

Kalina



A Novel

By

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

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Published by:

Risto Stefov Publications

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Toronto, Canada

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e-book edition

December 29, 2015

Introduction

The Greek Civil War and events subsequent to it have provided inexhaustible inspiration for Petre Nakovski, author of the following published novels “A bed for the wretched”, “A stone too is soil”, “The great decline”, “The great lie” and “On the road of time”.

The novel Kalina takes the reader back to the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) and explores the tragic experiences of a young, seventeen year-old village girl who, along with hundreds of other Macedonian and Greek young women, was forcibly mobilized into the Democratic Army of Greece (DAG), fought in the Greek Civil War and eventually faced a long prison sentence.

By writing this novel the author is not attempting to present a historical assessment of events, because those events are derived directly from the experiences of the main character in the novel, telling her own story and never drifting beyond what she has experienced. Kalina tells her story the way she saw things, the way she felt things, especially in the bunkers and trenches where she spent a lot of her time. She talks about the charges in battle during the night, the long and exhausting marches, the hunger and thirst she felt, the seventy days and nights she spent in the battlefields of Gramos, the suicide missions she participated in, in Voden, Lerin and Negush, the treatment she received for her wounds in the hospitals in Korcha and Katlanovo, the struggles she experienced in Vicho and finally the disappointing disastrous military defeat... After that she talks about her experiences as a prisoner being locked up in hot and cold dungeons, in outdoor prisons under the hot and cold skies and in the Greek island prison camps in the Aegean Sea.

At the end of the Greek Civil War and during DAG's disastrous defeat, Kalina found herself off the coast of the Great Prespa Lake. Her battalion was cut off and failed to pass beyond the two lakes and continued its trek to Albania. It had no choice but to fight for its survival. It took its position by the lake and its fighters hid in the reeds and willows near the water while fighting a desperate pitch battle against a superior opponent. Salvation came in the dark of night when the battalion withdrew and took position along the Yugoslav-Greek border. Its commander appealed to the senior JNA

(Yugoslav National Army) officers at the border and they in turn gave him an opportunity to explain his situation. He told them he wanted permission to transfer his partisans to Albania through Yugoslav (Macedonian) territory. After long and arduous talks the JNA officers agreed but under the condition that the partisans surrender their weapons. The battalion commander could not agree with that because such an act would be treasonous. Not given the opportunity to cross through Yugoslavia, the battalion was then divided into three squads. This way they each would have a better chance of crossing into Albania. The trek began during the night under a difficult night march in silence. The idea was that they would cross through enemy lines undetected. Unfortunately some of the units ran into a minefield. Kalina was wounded. She became a major obstacle for the mobility of her unit and she was left behind on the road. The next day the enemy found her, put her on a truck and sent her to a military field hospital. There she received some medical treatment but her wounds were too severe so she was transferred to a military hospital in Solun where she found her friend, whom she had left wounded to drown in the lake. After that when she was well, she was surrendered to the Greek police and was imprisoned. She spent five years of her life being constantly physically and mentally abused, just like most of the women prisoners in the Greek island prison camps in the Aegean Sea.

With her military experience, being a prisoner in the camps, the experiences of her friends fighting in the trenches, marching at night, being hungry, with the enormity of the war, her cell and camps, Kalina paints a picture of the environment in which she existed; a cruel place reeking of inhumanity. But in all that she paints a beautiful picture of growth, of delightful youthful individual and collective friendship, always crowned with faith and confidence, dedication, willingness to help in any situation. She speaks of heroism in the young fighters, also hinting at their fluctuations, mistrust, psychological digressions and internal and external conflicts. All her experiences are tragic and painful, almost unbelievable, but also inspiring by the faith she projects in herself, her unbounded desire to survive; to survive despite all the suffering and not to lose hope. She constantly and incessantly believes that inevitably, with invisible help, she will come out of this labyrinth of evil alive.

When Greek society began to slowly recover from the scourge of the civil war and from the repression carried out by the Greek state, it protested violently against such mistreatment of people, leading to the dissolution of the women's prison camps.

After spending years in prison Kalina was finally free, but not exactly. She was followed by her police file everywhere she went and twice a week she had to report to a police station and do the dirtiest things unimaginable, just to be able to survive.

Her memories of the military, the prisons, and the concentration camps, are one long thread of beads, woven together in a continuous mosaic of a life tormented and wasted. However, Kalina was happy and willing, with sincerity and authenticity, to tell her story in the first person, to reveal the path that took her through the hellish Greek civil war over her three-year course and the five tormenting years of her stay in the Greek prisons and concentration camps.

It would have been easy for her to die during the war by a bullet, grenade, bomb... and she would have died only once... maybe only once. But in prisons and in the concentration camps she was made to die every day and every night. And every day and every night she weathered as she struggled convulsively with death... but she survived. This was her personal victory.

Her military experience made her strong and allowed her to withstand her suffering as she spread her wings over her tormentors and never hid her name from them. She refused to recognize all the accusations in her file, which had sent her to the prisons and concentration camps and would never sign the pre-prepared staged confession.

When she was freed she returned to the village where she was born but found it ravaged and torn apart by the war and the mass exodus. Wherever she went she was followed by her police file. Twice a week she had to report to a police station and do things she would never want to do, but she had to... in order to survive. Various American, Canadian and Australian agencies opened offices in Kostur and Lerin in 1958, offering work and a paid one-way ticket

abroad, but Kalina would not leave. She wanted to stay home, in her family's home, where she was born.

Kalina endured plenty but managed to spread her wings and weather the storms. But did she ever find freedom and peace during the remainder of her life? No she did not! She was forever a captive of the evil that took her; she never separated herself from her thoughts, even over long periods of time. But at the same she never allowed herself to fall into darkness and oblivion from which there is no escape. She managed to hold herself in the light without forgetting and by preserving her memories through the written word. She wrote things down, not to remind herself of her sad and painful experiences or of the fear that she might forget them, but to preserve them, save them as part of our survival?

Kalina did all that through a long monologue...

KALINA - a novel protecting and preserving dignity and honour.

The same could be said about Peter Nakovski's most recent work.

Chapter - 1

How do I start?

From where do I begin?

Let it be this way...

In those days, when they first took me to the bunkers in Gramos, along with the many others they gathered, I was soft, to say the least, like well-kneaded clay. With this kind of clay one could fashion pitchers, plates, cups, pots, pans... which in time would become firm, like iron, like raw iron. And like raw iron, when it is heated under burning coals, pounded over an anvil by the firm hand of a blacksmith's strike, it can take a shape, the kind of shape that is needed.

This is how it was with me and with many of the other young men and women taken from the villages. Harvested at night, like pig iron, we were taken and placed on the anvils in the mountains, forests, cold bunkers and trenches, bleached by the wind and the rain, forged by cold and hunger, we became steel. I say we became what they needed us to become, partisans and later fighters of the Democratic Army of Greece. In character, in looks, in spirit, in faith and in trust we were what they thought we should be... molded on the anvil under the blows of a hammer. And under that hammer, on that anvil, we lost our fear and became what they needed us to be... partisans.

Partisans! Partisans wearing old military uniforms and coats that were worn by various armies... We were shouldered with rifles and machine guns that belonged to other wars, various wars; wars from different times fought by different countries. There, in the thick shade of the oak and beech trees, we exercised in the art of defense and killing...

The exercises did not last long. We, however, continued to practice live, in the field against a real enemy that fought back. We attacked our opponent only at night, usually after midnight. From the moment of darkness to the moment of attack, we marched. We changed only at night.

We were most confident in the dark of night. We only stepped out of our bunkers when the silver bird floating in the sky, the airplane which kept an eye on us the entire day, disappeared after sunset.

Our stepping out was called a march.

Our march always began in the dark of night and always ended before darkness disappeared. It was never just one march and only one night. And it was not only a short or a long march that lasted so many hours. I never did count the marches or the hours. Not all nights were equal in length and equally dark. One night varied from another just like one day varies from another. And the marches too were different. Each march was always long. We started the march when darkness covered the ground. With a song. Always with a spirited song.

The first steps of our march always began with a song filling our hearts with cheer but depriving us of our conversations and our thoughts. The song encouraged us, cheered us on and welded us together. The song was strong in the beginning with the first steps, but our voices began to weaken as we marched further along the trodden path, still persisting until we completely tired. By then our voices sounded less like a shout and more like a whimper. After that there was silence, only the rustle of our old military boots and sandals could be heard in the dead of night. Most of us had shoddy old shoes or boots which we wore barefoot. Some walked completely barefoot and some wore moccasins. We may have been a barefoot army but we wore military uniforms, all kinds of old military uniforms belonging to all kinds of armies. We carried guns of various times belonging to various armies... armies which always began a march with a song. Fatigue slowly withered our song. No one spoke, silence and the sound of trotting feet, hour after hour trotting in dust, mud, water, over leaves, in grass, snow... step by step... each step becoming heavier than the last... each step being shakier than the last, each step being shorter than the last...

Walking in silence we listened to our own steps, each becoming more difficult than the last, this is what was ordered of us and this is what was demanded of us. They needed us to be at such and such an hour, in the dark of night, at such and such a place... a town... a

village... a hill... a place whose name was written on a piece of paper and delivered to us by a courier. Our orders were written on a folded piece of paper. And it did not matter if we were tired, hungry, thirsty, or sick... there was nothing about that in the order. It was not up to us to decide... Those up above decided what was in store for us, what was needed of us to do. Not what we thought... not what we desired... but what was written on that folded piece of paper... those were our orders which we needed to carry out. We were free of the burden of knowing where we were going and how long it was going to take us to get there... all we knew was that we had to get there... where that was we did not know... and so we endured... slowly but certainly being overcome with fatigue... sweat flowing down our foreheads and shoulders... Step by step we dragged on, one following another, one tripping over another, one pushing another, moving forward on our endless march. Looking up we saw a rifle and a backpack full of bullets and hand grenades belonging to the person ahead of us... they were bent forward, moving along taking heavy steps, each step becoming harder than the last... being weighed down by the baggage on their shoulders. It was the same behind us. We were a column of living shadows pushing along. Our heads weighed us down but they felt empty because we were not allowed to think, not even when we marched. Someone else carried that burden for us... Ours was to do as it was written on the folded piece of paper which the courier delivered... Those few words written down decided what road we should take, what time we should arrive and at what place we needed to be...

That which was written on the folded piece of paper could not be debated. We could not ask why... we had to carry out what was required of us without asking why. We did what we were told... We walked, we did not talk, we did not think, we did not complain. We felt tired, our feet, joints, knees, shoulders and backs were sore, salty bitter sweat filled our eyes and ran down our faces and lips... but we did not complain. Our throats were baked dry and our canteens were empty, we were thirsty but we did not complain. We moved our rifles and machine guns from one shoulder to the other in hopes of alleviating our pain... but the relief was only momentary. The weight of our gear became increasingly heavier, making us stoop forward, applying painful pressure on our spines, but we did not complain. We continued our march passing hills, slopes, ditches,

muddy water and muddy paths and we quietly and viciously spat, cursed and sighed at the sight of new hills, new slopes and another muddy path... every step brought us closer to our unknown destination... written down on a folded piece of paper and delivered by a courier. Then suddenly, in the dark of night, our commander yelled "stop!" There was a ten minute rest! Our fatigued bodies immediately and gladly obeyed and went to sleep. Our bones, muscles and souls were relieved... and so were the blisters on our feet.

We loved the clouds and hated the full moon during our marches. We felt safest in complete darkness. We became one with everything around us, the forests, the trees, the hills, the mountains, the sky, the rocks, the ditches... we were all one in the dark. When we were ordered to line up in the dark we became alive and one with everything around us. When we were ordered to move forward we moved one behind another, touching the shoulder of the person in front of us, trusting that they would not lead us into a void. We marched and covered a lot of space and the more space we covered the harder our march became. It was like that until dawn. At first light we looked for each other, we took attendance... and when we assured ourselves that we were all there, we breathed easier...

Dawn usually found us curled up next to one another in a forest under some big old oak tree. By day, we always wanted to be covered by thick shade. The long marches in darkness would make us dream without nightmares. Daytime was announced by the buzz of the silver bird circling above us, looking for us, lurking up high like a vulture looking for carrion, like a circling hawk looking for prey, circling and circling then leaving, but only for a moment, then coming back, always on the lookout, especially under the thickly shaded trees. The day ends with the sharing of the last piece of stale bread and a small tin can of meat, divided into four pieces.

"All to attention, backpacks and arms on your shoulders... Move forward!" the commander would then order.

Where to? Where are we going?

Only the commander and the courier knew and they are guarded by the black guard...

And so we melted into the dark of night, as we continued to move forward becoming even less visible in the fog. We often tripped and stumbled always looking for something to grab onto, to lean on, but other than our own two feet, more often than not, there was nothing to grab... nothing that would restore our balance and make us rest easier. There was nothing to lean on, to even get a moment's rest, to catch our breath, to spit the bitter taste from our mouths or to wipe the salty sweat from our bodies... "Do not stop! Do not stand! Do not fall asleep! Walk! Continue to walk!" Were whispers quietly passed on while we moved, step by step, kneading the mud under our feet.

We carried our rifles and machine guns on our shoulders and our back packs full of bullets, hand grenades and everything bad, on our backs.

We carried death on our backs and made sure it did not fall off, did not get damaged, did not get dirty and that it was light on our shoulders...

Our night marches were a great silence. Often all night, in lightening and thunder, in rain and snow... hungry and thirsty... we continued our nightly marches. Merged in darkness, we felt like we were lost in a black void, like we were a small part in the dark wasteland that surrounded us. And with tiny, very little hope, like the flame of a tiny candle, we stood erect and aware that we were moving forward, and that we would reach that specific place where our tired bodies could rest.

We swallowed the entire night until dawn but this was not the purpose of our march. Our purpose was to reach a destination, the place where we needed to be. But in our effort, sometimes our chain of travel was interrupted. Someone would stop to catch their breath, someone would stumble and fall... someone would be lost in the dark... That's when we waited... that's when we felt lost and when doubts began to gnaw at our souls. Some of us turned back, back on the path, traveling in silence, voiceless, without making any noise...

looking... searching along the trodden path. The lost, the marauders, the ones who made us wait... we looked upon them with suspicion.

Our march ended before daybreak and we ended up at some unknown location in the countryside where we were housed in the homes of some local village.

During one of these marches, tired and dirty, I stopped in front of a gate beside which stood a woman all dressed in black. She stared at me with a sad look on her face. She moved slightly and made room for me to enter and, without saying a word, she took me to a carefully prepared room.

It seemed to me that she was waiting for someone... She wanted to ask me something. I looked into her eyes... she said nothing. Her stare was deep, inquisitive, sad and strange... Her lips began to shake...

She helped me take off my dirty clothes and motioned for me to take off my shoes so that I could wash my smelly feet. I moved closer to the fireplace to warm myself. She offered me food which I greedily gulped down, quickly nibbling on the bread and sipping on the hot bean soup she had prepared. The woman sat next to me.

She tightened her black head kerchief under her chin and crossed her arms and knees. Lacking courage and with a deeply hidden fear in her tired eyes she stared at me quietly without saying a single word. She looked sad. A strange gasp tore through her chest and spilled out into the dark room. It was a reflection of her pain and thoughts of someone.

Spilled from her trembling lips, quietly, barely audibly, came out the names of her sons. She sighed and said:

“Those are my only sons... The older one was taken by the government army, the other one, the younger one, was taken by the... They called upon the older one to serve as a soldier last year. He went and since then I have heard nothing from him. The younger one was taken this year, this summer at night. They knocked on the door and took him. I have heard nothing from him either. Now I

don't know where they are and how they are doing. Are they alive, are they healthy? I don't know! I ask both armies every time they pass through here if they know anything about my sons. Now I feel I must ask you, do you know anything about my younger boy who is with your army.”

The anticipation in her eyes grew with every passing second and her eyes began to pool with tears of pain which spilled over her cheeks. She became rigid with anticipation...

She kept looking at me and waited...

What could I tell her? What words could I use, what promises could I make to comfort her mind and ease her soul?

I was dead tired that day but I could not sleep. I was tormented by the sight of this poor woman constantly simmering with burning questions about her youngest son who was in our army...

In the morning when I left her house, she walked me out to the front gate and stopped there. She stood motionless on the threshold.

In the evening I joined my line and left. As usual we marched out with a song and lost our shadows in the dark.

Even in the dark of night I could not shake the thought of that poor mother who, every day, stands at that gate waiting for her sons, asking soldiers and partisans about her sons fighting in different armies... on opposing sides?

I took steps and with each step I took, I saw that mother before my eyes... standing there on the doorstep... waiting... waiting... Standing at the threshold of the open gate and waiting...

She waited as we took step after step and disappeared in the shade. I continued with my own steps and with every step I took I talked to myself and every word I said was a plea, a prayer. I prayed that the two sons of this good mother never find themselves on opposite hills, in opposite trenches, or become targets of each other.

My prayer to the Almighty was a great request, a prayer for the sons who fought in both armies to return home alive and well and for me to return to my good mother alive and happy, smiling...

I turned my head to the side and in the murky darkness I saw the poor woman, the mother still standing in the doorway, waiting...

Waiting, sad, waiting for the armies to go by and tell her how and where her sons were... her children who were fighting in two opposing armies...

How long would she stand on the doorstep and wait for the armies to pass so that she could ask about her sons who were fighting in the two armies that are locked in a deadly vicious war fighting one another?

She waits...

Please God, help her, help her and fulfill her wish...

Let it be that way...

And for me, I pray to you, I beg of you to let her have her wish...

And for my mother... please mother wait... give her the strength to wait for me...

After the march that night we attacked our opponent in the dark. We went on the attack in the dark and we returned from the attack in the dark.

And in that darkness some, from our line, did not return...

* * *

My first autumn as a partisan in Gramos was rainy, humid, hazy and cold. I experienced hunger and was particularly cold especially during clear and bright mornings. Early autumn was beautiful, dressed in all colours, basking in the last warmth of the sun, waking in immense sadness and squeezing out tears. The golden leaves were

falling and the trees looked naked. The colours of the forests were spilling out. Everything around was wonderful, a colourful carpet. Late autumn was hazy, rainy, wet, cold, creepy and smelled of rotting leaves and moldy grass and ferns. I was always hungry... my thoughts of returning home weighed on me.

Home, all my thoughts were of home, if only I could go home... only for a little while...

My first winter as a partisan in Gramos was very cold. But I was blessed to have witnessed the immense whiteness adorning the peaks of the surrounding mountains and hills during the nights when the silvery full moon shone on them from above. It was a huge whiteness. The snow that lay on the branches and on the ground was covered with frost and glistened during the day in the radiant sun. The cold was harsh. The trickling spring water could be heard rustling under the hard crust of ice. Grey smoke rose over the bunkers, the hot coals in the fireplaces slowly melted the snow above the beams and bathed those inside with large drops of water.

We did not come out of our hiding places during the day because of fear, that the silver bird, the airplane circling in the sky high above us, would see us. In times such as those we preferred to have cloudy skies above the fog on the ground. Only then we felt safe and free. We bathed in snow and plucked the lice off our bodies as we waited for our porridge, mixed with corn flour, to arrive. We ate mostly porridge.

