fact he thought it would be impossible to reproduce as a clear picture. He said he could not see anything distinguishable. I told him I would help

him and I suppose, sensing my angst, he finally agreed to do the painting but only if I helped him with my memories of the village as it had been.

So for one or two hours, every day after work for a number of months, I would go to his home studio and sit with him as he commenced the difficult job of reproducing my village on canvas. I would relate to David little by little minute pieces of information regarding positions of the houses, what they were constructed with, the slate roofs, the roads, the school, the church, the river and the people. It had been ingrained in my mind and I had no difficulty in remembering anything. It took David about six months to finally complete the painting and the end result gave me much pride and enjoyment to view my village exactly as it had been.

He did a magnificent job and when I look at that painting, I feel as though I am transported back there - going from place to place, being able to identify each house as belonging to whatever person or family member occupied it.

I look at the painting and I see my house and I imagine the way it was with stone walls and slate roof. I see the room I was born in, the entry, the steps and the balcony. Underneath the house was the *avuro* (stables) where the animals were housed.

I can see my grandfather's brother Nikola's house. Dedo Kolo had one daughter Rina – my father's first cousin, and being an only child her track of land was three times bigger than my father's who had to share his with his two brothers.

I see the *goomno* and the shacks that we stored the hay and food for the animals. I see the house that my sister Costandina lived in when she married and that of my older brother Panayoti. My memory goes back to when I was very young and I think of my two brothers Vangel and Pando and the joy we had growing up together and the mischief we managed to cause.

I track the path that I took to go to the school on the hill and the church on the other side. I imagine walking from one end of the village to the other and watching the beautiful river flowing along the bottom of the village or the creek that flowed through the

centre of the village between the two mountains - the *Ginova* and the *Alavitsa*. I look at the tall mountains behind which lies Albania, the mountains that as a young boy I thought I would never venture beyond. I see the bridge that crossed the river which I have a memory of being destroyed by the immense turbulence and often alarming force of the water that it had to be rebuilt twice.

I felt very proud the painting was a success and upon completion many of my fellow countrymen and relatives requested a print. In fact, it was featured in a Sunday Times article and as a short human interest story interview on ABC television. They called it *A Village Reborn*, a village that was completely destroyed in the war coming alive again through the artistic talent of David Gough and the memories of a man who needed to assuage a saddened heart.

David acknowledged that my memory of even the smallest detail contributed to a beautiful work of art that I treasure and trust will stay as a keepsake in my family for many generations. It hangs in pride of place in my lounge room and I am able to look at it and lose myself reminiscing in the memories of my youth whenever I choose.

Chapter 61 – Another unsuccessful attempt to visit

In 1990 we thought we would try visiting the old country again. Our daughter Pobetka, her husband John and Lexo their son, decided to accompany us.

This time, we didn't advertise it around the Community that we would be going back to Greece, simply because we had a suspicion that the reason we were rejected entry the first time back in 1977 was because someone here in Perth had maliciously gone to the Greek Consulate knowing of our plans and told all sorts of untrue stories regarding myself. Unfortunately, some people did this sort of thing.

Yes, I am an active member of the Macedonian Community but goodness knows what untrue deeds I was supposed to have committed against Greece. So, all this false information had been forwarded to Greece and the result was denial of entry to that country.

There was also a change of government in Greece in 1974 when the Papadopolous dictatorship in a coup arrested and exiled Prime Minister Karamalis to France. In late eighties, Karamalis returned and it was rumoured that the government was more democratic and not as strict.

Unfortunately, when the Greeks compile information in their books, it is never wiped out. It is said – *Better the Turkish sword than the Greek pen*. When we landed in Athens airport and went to the customs window, we presented our passports.

The authorities looked at our passports and told us to wait while one officer got up from his chair and disappeared somewhere. Within a couple of minutes, he returned with two armed policemen. They grabbed my arms – one on either side – and escorted me, guns in hand, into a small room under some stairs. They locked the door. It was dark and dank with no windows and I could hardly see anything and it stunk. There were also another two or three people held there. As well as a couple of dark-skinned people there was someone who, in my view, looked somewhat suspect.

I waited there upset and confused until suddenly the door opened to push in another person. I immediately got up, grabbed my small suitcase and moved out of the door. I went through the border control and moved to the other side. I knew that in every country, the moment you pass through the passport control, you are under the law of that country, but before you pass that place, you are in an international airport and they cannot do much to you. I did this very quickly and then of course the guards came after me and they tried to pull me back.