My first spring as a partisan in Gramos was in 1948. The entire region was covered with large green meadows, blossoming and fragrant flowers and songs... the brooks and streams were filled with water dripping from the melting snow. There was less marching to battle because the battles were brought to us. Our enemy was attacking us while we were digging trenches and building bunkers. Every hill and peak was tied together with trenches and bunkers; all covered with logs, tree branches, stones and earth. We waited for the enemy there...

My first summer as a partisan in Gramos was hot and bloody...

* * *

And then they started...

Their attack on Gramos... Our defense of Gramos...

In the morning of June 14, 1948, our positions were beaten down with rockets and bombs dropped from the airplanes. After they finished flying, the artillery and cannons delivered their death and destruction. After that storm, their infantry attacked us.

They fought fiercely and we fought back with equal ferocity, defending the hills and rocks we stood on. We stubbornly held onto the burning hills and crushed rocks to save ourselves.

In all the days that followed, the same routine was exercised... First the airplanes pummeled our positions with rockets and bombs, then the artillery and cannons thundered and beat us with shells and mortars and then, when they were done, their infantry attacked us. And we, we stood our ground in our trenches and bunkers and endured. They could not break us or our defenses...

And then, one day...

Flames fell from the sky. Barrels fell out of the aircraft and spilled their fire on us. Red flames falling from above beat down on us. They were noisy and carried a foul stench as they scattered, spreading all over the ground burning everything they touched. Like a big burning carpet, the flames jumped, rose, swirled and churned, covering everything in their path. And as the wind picked them up, they intensified and moved in layers and waves burning everything they touched, jumping from tree to tree from stone to stone burning the ground, the grass, the bushes, the leaves... burning green stems like candles... burning everything they touched.

The rocks, the soil and the green beech trees too were burning, just like the young men and women who happened to be in their path.

Their shrieks and screams of horror were also burning.

Everything was burning...

My friend Olga was burned that day. The next day we found her cramped between two blackened rocks. She was looking for salvation in those rocks. Her knees were bare bones. Her burned flesh was separated from her bones. The left side of her face was naked to the bone and the entire row of healthy white teeth glistened. Not a single hair was left on her head. Her skull was naked and black.

She was baked by the fire that fell from the sky.

What kind of bomb, what kind of weapon was this that burned soil, rocks and living souls? The smoke stunk; it burned our throats and poisoned the air...

The hill was burning and on this burning hill our young men and women were burning, burning alive, roasting alive, running, shouting, screaming, praying ... screaming horribly as they were engulfed in flames. Pain was burning along with the ground, the stones, the trees, the bunkers...

What kind of bombs were these?

The screaming and yelling was loud and frightening... spine chilling. We ran towards the screaming... We were hit with a strong smell of roasting flesh. People's naked and charred bodies lay imprinted behind blackened rocks, on the ground and in the burned grass. Their faces, their foreheads... were burned black... their heads bare... their skulls burned with two holes in their foreheads. There were no eyes, no eyebrows and no lips... only two rows of blackened teeth and, in between them, the not completely burned tip of their tongues...

We collected the burned bodies during the night, in the moonlight, and buried them all together in one grave.

We buried cooked flesh and blackened naked bones. We buried them with fear in our eyes and wondered - what kind of bombs, what kind of weapons were these?

What kind of weapon, that made no roaring sound, could burn soil and stone, trees and people?

The scream was the last sign that this was a person – a young man, a young woman... who before that had stood before us and smiled.

The next day we collected all that remained in bags, took them under the beech trees, dug a wide pit and there we buried the remnants of our comrades in arms.

The same terrible fear I had was present in everyone's eyes and everyone was whispering the same terrible question:

“What kind of bomb that did not roar would burn to ashes, fry and cook soil, stone and people? What kind of bombs were they? Who brought them here and from where?”

The next day the same great slaughter was repeated. Whistling, fire, death, piles of soil displaced, stones smashed and crushed, thick beech trees burnt down, smoke covering the sun. With our heads clenched in our hands we sobbed in silence, again wondering:

“What kinds of bombs were these bombs that burned our trenches, bunkers and our people?” We could not extinguish the flames with water, we could only shrink them until they reignited, spreading, intensifying, increasing, breaking out into smaller flames and moving uncontrollably. Flames that were carried by the wind then deposited on plants, trees, rocks, stones, grass and on our people! It was a storm of flames and fire... It scorched the earth and covered the sky with smoke, under which we stood cowering in fear and pain...

What kind of bombs were they...

The earth was not earth and the sky was not sky...

The earth and sky were tied together by the fire...

What kind of bombs were these bombs that did not thunder, that did not hum, but just poured out fire and spread flames with the power to scorch the earth and burn the rocks... stones, trees and us... the people?

But all of us did not burn!

And then, when we were at our worst and seemed that there was no way out, we envied those who were gone because we were sure that things would become even more difficult.

Those poor lucky...!

And we, the ones still living on this scorched earth, were hiding in the trenches and bunkers and among the rocks and stones...

We left behind forty-five crushed days and nights...

* * *

They were pounding us day and night.

Where did they find so many bombs, so many cannons and the countless mortars they dropped on us? Where did they find them?

This is what I often asked myself and wondered. The thunder during the night seemed to me to be stronger, louder and more ominous than that of the day, slicing the sky above us and tearing it apart. There were explosions going on all night. It was calmer in the mornings. Heaven and earth lay calmer but it was an ominous calm. The land reeked of gunpowder and the sky was filled with clouds of smoke. We were unable to shake the soil, dust and sand off our bodies and spit the bitter lumps from our mouths before their infantry charged us. Men, standing upright, ammunition tight against their bodies, in perfect step, they moved closer and closer. After reaching about a hundred metres, a loud voice echoed - forward! They then bent forward and charged... We greeted them with bursts of machine gun fire and hand grenades. They lay down in front of us, fifty, thirty and sometimes twenty metres away. That was how far they could reach before we cut them down with our hand

grenades. One after another we threw hand grenades and we cut them down. There was only silence on their part and bursts of machine gun fire and hand grenade explosions on ours. That's the way it was!

I was really surprised when I saw heavy smoke covering them. Where had all that smoke come from? What kind of fire was burning to create such thick smoke between us and them? Was it some sort of cloud or perhaps dense fog? Later it was explained to me that it was a smokescreen. This is how they retreated from us, from in front of our trenches, invisible behind the thick smoke, and carried with them their dead and wounded.

This is how they charged us during their attacks and this is how we defended ourselves spending day and night guarding those damn hills and rocks...

Why?!

* * *

At night they approached the mountains very slowly, moving like the fog that fills the ravines. It starts from the bottom. Then it fills the deep brooks that divide opposite hills. It then silently climbs up, slowly covering the rocks, the bush and entire forests, erasing all colours, swallowing the trenches and bunkers and extinguishing all light from our faces. Just a little longer and then the last beam, on top of the hill behind us, would be extinguished. After that there would be no movement and no sign of life. And we and they on the opposite hill – would be swallowed by darkness and everything that was around us, below us and above us would be a big trap, silent, and every moment ready to awaken the hill with a big bang of loud thunder... which would take our breath away. That is why both we and they held each other on target, lying there like stones on our stomachs and holding our breath.

* * *

The trenches, the bunkers and the ditches tied us all together. There we were all the same, we may have differed only in the length and

depth of our sighs, but our desires were more or less the same. First we all wanted to be fed, dressed warmly, to have slept enough, to have been freed of lice and to always have been present in the marching line. Some may have had other wishes but this was my wish. Oh, I had one more wish. My wish was to not be afraid before an attack and not to cry when the food line for the cauldron was shorter. It was one of my greatest wishes to see everyone in the food line...

I felt good when I was in the middle of a warm bunker smelling the aroma of leaves, ferns, sweat and unwashed clothes, where thick smoke was glued to the beams above and where a fire was burning. I felt good when we were all covered in swarms of thoughts lying there in silence, staring into the flames and dreaming... thinking and wishing... my thoughts interwoven with my wishes...

We all, but each separately, had our own rosaries strung with dreams, desires, hopes...

A whole fabric of thoughts...

A fabric of thoughts that quickly tore apart when black spots appeared in the sky, getting larger and larger as they came closer and closer. When they flew low they pummeled us with machine gun fire and then dropped their bombs on the right side of the hill... one after another. All we could see was soil flying up in the air followed by a thunderous deafening explosion that gave us pain in our ears.

* * *

The grass that grew near my trench was covered in dust. The dewdrops that were present on it every morning and strung like pearls trembling in the first rays of the morning sun had disappeared. I always loved the green grass, the tips and stalks were my favourite. I was happy when I watched them sway in the soft and gentle breeze, looking playful, bending back and forth but not breaking... I often gently touched them, collecting dew on my fingers and watching it sparkle like pearls in the early morning sun.

It made me feel calm, peaceful, hopeful to wash my face and eyes with it.

The partisans, the grass and everything else that existed around us was beaten more and more with each coming day.

I began to dislike the clear days and cloudless blue skies. I began to dislike the dawn, the bright white light that covered the mountain peaks at daybreak. As nice as they were, they no longer brought me joy but only anxiety and fear, mayhem and death. I preferred the night, the darker the night the better. I also started to dislike the full moon. I began to like the night, the dark black and silent night.

The day wounded, maimed, killed and carried a lot of pain, which could only be eased in the dark of night... but only slightly. Only then did we have a bit of quiet. The days always stirred without serenity over the trenches and bunkers...

The black spots regularly appeared from the flatlands. Moving, growing in the sky; the closer they came towards us the uglier they became. They fired upon us with their machine guns in low flights and then dropped their bombs on the hills, covering us with thunder and heaps of soil.

This is how we knew that we still existed and were defending the hills.

Those days and the days that followed I did not like. I began to dislike clear days and the cloudless blue sky. I do not like the dawn or the mountains at dawn. As much as they were nice, they did not give me joy... only anxiety, fear, mayhem and death. I preferred the night, the thick darkness of night. I even started to dislike the full moon. I only liked the night, the dark blackness of night and the silence it carried.

And as I said before, the day wounded, maimed, killed and carried a lot of pain for people, which could only be eased in the dark of night... It was quiet during the night... but not always. The days were full of madness over the trenches and bunkers...

This is how it was in those days and the days that followed...

* * *

The commander had us line up in the evening and told us that tomorrow or the day after we would be visited by some French people and that we should dress properly... in our best clothes.

He ordered: "Everyone should be clean and properly dressed so that the French can see that we are an army." Half the night we carried water from the shallow stream to wash our bodies and to remove the lice from our heads. We then patched up our well-worn and already patched uniforms that had belonged to foreign armies.

The next morning we lined up and nervously welcomed the French. A tall man, who we later found out was a poet, greeted us. I don't remember his name but people said that he was a great French writer who came to see us and give us encouragement. The French poet was so brave that he picked up the funnel made of folded cardboard slightly, raised his head above the trench and, with a loud voice, addressed the government troops, in French of course. None of us understood what he said but we realized that he was on our side. The political commissar later told us that the poet spoke to the soldiers about peace, about brotherhood with us and now that such people were on our side, we should be even bolder and confident in our victory. That's what our commissar said.

When the French poet finished his loud address he walked along the front of the line. He said something to a person dressed in civilian clothes. The civilian wrote it down, smiled and raised his left fist up in the air, probably as a sign of confidence that we would win. While the French poet was assuring us of all those things, the cauldron with stew arrived. Thick slices of potatoes with meat.

This was the biggest and best meal we had had in weeks and we ate it together with the French poet and all those who came with him. The photographer, with a silly smirk on his face, kept taking pictures. Later we sent off our guests with great applause. Thinking about the thick potato stew with meat, I said to myself that we should have guests like the French poet more often...

Encouraged by the French poet, that night we left for a counterattack.

* * *

The opponent positioned his cannons and opened fire. I did not have enough time to run and hide behind a rock. I felt a stabbing pain in my shoulder and lost control of my legs. I felt weak at the knees and lost my breath. I lay there flat. Someone tossed me a smelly blanket that stunk of everything my soul could not tolerate; blood, gunpowder and rot... I placed the blanket under me. They grabbed it by the ends and carried me, jolting me to the right and the left as they ran. They were running out of step. The more they swung the greater pain I felt. It felt like a thick sliver, a spike, an ice pick, was stuck in my back. I passed out. I lost my sight and voice. When I came too I felt the sharp pain and I moaned, whimpered and wailed. They stopped running. They put me down on the ground. I tried to turn. I had no strength. I wanted to see the faces of those who were carrying me. I knew they were not men and not young women. The men and young women stayed behind, on the hill, to defend it. I knew that... and I knew that the people carrying me were wearing black, had swollen feet and hardened hands... they had hunched shoulders and arms swollen from carrying mutilated bodies – living flesh... They were compassionate but firm, made that way by my pain and the pain of those who they carried yesterday and the day before that and so on...

Outside of my pain, my vision became blurred and I was unable to see them, their faces... but I knew what they were. They took me and loaded me on a horse and along with many other horses, hoof behind hoof, took me down the hill. The horses stopped and a couple of hands took me off. Another set of hands took me and placed me on a table. A woman in white with scissors came and cut my shirt and blouse exactly where I was feeling the spike poking me. Something poured out... the liquid that burnt me. A man in white came and examined me, he said something but I did not understand what he said. He put a damp cloth on my face and I fell asleep...

I woke up in a great big room. I realized I was lying in a bed. I tasted bitterness in my mouth, had a dried throat and felt nauseated. I felt like my throat was full of something. I started coughing and spat out a bitter yellow liquid. I felt light-headed and began to take deep breaths. I realized that I was lying down flat on my chest. I turned my head to the right and then to the left. I opened my eyes. I saw a large, bright room full of bodies belonging to mutilated young men and women. Women in white were handing out baskets of bread and cheese. One of them cleaned up the mess I made when I spat the yellow liquid out. The bitterness still burned in my mouth. I took a deep breath but I could not smell the wet earth, the gunpowder and the smoke. I no longer felt the stab of the spike in my shoulders. I only felt dull pain and burning. I could breath easier. I said to myself, I'm alive... I am alive... I will live... and began to cry...

About a week later they again loaded me and the other wounded on horses, we joined a column and at night they took us across the border into Albania. Hidden in the woods, beyond the border, were trucks waiting to take us to a hospital in Korcha. The hospital was full of wounded. They were all ours. There was not a day that the trucks did not bring wounded or take those healed back to the battlefields. The hospital was boiling with people. There was no place for them all. Even the hallways were filled. The nurses often said the beds here never got a chance to cool down.

My wound was healing quickly but was not completely healed when they took me back to the battlefield, to my old position.

By the time I returned about half of my unit was no longer there... present in the line...

* * *

By sunset the sky was free of aircraft and we of them. That was when we were ordered to cut trees. We cut three to four metre long beech wood logs and took them to repair the damaged bunkers. We piled them in ordered rows over the damaged bunker, a row of logs, then soil, another row of logs, then stones and so on. We piled five, six, seven and sometimes more rows. Each bunker was like a house.

They were slightly raised and good targets for the cannons, aircraft and mortars... inviting... letting the enemy know that we were still here, go ahead and pound us some more...

After we were done with the bunkers, we dug holes, small burrows, behind the trenches. We hid in those holes, one or two people in each hole, when they pounded us with cannon shells and aerial bombs dropped from the aircraft.

I dug deep, the deeper the better. It was safer that way. I dug persistently with the stubbornness of a donkey and the determination of a goat. I perspired a lot and when I wiped the sweat from my forehead and face, I smelled like the soil, the roots, the moisture of rotten leaves and ferns... I dug deeper and deeper into the earth until I could no longer smell the grass, the leaves and the fresh air... Then when I was deep enough I felt as if I was losing my drive... my encouragement. I felt like I was part of the earth, twisted, bent, cramped and contorted. My face took on an earthen colour, my clothes smelled of soil and my breath smelled like dirt. Only my soul remained pure and had not taken on an earthly smell. The earth did not care... it was not choosy. It accepted me and all the others around me, to my left and to my right, those in front and those behind... It accepted all of us – the brave and the fearful, the dirty and the ones full of lice, the hungry and the thirsty, the frightened and the lame, the living and the dead – everyone... The earth did not choose... it accepted everyone...

The earth was good...

I came out of my burrow only briefly. I sat on the piles of displaced soil and deeply inhaled the air mixed with the smell of gunpowder. And I thought to myself: is this life? What kind of life is this? What is this? What do I expect from this? I thought about many things but I wanted only thing for sure, to stay alive even under the earth... and my friends to stay alive...

This was my big wish... For my heart to continue pounding, beating... from suffering, from fear... beating from joy because I still have the strength to think I am whole, that I have my legs to

walk with, my arms, my head and that I am still alive . Am I strong enough to continue?

They say that we should not think. Someone else, they say, thinks for us, all we need to do is follow their thoughts and do what they say... only they can think for us.

And that is exactly what we did.

They thought that the bunkers were weak and ordered us to make them strong and more resistant. We did that.

They thought that the trenches were shallow and needed deepening. We did that.

They thought that we should be persevering. We persevered.

They thought that we should be defending the stones and rocks. We defended the stones and rocks.

They thought that we should not budge, not even a step. We did not budge.

They thought that we should fight to the last drop of our blood. We did that too.

We did everything they thought we should do...

This is what we did! And when we marched in snow and rain during the night... and when we marched hungry and thirsty... and when we took new positions and dug new holes... and when we attacked and were attacked... and when we killed and were killed, injured and maimed... and when we rotted in wet, moldy and cold bunkers and trenches... we did exactly what we were told!

We always did what they thought we should do. They even wanted our spirit to behave in accordance with their thoughts. My spirit was the only thing in me that was mine. It lay deep in me, deep down in my soul. It cheered me... it brought me joy and pain, fear and courage... and hope. My spirit, my soul, were deeply embedded in

me and made me strong, kept me from getting lost, from being disenchanted, from sinking into the rot of time...

Stuck underground, perhaps a metre or deeper than the bottom of the trench, I felt safer, more secure, despite the polluted air spreading putrid smells. The soil I removed from the hole, I placed in front of my burrow entrance and covered it with ferns and leafy branches broken from the nearest trees.

I wanted the excavated soil to be hidden, just like I was hidden. In the battlefield, at the first line of defense, we survived the pounding of bombs and shell fire by the heavy cannons, only because we were hidden deep underground. But when the infantry stormed us, we came out of our burrows and waited hidden in the trenches, bunkers and behind rocks to welcome it...

When there was no heavy bombardment, the bunkers were our bedrooms (if we were not constantly at our position), our dining rooms (if there was something to eat) and our place to rest (if we ever needed to rest) outside of the brook. The trenches and bunkers were our home. The entire hill was dug with trenches and covered with bunkers. Our orders were to defend them...

But how long?!

* * *

Day in and day out... They pounded us all day long every day.

At the end of the day, when the planes stopped streaking over us, the cannons kept pounding. When they were done, half of our bunkers and trenches were badly damaged. Every time I saw that I wanted to cry in despair.

Someone beside me whispered:

“We were better off before, when we had no trenches or bunkers. Bang here, bang there we hit them hard and disappeared into the forests... Now they shoved us in trenches, bunkers and burrows... and what are we defending? The hills, the rocks, the burned and

mutilated tree trunks...? What are we defending? The mountains... or our burrows...?!”