I yelled back at them, “No, you cannot touch me here; I am not officially in Greece.” They were very angry with me and finally I sat in the neutral area of the airport where they sent a policeman to guard me there on the international side. Elena, Pobetka, John and Lexo were allowed to leave. I told them, “Go and get in touch with Tetin Andréa (Teta Fania’s husband) and ask him if there is anything he can do.”

Elena sent Pobetka upstairs to the waiting lounge to try to find Teta, but Pobetka was afraid she would not know her. Finally, however, she did find Teta Fania and Tetin Andréa and told them the whole story. Tetin tried to intervene and mediate with the airport authorities but they brusquely and loudly dismissed him saying, *“This man is not allowed entry – he is not to step one foot in Greece”*

In frustration, I told my family that they should all go to Greece and I would either return to Australia or go on to Cyprus where Jim Siderov was now living. From there, yet again, I thought I would meet up with them in Bulgaria. It was hard to separate, not only emotionally but physically as well, as we also had to pull apart the contents of our suitcases and separate clothes, etc.

Finally, my family left and I waited at the airport to board a flight to Cyprus. They had told me I could go anywhere I wanted, except, of course, Greece.

I had asked one of the female security personnel to go and buy me a ticket for Cyprus. I gave her \$400 to buy me the ticket – one way to Cyprus. Then I waited and waited for one hour, then two and she didn’t come back. I told one of the airport personnel

that I hadn't been given my ticket yet and the plane would soon be leaving.

He shrugged his shoulders and said he wasn't interested. I spotted the woman I had given the money to and when I approached her, she denied it and said she did not have my money. I lost the \$400 and as my frustration increased, so did my blood pressure and my blood sugar levels and I started to feel quite unwell.

I said to the guard, "I don't feel well." He went and reported to someone that the *prisoner* doesn't feel well and wants a doctor. They took me to a doctor inside the airport who checked me out and asked me what had happened; my blood pressure spiked through the roof. I told him the story and he gave me some tablets to take and then I went back to the international section of the airport.

I was so hungry. I hadn't eaten anything and my sugar level was seriously affected. I told them this and they gave the guard permission to take me to the restaurant in order to get something to eat. I ordered some eggs and toast and I told the young guard to not worry, I wasn't going anywhere. He told me, sorry, but he had to guard me. I ended up buying him breakfast as well.

I asked the young guard why had this happened, what was going on? He said to me, "They have a lot of evidence against you that you are working against the Greek state." He said he had seen information on the computer that suggested in Perth I was the main organiser of protests against Greece and other things. He said, "It is impossible for you to get into Greece. If you want to you will have to hire a lawyer to prove these facts are not true." (I had to prove a negative!). He begged me not to say anything of what he had revealed to me.

While in the restaurant I heard a voice over the PA system – "*The prisoner Vasilis Radis is to be taken directly to the airplane.*" I enquired about my suitcase, but was told it was already on board the plane. So, with the gun in his hand, the guard took me through the restaurant down through some passages in the cellar and through a door right up to the airplane for my flight to Nicosia in Cyprus. I was even escorted right up to my seat,

buckled in with the seat belt and then left alone. He had orders to make sure I had well and truly gone.

In Cyprus, Jim was waiting for me because as soon as Elena went to Athens she rang Jim and told him what had happened and said I was now coming to Cyprus.

Again, I was so traumatised with the previous events; I rang Ron Edwards in Perth and told him what had happened. Ron was shocked and very empathetic. He tried very hard to mediate through government channels. Mr. Hawke got in touch with the Greek Ambassador in Canberra as to the reason I was not permitted entry to Greece. The Ambassador told Mr. Hawke he was not allowed to intervene, it was a matter of Greek security over there and he had nothing to do with it.

Ron went to the Greek Consul here and was told the same thing. He then suggested I get in contact with the Australian High Commissioner in Cyprus with whom the Australian government was in liaison. They endeavoured for three days to find a way around the dilemma, but finally they found it was absolutely impossible. I was talking with Ron two or three times a day by phone, until he finally told me, "Vic, it is impossible, we did everything we could to open the way, but they will not budge." The High Commissioner told me the same thing.

I stayed in Cyprus for about a month and it coincided with Jim finishing his work there as well and returning to Bulgaria. I came back with him and Tanya and stayed with them for a couple of weeks until eventually Elena joined me. They had toured around her village and other areas and caught up with many friends and she returned with Tanasa (her first cousin) and we all stayed in Bulgaria for another month and then finally came back home to Australia.