His whispering was interrupted by another order barked out:

“The trenches and bunkers are in need of repair! Get to it!”

And we knew exactly what to do. In the dark of night we cut trees, carried logs and dug, dug, dug...

It was not the kind of soil that a shovel could easily cut. We had to use picks and the picks kept hitting rock and getting stuck. Sometimes the handle would break... the stone refused to give way. I scooped the soil with my hands and tossed it out... it was easier than trying to get it with a shovel. We did this until dawn. If there was no attack we spent the day sleeping. After sunset, pick and shovel in hand, we began digging again. The opponent did not attack at night. He rested, ate, slept and prepared for the next day's attack. If he was not going to attack, he did not pummel us with cannon shells... only a few shells were dispensed... The aircraft too would not bomb us. They would fly by a few times just to keep us in suspense and rob us of our sleep...

Our opponent's positions were not too far from ours. We heard his trumpet three times a day, in the morning before breakfast, at noon before lunch and at sunset before dinner. They had time to eat. We, on the other hand, only had time to repair our defenses... our trenches and bunkers. We ate once or twice a day on the go. Usually beans, porridge, a piece of dry bread and part of a can of meat, but rarely. A soldier that we captured told us that he regularly ate meat with lots of potatoes and pasta. Our political commissar was annoyed with him and told him to stop spreading propaganda. He loved to torment the soldier and spit at his American food. He told him that when we were free we would eat twice as much and drink as much as we wanted. Of course as we listened we laughed and looked at him with contempt. The man was fantasizing and lying... We had heard his nonsense before... as well as all the many promises he had made...

* * *

I came out of my burrow. The sky was mostly cloudy with very few stars visible. A new moon hung over the mountain peaks. I got hit in the face with a refreshing breeze of wind. I did not stay out long. I returned to my burrow.

I dug deep and then laterally. I did not stop digging and had no idea how deep or how wide I had dug. But that was okay I thought. It seemed like I had dug an entire room. I would fill it with myself, my thoughts, my dreams and I would decorate it with burned leafy branches and with withered mountain flowers. There is nothing here that has not been burned, scorched and singed and that has not withered. I would breathe the warm air in and exhale part of my soul to bring life into this underground dark burrow.

A little further away from me I could hear the hard blows of picks and the scraping of shovels. Everyone, to my left, to my right, was digging a burrow. They were looking for salvation in burrows and dens, not on top of the earth but deep underground. I continued to dig. I stopped, but only for a moment, to measure the height and width of my burrow. Was it enough?

No ray from the sun could penetrate in here because the top was covered by the thick shadow of a beech trunk which protected me from falling shells. Beside me was a great big solid rock, flint I think. The one who was digging in front of me was chipping at the rock with a chisel.

I dug a small hole in the wall of my burrow. That's where I lit a stick of pinewood to give me some light. The smoky flame trembled as sap spurted from the kindling. I moved closer and watched my shadow fatten. I shifted sideways and watched my shadow move from corner to corner, growing smaller and larger as I moved back and forth. I was not alone. I was in my burrow with my shadow. I had a friend with whom I could talk, get angry at, laugh at and mock; two heads, four hands and two bodies, moving and bending simultaneously... After a while, after the pinewood stick burned out, my shadow disappeared. As I watched my shadow disappear I thought:

“Am I still here? Am I dead?” I was alone in the dark... all alone... without my shadow. I stuck my head out of the burrow and looked up at the new moon. Slowly I was overwhelmed with infinite sadness... it caused me great pain. Looking at the new moon reminded me of the harvest when we stayed outside all night, when we spent the entire night out in the fields finishing the harvest. The quiet night sky was embroidered with countless stars above. I could clearly see the shining Milky Way galaxy. I could hear the night birds screech in the serenity of night and occasionally an owl would hoot, advertising its presence. Looking at the moon and the Milky Way galaxy up in the sky, I was always absorbed by its vastness, I always breathed its freshness and enjoyed the night silence, the aroma of the wheat stalks... and I wanted, very much I wanted, for things to remain that way...

My memories began to bother my soul. Remembering just one thing drew many memories out of me, even of things that I thought I had forgotten. They made me remember things that happened in the past, yesterday, the day before... like a film on a reel slowly turning, slowly unwinding... like beads strung on a string... my joys, my sorrows, my love, my wishes and dreams... My memories were unwinding and unwinding, some were lost somewhere and then sprung up again... they flowed in ripples of joy, bitterness, fear, expectations, hope, dreams...

And so I leaned on the stone that lay near my firing position, very much wanting to have another night like that. I wished that a full moon would shine upon me and that I would be able to again listen to the crickets sing while breathing the fresh night air full of the aroma of herbs and mountain flowers. Those were my thoughts and that's what I very much desired... to last forever...

It was so sweet to dream under a starry sky with a full moon... I wanted... I very much wanted to be at home, to be in a wheat field before the harvest, lying among the stalks and staring at the sky until dawn... watching the moon move across the sky... My dream was interrupted by the invisible, quiet, ringing voice of a girl singing. Her quiet melody spilled from trench to trench, filling the trenches and slowly building strength... mournfully beckoning, calling someone...

I stopped breathing to listen to the sad song. My throat clenched...

I wondered. Could this sorrow be subjugated, tamed... so that it did not bite my soul, so that it did not torture me, not burn so much in my chest?

Dawn was breaking over the trenches and bunkers.

* * *

I went outside. The air hit me hard and filled my lungs with the smell of gunpowder and burned rags. I moved back into the trench. I looked down. The starlight was reflected on the barrel of my automatic rifle. It glistened. A cricket began to sing in the grass. It sang then stopped... sang again and stopped again... repeating the pattern again and again... persistently singing aloud... again and again ... the poor creature.

I thought to myself – it is full of life.

An involuntary long sigh ripped out of my chest... It brought me relief. I tried hard not to think. I wanted to suppress my memories... and to stop thinking of my past. I wanted to lie down on the moist ground, which I earlier discarded, and stare at the starry sky, at the moving clouds, at the singed branches above, at the wounded trunk of the oak tree sliced by cannon shrapnel...

The night was hot. The soil I had just dug had a raw scent which I inhaled along with the moisture that evaporated from it. I could hear my own heart beating and I said to myself - I am alive... If I could hear my own heart beating, the leaves rustling, the cricket singing... and if I could smell the aroma of the earth and hear the snoring of my fellow fighter in the next trench, then... I was alive.

He was sleeping, leaning against the wall of his trench. His face looked peaceful... he was in a deep sleep. He was snoring loudly, scaring the cricket, interrupting its song... its rhythm... The night was alive in the quiet breeze, in the rustle of leaves, in the light

flicker of the trodden grass... the cricket was singing a sad song accompanied by the loud snoring of my comrade in arms...

I was alive...

* * *

All night we waited for our opponent, hidden in the trenches, bunkers and behind rocks...

When there was no attack, the trenches and bunkers became our bedrooms (if we were not constantly in our positions), our dining rooms (if there was something to eat) and a place to rest (if there was need for rest).

The trenches and bunkers were our homes, our nests.

There were other bunkers and trenches and other very large stones and rocks up on the hill... which we defended for days. We had orders to defend them...

For how long?!

* * *

It was my turn to fetch water.

The spring was near the brook, squeezed between two large rocks. Drop by drop, like white pearls strung on a string, the clear water dripped from a leaf twisted into a cone. It flowed and flowed, hour after hour, drop by drop, stringing large, thick drops. It paused, but only for a moment, building strength and resumed again, hour after hour, dripping into the throat of the metal canteen, whispering something with each drop...

...The living water flowed... the water of life... It sparkled in the disrupted rays of the sun passing through the scorched branches and leaves that rocked in the gentle breeze... A dense shade covered the spring and only a few rays penetrated down to it...

All around it stunk of rotting leaves and everything that was rotting in the black swamp covered by the thick shade of the beech trees. There was rarely any sun down here. The dense shade covered the spring keeping the water cool.

The first canteen was full so I took it out and replaced it with a second. I watched the water flow drip by drip and listened to the sound it made when it hit the bottom of the metallic container. It had a rhythm of its own and quietly sang its unique song filling my metallic water container. I enjoyed listening to its song, to its rhythm... it was peaceful and mesmerizing and, along with the tranquility and coolness of the shadows, it made me feel good, peaceful and tranquil... and only a few steps... not far from the trenches. I sat near the spring, near the two rocks that protected it, and prayed that this moment would last a long time... just like this spring has lasted at the foot of this hill.

The string of drops continued to flow from the spring, gurgling life-sustaining water down into my military canteen. As I listened to the water burble I wished it would never stop and that the life sustaining water, which aroused immense joy in me, would continue to flow forever.

I was filled with exhilaration and excitement and wanted to flow this way through time, just like the water flowed, without a care in the world. It seemed to me that the water was inviting me to remain there and keep it company, to stay beside the spring and nap in its coolness without any fears, and dream my dreams and have my best wishes come true...

The water, tied like a string of white pearls on a silver necklace, gurgled and sang into the throat of my canteens...

Then suddenly I remembered!!!

Today I turned eighteen!

I felt no overwhelming joy, but I had a question – Would I be spending my eighteenth year running on these bare and arid hills or...?

I knelt down in front of the spring and made a cup with my hands, filled it with water and slowly drank it. It was nice and cool... life-sustaining water...

I then whispered one of my many wishes:

“God please let my years bubble like this water, let them flow and gurgle like this spring...”

All the canteens were filled. I hung them on my belt and took the narrow uphill path leading to the trenches. Walking away I could still hear the gurgling song of the flowing water in the spring... but it was inside my head. I could feel its coolness and the coolness of the shade on my face... It seemed like the water was singing to me... from inside the canteens.

My breathing began to quicken as I climbed up the hill. When I came out of the shade the sun poured its light on me. I looked up towards the sky, the forest, the hills, the mountains and at the entire panoramic view in front of me. I heard a whistle and then thunder...

The roar came from above. The air trembled. The earth moaned. Broken stones rolled down the hill.

The silence was broken. I lost the gurgling sound of the spring water that was in me.

I realized they were bombing the hill. I ran up as fast as I could with only one thought in mind – they were slaughtering us.

I said to myself:

“Today someone will not be drinking fresh, cool, clear spring water that gurgles from the depth of the earth, rocks and roots of the beech trees... The cannons thundered and pounded the hill for a long time...”

And I, my greatest wish at that moment was to deliver the water to everyone as soon as possible in honour of my eighteenth birthday...

Oh!!!

* * *

There was no moon and no stars in the heavens that night, only black clouds coming from the north. There was a flash above the mountain beyond the hills and light, like a long curved cord, that lit the mountain peaks and paled the sky above. Then there was a loud boom, thunder, that echoed everywhere; it was taken over by the hills and bounced from hill to hill until its roar dispersed somewhere in the ditches. There was another flash... then another and another... again and again... each flash followed by loud thunder-like cannon shells exploding one after another, each explosion bringing more explosions. I felt a raindrop fall on my face... then another and another. They came down like beads tied by a string and pulled out of the black clouds. Water began to run down the hill, dragging soil, leaves, small branches, pebbles and mud. It built and built as the rainfall intensified filling the trenches with mud and everything else it carried. My trench was filled up to my ankles. I stood upright and leaned against the wall... I did not move. Lightning kept slicing the sky and thunder roared, tying the hills together. My trench kept filling with muddy water and I kept my back against the wall... refusing to move. I was afraid of the lightening... I was afraid of the flash... I was afraid a bullet might be waiting for me out there, hiding behind a rock, behind a thick tree, behind some thick branches... Then, when lightening flashed it would hit me on the head. I felt its presence, it was near, I felt that I could hear it breathing softly, I felt like it was watching me, had me in its sights... then when it flashed, it would hit me on the head. I did not move. It was enough that I raise my head... but only a little... A flash would be followed by thunder but it would not come from the sky, it would come from the earth. A sharp, short whistle then bang! Then, suddenly, I felt something warm drench my face... large drops dripped down my cheeks. It was blood. The young man who was standing next to me fell forward into the muddy waters. He was convulsing, kicking with his legs... his mouth was wide open. I did not know if he wanted to say something or was gasping for air. I knelt down beside him and wiped the mud off his face. In the light of the next lightning flash I looked at him. His eyes began to lose their light. His body began to slowly relax in my arms. The trench

continued to fill with muddy water until it reached my neck. I was afraid to get up, to get out of the mud pit... which was filling... I stayed crouched until dawn. My friends pulled me out the next morning. They found me holding the young man in my arms.

He was seventeen, only a few weeks after his birthday.

* * *

During the day, in the hot sun, everything in the trenches congealed.

We were all ordered to clear the mud. Heads down, crouching low, so as not to be seen, we silently began to scrape the mud, leaves, pebbles... out of the trenches. By sunset the trenches we all cleared. Then, just as we were about to take a deserved rest, we heard the commander order:

“Line up! We are taking new positions!”

We took all that we could, lined up and began to march up hill. A few hundred steps later a new order was issued:

“Take your positions!”

We climbed up on the treeless hill. The wind was blowing and the clouds were resting above our heads... and we under them. We spent the night on the hill watching the mountains, hills, rocks... waiting for daybreak. Below us, far from us, were our opponent's cannons. All we could see from up there were puffs of white smoke followed by a delayed thunder, then the crash of the exploding shells.

I said to myself:

“Well, today too we will be beaten from heaven and from earth. At least our souls will be higher for those whose time has come... closer to the strong winds, closer to the stars.”

We had less space to maneuver... fewer hills to back into.

* * *

I must have dozed off in the quiet. Dawn was always beautiful to witness, even after a short nap... The black mountain peaks began to whiten and reveal their colours. The tiny clouds in the sky turned to gold... the entire surrounding sky, beyond the tip of the mountain, began to turn ruddy as if it was about break out into a blaze. Wow I said to myself... the dawn today is beautiful. I stood there and watched the sun climb up from behind the hill and greet my world. I looked down beneath the hills. The brooks and forests were still dark and covered in purple... The last darkness in the valley began to evaporate...

Every day we climbed higher and higher up the mountain, getting closer and closer to the stars... and as we climbed closer to the sky our opponent's strength pushed us closer to our death. The ground up there was hard and the stone was flint. It could not be penetrated; it could not be broken, not with a shovel and not even with a pick.

We collected small piles of crushed stones and placed them in front of us, just enough to hide our heads. Stone by stone, our stone piles grew, but just enough to hide our heads from the other side. Dreadful whistles and terrifying explosions greeted us from above and from below. Cannon shells fell in front of us and behind, tossing dirt and broken rocks at our unprotected backs. The entire place was covered in smoke and hot shrapnel.

This time they did not get us... Not yet!

Maybe this afternoon or tomorrow morning they will take better aim and pound us again... we received orders not to step back... to remain where we were at our current positions. If the big guns could not dislodge us from here, then the airplanes will certainly destroy us... first chance they get.

This is what I was thinking... I was gripped with fear. But this was not the first time. Every time there was a firefight, every time there was an attack, I was gripped with fear... which protected me and kept me alive.

That day, behind the scant rock pile on the hill, I was truly afraid. I lay on the bare rocky ground trembling in the ominous silence.

The silence was deafening on that bare naked rock... bringing nothing good.

Every day our opponent beat us harder and harder with each passing day... We held!

The rocks behind which we found shelter remained durable and we behind them and beside them - hard and durable and the earth plowed by bombs and shells still supported us.

What kind of day was that day? How many days like that did we endure? How many of us went there and how many still remain?

My friend crawled over to me, sighed a sickly sigh and whispered:

“My brother was killed somewhere on one of those hills... they told me he was cut down by a burst of machine gun fire...”

I felt a hot excruciating pain cut across my abdomen. It squeezed my heart and soul and I said: “My brother too was killed on one of those hills... somewhere... on those hills... there...”

Many hills... and many brothers and sisters left on them...

We spent days and nights in defense of the hill called Kotelska Kula. Underneath it was an abyss. Its side was very steep as if it had been cut with a knife. It was all stone from top to bottom. We knew that in its bottom lay the bones of three partisans who, a year ago, had jumped to their death attempting to escape a different death.

Our battalion's political commissar and party secretary were inspiringly weaving a tale about our suicidal heroism, which hung like an icon before our eyes... They said and repeated that those three partisans who had jumped into the abyss were real heroes and that their deeds should be an example to all of us...

We were defending the hill that day and the days and nights that followed. We were holding on hard at the edge of the Kotelska Kula...

None of us jumped into the big, deep and dreadful abyss...

* * *

We lasted for days under the rain, in muddy water, in mud, in blood, in sight of mutilated trees, split tree trunks, scorching weather and flirting with death. When it rained, everything on the slope, from top to bottom, became muddy and the rain pushed the mud downhill. Our trenches were filled with muddy water and it felt as if we existed in a bog. We were sinking in mud to our knees, some up to their waist. The mud was sticky which made it difficult to maneuver; we could barely move our legs. By day we stayed in the mud because of the silver bird, the airplane above, which constantly looked for prey. When it detected prey it informed its partners the black jackals; the cannons down below. We could tell by the sudden flash at the bottom followed by a delayed boom, a sharp approaching whistle and a deafening crash on our hill. We only had the night to clear the mud. After it rained the wind blew the clouds away and emptied the sky above, giving us a clear, starry night; a dark sky embroidered with stars. The night was warm and still as we breathed uneasily in darkness, clearing our trenches of mud...

And then we waited... for the next attack...

* * *

The dawn was fresh, a time when most birds sang. But instead of birds, airplanes were flying, coming at us from the west and pounding our backs.

They mostly pounded us this way... from the back.

Curled up like an animal deep in my trench, I listened to the roar of thunder and felt the vibration and groans of the earth. Then suddenly, there was silence. Yes, but for how long? I uncurled and sat up. I came out of the trench. The air was heavy, soaked with the

stench of gunpowder and smoke. I strained my ears to hear but I heard nothing; no voices. I shouted. Silence! My voice became mixed with the whistle of cannon shells. I rushed back into the trench. I don't know if their aim was off but their shells were skipping over us, missing our positions and landing beyond us in the brook. There they flashed, tore apart rocks and threw stones into the air, they cracked and tore beech trees and plowed and overturned the earth. Then I heard heavy machine gun fire, unleashed by our opponent's infantry approaching our positions. Mouth to mouth, the order was given; "Everyone remain at their position!"

They came at us upright as usual. We waited. Rifle butts tight against our shoulders, eyes on the sight and breathing shallow...

This time too we let them have it.

The fresh dawn was stained with the smell of gunpowder. At noon the battlefield, the earth under the scorching sun, smelled of clotted blood...

The day was over...

Did we have losses?

There was nothing in the bulletin but we buried two in a single shallow grave and sent five to the hospital... that I know of.

And our opponent?

In the bulletin that our political commissar always sent to higher command, the number of enemy soldiers killed was always great...

Our trenches were no longer trenches and our bunkers were not bunkers. Everything was destroyed. We repaired them during the night. Mixed in the wreckage of soil, split logs and rock we found legs, arms and heads. Body parts that belonged to the young men and women, to our friends and comrades in arms...

All of them, every body part along with the debris that we took out of the trenches and bunkers, we tossed into the abyss.