Holidays in Lagen, 1990. Pavlitsa Masina, Tinka, Elena, Elena Delova, Tanasa, Tinka Kostova, Leta Markova, Sofka Popova

Chapter 62 – Third time lucky and a happy reunion

In 1997 a group of people from my village of Yanoveni who had left in 1947 following the bombardment and burning that destroyed the place decided to organize a reunion of all the Yanoventsi back at the village and they sent invitations to many people.

This was organized through a village association in Chicago. I don't know how they found out my address, but nevertheless I too received an invitation. I thought this was a marvellous idea but bearing in mind that I had twice been denied entry I wondered what would happen.

I decided to go directly to the Greek Consulate here and relate my previous experiences in Greece. I spoke to the Consul and said that I wanted to go to Greece for a village reunion and that I had already twice been refused entry, the reasons for which I still did not know. This time I would like to go but I needed assurance that I would not be turned back and denied entry.

The Consul said he didn't know anything about my previous problems but would look into it. This was when I made him an offer I hoped he wouldn't refuse. I said to him, "I want to go back and I want you to make sure I will be allowed entry or otherwise I will take my story to the media and then everyone will know what type of so-called democracy exists in Greece, where citizens who have been born there and have done nothing wrong against the Greek state are not allowed back." (Many people who were either exiles or refugees or who had fought the government and had fled Greece during the Civil War were stripped of their citizenship, had property confiscated and were barred from re-entry to Greece, particularly those who were ethnic Macedonians).

He promised me he would address the matter. This took about three or four months and about a fortnight before the reunion was to take place on 15th August 1997, he called me and said he had received an answer from the Ministry of the Interior in Greece and I would be allowed back into the country but only for a limited period of two months.

I asked for written assurance upon which he wrote on a blank piece of paper devoid of any letterhead that I should be allowed

entry into Greece for that specified time. I asked about the informality of the letter, but he assured me it would be alright. I took the risk and when I showed that piece of paper to the authorities in Greece they sent me through, but not without first telling me I *should be a good boy*.

We first went to Lagen and saw all the places that Elena had been telling me about and describing all these years to me. I was simply fascinated with the beautiful, picturesque village, the green fields, the waterways, the valleys and vales of Vicho Planina. We stayed a week then travelled around to Prespa and Lerin.

Next we moved to my beloved village of Yanoveni and met many people I had not seen for fifty years and naturally no-one recognized each other. They had come from America, from Canada and Australia and from all over towns in Greece, Rumania, and Hungary – 200 people in all.

It was a very exciting day for me, even though it was only for one day. As I have described previously, the old church was the only building standing. I was satisfied in one way that I had seen the place I had spent my early years and in another way it was sad that I could not even locate where my house had been standing. I found a dilapidated little corner wall and according to the distance from the river and other calculations I guessed it could have been the entry to my ancestral home, but I wasn't sure.

The village was so destroyed that only weeds and brush grew from the ruins and remnants of what were once houses. I heard that people from neighbouring villages had even come in and taken stones away for their own use.

I looked at the river where I had spent so much time and here again my feelings were mixed – joy and sadness combined.

We stayed overnight in a little house that had been built and used for weekend hunters together with my nephew John Pilkadaris, his wife Helen and her sister – about ten of us. We shared wonderful memories that evening. We lit a fire and talked, reminisced and laughed about the old days and our history. My nephew Pavle (Paul) Radis and his wife Anne also accompanied us

on this trip. It was at this time that Pavle met his mother for the first time after he had parted from her as a five year old in 1953 to go with his grandparents to live in Poland. She and her son Louie from her second marriage came with Paul and Anne to the reunion in the village and it was here that I first saw my sister-in-law since those terrible days so long ago in 1947. When Paul had first met up with her in Athens, it happened to be his 50th birthday and they celebrated this occasion together. She told everyone there that day, "I am the person who gave birth to this boy, but my sister-in-law Elena is the mother who brought him up."

We left the next day to visit the two neighbouring villages of Pilcati and Slimnitsa. We then went the other way down by the river and passed the village of Omatsko where we found quite a few houses still standing and used by people as holiday homes.

We went back to Kostur where we met up with my American relations (first cousins – my mother's brother's daughters) who were visiting there and we had a lovely time with them.

Then we went and visited Teta Todora and her husband Tetin Niko. We stayed in their lovely home and she was overjoyed to greet us. She, unfortunately, was not in the best of health with stomach problems.

Next came Solun where we stayed with Teta Todora's daughters Vassilka and Kata and their families. We then went back to Tanasa's and visited Vergina where the tomb of Philip II of Macedonia (382-350BC) (the father of Alexander the Great) was discovered twenty or thirty metres below ground.

We left Macedonia and went to Athens and met up again with my nephew Paul's mother. We stayed at her place for three or four days and visited the Acropolis and other famous landmarks. We then returned to Perth. This trip wasn't very long but it certainly was a satisfying and eventful one.

When our granddaughter Sandy and her husband James were on holiday in Skopje Macedonia about 19 years ago, while visiting relatives, there was a documentary on the television regarding the

evacuation of partisans and children from the war zone in the villages during the Greek Civil War.

They thought we would be interested to see this programme so they recorded it on their movie camera and showed us the documentary when they returned home. The film was crude black and white newsreel footage of wounded soldiers evacuated from the war zone and tended to in a hospital in Albania.

As they watched, Elena said, "I was in that hospital when I was wounded." James called out, "Stop the film, I want to see something." We stopped the film and could not believe what we were seeing. There sitting up in a hospital bed, was a young girl with long fair hair, her wounded arm bandaged. It was Elena. We shed many tears that evening.



Screen shot from Newsreel footage showing Elena in Hospital in Moscopole, 1948.

Chapter 63 – A useful invention (Uni-directional Air Valve)

I have always had problems with my artificial leg and a lot of discomfort with the leg stump. The heat and moisture in the prosthesis would cause my stump end to ulcerate and it would become very painful and not heal easily. I was battling for quite a long time with this discomfort.

One day, while talking with Nasé, discussing my problem, I made mention how I could possibly get some air circulating in the prosthesis to assist with the healing. One suggestion was to drill a hole in the prosthesis.

Nasé drilled a hole and the air was indeed getting into the stump, but at the same time, it was also flowing out again and wasn't doing much good. I then asked Nasé if there was some way we could prevent that air from coming back out again from the artificial leg.

Nasé stopped and thought about it, and suggested placing a one-way valve on the hole, so that when you lift up the leg, the air will get sucked up into the stump, but when you step on the leg, the valve will close and the air inside the stump would be trapped and forced upwards through the sock.

We placed a valve on the prosthesis and everything we thought would happen, did. Within a week or so, the ulcer on my stump was already healed, and walking around was so comfortable. I thought this is a very good thing. I went to a prosthetic company and discussed what I had done.

The doctor Robert McWilliam, was very interested. He contacted Monash University in Melbourne. The laboratory there was conducting a study on artificial limbs, modifications and associated matters. He told them an amputee in Perth has discovered such and such a thing and soon after the person in charge of that laboratory, together with a doctor and a cameraman came to investigate this.

They called me to Shenton Park and I spent the whole day there walking up and down, with the valve in, with the valve out,

getting pictures taken, checking the air circulation, checking the pressure and they found positive results.

They decided to fit the valve to another five amputees who were requested to report back after one month. The reports that came back were very positive. Following this, Monash University approved the valve to be used in the artificial limbs of below-the-knee amputees and started using them. We made the valves down in my shed and eventually I fitted about 200 of these valves in Perth alone.

Monash University had produced a questionnaire form to be filled out by the people who had the valve fitted and the feedback was again positive. I sent the forms back to Monash and as a consequence that valve is now officially fitted as a component in prosthetics in Australia.

The following year, in 1998, a world wide Convention for Prosthetics and Orthotics took place in Amsterdam, Holland and Dr. McWilliam wished to present the invention there and so asked me to go with him. I accompanied him to the convention where he presented the valve to a congress of 3,000 delegates representing companies from America, Asia and Japan. The Uni-directional Air Valve was approved and adopted as a new way of improving the below-the-knee artificial limb.

Subsequently, I received invitations to go to Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Royal Perth Hospital and Princess Margaret Children's Hospital to speak about the valve. The valves began to be fitted by the prosthetic manufacturers in Perth and we sent out valves to Victoria, New South Wales, Germany and Scotland and the idea took off quickly.

Then, the prosthetics industry manufacture went in a different direction. They were developed in a way that they removed the suspension and fitted the stump very tightly with a silicone sock so that there was no air circulation in the stump. This valve was therefore not compatible with this new development.

Although the valves are sometimes used in the older style prosthetics, new prosthesis' are different. I took out a patent in

both Australia and America but it proved to not be viable financially.

For that invention, my voluntary work for the City of Stirling and my work for the Macedonian Community I was nominated by the City of Stirling for the Centenary Medal awarded to 2,000 people in the year 2000.