* * *

Kole was one of our favourite companions. He was quiet, a little withdrawn and knew how to tell nice stories, spoken, sometimes sung, in a quiet hoarse voice.

He knew a lot of Macedonian folk and partisan songs and frequently sang them for us. He learned them in Yugoslavia where one time he served in the Yugoslav army. And like he used to say, he was eighteen years old when he joined the Macedonian partisans who broke away from the Greek partisans and raised the red flag. This is how he found himself in Bitola and after that in Debar, Kichevo and Gostivar where his brigade was eventually disbanded.

Kole was a village boy, a young man without a craft, so he joined the Yugoslav National Army (JNA). He completed a six-month military course and the army stationed him somewhere near Dubrovnik. He used to say that Dubrovnik was an old town by the sea, surrounded by high stone walls.

His unit was tasked with providing security for Tito when Tito came with his friends to Dubrovnik. Kole spent his leisure time reading books because he wanted learn as much as possible. He became a great artilleryman and was recognized for that. High command offered him a scholarship for higher education. He received much praise for his excellent service and was sent to study artillery at the military academy. The regiment commander was an old partisan himself and had much respect for smart village children because he also had once been a peasant. He was the one who recommended that Kole study at the military academy in Belgrade. While studying in Belgrade Kole was discovered by activists from Bulkes who told him about the struggle in Greece and how much the Macedonian people were suffering. Kole listened intensely and decided to return home and fight. The train brought him to Skopje, then to Bitola and from there he traveled by truck through Bilishta and Pogradets in Albania and, along with some thirty others, ended up in Vrbnik. From there he traveled on foot to Mali-Madi. He left the military academy and his desire to learn behind him. At the end of his story Kole said:

“Had I stayed at the academy, today I would have been a general.”

And ever since then we did not call the man simply Kole, we called him Kole the general who, like he said, had a great desire to see the commanders of the Aegean brigade, but unfortunately they were not here among us, they were gone. They left and stayed in Skopje and there, as Kole the general used to say, who was the most educated among us, they were playing politics, that is why he disliked them and had no place for them in his circle...

Kole the general was a tall man, solid with a wide back. His eyes were always bright and friendly and his lips swollen. His voice was quiet and he always spoke with measured words. What a tragedy it was for a small piece of metal, the size of a finger nail, to bring down such a large body?

His life force, his youth... all extinguished from Kole's large body! His desires, love, dreams... extinguished... We buried Kole the general's large body together with the small piece of metal that killed him. How long would this earth take to eat his large body and a small piece of metal? We placed no cross on his grave. We buried him and the small piece of metal under the shade of a beech tree... to be together forever...

On these hills and rocks, in these trenches and bunkers, on the soil that burned, on the earth that was scorched, set ablaze... tiny pieces of metal fell and cut down the small and large bodies of many young men and women. And just like on other days and nights, today, those who knew him said:

“Here lies the body of Kole the general...”

Those were all the words that were said to remember him by...

* * *

We changed places with our opponent. In the beginning he was in trenches and bunkers, now we were. By being there, we let him know exactly where we were! We were buried, he was in motion.

Up until recently we were in motion and he waited for us in his bunkers and trenches. We hit him at night and then vanished without a trace.

We knew where he was.

Now he knows where we are.

Now we do everything at night. There is no rest for us. Our greatest concern is to repair our bunkers and trenches; fix them because our lives depended on them. That was our first order and that's what we did most of the night; with a pick and shovel in hand. We dug deep enough and piled enough rocks to cover our faces and heads.

A large pile of rocks were stacked on the ground in front of me. I pushed them to see if they were firmly set and said to myself:

“Are these stones going to protect me or am I going to protect them...? What in God's name are we protecting?”

The villages were far away, the cities were even further and there were no roads and no bridges. There were only hills, peaks, forests, cliffs, stones and canyons.

And so I said to myself:

“Is it just these rocks, hills and mountains that we are protecting?” We will protect them and they will protect us, I thought. The only living things here were us and those who would attack us tomorrow. There was no other life. And that life that does exist in the trenches and bunkers, and in the spaces in between, was diminishing every day. And everything became narrower... Fewer people were alive, most were crippled and in pain, and there was much blood spilled and plenty of hatred.

There was dried blood on the rock pile in front of me. My hands smelled of blood, clotted blood.

And the soil I walked on had been mixed with blood...

* * *

They attacked after sunrise. We held them back. Someone wounded was left behind in the space between us and our opponent. He was crying, begging, begging for help, swearing. He was one of theirs.

Someone on our side was praying. But who?! We were yet to be counted. He was beside me lying wounded. He was looking up towards the sky and praying. He was squeezing his chest with his arms crossed. Blood was dripping between his fingers. His eyes were filled with pain. He exhaled and stopped breathing... I was scared... my cry got stuck in my throat; I wanted to cry but had no voice. I covered my face with my hands. There was a heavy stench of gunpowder and burned flesh in the air all around me...

* * *

I leaned on the wall of my trench and felt like I was going to faint. I was on the ground but still conscious... Something inside me was still awake, protecting me, warning me of danger...

There was no light in the bunkers and we all felt alone in the dark. We saw each other only when someone lit a match. That's when we saw faces, eyes, foreheads, mouths... That's when we winked, smiled, or gave a sign that we were still alive. Each had their own silent signal... the motion of an eye, the raising and lowering of the eyebrows, wrinkles on the forehead... each was saying something to the others... expressing a wish, pain, desire, hope, relief... When the flame was extinguished everyone went back to feeling alone in the dark... back to their private thoughts and worries... We sat with our backs against the walls of the bunker and as long as we daydreamed something hung in us and over us, circling and protecting us, keeping us awake and ready...

Was that a feeling of fear or death?

I could not sleep and I could not even nap. I tried very hard to push the thought that I was going to die out of my mind. My most hated thought was that a grenade, a bomb, was going to explode and kill me. Or, any time now a bullet was going to find its way here and hit

me, kill me, maim me, burn me or, God forbid, paralyze me. Is someone going to shoot me? I kept thinking. Death stalked me every day looking for the right opportunity to grab me. I could not be that lucky, one of these days, one of these moments it was going to happen... I was going to die. How was it going to get me? A bomb, a grenade, a bullet, a knife, a bayonet... a weapon brought here to the Macedonian mountains from far away... a weapon that does not forgive, that does not spread beauty, but grows ugly and kills; a weapon that kills day and night? That is why, day and night, I defended myself. That is why I dug deep and, with great certainty, protected myself from a bullet, bomb, grenade, flame, or fire falling from the sky. We strengthened our trenches, bunkers and burrows in the dark, in the night, in the moonlight, preparing to defend our lives so that we could survive for another day and wait for the night when we could again live and rejoice in the dark... That is why I persistently dug in the dark with all my might... I emptied and strengthened my trench so that it would save me from the storm for another day... I could go home, back to my village, only if I was alive and that motivated me to keep digging.

A few years ago this was the time of weddings and celebrations. Perhaps I too would have been wearing a wedding dress and my girlfriends would have been my bridesmaids. I would have worn a long white dress, with a white crown on my head, and definitely not military pants that were too large for me or a frayed military shirt or a military cap that constantly smelled of sweat, or torn socks, like I did now. Many times they had said that they would issue us new uniforms, Czech or perhaps Russian and new boots, but I have yet to see them. They say that those countries are far away and it takes time for the uniforms to get here and that is why we need to be patient. They have also said that they would issue us underwear made in Romania. Our pants and shirts are English made with many patches on our buttocks and knees. Now they don't smell like mold because they were washed in the rain and dried in the wind. Now they only smell like damp earth, sweat and rot. I have been rotting in my trench and my burrow smells of rot, just like me. We all sleep on beds of fern, smelling like the earth and the ferns... waiting for the storm to end. We are waiting to get out so that the rain can wash us, take the stench out of us. When we were not in trenches, bunkers, or burrows we smelled like the green forest, like the fresh mountain air,

like early dawn, like freshly cut grass, like squeezed thyme... And now we smell like smoke, rotting roots, moldy ferns, dry leaves, singed grass and everything that is burnt and dying all around us.

I closed my eyes and imagined myself in a bridal gown. I opened them and saw myself a soldier in a uniform belonging to an unknown army, a soldier soiled with dirt and grime wearing large torn shoes, a large grimy shirt with sleeves rolled up. In place of a wedding bouquet of red roses, I hold a shovel, beside me is my pick and beside it is my German automatic rifle... Here I am just a soldier but I can't help myself asking: "Would I last to be a bride?" Will I be wearing a white wedding gown? Will I do what I was fated to do or will I remain and rot in this burrow?

I thought a lot and daydreamed a lot... I hoped my wishes and dreams would come true... I used all my strength to dig deeper in my trench and burrow... I swung my pick harder against the hard ground and scooped away the loose soil along with all my doubts. I dug and thought:

"When I finish digging my burrow I will pick green ferns, bundle them and make my bed with them, then I will think my thoughts and dream my dreams lying down... I will think of being a bride standing before the altar wearing a wedding crown on my head. I will imagine the entire church glistening with many lit candles. I will imagine coming out of the church, standing on the stairs and throwing candy into the crowd. Then I will watch the children gather it and rejoice... And after that... After that I will think of knitting socks, mitts, hats..."

"Dig!" I heard a man's voice order. It was the commander.

The order was not directed at me but it made me shiver. I began to toss the soil vigorously and together with it my bridal dress, my red roses, my wedding crown, my brightly lit candles, my candy and... my hopes and dreams...

Me and my wants and needs... My wishful thinking... Can a young woman who is a soldier have such thoughts and dreams?

Can she?

This is what I thought...

“Dig! Dig! Dig!” the same voice kept ordering.

The thunderous order petrified my desires, covered them with black moss and shattered my dreams...

I picked up the pace and, over and over, struck the hard ground with my pick until I unearthed a big stone, and underneath it... ants, not a few ants but a pile of ants. They quickly ran up my legs and covered my arms, chest, head and entire body. I got out of the hole and took off my blouse, shirt, trousers... and tossed them in the trench. Then in amazement I watched the ants hunt down the lice and take them down their hole. These were the same lice that had penetrated every piece of my clothing, including the holes in my belt, and for days and nights did not leave me in peace to nap or relax. All day and all night they were biting me... a terrible insect, sucking my blood. The only way to destroy them was to squeeze them between my nails. Except for one time when they brought some white powder which they sprayed on us... and that was it. Thanks to the ants my clothes were now free of lice...

* * *

We waited for the attack and while waiting I had just one big desire: to stay alive...

Having that desire made me feel at peace and stare at the top of the trees, watching the glimmering sunlight pass through them, watching the sun's rays cut through the branches. I felt the sun's rays more than I could see them. The direct sun I could not see.

Just a little to my side direct sunlight was shining on the ground. That's where I moved my automatic rifle... so I could lie down in direct sunlight. It was a tiny beam the size of a pea but it was shining boldly, penetrating through the overhanging branches. This way I could have the sun shining on me without me having to raise my head above the trench or move it off the butt of my rifle...

We only came out of our bunkers and trenches in the dark; just to do some stretching. Those from over there, the opposite side, knew that and fired at us a volley or two, just to send us back to our holes in the ground. Then, through loudspeakers, they invited us to dinner. They boasted about the plentiful supply of bread, wine and ouzo and finally swore at us and cursed us with the most disgusting words.

We thanked them and declined their invitation with our cone funnels made of cardboard. They would not leave us alone, even in the night. They shot colourful rockets into the air illuminating the hills, disturbing the peace, our work and our dreams. They shot balls of yellow, red, white and blue lights over the hills and made the night look like day. We had to hide in our burrows just to avoid them, to get some rest and some sleep. Our opponent wanted us to stay awake and watch the balls of light rise above the hills, explode into thousands of little stars and slowly fall down on the ground. Some stars lost their light as they came down, others continued to glow even after they fell on the ground. If this was not a war we would have thought that these little suns adorned the earth and night sky. They decorated the mountains, hills and forests like it was some great long-awaited holiday. The lights glimmered, beckoned, ordered, announced, informed... those little suns which made the darkness vanish... those little suns that turned night to day... And when it was day the airplanes flew and pounded us, they pounded the earth and made the ground moan and shake, sending soil and rock up into the air. They pounded the forests and trees and set them ablaze. And then when the airplanes left, the cannons took their place pounding us with exploding shells, crushing the ground we stood on, scattering soil, rocks and trees, covering the earth with suffocating smoke and debris.

Horror prevailed over our trenches and bunkers and long cries for help came from muffled voices... from people in pain...

* * *

I was trapped in my trench. The earth above me crumbled and fell down raising dust and, combined with the thick smoke all around me, made it difficult for me to breathe. I heard the chilling whistle of

a shell passing over me and then came the crash and falling dust and soil. It was always the same, first the whistle then the explosion and then the falling of debris. One never knew when a shell was going to land inside the trench... With every falling shell I coiled myself into a ball and waited for either more debris to fall or shrapnel to hit me... and wondered which part of my body was going to hurt the most...

I was afraid, terrified, when I heard the sharp whistle... and blast of the exploding shell. After the explosion I uncoiled, but only a little... waiting for the earth to stop shaking and debris to stop falling on me... and when it did stop, I inhaled deeply, spit the bitterness from my mouth and said to myself: "I am still alive..."

* * *

Another flare rocketed through the sky when the infantry charged. They were not running but kept in step and approached erect. And the closer they came the more they bent forward. When they came close enough for our machine guns to cut them down, they lay down on their stomachs. They did this today, yesterday, the day before and so on... and days grew into weeks.

Time was not measured in hours, but in days and nights during which we were attacked in waves... We defended ourselves and those damn hills and every day we became fewer and fewer...

Everything all around us was plowed. Trees were knocked down and branches ripped and scattered all over and mixed with them were ripped out human body parts; arms, hands, legs, intestines... They belonged to us. My sobbing echoed and mingled with the groaning and cries for help in the ugly silence.

From mouth to mouth the order to "retreat" was being passed on.

We grabbed our belongings and ran, jumping over tree trunks, rocks, holes... and regrouped on the other side of the brook where we took attendance. How many of us did we leave on that dreaded hill of horrors? We took our new positions and were given new orders:

“We were to remain there until our last breath! No one was to take a step back!”

We lay down on bare ground. There were no trenches and no bunkers. The earth was naked; stony, hard, dry, cooked... Further over there were cracked rocks. During the night we broke some of them into pieces and arranged them so that we could hide our heads behind them.

Tomorrow they will pound us by air and by ground.

Who is going to be stronger; the rocks or us?

I sat down behind the rock pile I had just prepared for my defense and leaned my back against the rocks. I looked up at the cloudless sky and felt alone. There was a strange silence in the air.

I continued to stare at the cloudless sky. I saw black dots approaching from the north. They grew larger and larger.

They were very large when they poured fire over us.

* * *

The space all around was becoming narrower. Our opponent was becoming stronger and pounding us harder. The more we were squeezed the closer our opponent came. He used large machinery to widen the narrow goat and donkey trails and dragged his cannon closer to the hills and mountain peaks. He dug wide roads so that his trucks could transport crates of shells and everything else that was needed to pound us and run us out of these hills and from behind the rocks. Step by step, he came closer to us, to our trenches, bunkers and burrows and to the holes made by his bombs and cannon shells. The hills became narrower the further and the higher up we withdrew... we were now standing on the bare, arid peaks.

As I said, we had no trenches and no bunkers at our new positions. We hid our heads behind a couple of stones covered with a few handfuls of soil...

* * *

We continued to move higher. The hills up there were bare-naked. The rocks and stones were bleached by time; washed by the storms and cracked by the sun. From what were we going to defend ourselves first? From the shrapnel or from the fragments of stone and fire that was falling on us? The pain is the same; being hit by a piece of shrapnel or by a piece of stone. What were we to defend ourselves from? Shrapnel or rocks? The day was long. We waited for help only by night. We could rest easier in the dark. Have a bit of rest and pray the night, the dark, would last a long time... But the dark did not last...

They fired flared into the night sky; white, blue, red and yellow flares. There was nowhere to hide on bleached mountain tops and barren hills.

We were on one hill and our opponent was on the opposite hill. We were tied, connected together by the glowing bullets that we fired at each other in the dark of night. Strings of bullets, short and scant strings delivered by our side and long and dense strings delivered by their side. Our strings were delivered by German machine guns and lost strength over the brook that divided us. Theirs were delivered by American heavy machine guns that had no problem reaching our scant defenses. The whistling of bullets flying over us motivated us to dig deeper... with our knives and hands... we dug deep enough to hide our heads.

Then we were charged by the government troops under the light of flying flares.

They had us and the hill that we defended in the palm of their hands and they were firing at us with long machine gun bursts...

At daybreak, under the deafening explosions of bombs dropped by their aircraft, we welcomed the 70th day and night of warfare in Gramos.

And after that?!

Well, after that we ran down the hill, crossed the river and, in the night, regrouped in Slimnitsa Valley. We were all gathered there, like a colony of ants. Something was up, quiet orders were given verbally and, up the hill, there was heavy gunfire, a lot of shooting. A unit took the lead and the entire column followed behind.

We rushed out of the valley, running, running to somewhere, anywhere, leaving this place as soon as we could. We ran along the valley fast to escape the openness. We then ran along a brook, rushing to somewhere, just rushing, to get somewhere before daybreak, before sunrise...

We ran fast, breathing hard, unable to catch our breath. At dawn we crossed a river and began to climb up a sharp hill. From there we could see a blur of Mali-Madi hiding behind the fog.

Over on that side was Vicho and Prespa.

Our salvation was there...

But until when?!

* * *

On fire and in flame, we left behind us the mountain peaks, hills, cliffs, ravines, forests, the broken-down trenches and bunkers, our burrows in which we rotted and built up our fear of death, our fear of thunder, lightening, rain, snow, ice... Our fear of being shot by a bullet, torn apart by shrapnel... Our fear of the roar of cannons, the whistle and the crash that followed... Our fear of the silver bird watching us... Our fear of the roar of aircraft and falling bombs from the sky... Our fear of fire splashing on us from the sky... We left all that behind... We left everything behind... the fear of fatigue, hunger, thirst, sickness, sleep, grief and with them we left our youth along with many, too many of our young men and women... We left behind seventy-two days and nights of tragedy and horrors...

We left behind the bones of our young men and women to be gnawed by the predators and to be washed by the mountain torrents...

There we learned to hate evil and to love kindness. There we became acquainted with death and stood erect before the gruesome horrors and despair...

There we learned to love and respect each other... there we became soldiers and men and women who did not differ in battle.

There we were soldiers... males and females...

There we quickly mastered the rifle, the automatic rifle, the hand grenade, the mine launcher, the machine gun...

There we were persistent, pressing, patient, resilient, obedient...

And brave...

Gramos was burning in flames behind us...

The hills were burning and burning in them were our hopes and dreams...

In Gramos we lost our faith, our trust in ourselves, our belief which supported us in battle...

The source from which our courage and strength sprang!

Behind us we left our enthusiasm and, although broken and unfulfilled, our hopes and dreams...

We were everything there; we were sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty year-old girls and boys in our prime...

Behind us we left a scorched earth... desolation.

Gramos was charred and we were weary...

That's how it was...

Chapter - 2

We left Gramos and took new positions in Vicho.

We conveyed much bad news to many mothers and covered them in black.

There was much crying of pain and anathema...

The bells tolled for the dead...

But no priests...

From dawn to dusk, the silver bird flew high in the sky, watching the entire so-called free territory but gave us time to rest, eat, change our clothing, arm ourselves and listen to speeches and slogans about new victories.

On the fifteenth of September we crushed our opponent in Mali-Madi.

In our charge we reached the gates of Kostur. Nobody was defending Kostur. Orders were given to turn back. We turned back and we were beaten by aircraft and tanks. We attacked Voden in the winter, in the worst cold.

We came out of that battle mutilated.

Yugoslav troops had to take us from Kaimakchalan in the dead of night and drive us on trucks to the hospital in Katlanovo. I was wounded in two places. I was hit in the shoulder and on my leg, below the knee; severely injured.

This was what the doctors said.

Two days after I left the operating room, I was told that both operations had been successful and that my leg would require some further treatment. I could not feel my leg; it was coated with thick hardened plaster and felt as if I was bound to a wooden block at the hip. I lay down and a nurse, a woman with a very sad face, who only

occasionally smiled with a slight smile, constantly fed me and told me that I would be well for my wedding and that I should not forget to invite her.

There were twelve girls in the hospital room belonging to various military units. The beds were placed so tightly together there was hardly any space in between them. With help from the nurse, a few days later I was able to lie down and have a conversation with the other ladies in the room. There were four girls there who did not understand Macedonian so, for the most part, we spoke Greek. What did we talk about? What could possibly be discussed in a military hospital? Illnesses perhaps...? The things that we talked about the most about were how we existed in the mountains, how we lived in cold burrows, trenches and bunkers... We talked about the long marches in the night, in the rain, in blizzards, storms, snow, cold... We talked about the hunger, the pain, the isolation that we all endured... We talked about the fear of being killed, wounded and maimed... Our conversations were often interrupted. And in the long silence many thoughts and memories swarmed our minds, sending us back in time...

The girl who was lying next to me sighed a long sigh and, while looking up at the ceiling, quietly said:

“My dear friend Tinka... she was unable to cross the swollen river. The muddy waters took her away. She was only seventeen years old and that day she was carrying her machine gun and a backpack full of bullets. When I told the commander that Tinka had disappeared in the muddy water he spat and asked:

“What happened to her machine gun?”

There was silence; only long, painful and sickly sighs...

“And my friend, her name was Tsana. They cut her legs just below the knees at the hospital in Korcha. We did not hear her voice for an entire month. She kept to herself. When they came from headquarters to see how we were doing and if we were well enough to be taken us back to the front line, that’s when Tsana spoke. She said:

“And me, take me to the front... She uncovered herself and showed us her legs... her mutilated legs... which had walked for nineteen years...

There was silence; only long, painful and sickly sighs...

“My corporal, the most beautiful boy in our unit was crippled but still alive when he was hanging on the barbed wire in front of our opponent’s bunker. We watched him but we could not get close to him. They kept firing at us with long bursts... we left him there... he was barely twenty years old...”

There was silence; only long, painful and sickly sighs...

“Field medic Stoina, our unit nurse, was carrying a wounded young man on her shoulders when...” but before this young lady could finish what she was saying she visibly became very emotional and lost her voice...

There was silence again. Only sad, muffled, broken sighs...
Silence... And the sighs led to more tragic memories...

I stayed in the Katlanovo hospital a long time and as a result I missed the battle for Lerin. They brought me back to the frontline at the beginning of the summer. Our battle lines were now at Bela Voda Mountain separating Prespa from Lerin valley. They were high up. The mountain there was bare. It was covered with green meadows and springs of water. We were located a short distance from Kaimakchalan. To the east and west of us were the Prespa Lakes and Galichitsa. There was a long and curved line of trenches left over from World War I, overgrown with weeds, thorns and spikes. They said the French built them. Now we were digging and rebuilding them... so that the enemy would not pass. There was a dense forest of beech trees at the foot of Bela Voda. Forty pairs of oxen, together with many villagers from the surrounding villages, were mobilized to drag logs uphill. Most of the villagers were women. They were led by an old man with a long moustache and their task was to carry the logs from the forest to the bunkers on top of the hill.

Five, six, or seven rows of logs and between each row a layer of stones and earth – that’s how our bunkers were constructed. Command ordered us to make them strong, strong enough to keep us alive and the enemy out of the mountains.

They always praised us for a job well done... and then they were gone.

Before sunset, before the sun disappeared behind the mountains, a number of women from AFZH (Antifascist Women’s Front) arrived at our camp. They had been here before but had never stayed with us in the cold and damp trenches and bunkers. They met with us and told us that we were winning many battles against the enemy everywhere. It was true that we were fighting the enemy, but they never told us about the losses we were accumulating and why they were never there fighting along with us. They were not in Gramos, they were not in Voden, not even in the battle for Lerin. Among them there was one woman who could not stop talking. She had a big mouth and spat as she threw big words at us - crushing the enemy with her words. At the end of her long talk, she threw praises at us for the good job we had done building big bunkers and digging deep trenches.

Bravo! – She shouted – no enemy is going to pass by here! Bravo!

But, for as long as I have been here and watched the woman from the various surrounding villages carry logs uphill on their shoulders, I have never seen this woman with the big mouth do anything.

These women from the AFZH organization were our guests and praised us a lot and we humoured them... but we did not want them to tell us that up here, high on these bare hills spread under which were green meadows, stuffed in these large and frightening bunkers made of logs, stones and earth, that we needed to wait for the enemy... We already knew that...

When we were finished setting up in Bela Voda we were left with two lines. The battalion received orders to take defensive positions in the hills of Bigla and Lundzer. We arrived there early in the

morning and immediately took our positions in already prepared trenches and bunkers. Movement was forbidden. The silver bird was watching us from up high all day long. We waited for dark to do our exercises and prepare for the attack. After that we were lectured, with much conviction, that the enemy would never pass through the region of Vicho and that we were strong here and everywhere in the surrounding hills and that we had many cannons and mortars here with which we were going to crush the opponent.

We believed what they told us. But at the same time we began to have doubts when, on August 9th, we saw the opponent offload many trucks of government troops and cannons in the valley located between the mountains Mali-Madi, Vicho, Polenata and Roto. The soldiers set up tents. We saw them do that from our bunkers. The valley was lit during the night. They had lights in their tents. There was no shooting. It was silent on both sides. The night passed peacefully.

At five o'clock in the morning we woke up to the sound of airplanes. There were lots and lots of bombs and rockets dropped over our trenches and bunkers. The entire front was burning; all the hills were on fire and smoke was bellowing everywhere.

Unfortunately our mortars and guns were silent.

Why?

It was August 10th, 1949. We endured two days and two nights of pounding before we abandoned our positions. The order was:

“Bela Voda!” Go to Bela Voda to stop the opponent from breaking through into Prespa.

We ran along the gorge defended by our positional unit. This is what the units made up of disabled fighters were called. Because they were all crippled, these soldiers had no chance of leaving their combat positions on their own, so they were ordered to stay and defend the road to their last breath, until they were all killed, this time to stop enemy tanks from going to Prespa.

We arrived at our bunkers at midnight. We were tired, hungry and thirsty as we waited to welcome the morning attack. Our orders arrived:

The battalion was ordered to immediately move to the village German and from there cross to the other side of Lake Prespa.

There was no time to form a column, so we all ran...

The village German was empty. Padlocks hung on all the doors. There was no one there... no people... only cats and dogs. We went down hill to the village Rabi which was a target for the tanks. We ran along a stretch of willows along the shores of the larger lake and rushed towards the bridge. The airplanes came at us one behind another in streaks, lined up along the beach and dropped missiles and bombs, just like they did in Gramos, crushing and burning everything. We ran and ran and then suddenly - boom!

The entire bridge flew into the air.

It was our side that blew it up to stop the tanks and infantry from crossing over to the other side. We were cut off in the sandy, large open space. I heard a voice ordering:

“Go back!!! Go back towards the border!!!”

We were being attacked from the right by the government infantry. We ran in defensive waves and got back to the willow groves and from there we ran along the beach, shooting, falling... I was up to my knees in lake water. Suddenly I was interrupted by a begging voice:

“Kalina... Kalina... Help me!”

I turned my head. It was Lefka... she was in the water. Lefka was from my village. The water all around her was red... bloody red. She was wounded and drowning. I ran to her, grabbed her by her belt and pulled her ashore. Blood was pooling on the sand beneath her. She was badly wounded. I left her there. I left her behind begging, crying and shouting. I ran struggling through the thick

willows and listened to her voice begging behind me. I felt terrible. I stopped. I turned and ran back. Lefka lay on the sand. I lifted her a bit and went under her. I raised her and, with much difficulty, put her on my shoulder. I dragged us both along the coast. I did not even make it ten metres before Lefka was dead... on my shoulder...

We broke through the ambush before reaching the village Rabi and ran towards the border. Cannon shells fell all over the place; in front of us and behind us. The closer we got to the border the harder they bombarded us. The tanks were roaring behind us... Suddenly there was a long whistle of bullets at the border. I thought the Yugoslav army was attacking us. The tanks stopped.

Later that afternoon the battalion hid in the brook beside the border... The shooting had stopped, but not in the Prespa plain. The shores of Little Prespa Lake were in flames. The rushes were burning. The thick black smoke shaded the sun. During the night we collected our wounded, bandaged them and hid them in the brush and woods along the border. I could not stop hearing Lefka's voice in my head. I grabbed the bag of bandages from the field medic, took my automatic rifle and ran back to where I had left her. She was not there...

I returned to the brook.

Our battalion commander, via courier, had made a special request to meet with the commander of the Yugoslav army. We were waiting for the courier to return. Sometime before midnight, accompanied by two soldiers, a Yugoslav major showed up at the border. Our Commander asked for me and said:

“Kalina, you come with me. You are fluent in the language. I am fluent in it too but I don't want the assistant or the political commissar to think that I agreed to something they did not understand because it was said in Macedonian. I will speak in both Greek and Macedonian and you will translate when required... Let's go...”

We met in a trench near the border line. The two army commanders greeted each other.

The talks lasted a long time. I stayed on the side and said very little.

Our commander requested to be allowed to pass through Yugoslav territory on foot and from there cross into Albania. The Yugoslav officer said he was prepared to permit that provided we surrendered our weapons at the border. Our commander could not agree with that and said that such an act would appear treasonous; similar to deserting, capitulation and used some other such words I did not understand. Our commander could not accept the condition to surrender our weapons.

That was it from the talks. Before our departure, our commander asked the major to give us some food and water and to receive fifteen of our wounded. He agreed. We saluted him and went back to the brook.

We were done transferring our wounded over the border a little past midnight. We dropped them off in the barracks where they examined them, changed their bandages, placed them on trucks and took them away. Both the wounded and we were relieved. This, unfortunately, was only a small part of the weight on our shoulders, weighing like a big stone...

Lying there in the brook beside the border we felt a sense of uncertainty and were burdened by a sense of insecurity.

In the dark of night we heard long machine gun bursts and watched lit bullets and flares fly over us. The sky over Prespa, the hills and mountains to the west and south, were all illuminated and embroidered with beautiful colours...

It seemed like our opponents there, near the Prespa Lake plain and in the surrounding hills, were celebrating...

He was celebrating his victory...

Someone lying beside me whispered:

“Well, look at them... they convey news of their victory with colourful bullets and rockets. Tomorrow all of Athens will shine under such lights...”

Our opponent celebrated his victory all night long until dawn.

We spent the entire night awake... until the shooting resumed in the morning. In all that noise I could hear church bells ringing. It sounded like they were announcing a funeral. But they were not! I remembered!

Today was the fifteenth of August. Greece was celebrating a religious holiday – The Great Mother.

The Great Mother was the protector of my village. The entire village celebrated on this day. We accepted guests from all the surrounding villages. I closed my eyes and imagined myself being at home. I could see my grandfather, grandmother and mother. The dining table was set for guests. Grandfather sat hidden near the stairs and waited... Was he waiting for someone? Why was he hiding? I was losing my image of him in my tears... my image of our stairs and yard, of our dining table and guests... I was losing everything in my tears...

I lay in the tall grass burned by the hot sun and listened to the ringing of church bells. I again imagined my mother, grandmother and grandfather in a room full of guests, sitting around a festive dining table. And again my vision became blurred with my tears and again I slowly lost the image of my grandmother, grandfather, mother, the dining table, and all the guests... They all vanished in a few drops of tears...

We stayed all day lying around the brook. We were hungry, thirsty, scared and felt insecure. There was great suspicion in our eyes. What would happen to us? We were lying in a brook in a place they called “dead frontier zone”, a no man’s land... How sure were we that this was ours... our place? Suddenly I felt a stabbing question in my head:

Were the leaflets they dropped over us in Gramos, the leaflets that fell from the airplanes... Was the information in them wrong... simply propaganda concocted by our opponent? Or was there some truth in it? The winds of doubt began to whirl in my mind...

It was July 29th or July 30th, 1948, nearly two weeks after the government army began its great offensive against us, during which time something happened that was unimaginable to us. There was silence in the trenches, silence in the bunkers and silence within us. We sat frowning in silence and sunk deep into our thoughts. We were looking at the hills beyond. The silence was interrupted by the loudspeakers that spewed curses and insults. I remember at the time I was scratching the wall of my trench with a piece of stick while occasionally casting a glance at the flyer, the same flyer that fell from the sky into my trench that morning.

Leaflets, thousands of leaflets dropped from the heavens to the earth. Thousands of leaflets came out of an airplane that circled above us. They filled our trenches, they covered the ground, they became stuck on tree branches and they rolled on the ground, picked up by the wind. We sat motionless, we did not move... we just lowered our heads and read:

“Tito sold you out!” the leaflet shouted.

That day the airplanes did not drop bombs. But the leaflets were bombs for us... terrible bombs. They wounded our faith and our soul, and somewhat broke our spirit.

That day the machine guns were silent and so were our opponent's cannons.

They were pounding us with leaflets.

They were a terrible weapon... these leaflets.

They did not thunder, they did not blare, they did not crash trenches and bunkers... they simply smashed our spirits and razed our faith... they wounded our soul for which there was no cure.

There is no medicine for a wounded soul.

Our faith was wounded... The fact that there was strength behind us, helping us, became questionable...

Crumpled in our trenches, we kept silent.

These pieces of paper defeated us with the bad news they delivered, creating doubt in our minds. The silence lasted a long time; the silence and our command. It was not until the afternoon when the political commissar, who had just returned from headquarters, gathered us together, that we found out that the leaflets were only propaganda and...

But he was not very convincing...

The doubt lingered on... especially in the circles of young men and women from Kostur, Lerin and Voden regions.

On top of tossing leaflets at us from an airplane, our opponent that day, for the entire day raised large canvas billboards on the opposite hill from where we were, reading:

“Tito sold you out! Surrender to us!”

We were hit hard because we all knew that Yugoslavia was our biggest supporter in this struggle and no one wanted this to be true, so we fought back... with insults...

We spent the entire day hurling insults at our opponent.

But later, for days, even months, we were lectured and brainwashed by our own political commissars and party secretaries that Tito was indeed a traitor and we were convinced to hate him. They would say:

“Look, our Party is in the right! If it wasn’t for Tito we would have won the war.”

Listening to this made me think that if it wasn't for Tito perhaps they would not have started this war at all...

But getting back to our predicament today, had we just gotten a whack on the back with a big stick? That's what I thought! There were soldiers behind the border pointing their guns at us ready to shoot. And here we thought they were our allies and biggest supporters... We thought they were our friends because they supplied us with weapons and food and treated our wounded. But now, at this critical moment when we needed their help, they refused us... Did they want to enslave us, to imprison us in some camp or did they want to surrender us to our enemy? I don't know. On the one hand we had them on one side and the government army on the other, only a couple of kilometres away, ready to pounce on us with their tanks. The tanks were not there waiting for us to return if they thought we had skipped over the border and had fled to Yugoslavia. They were there waiting for us to return...

I was worried about all this and kept thinking:

What will happen to us? How long are we going to lie in this brook surrounded by the two armies?

At nightfall the Yugoslav troops brought us food and water. While we were eating, the battalion commander busied himself thinking how to get us out of this brook... and out of this predicament.

Late at night the commander informed us that he was going to divide the battalion into three large units and each unit was going to withdraw from here independently and that the three units would regroup in Albania. He did not say what direction to take and where and when we were to regroup in Albania. This information was to remain a secret that was only known to his assistants. He also said that the breakaway was to take place at night and in complete silence. That silence was to be broken only if there was no other way out.

He then ordered an inspection of weapons and ammunition.

I only had six bullets in my revolver.

We did not stand up for attendance. We just whispered lying down when our names were called. Only ten of us remained between us. The rest had defected to Yugoslavia. They left their weapons in the dry grass and deserted. We had much contempt for the deserters. We did not pick up their weapons... Every comrade in arms has contempt for deserters... Every army in the world has rules for deserters... those caught are court marshaled and shot. Our military court never did judge them, or all the others before them who had done the same, and no bullet found them.

I don't know what time it was when we left. One after another, step by step, we moved through darkness. There was no shade. Above us there were dense clouds. That's how we wanted it to be. To avoid having shadows... us, the hills, the rocks, the brooks... all of us to be one in the dark.

We were forbidden to cough, sneeze, breathe loudly... we were to take light steps like a cat on a hunt... We went in the opposite direction from the horn of the moon which, for only a moment, appeared in the sky over the opposite mountain. To our right was the lake which we left behind.

I already knew we were moving south. We were traveling along the slope of the hill above the village German. We were headed uphill crouched and taking quiet breaths...

In the dense and foggy grey we lay in our bunkers and trenches in Bela Voda. I was relieved being here. I did not feel comfortable lying motionless in the brook. I had many bad thoughts that bothered me, especially about meeting our end being trapped between two armies!?! Here, up high, on top of the mountain my bitterness, doubt and fear have disappeared, evaporated into the thin clean air.

We were quite tired that day. We were fatigued from having traveled a long distance quietly in the dark of night and from having to climb to the top of Bela Voda. We spent all the next day sleeping. We were awakened when it was dark.

In the evening we were gathered together by our commander. He informed us that our second breakaway was going to take place tonight. We were told that the same orders that were followed the night before were going to be followed tonight. Our destination, again, was going to be kept a secret. He underlined that we would be traveling only at night and that we would be passing through settlements, but only by their side and in complete silence.

We began our trek down the slope of the mountain passing through short bushes which hindered our stride. The column was led by the dead guards. A little after midnight we crossed the river Bistra and began our trek uphill towards Bigla. I knew these places. I had been here many times before. When we reached the foot of the hill, we were ordered to rest.