Chapter 64 – The War Memorial

Another project I consider my best work and my personal baby was the war memorial that was erected in the courtyard of the church. It was built by the Veterans Association which we formed in the 90's. There were quite a number of ex-partisans here in Perth and we registered that association officially with the government within the Act and as a sub-branch of the RSL. I was the secretary and feel very proud that I and members of our committee helped raise the \$50,000 required for the project.

The name plaque on the memorial commemorates all the partisans who fought and died in their struggle for freedom during the Civil War in Macedonia 1946-1949. Our people gave generously and appreciated the acknowledgement of their loved ones as many had a father, son, brother or sister who had fought or died in that war.



War Memorial (Pometnik) at Macedonian Church

Young people and visitors to our church look upon and admire the memorial and appreciate its importance. The official unveiling was in 2001 by the Premier of WA at the time, Geoff Gallop.

As I said I feel very proud of this project and I enjoyed my involvement very much. I have done a lot of volunteer work, as have many others, and I do not regret anything. I have derived an enormous amount of satisfaction from my work.

Elena was also very active in the ladies section, working in the committee and in the treasury and as secretary of that section. Ever since we joined in the early sixties until this day we are still very much involved with our Community as are many of our family.

Chapter 65 - Summary and gratitude

So this rounds up the story of our lives. There were a lot of difficulties and hardships endured but if you compare the years that these took place, they are far outweighed by the wonderful, joyful life we have had – before the Civil War and then after our arrival in Australia – our new homeland.

If you ask me if I would change anything about our lives or do it differently, I would have to say I would not change anything except the period when Elena was very sick in Poland and her life was hanging by a thread.

We have had some health issues here, Elena underwent two hip replacements (1983 and 2004) but she is a very strong energetic woman, constantly working in her vegetable garden that she loves, and has always been the driving force in our family. As for me, I have been reasonably well with only the usual maladies that come with getting older, something that long ago during the years we fought in the Civil War, thought may not happen.

We welcomed lovely grandchildren into our lives. Pobetka and John had two daughters, Alinka, Sandy and a son Lexo and Nasé and Julie had two daughters Sherry, Michelle and a son Robbie. We have been so proud to watch them grow up, marry and have children of their own.

We now have twelve great-grandchildren and I cannot describe the happiness and love Elena and I feel towards them all. They are our life and we have not wanted anything more. Our immediate family now numbers twenty eight. We have wonderful memories of our many family gatherings and joyful times together.

We have also enjoyed on Elena's side the extended families of her three sisters and her brother and all our wonderful family get-togethers and we enjoy a genuine kinship and closeness unrivalled by any other family.

Elena and I are eternally grateful to her parents, Dedo Chrste (1912-2004) and Baba Vassilka (1912-2000) two wonderful people who brought us out to Australia to be able to reunite with all our

families, helped us financially many times and allowed us to achieve the wonderful life we have had and still enjoy.

We will always be grateful for the support, kindness and generosity shown to us by Ristana and our late brother-in-law Pavle Kristoff (1922-1987). In those early days, they supplied us with fresh fruit and vegetables from their shop and whatever Ristana bought her own children, she would buy for ours, and whatever she would buy for Pavle, she would buy for me as well. Pavle was always a very kind, gracious and giving person as Ristana is still to this day and his premature sudden passing left a sad void in our lives.

I have had a wonderful life with Elena and with all our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They for me are my whole world.

And so, my family, I hope one day when we are no longer here, you will look at our photographs and read our story and remember Dedo Vasil and Baba Lena who were once here and who loved you all dearly.

When we were children and our simple life was the village, who could have imagined that our existence would be anywhere else but in our village as our parents and grandparents before us or that we would be so far removed from all that we knew.

But the unexpected turn of events, unforeseen quirks and twists of fate that take a person on their destined journey in life, verily, took us on a path ***beyond the mountains***.

End

Additional Family Photos



In our garden in Balcatta



Chrste and Vassilka Gellin c.1993



Vasil, Elena, Pavle and Ristana at Kings Park, 1986



Smashing red eggs at Easter – Elena, Vasil, Pavle, Chrste and John, c. 1985



Gellin clan at Yanchep, 1987



With my sister Costandina and brother Panayoti, c.1990



Gellin Siblings, 2004 – Ristana, Vera, Johnny, Yana and Elena



Ristana and Elena, 2010



Kristine (Pobetka) and John and their grand children



***Tom (Nasé) Julie with daughter Michelle
and their grand children***



60th Wedding Anniversary celebrations with family, 2009