The commander took a dozen fighters and split from the unit. It seemed to me like he came back about a half an hour later. We all left after that and walked briefly. The place where we stopped was an overgrown dense beech tree grove under which was thick darkness. I heard a quiet knock on wood, then a sound of branches being tossed, then cracking of boards, like a door was opening. In the misty light of my battery powered flashlight I saw a huge black hole yawning between two large rocks. We entered the hole one after another. The area inside was quite large. There were crates stacked everywhere and piles of sacks. I just realized that this was one of our hidden storage places where we stored weapons, ammunition and food for the 40th Division. After we entered the opening the shelter door was closed off with thick planks. We lit torches inside. What a place! It had everything we needed here! The commander ordered us to open a few crates. They contained weapons, ammunition and several hand grenades. It would be nice for us to arm ourselves with automatic rifles. We then turned to the bags. They had sugar, flour, beans, pasta... we even found a bag of coffee beans and some bottles of wine. I asked myself: "Who up here, on these mountains, drinks coffee and wine?" In one of the corners I found a whole bunch of boxes. They were filled with chocolates. Further over I found more boxes full of new military boots, shoes and uniforms. There were loaves of bread, cheese and cans full of meat and marmalade. We were busy looking around until dawn and then spent the entire day sitting inside the cave.

In the many years I had spent in the whirlwind of war, this was the first time that I, we ate well and got some decent sleep.

We spent the entire day sheltered in the cave. Well-rested, fed and wearing new underwear and uniforms, new military boots and a backpack loaded with ammunition, we resumed our trek... we were headed south. After about an hour of walking the column stopped. The commander chose me and two of my friends to take the lead and scout for the column. It was our turn to replace the dead guard. With our weapons ready to fire, we walked about a hundred or so metres in front of the column. We were careful about where we took our next step in the dark. There was very little growth on the ground which made it easier for us to walk. This was the eighth or ninth time that I led the unit as a dead guard in this war.

Scouting for the unit on the march was a serious task. You had to move with your eyes wide open, looking in front of you and to your right and left. You had to be fully aware that someone in front of you may be hidden behind a stone, behind a rock, behind a tree trunk... watching you and holding you at gunpoint. If they fired and hit you then you saved the unit. And so we walked carefully and slowly down the slope and suddenly - boom!!!

I felt a strong and blunt blow to the side and on my head. I came to when they were bandaging my wounds. I was lying unconscious in the tall grass. I was hit so hard I could not take a step. I was not able to move. I thought they would carry me on a stretcher like the other time I was wounded, but...

Sitting beside me, my commander, in a low calm and begging voice slowly, as I remember it, said to me:

“Be brave Kalina... You and your friends walked into a minefield. You are alive but your friends did not make it. I feel very sorry for them and for you. The unit, however, must continue on its trek and is unable to carry you. I have decided to leave you behind. We will place you beside the road and tomorrow, when the government troops pass by here, the army will take you. I am convinced that when they see that you’re wounded, they will spare you. Stay here.

This way you may save the entire unit and hundreds of your comrades. This will be your heroic act... Stay here... I am not ordering you but I am begging you please... please... please... I am begging you!”

What could I do?

I could not hold up the entire unit just for me. It could be ambushed many times on its way and I could not have that on my conscience; to perish while carrying me on a stretcher? I could not have that!

I agreed and then asked my commander to leave my machine gun and one hand grenade with me; so that I could have something to defend myself with... Unfortunately they took everything... my weapons, my backpack and my military booklet.

They covered me with an army blanket and left.

I was all alone under the rain. Occasionally the hills flared up from the flashes of lightening and the mountains roared from the thunder. Black clouds covered the sky. The rainwater washed the clotted blood from my darkened face.

I endured a lot during that night but I hung on.

In the morning I heard the noise of a motorized vehicle. I saw a jeep with four soldiers approaching. I dragged myself to the middle of the road. I stuck my fingers between the stones on the road. I felt tears pooling in my eyes and mixing with the dirt on my face. I tasted bitter cold sweat in my mouth as I waited for the jeep to run me over.

I then heard the screech of brakes and loud cursing from the driver.

That’s all I heard.

Chapter - 3

I found myself in a military hospital where my wounds healed and all that remained were my scars.

They reminded me of my pain and of times and people gone. In moments like these everything that is nestled in the mind, heart and spirit awakens with bitterness and opens a very large wound, not full of pus but crusted over and flushed with blood. It lays deep in the soul and burns and hurts; a constant reminder of life which is carried in the mind, heart and spirit. And yes – in the consciousness. It is divided into two parts. One, obligation to help to save lives in the most difficult moments... Two, the personal part, my part, nestled deep inside me, which eats away at me, making me want to ask hundreds of questions that open more wounds, like this one...

The wound of the great, unforgettable memory which, however distant, has not faded with the passage of time is permanent, bitter and mean. No matter how hard you defend yourself it is stuck to you like glue, creating doubt and pain, disappointment and wanting to ask:

“Why did my friends abandon me to the whirlwind?!”

My wound was the question...

The wound of life... a bitter memory... A memory, no matter how close or distant, will not pale, will not be muddied by time, is permanent, bitter like wormwood, a bad nightmare, daily suffering, no matter how much you defend yourself it always reminds you to ask: “Why did my friends leave me?”

And is it not better then, when it hurts, not to tamper with the wound - memory?

My wound was the question...

Do I, in my consciousness, have enough strength to overcome, to spit out the bitterness that is embedded in my mind, heart and spirit?

My wound was the question...

That damn wound is still open and it hurts, it is a bloody wound that burns, disturbs, irritates and wants the question asked:

“Why?”

On the twentieth day of my treatment in the military hospital, I read something in the local daily newspaper that was issued to us to share, which among other things included the following:

“After wandering for a long time behind our heroic national army, a large group of communist bandits managed to cross the Greek-Albanian border...”

I understood. I did not read any more. I put the newspaper aside. I smiled, but very little, and said to myself:

“That was my unit... my unit... my unit was saved...”

Who saved it!?

* * *

The entire time that I was treated at a military hospital, I was constantly visited by investigators. They were from the military. They constantly asked me about my past. The questions and answers were always the same. I told them the same thing time after time. This routine, more or less, was repeated on a daily basis. Who am I, what family do I belong to, where am I from, where have I been, with whom, in which battle did I participate...

The investigators did not threaten me. They only asked questions, wrote things down and stuffed the papers in a blue envelope that grew thicker with each visit. They came in and left in silence, without any greetings.

Even though there were nine beds in the hospital room, in which lay the “Andartises” (a name the Greeks used to call the female

partisans), the room was always silent. I had the impression that we were all burdened with thoughts about our future...

“What is going to happen to me? When will they release me from this hospital? Where will I go? What would I do? How are things out there? Where is my family?”

One day I gained enough courage to ask the major who was interrogating me:

“Major, Sir, what are you going to do with me?”

He looked at me surprised and said:

“Nothing... You will go home, to your family... The war is over... Everyone is going home... except...”

I also asked the doctor. He just smiled and whispered:

“Everything is going to be fine. The war is over...”

I repeated the words “the war was over” all the time and everywhere I went, like a prayer, like those words carried all the hope in my world.

That’s what I used to tell myself... “The war was over and everyone was going home...”

It was a great deal to find yourself on the path that led you home... And the word “home” became my dream. I dreamed of the narrow alleyways, the tall walls around the yard, the wide open thick oak gate, the thick wooden threshold, the cobblestones in the yard, the chiseled stone stairs, the entrance to our house, the living room, the guest room, the...

And who am I going to find in front of the house, in the yard, on the stairs, in the rooms?

As I sat here in the hospital, I dreamed about home and in my dreams I could smell the bread baking in the oven, the smoke rising

above the roof... Ah, home... home... is there anything left of my home, anything that will remind me of the house in which I was born and grew up ... and that night they took me? Is there now a home? Who is at home? Questions and more questions begging to be answered...

“Everything is okay when there is no war...” This is what the doctor said.

I believed him...

The main doctor, a colonel with long years, visible by his tired eyes and by his unsure step, handed me my hospital discharge papers. He was an okay man; he had a peaceful look about him, a calming tone of voice and a light touch. He wished everyone in the hospital a speedy recovery. He was respected and loved by all, perhaps because most of the people in the hospital were his patients. When he handed me my papers he warned me:

“Wherever you go, whatever you do, please be careful... Be careful mostly from people... Go well and be happy...” he said and winked at me.

“Thank you... I will always remember you...” I replied.

With an easy gesture he showed me to the door where two men in civilian clothes were waiting for me. They asked me to go with them. I did not protest. They put me in a jeep and took me from the hospital directly to the police station. There they questioned me and finger printed me. After that they wrote a note with my personal data and something about my treatment in the hospital. The police chief signed the paper, placed it in a blue envelope which, as it turned out, later became part of me. Being in the envelope I would never be forgotten.

The next day the two men (who escorted me the day before) and I arrived in Kostur where I and the blue envelope were surrendered to the police. I was interrogated the entire day and, so as not to be forgotten, things were written down on paper and placed in the blue

envelope that traveled everywhere with me. After each time I was at the police station the envelope became thicker.

Up on the wall, behind the chief's back, a number of folders were neatly arranged. He asked me:

“Name and surname, name of your father, mother, grandfather, great grandfather, grandmother and great grandmother... place and date of birth...”

As I answered his questions he interrupted me and looked at the folders. He drew one out. It was covered with dust and tied with a cord. He blew the dust away and opened it. He flipped a few pages and stopped. He looked at me, hit the open folder with his hand and, in a sharp tone of voice, said:

“Yes, here you are...”

As he was leafing through the yellowed pages he raised his eyebrows, curled his forehead and stopped for a moment. He then looked at me and went back to leafing through the pages. After he flipped through everything he sighed deeply, hit the page with his finger and said:

“In here there is everything about you. Everything has been written. Allow me to briefly repeat. I see here that you were head of the village pioneers and that you visited village streets singing “Mlada Partizanka da odam” (I want to be a young partisan) and other songs like “A bre Makedonche” (Hey you Macedonian) and “Makedonsko ime nema da zagine” (The Macedonian name will not be forgotten). I see here that you then joined the organization EPON (Ενιαία Πανελλαδική Οργανωση Νεον) [Pan-Hellenic Youth Organization - formed on February 23, 1943 and outlawed by the Greek government in 1947. During the Greek Civil War it was restored by the CPG and disbanded by the CPG, in 1958] and one time you led the village youth organization and, in the spring of 1946, with the exception of a few, you organized the entire youth and brought them to Kostur to protest against the return of King George. Later on you helped the bandits (partisans) with information, food and clothing. Until you were captured you were active in fighting against the

Greek national army... In a word, you were against the state. Is that true?

“Your information is accurate but I was never against the state, I was against the regime, against the terror...” I replied.

He pushed me to sign the piece of paper that contained the information that he just read to me but I refused and said nothing more. The strong slap shut my mouth and my eyes.

He slammed the folder shut and put it back on the shelf. He then said:

“For people like you we have been issued orders to surrender you to the military courts where you will receive a lengthy prison sentence or death. You cannot stay here with a biography like yours. You will be sent to a camp for women, which is a lighter sentence. There, people like you will be re-educated to be useful and valuable citizens. It’s better being placed in the camps than rotting in prison for years.”

He pulled out a pre-printed sheet of paper from a drawer, filled it out with my personal information, signed it, stamped it and shoved it in front of my face.

I looked at the paper. It read: “Μερος εκτοπισμου για ενα χρονο στο ‘Στρατοπεδο Πειθαρχημενης Διαβιωσης’ στο Τρικερι σαν αμετανοητη και επικινδυνη”. (Place of residence for a year in the “camp for discipline” in Trikeri as irredeemable and dangerous.)

He then said: “Sign here acknowledging that you received the referral and tomorrow you will be on your way. This is like an identity card.”

Just then I remembered the doctor’s words when I left the hospital.

“The war ended... When there is no war, then everything is okay...”

Putting the piece of paper in my pocket I asked myself:

“Has the war ended for me?”

Chapter - 4

It took the old police truck two days to drag itself to the port of Volos. The trip lasted that long because the truck had to stop at many police stations along the way and collect more prisoners. We were packed like sardines. Finally they offloaded us in front of an anchored ship, called our names and then ordered us to climb up the long stairs aboard the vessel.

This was the first time I had seen a ship. I was afraid climbing up the stairs. The rocking of the ship in the troubled water made me feel strange; upset. There were two policemen with guns pointing at me who stood at each side of the ship's entrance. I took a step over the threshold and followed the narrow iron stairs leading down inside the ship. Step by step I came down below in the stable. That's what I heard them calling it – a stable. That's where they put us partisan girls who had participated in the “bandit war”. That's what they called the Greek Civil War – a bandit war.

The only light entering the stable came from two small windows, which barely provided enough scattered rays to cut the thick darkness inside to reveal the piles of rubbish on the floor. The stable had a terrible stench about it as if all the dirt and garbage from the entire ship had been collected for days, dumped there and left to rot.

The ship sat in the port for a long time. There was very little circulation of air in the ship's stables. We kept calling them to open the windows so that we could breathe. But instead of giving us air they turned up the music and played military marches. The noise was so loud that we could not hear ourselves think. The loud music continued uninterrupted, one march after another. They repeated the marches over and over. Some were sung by choirs, like the songs “Greece will never die” and “Sofia and Moscow are our dream”. The loud music was not played to please us but to drown out our demands for more air and to stop us from talking to one another. For the most part we had to plug our ears to avoid listening to the horrible loud music and were forced to communicate by facial and hand gestures.

The wait was very long.

They closed the lids over the stables. A sharp loud whistle echoed. The ship began to shake and tilted slightly to the left, then to the right. And after several more whistles the ship began to slowly leave the harbour.

The loud music coming from the speakers was turned up. They not only wanted us to hear the marches, they wanted us to dream them in our dreams... They wanted us to dream their dream that they would march to Sofia and Moscow.

The ship was constantly rocking... to the left... then to the right... over and over again. One of the women prisoners yelled: "There is turbulence in the sea." I don't know what it was, the lack of air or something else, but I was feeling very sick, my stomach went up and down and after a while I started to vomit. I could not go out of the stable because an armed police officer was guarding the exit and we were not allowed to leave the stable... I felt ill and fell at the feet of the policeman. I came too on deck. I felt the fresh air in my face. I recovered. I regained my wits. I leaned on the ship's wall and began to inhale the salty air deeply.

This was the first time I had seen the sea and traveled by ship. This was the first time I had seen waves and, when the water was calm, stars soaking deep in it. There were stars high up in the sky and there were stars deep in the water. Water, water and only water... there was water in front of me, all around me and below me...

They took me back to the stable. I lay on the dirty floor. I had nothing to put under or over me... nothing to cover myself with... I had nothing except for the clothes on my back that I was given when I left the hospital.

In the morning the ship stopped. They ordered us to come up on deck. In the crack of dawn I saw ugly rocks ahead of us with white snow, like froth violently splashing on them.

From the distance the island looked green and peaceful. Just a few houses, a lot of olive trees and several little fishing boats tied in the tiny harbour.

They ordered us to get off the ship one by one and then lined us up against a grey boulder near the shore.

We had arrived at Trikeri...

We spent the night on shore, on the wet sand where they offloaded us. The next day they loaded us with supplies and marched us uphill to a monastery located on top of a hill. We carried everything from the ship on our backs. Step by step we climbed up a steep slope overgrown with bushes and thorn trees.

The monastery was abandoned. It had no doors or windows. Everything was rotting inside. There was mold growing in the corners.

They gave us quarters in the damp, moldy and cold monastic cells and in the basements. It was dark at night. The air stunk of moisture and mold. The stench was putrid. It was burning hot in the day, especially under the scorching sun. We were thirsty... It was prohibited for us to get close to the shade of the few olive trees. We spent the first few days and nights in torment before the next ship arrived and brought small and large American military tents. The sailors tossed all our supplies overboard on the shore and from there we picked them up and carried them on our backs to the top of the hill.

* * *

The interrogator, a military man, persistently tried to extract more information from me and kept repeating the same question:

“How many of our people did you kill?”

And I persistently replied: “I don’t know, I don’t know; maybe one, maybe ten, maybe twenty, or maybe none. When you shoot from a trench or from a bunker or when you charge, you don’t count, you just keep your head down and shoot. You do not count! You just shoot, shoot and shoot, sometimes with eyes open sometimes with eyes shut, you just shoot and you don’t count. Yes, soldiers fell in

front of our position... yes they were shot... yes they shouted, called for help and prayed... Did I shoot them? I don't know. Maybe... It was a war and a war is just killing and mutilation. You know that? Perhaps you, yourself participated? If you held a position, or participated in an attack then you were not there to admire the scenery, you were there to kill and the rules of the game are that if you don't kill them they will kill you... perhaps you will wound or get wounded but the aim is to kill, the goal is to bring death to the opponent. This is what soldiers are trained to do because the essence of war is to kill the opponent. That's what they teach soldiers everywhere, even us up there on the mountains... that's what we were taught. Kill so they don't kill you. This is what the school of war is about. From the first day you put on a military uniform and shoulder a rifle, your education is to learn to kill. This is how it is everywhere... they teach you how to kill..." I said this seriously and with confidence because this is what others up there on the mountains had told me.

"How many of our people did you kill?" he asked the same question again.

Again I gave him the same answer.

"That's all for today..." he said, put his pieces of paper in a folder, closed the folder and, with partly closed eyes, gave me a cold stare. He then lit a cigarette, blew his first puff of smoke in my face and loudly said:

"Duty officer! Take this woman to the other women!"

The room to which the duty officer took me was full of women. They stood side by side, shoulder to shoulder, with some leaning on others. I looked for a place to stand. There was none. I pushed my way past them and got to the corner. There was enough space for my two feet. I tried to kneel. There was no space. I remained standing.

* * *

The next interrogation began with a slight nod and some benevolence in the interrogator's voice. He had a calm and amiable

look about him and a bright smile on his face. He gestured for me to sit down on the other side of the table opposite to him.

He looked at me with a peaceful look on his face leaving the impression that he cared, but during the interrogation slowly, very slowly he lost the peaceful look. His voice became rough and sharp, his eyes piercing full of sparks of disdain, cruelty and hatred...

“Child... young lady... here is a piece of paper and a pen...” he said.

“Why? What is this?” I asked.

“This is your pass to get you out of here. You don’t have to read it. Sign and go home, don’t be like those rotten women who we have collected from the streets and cafes of Athens for fornicating...”

He again gawked at me and said:

“Sign!! They are waiting for you at home...”

I knew very well who these women and girls were. That’s the way it was. They collected women and girls from the streets, cafes and taverns and locked them up in the cells. Many of them were suffering from venereal diseases. These women laughed and made fun of us and spoke about disgusting things with shameful words. They brought strange men dressed in women’s clothing. They lay between us at every opportunity... anywhere they could find space. They teased us. For as long I was in the mountains and everywhere else, while I was a soldier, I lay between men in the same trench and in the same bunker. We breathed the same air face to face, we warmed our bodies body to body, but none of the men lay a hand or said anything hurtful to me... they were honest and decent...

“You, girl, I see you are a nice looking, robust, mature woman ready to be married. What are you doing among these nasty women? You don’t belong among them. There is not a nice word coming out of any of them. They constantly threaten, some are more threatening than others, they are abusive, and some swear and curse terribly... Your future is black here...” he said. When he was talking slowly

in a low tone of voice that's when he was best describing the hell I was living with a final outcome – being executed.

I kept quiet and stared into his eyes, which grew as his anger intensified, as his dictionary was enriched with new threats and new swear words. His eyes grew and shrank opening and narrowing, filling with hatred and more anger. It seemed like they were about to burst and madness would flow out of them as his tantrums continued. When threats were no longer enough to bring fear into my eyes, he raised his voice and, with an even sharper tone of voice, shouted:

“Sign! Sign! Here it says that you think that you are infected with some sort of idea that you can only dream of. But you can't live in a dream. There is no doubt that such stubbornness will cost you your life. If that's what you want then go ahead be stubborn, you will certainly condemn yourself and you will be shot. And let me tell you this... You will not be the first or the last to be shot. All of you who were brought here will be sentenced to death. So I sincerely advise you to give up your past and sign this statement of regret...”

“No! I will not sign... What you are asking me to do is nothing more than to defame myself, to humiliate myself, to turn myself into nothing... without honour and without dignity...” I replied.

Δύλωση μετανοίας - statement of regret – were the only two words that truly mattered, that were repeated every day with each interrogation... words that stood behind threats of beatings, threats of jail time, threats of being shot... there was nothing more important, nothing more necessary, but the... statement of remorse... for the promise of freedom, life and an open door to exit the cell, the camp and the nightmare... These two words were spoken by the mouths of every guard, service person, driver... everyone who wore a uniform, carried a weapon, a stick, or a whip...

Δύλωση μετανοίας – statement of regret... Signing such a statement was a gift of life, hung over our heads like a sharp axe, ready to fall and smash our head at any moment...

My silence, my persistent silence – my refusal to sign - made them wild, drove them crazy to threaten and invent new ways of intimidation and, every day, do something more radical to mistreat us, to torture us... and make the evil worse.

I was insulted with every dirty word in the dictionary and I kept silent. Even though I was boiling deep inside, I kept quiet even when they filled my file with imaginary accusations. Even though I was boiling with growing anger and I felt like I was going to explode, I kept my cool. Even when it felt like I was going to erupt and pounce on their neck and cut their throat with my teeth... I kept quiet. I suffered but I restrained myself with great effort in order to weather the storm...

“It says here young lady that you have been contaminated with dangerous ideas which will put you six feet under. Many have ended up there. Give it up, sign the statement and you can go home tomorrow,” he said.

“No...” I replied.

“Seize this opportunity and sign... There is only one way out of here... sign! Otherwise the dark will eat you up and nobody will find out what happened to you...” he demanded.

“No... I will not accept humiliation, I will not accept to be turned to nothing...” I replied.

The interrogator had a long arm and a wide palm. With a single swing he took my breath away and put my lights out. When I came to they took me to the basement. The basement was a torture chamber. Behind the table was a policeman. He was frowning. His sleeves were rolled up above his elbows.

“Get closer!” he ordered. “Sit down! Now lean over!”

“This is how it’s going to be... Well, tell me now, are you going to sign?” he asked.

I kept quiet.

“I am asking you!” he said.

I kept quiet.

“It is only a signature! Are you going to suffer for a signature?!” he asked.

“Yes...” I replied.

Without warning, he began to slap me hard... I saw stars... then lightening and thunder.

The silence turned into ugly yelling as he continued to slap me repeatedly, pausing slightly after each slap, waiting for me to say something... Perhaps he was hoping I would plead with him or beg him to stop. But I did not plead, I did not beg and I did not cry... I just took the abuse... I felt a knot in my throat but held on... It was painful. The knot in my throat was my cry of horror...

Was I yelling? Yes I was yelling... a lot. But I was not begging or pleading... just yelling... He was not hitting me to kill me, he was hitting me to torture me... to torment me... at that point I should have wished for death, that way I would have died once instead of every day. In those dire moments I prayed to God to save the power of my mind so that I wouldn't go insane. If they are going to kill me, I prayed, please God let them kill me the way I am, and not crazy, because murdering a crazy person can be justified.

Dark, dense, blacker than black.

I woke up with my head stuck in the corner and with the torturer standing above me holding a bucket full of filth. When I opened my eyes he dumped the contents of the bucket all over me. I wiped my face with the palm of my hand, looked up at him and whispered:

“Pray that nothing like this happens to your mother and to your sister... or” but before I was finished whispering he kicked me in the stomach and extinguished my words.

I was repeatedly kicked, punched, whipped with a whip made of braided wire and hit with sticks... I was yelled at, screamed at and cursed with the vilest words... but I endured.

He beat me every day...

They took me back to my cell on a stretcher.

I endured the pain from the beatings. I also endured the fear. It somehow encouraged me... It not only gave me courage but also gave me strength and made me feel content. It is a strange feeling to feel content when you are in pain. As I lay there motionless I could feel my entire body hurt and I would say to myself:

“If it hurts it means that I am alive.”

Pain is life. If you feel pain, it means you're alive. When I was in a lot of pain I yelled, to hear my own voice. And my voice told me that I was alive.

This was the kind of pain I had to endure in the partisan hospital when the doctors did not have sufficient medication to put me to sleep and were operating on me without anesthetic. But my pain subsided after I lay in bed, after they gave me something that warmed me up. After that the pain began to slowly subside, to drain, to drain out of me. I filled my mind with images of the sky, the mountains, hills, rocks, meadows, springs, brooks, rivers, flowers, trees and the people whom I dearly loved... then I fell asleep...

If you don't know how to bear and endure it, pain can be a large weight on you, which eventually will take you down, crush you and turn you into nothing. This was what they wanted to do with me.

I was numbed from the pain... Then I used to say to myself:

“I am alive...”

I was happy even though I felt that I was holding on with my last ounce of strength and constantly thought that I was dying.

I was in pain. Therefore I was alive.

And down there, in the basement, when I was listening to my own horrible screams, I would say to myself: “I am alive and becoming stronger with each beating...” I kept repeating that to myself.

My screaming, my yelling, my crying, my swearing and my whispering to myself were all signs that I was alive...

Even the smallest, barely visible movement of any part of my body, my tortured body, was a little sign of life.

They beat me, but I held on defiantly...

Stubbornness too is a sign of life. Being stubborn means that you are defiant, you endure... Stubbornness in the police basement is life, existence, opposition to evil, to horror, to humiliation... There, in the police cellars you are not allowed to die from beatings. You are only allowed to come out crippled or crazy.

I did not want to lose the thought that feeling pain meant I was alive... After each beating, deep down, I hid the horror, the despair and the persistent hopelessness and swallowed my pain without crying. I squeeze my eyes so that my tears of suffering did not flow and they remained hidden from my tormentors.

I endured the pain and in me boiled the thought that I was alive, rejoicing, feeling triumphant... I thought and said to myself: “I am alive! I am alive!” And at that moment I felt myself swell deep inside with joy. I wanted to talk, I wanted to say out loud that I was alive but my lips were swollen and sore, I could not push a word past them. Every word I tried to say spun in my mouth and, together with my bloody saliva, drowned in my throat.

Every time, after each beating, after I recovered, I would say to myself: “I am alive...” and to make sure that I was alive I would pinch my cheeks, squeeze my nose, bite my lips and tongue.

Then?

After that I would sink into oblivion. With great concern the women around me would try to revive me so that I could regain my composure.

I was very happy when the women gathered around me and comforted and encouraged me. I expressed my gratitude with a slight smile. And when I was unable to go out for the mandatory prison walk, I collected the blue and gentle leaves of the unforgotten that had fallen between the stones and gave them to them as gifts. All my gratitude, respect and love for the women and girls who looked after me and who encouraged me was in those leaves.

During that time, the time of horror, we were all one body and one soul...

* * *

During one of our regular interrogations I asked the interrogator:

“What do the words ‘vulgara’ (female version of Bulgarian) and ‘paleovulgara’ (female version of old Bulgarian) mean to you? Why do you call me that at each interrogation? And let me tell you one more thing... you can be sure that the more you insult and humiliate me, the more I will persist to be firm... and know that I will not sign because for me signing means I give up on life...”

After a long pause of silence the interrogator said:

“Any woman who is not Greek is Bulgarian...”

To that I said: “You call all the women in the camp ‘vulgares’, are none of them Greek?”

“Yes, they are all Greek but they are not decent. They are insolent, especially towards their fatherland, and that’s why they are here... are you satisfied now?” he replied.

“No!” I said.

“Silence!!! Paleovulgara!!!” he yelled at me.

Two policemen ran in, grabbed me by my arms and took me down to the basement. And from there they threw me into a dark cell while I was still unconscious. The cell was very small; I could touch the walls with my feet and hands while I was lying down. I recovered quickly thanks to the humidity and coolness of the cell.

I gathered all my strength and slowly rose up but was unable to stand up straight. The ceiling was very low. I sat on the wet floor. There was a weak beam of light coming from a small crack under the door. I don't know how long they kept me in this hole. I also don't know what time they took me out of there, dragged me down the hall and threw me into another cell. It was full of women. There were many of them. Half lying down half sitting up, they were crumpled together, body to body, sleeping. They languished here day and night, waiting for their fate to be determined.

They were beaten, bleeding and smelled foul, they breathed the moldy air saturated with the stench of clotted blood and the smell emanating from the buckets full of filth. Many of them constantly coughed. A little fresh air entered the cell when they brought someone in or took someone out.

They opened the door in the morning for just half an hour and allowed us to stretch, go to the washroom and empty the filth buckets. It was forbidden for us to talk or touch each other... not even to shake hands... We were only allowed to breathe the fresh air.

There were many prisoners from across the country; villagers, homemakers, teachers, professors, scientists as well as illiterate women. I was one of them.

But that did not matter, we were all the same here, I lived the same life as they did. These same torturers tormented us all and we all suffered the same pain. It was easier for some and harder for others. The interrogators, the policemen, the torturers, the laws, the courts and the state were the all the same for all of us.

I was just one of them in that big, smelly cell...

The nights were particularly torturous. There were many interruptions during the night... blaring loud music over the loudspeakers, playing recorded voices crying, pleading, moaning, begging... These were the voices of battered women. We listened to them with clenched hearts, fear and agony... After that they would play music again... and suddenly the cell door would fling open and two policemen would grab another woman and take her to be tortured. They would play her cries of pain over the loudspeakers. And then, suddenly, there would be silence and a strong knock of the cell door opening followed by the slamming of the tormented body being dropped on the cell floor...

How could you help her?!...

* * *

The often practiced way of multiple interruptions kept us up most nights. When they came down to our cells they carried strong flashlights and lit them straight in our eyes. During the day they often lined us up facing the sun. Even light was used as torture.

They used bright light – day or night – to burn our bodies and our spirits...

Chapter - 5

During the first days of January 1950 we heard voices saying that they would be moving us to the island Makronisos. From the scant news we received, mainly from the letters that had arrived, we learned about the horrible things that were done to the prisoners on that island... the news filled us with terrible fears. But we did not have to wait long before we learned more from our own camp commander, who ordered us to line up in front of our tents.

It was raining hard that day. The rain was mixed with snow. We were freezing, barely being able to stand up, while we waited for the commander to appear.

We waited and waited... and waited.

Finally he came out and climbed on the stage. Then, after looking at us with certain sympathy and, at first modest and restrained fascination, he shamelessly said that the life we were living on Trikeri... on this island... despite all its difficulties, was idyllic compared to the life we were going to experience in Makronisos. He also advised us to sign the statement of repentance immediately, so that we could go home, otherwise we were going to Makronisos where they would force us to repent, if we didn't then there would be certain death for us.

He stopped talking for a moment... looking like a hungry wolf... and again began talking, attempting to convince us that there was no hope for us of ever returning to our homes by the end of our lives if we didn't sign. If we didn't sign, he said, we would stay on this island, then on another island and on the many islands that belong to Greece. And that we could only be saved if we signed.

His words crushed the spirit of many women. One after another, or two by two, more women went to sign the statement of repentance. They went and turned their heads to look at us for the last time. A terrible look of defeat was written all over their faces. They were fully aware that they were leaving us in the wild hands of our torturers. Almost all of them, who separated themselves from us, had husbands, brothers, sisters, fiancés and close relatives killed in

the war. Their last wish was to return home to their towns and villages, to their homes looted and laid waste, to escape the hell of exile.

A few hours later that same day, still standing lined up under the snow and strong cold wind, the commander ordered us to take off our jackets, shoes and head kerchiefs.

We obeyed the order.

“And now,” he shouted furiously, “I want you to line up in a straight line, in rows of three. Then I want you to run and I want to hear a single step with each step you all take! Now run!!!”

We ran twenty laps. We were exhausted, barely able to breathe. Some of us were falling on the wet snow and those who could not keep up with the rhythm of the music blaring from the loudspeaker, were ruthlessly beaten with sticks and whips by the police officers. The commander reveled in the terror and, with his sinister and ugly smile, cheered on the tormentors who beat us.

We did not yell or protest even though the many blows we received hurt a lot. Our silence infuriated and outraged the commander and the police who then beat us even harder. Then, with a single shout: “HALT” the running ended.

Beaten, disappointed and thoroughly exhausted we stopped running and silently collected our belongings; jackets, shoes and head kerchiefs.

That was a terrible day; a day of warning, of what awaited us in Makronisos.

The next day was a day of preparation for departure. They woke us at dawn and ordered everyone to gather everything that belonged to the camp including tents, barbed wire, stakes, cauldrons, boilers... everything to the last rusty nail... and bring them to a designated place.

The snow that fell the day before had not completely melted and the strong wind blowing from the north was freezing it. The snow was not the only thing freezing... our courage, however little we had, seemed to have also been frozen... We collected everything and brought it to the designated place. After that, without giving us a moment's rest, they ordered us to take it all down to the beach. It was now night time and we had to walk in the dark and in the snow from the Monastery to the beach - a very steep slope. Loaded, we went down hill on a narrow path escorted by profanities and insults and beaten with sticks and whips.

We found it painfully hard to walk loaded down hill, in the dark, with nothing to grab onto, to stop us from sliding.

The third day was cold, grey and wet... the sky was dark. A large freighter was anchored in the port.

“Here are your orders!” someone yelled.

“Everything that was delivered and is lying on the beach must be loaded on the ship!”

Everything that belonged to the camp we loaded right away. After that, after about midnight, we loaded our own belongings.

I had only one bag and nothing else to transfer. They lined us up on the beach and under the lights of battery powered flashlights they counted us and ordered us to climb aboard single file. The steps up were narrow and unsteady. Strong waves were battering the ship being boarded by one thousand one hundred and forty-five women ages sixteen to eighty-two.

That's how many the policeman who stood at the entrance counted and wrote down in his notebook.

We descended down into the stables. Filth and stench. The air was putrid. The stables were quickly filling up and there was no place to sit. We were exhausted from working all day. We were thirsty and hungry. We hadn't slept for a long time and we were all looking for a place to sit. There was none. We stood tightly packed together and

started having difficulty breathing... there was a lack of air. We started yelling for them to open the tiny windows. There was no answer. Instead of air, they played music - military marches echoed from the loudspeakers.

The ship left the port sometime after midnight but our uncertainty, the great fear in our eyes and the many questions glued to our thirsty lips, still remained.

“What would happen to us now...?”

I stood pressed against the wall and tried to imagine that Makronisos was no worse; at least in terms of the difficulties I had experienced in the recent months spent in Trikeri.

I told myself: “I am sure there too will be more fear and more tortures of body, soul and thought...”

The ship traveled for a long time so there was plenty of time for reflection.

During the day we were joined by a boat full of soldiers. Some were transferred to our boat and they told us that they were ordered to help us unload the ship when we arrived in Makronisos. They then pointed to the island to which we were going.

The island was an awful sight. It was an elongated naked island and the closer we came the better we could see that there were no trees. The island was bare-naked with cliffs hanging over the sea. There was no sign of anything green. The oblong island was naked with steep and high rocky shores. It looked like a petrified monster flogged by frothing high waves. When the ship got closer I saw tents pitched in straight lines.

The ship remained at sea during the night. Then in the morning, with much difficulty, it was anchored to a concrete platform. In the morning light the island was everything we expected and worse...

We got off the ship in silence and, with strangled breath of alarm, we stepped on land in Makronisos...

Did I have any hope?

I was convinced that this bare rock did not look like earth, but I did hope that my days and nights would not be as bad as those on Trikeri where I was made into a martyr. I also hoped that I would have the strength to endure the storms that were conveyed to me in whispers and news about this infamous island of horrors...

* * *

By dawn, with help from soldiers, we unloaded everything we had loaded in Trikeri.

When I stopped for a moment to collect my breath, I looked into the distance and, with my own yes, I saw how hideous and terrible this island was.

An officer, with the capital letters A.M. sewn on his right sleeve, ordered us to line up in threes and, under rifles pointed at us by an entire line of soldiers, who also had the same letters on their sleeves, marched us to the square. There on the stage were generals, colonels, police chiefs and a bishop. A captain welcomed us on behalf of camp command with the words:

“The idyllic life you lived in the other places during your exile has irrevocably ended. Now you belong to OAM (Οργανισμος Αναμορφωσης Μακρονισου - Society for rehabilitation in Makronisos) and are part of AETO (Α Ειδικον Ταγμα Οπλιτων - First Separate Battalion of Soldiers) and your school is called ESAG (Ειδικη Σχολη Αναμορφωσης Γυνεκων - Special school for the rehabilitation of women). Your life in AETO/ESAG will be very difficult. It will depend entirely on you how long you survive. We will do everything in our power to quickly return you to the bosom of the nation. If you don't do that, I am warning you; all provisions of the law will be applied to force you to change your opinion. I have the honour to inform you that our esteemed commander has given you three days to change your mind. After that there will be no mercy. The process will be the same for both men and women.

There will be no pity. The law applies to everyone regardless of gender or age...

After that one of the generals greeted us by giving us our first lecture on the curriculum for rehabilitation. He began something like this:

“Our victorious national army defeated the partisan bandits... Today, from this moment on, I officially declare war on you... If you don’t sign the statement of remorse then you will wander barefoot, naked, hungry and thirsty over the precipices and you will eat snakes and dead horses and mules... I also promise you that if you proceed according to the law, you will go home soon. Before you came here the holy land of Makronisos, on which you are now treading, was stomped by forty thousand men who had left inclinations. But we re-educated them and they were well received by the bosom of our homeland. The same thing will happen to you. We have many means and methods available to make you choose the right path. If you don’t want to do this in a civilized manner, then we will show you another side... First we will give you three days to think about it... for your own good... Don’t forget, you have three days to think about it...”

The lecture contained many other threats and intimidation and promises to send us home... only if we repented...

We were ordered to leave the square. The loudspeakers came on and began to loudly pour out a military march. It was the anthem of the island and went something like this:

Μακρονησι σεμνο, σκαπανεων αγκαλη
μια πατριδα ηρωων με δοξα μεγαλη
μια πατριδα μεγαλη, τρανη κι οχι σκλαβων
η φοβερα κι ο ταφος των βαρβαρων Σλαβων

(Humble Makronisos, embrace of the great ones, homeland of heroes, a great glory, a great country, but not of the slaves but of fears and a grave for the Slavic barbarians).

They placed us in tents that were set up prior to our arrival. And from that moment on the countdown for what was to be done with us began. At night, every hour the loud speaker came on to remind us:

“Women of ESAG. The clock is ticking. Do not waste time!”

Packed and frozen stiff in the cold tents, we listened to the reminders. Uncertainty and fear began to grow in all of us. The days and nights passed. The third day was January 29. At three o'clock in the afternoon that day they gathered us all in the square. The commander ordered us to sit down. Soldiers, officers and alfamiti (military policemen on the island marked with the letters AM) with all kinds of military equipment were placed all around us. There was complete silence. The commander stood behind the microphone and began to shout:

“Poisonous snakes! The time has passed! Look around you for the last time; look at the sea, the sun, the light. If you don't sign, you will die. For you there is no mercy! No philanthropy! Today you will have to sign if you want to or not!!! We did not bring you here to live, but to die. If you don't want to die, then sign!”

His face and eyes were glowing, a reflection of evil and hatred.

He paused for a moment and then addressed the alfamiti. He said: “I now surrender them to you. They are in your hands; you can do with them as you wish...” He then urged all forces to deal with us whores and traitors...

That's what the alfamiti were waiting for. They had sticks, yardsticks, iron rods, whips... in their hands. We all huddled together in a bunch, tight against one another.

“The time has passed!” shouted the commander.

The alfamiti lined us up then divided us into groups of forty women and ordered us to walk. Two alfamiti walked in front of us and two behind us. We did not know where they were taking us. We stopped at the shore. They lined us up about three steps away from an abyss.

They then, one by one, pulled us by the hair and made us look down. Roaring mad waves were crushing the walls at the bottom. Fear grew in me as I thought that they, one by one, would toss us into the abyss.

After everyone was given a turn to look down into the abyss, one of the alfamiti said: “Whoever does not want to find themselves in the bottom of the abyss, drowning in the wild waves, may step aside”. There was silence... Anticipation... In the silence that followed about fifty women separated themselves from the rest and stood about twenty metres away from the abyss.

Several alfamiti lined them up and led them back to command. The others, the ones who remained behind, were ordered to keep walking. And we did. We were given an opportunity to tour the rest of our island and prison...

I could not shake off the fear that had gripped me earlier. I was frozen with fear... it took my breath away.

As we walked along all I could see was grey rock. The island was ruthlessly beaten by waves from all directions. I saw no beauty, no tree, no grass and no trace of green... I heard no bird singing and saw none in flight. All I saw was stone and sand. The wind was blowing fine sand into my mouth, nose and eyes... and all I felt under my feet were angular, pointed and sharp pieces of stone that caused my feet to bleed.

I was stepping on barren and dry land which later would become my daily companion, which I would regularly dampen with my tears and sweat...

The alfamiti took us to the other side of the island where they showed us even more terrible precipices. Above them, along the full width, was a large rock that extended right down into the base. These were deep chasms. When I saw them it reminded me of what a soldier, a prisoner who was sent to Trikeri, had told me. He said: “There, in those depths is the abyss of death where they torture you until you sign...”

They returned us to our tents late in the afternoon and gave us cold beans and a piece of moldy bread to eat. This was our entire meal for the day. But even before we had a chance to eat our beans, they crashed into our tents screaming, swearing, insulting and threatening and ordered us all out of our tents. They then ordered us to line up. As soon as we did they began to beat us with whips, sticks, fists... punching, pulling hair, kicking, slapping... Left and right the battered women kept falling down. The air was filled with shrieks of horror and screams and cries of pain. The alfamiti brought stretchers and took away those who were down and did not have the strength to stand up... those who lay in the sand bleeding.

I heard the ominous whip whistle as it hit my head and shoulders.

I counted: "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven..."

I counted up to twenty before I fell down. I lay down and protected my head with my arms. I felt the heavy military boots everywhere on my body. I was numb from being kicked. As he continued to kick the alfamiti standing above me, in a hoarse voice, kept yelling:

"Come on bitch, now, now bitch, sign! Will you sign or do I have to kill you?!"

The alfamiti stopped kicking me, grabbed me by my hair, lifted me up and then ordered me to take off my shoes. When I did he yelled:

Forward! Walk in front of me! Walk to the abyss!

I walked.

My feet were sore. I trudged along the sharp-edged stones. My shoulder and my head were sore from being whipped but I made it to the abyss on my own power. He then ordered me to look down.

I looked down, the sea water was roaring. It was boiling. It was madly hitting the rocks... I froze... I was petrified...

"Will you now sign?" the alfamiti growled behind me.

I turned a bit and shook my head... no!

“Are you going to jump or shall I push you?” he screamed.

“I will jump!” I yelled loudly and took a step toward the abyss.

He did not allow me to jump. He grabbed me by my shoulder, pulled me back a couple of steps and hit me hard with his fist. I fell down. He jumped on me and with his heavy boots began to dance the Sirtaki (a Greek dance) all over my body... I jerked with each step, with each blow and prayed that I remain rigid and silent for the next blow and that each blow silenced my cry of pain. When the pain was strong my body burned the most and with each blow I yelled:

“More! More!”

I felt more at ease and could hold out longer when I mocked my tormentor.

He took me back to command. There were tables laid out with sheets of paper and pens. There were women sitting down behind the table with their heads bowed down, signing. The alfamiti forced me to sit down and ordered me to sign.

I said: “No!”

He tried to force a pen into my hand but I tossed it away.

He slapped me hard on the face. I saw stars and felt dizzy. Droplets of blood were dripping into my lap. Two alfamiti took me by my arms and dragged me into a small shed where I remained all night fighting with hungry rats. The worst thing about being there in the dark was the thought that they would force a pen into my hand and draw a signature out of me.

The thought of that happening was tormenting me.

They returned me back to my tent all black and blue and bloodied from the beatings. The camp commander was there threatening the women prisoners who had also been beaten and bleeding. He said:

“None of you are leaving here alive unless you sign. You will suffer here and you will die here... and the worms will eat your rotting bodies here!”

They left me alone for several hours. I tried to pull myself together and rub the parts of my body that hurt the most. I kept telling myself that this storm too would pass and to be patient. When I felt better, as much as I could, I helped the other women, the ones who had suffered even more...

Sometime after midnight a new madness gripped the alfamiti. They stormed our tents wearing black face masks and, with the same threats, the same whips, rods, hammers and iron bars, beat us all over again.

There was screaming, shouting, whining, moaning and begging... women were bleeding and falling unconscious everywhere... everything was mixed in this new cry of horror...

This is how the day and night of January 30, 1950 ended.

And this is how we spent the days and nights that followed.

* * *

We were awakened at the crack of dawn with the sound of three short blows from a military trumpet. The alfamiti would crash our tents shouting and swearing and would chase us out. We would rush out with our eyes half-open and dreams unfinished and line up in front of our tents. The last ones to join the line, in addition to being denigrated and called everything vile and dirty, were also kicked and whipped with sticks and whips. They would count us and divide us into two rows. Breakfast consisted of a piece of bread and salted fish. After that we were returned to the line and made to stand at attention. It was forbidden to speak. We would wait and wait. We waited for the commander... Finally when he arrived, he would walk between the lines and stare into our eyes.

“She who has decided to sign the statement of repentance, step forward three steps!” he would then blurt out loud.

And then he would wait.

He would whip his palm with his whip while staring at us, looking for weakness, eyes filled with hatred. This is what he did every day.

No one would step out of the line.

Then he would give the order:

“This row in the direction of the quarry! This row to the other side of the island! March!!!”

They would order the line to straighten and they would count us again while thundering over the speakers:

Σοφια, Μοσχα ειναι το ονειρο μας
(Sofia, Moscow in our dream)

Then the speakers would go silent and they would order us to march. We took steps in the sand as if we were taking steps to Sofia and Moscow.

Lined up we would march towards the stones. That’s where the hammers, the picks and the rocks waited for us.

We would line up, one behind the other in a long queue, barefoot. We would then walk through the cold and sharp gravel of crushed marble.

The quarry was not too far but the road that led there was unusually long. There was a big pile of stones, large and sharp stones, large enough to cover the entire shoulder and sharp enough to cut flesh. We were each ordered to pick up a stone and place it on our shoulder. The alfamiti made sure mine was large and had many sharp edges. I picked up the stone and placed it on my shoulder and, with my heart pounding and my soul full with fear, I walked down the path to the other side of the island. Somewhere in the middle of

the road the two lines met. One line placed the stones from the quarry in a pile and the other line took them from the pile and returned them to the quarry. And so we gave the stones a ride from the quarry to the shore and from the shore back to the quarry. And while doing so, we the slave women of Makronisos with bleeding feet and shoulders, left our sweat and blood on the crushed marble stones. And then when the lines changed places, we quietly whispered to each other:

“Cheer up! Keep your head up!”

These words often did not go unnoticed and landed us in trouble. More often than not we became victims of the whip, fist and stick... a tiny whisper... an impetuous look while passing by... words passed on from mouth to mouth, barely audible... lips barely moving... from burned lip to burned thirsty lip... yet enough to land us in trouble... to have us whipped and beaten...

“Cheer up!” we whispered moving along like living skeletons... a spark of defiance...

“Cheer up!” the long lines of women whispered while bent under the weight of the stones that cut the living flesh of their one time fragile female bodies.

They always returned us to our tents late. We were exhausted from carrying stones and frozen and, in the warmer months, burned by the sun, our only wish was to lie down, to rest, to refresh our rotten bodies with a nap. But we were not allowed. The alfamiti violently entered our tents at night and danced the evil dance over us.

It was part of the curriculum for national rehabilitation.

* * *

You can't recognize anyone in the dark so we endured our pain and lay in our own blood until dawn. They came in the morning to check on us and see if we were still alive. They looked at us all wounded and bloody and sneered and then pretended to be surprised by the bloody spectacle. Then they would again force us to line up, go

down the steep bank and wash in the salty seawater. Our wounds burned from the salt. There would be dead corpses on the bank. The waves pulling them back and forth, hitting the rocky coast with them and tossing them out again... into the deep...

These were the bodies of those gone mad or of those killed during the night. The alfamiti threw them there in the dark of night...

The horror of the scene made our hearts freeze, it filled us with fear. But our fears subsided on the way back to our tents. Part of our line was pulled out and sent along the road that led to camp command.

That's where the signing of the statement of repentance took place...

* * *

It was morning. Five alfamiti entered our tent. One of them, pointing with his finger, said:

“You, you and you! Out!”

I was one of the ones pointed at to get out.

We were each given a shovel and taken to the beach.

“Do you know how to dig?” asked the sergeant.

“I know how to dig!” I replied loudly, spat on my hands and began to dig in the sand with the shovel.

“Bravo!” he said, then asked: “Where did you learn how to dig? Have you been...?” he pointed towards the hill with his head.

“Yes, I have been...” I replied.

“So that's where you learned to dig, eh?” he said with a sarcastic smile on his face.

“That's right!” I replied.

“In other words, you dug trenches and bunkers... Is that right?” he asked.

“Exactly...” I replied.

He measured my height with a stick and then measured the same length on the sand, marked it and ordered:

“Dig!”

I spat on my hands and began to dig. I threw the sand far with a strong swing, left then right. When I had dug deep to my chest he ordered the women to:

“Put the sand back in the pit!”

Shovel by shovel they were slowly burying me in the pit. They kept burying me to my knees... to my waist... to my chest... the sand eventually reached my chin. I was cold and numb all over. I was unable to breathe...

The sergeant leaned over towards my head and said:

“If you sign a statement of repentance, I will immediately unearh you!”

The sand was clutching my throat. I could not speak. I could not move at all. I stood there motioning with my head that I would not sign. Every breath became harder to take... I was running out of air. I passed out.

I recovered in my tent late in the afternoon.

I did not see the women who buried me, on the sergeant’s orders, in evening line up.

I did not see them in the morning line up, the next day, either...

* * *

“Will I be rescued from the evil today?” That’s what I thought when we were returning to our tents. That’s what I thought when I went to bed exhausted; when all I wanted was some peace, to be free from torment... from the alfamiti. That’s when I lay in bed on my stomach, with my eyes closed, to avoid looking at the sky through the torn roof of the tent. That’s when I let my thoughts leave the island. How can one escape from here? Is there a way? There is no escape from here; not even for my thoughts. I can only dream of escaping... But even such a dream escaped me...

Rest and comfort were nonexistent here... they were only parts of my imagination... of our imagination. No one was able to have them... to make them part of their personal life. People were unable to control their time, life, thoughts, hope... or be masters of their own bodies. How life flowed in the daytime, at night, even at the very moment, was determined by command. The officers were responsible for delivering what command was ordered and the alfamiti were responsible for enforcing those orders, particularly against those who disobeyed them. Everything was done in accordance with the methods outlined in the curriculum designed to “correct” our behaviour. One of those methods was for the strong winds of the north and the south to alternatively blow wildly. They scattered the tents, picked up sand, carried salt water rain, created grey clouds that disappeared in the air... In the winter and early spring we froze in the cold tents. In late spring and summer we burned under the scorching sun. Over us was this associated satanic alliance of the torturers and nature.

Which mythological god created this piece of rock in the sea?

There was only pain, fear, moaning, uncertainty and anticipation of new pogroms... inside and outside our tents in this cage designed for the Special School for Re-educating Women...

Re-education classes always ended with the triumphal anthem:

Το πρωτο ταγμα Μακρονισου
Μισει τωρα το Σλαβισμο
(The First Battalion Makronisos now hates Slavism).

* * *

One day two alfamiti took me to the shore. They told me to sit and watch the sea and the waves hit the rock.

I watched. Down below the roaring waves were pelting the rocky beach, the water churned. The high waves roared, slid wildly and foamed on the rocks. The alfamiti sat behind me, smoking cigarettes. At one point one of them said:

“What are we waiting for? Let’s push her down and then we can go...”

I was stunned. I froze. I moved slightly and slowly stood up. I stood upright and waited. I shivered and froze when I felt the hand of the alfamiti on my shoulder. He slowly pushed me towards the abyss. I took a step forward and stood over the edge. I was at the end of the rock. Half my foot was over the abyss. I stood and waited, watching the waves foam. They roared below. They boiled. I felt the alfamiti’s fingers squeezing my shoulders. I waited for him to push me. He did not push me. He pulled me back. He again pushed me to the edge, held me there and pulled me back again. He did this several times. Step forward, step back. He then stopped and asked me:

“Will you sign?”

There was silence... I did not reply.

“Sit down!” he yelled, “and think about it...”

I sat down goggle eyed. A butterfly landed on the stone beside me. It slowly flapped its wings. It was colourful with many dots and circles of various colours. This was the first time, since they brought me to this island, that I had seen another creature unlike us slaves and our tormentors. I wanted to touch it... to caress it. I slowly lowered my hand and at that very moment the wind blew and the butterfly flew off over the abyss. It disappeared. It reminded me of the crazy women. Did the wind blow them away like it did the butterfly or did the alfamiti throw them into the abyss...?

Sometimes in the few moments I had to myself in the cold tent, I thought wouldn't it be nice if the wind could take me away, if I too became insane and they left me on the shore so that the mad wind could surrender me to the crazy waves?

That's what I thought then, but later I was disappointed with myself for having had such thoughts. Yes there were moments when I had fallen prey to my weaknesses, when I was confused and when I thought my salvation was in the muddy waters. But that's what they wanted from me... they loved it... for me to have blurred thoughts... I was afraid of that. Wherever they took me, whatever they did to me, I protected myself from my mind becoming a blur...

The alfamiti ordered me to stand up. They tied a rope around my chest under my arms and began to slowly drop me down into the abyss.

I dangled on the rope as I was slowly lowered into the abyss. Salty water droplets fell on me making my face wet. Both alfamiti held onto the rope while lowering me. The waves began to hit me and whip me against the rocks. They dragged me into the deep, spit me up and whipped me against the rocks. My cry of horror was lost in the roar of the waves. I could not hear myself screaming... I felt pain inflicted on my body every time I hit the rocks. I don't know how long I was hanging over the water. The waves were in control of my body hitting against the rocks, then sucking it deep into the sea, then spitting it up again... again and again and again... I was drowning in salt water... my blood froze in my veins... I was filled with terrible fear.

They raised me slightly above the water. I breathed salty air. I said to myself "I'm alive..." and felt that they were slowly pulling me up. They threw me on the sand and stood over me yelling:

"Will you sign!!!"

All I could think of, lying there in the sand, was that I was alive. I kept telling myself "I am alive," while I listened to them yelling and cursing...

I was completely out of it, I thought I was out of my mind when I moved my head slightly. They interpreted my motion as positive... that I was going to sign. They picked me up and led me away. On the way they kept hitting me with their sticks and whips. The whips had a tiny lead ball at the end which penetrated my skin and opened a wound with each blow. They wiped my blood with a cloth soaked in salt water. I did not cry or scream; I just fainted. I fell flat on the sharp stinging stones. When I came to, I found myself in the room where women were forced to sign. They put a piece of paper in front of me and shoved a pen in my hand.

“Sign!” one of them yelled.

I blew on the paper as hard as I could and did not pick up the pen.

“Sign!” they both shouted.

I shook my head: “No!”

“Sign!” they shouted again.

“No...” I said with a weak voice feeling cold sweat covering me. I felt light headed and began to lose my sight. Everything was turning into shadows. I felt faint, weak, empty and began to lose my strength...

They locked me up in a small, dark low and narrow shed. I stayed there until the next day. I had horrible thoughts of being tortured while I was unconscious and that they used the opportunity to put a pen in my hand and force me to write my name?

They returned me to my tent in the evening. I was beaten and battered. I was wounded on the head pretty badly. The women tried hard to cheer me up....

My days passed in a state of non-awareness. The doctors decided to send me to the hospital but the commander ordered that I sign the statement first and then they could send me wherever they wanted.

The pain persisted.

I was surprised that I did not slip away.

And this time too I said: "I'm alive..."

* * *

We were all one body in the tents and shared the same pain, care, compassion, suffering and courage... We had one thought and the same glimmer of hope. Here even a glimmer of hope was something to want to dream of...

I was not the first, the last, or the only one on the rock by the sea. There were other women before and after me. They brought them there during the day, at night and in the dark.

Some were swallowed by the sea, some were frightened into signing and, a day or so later, with bowed heads, they passed in a line in front of our tents. We watched them with disdain, but we understood their fear and apathy. By bowing our heads we wished them a safe trip home...

* * *

Parliamentary elections were scheduled to take place on March 5, 1950. All of us who were in the camp, wherever we were; whether we were in our tents at night waiting to be attacked by the alfamiti, or out in the quarry moving stones from coast to coast, or standing in line for hours in the cold, or were called in for questioning and forced to repent, we all eagerly awaited the outcome of the elections.

Sometimes secretly and sometimes openly we all hoped that there would be changes in this country and that perhaps those changes would improve things on this notorious rock.

The moment the results were announced we felt encouraged and openly, in front of the alfamiti, hugged, sang and jumped around. We trusted and expected that something in our lives might change. We felt so much at ease that we almost forgot our burden of having

to carry the stones, our fear of the rocky depths, the crazy waves, the black shadows of the alfamiti following behind us... It even felt like the furious winds had stopped blowing... in the tents... in the quarry... above the stones... on the cliffs... between the rusting barbed wire...

Smiles appeared, for the first time since we had been brought here, on my face and on the faces of hundreds of women and girls... and then hope lay open in our hearts that we might go home without having to sign, without the humiliating signature of remorse...

There was growing optimism but it did not last... The alfamiti were back to their old tricks and back to the night pogroms.

Unfortunately Makronisos remained Makronisos for a long time...

* * *

I don't know how, but it was true that news of what was happening in Makronisos had reached the West and extensive stories were written about it.

So one day journalists from the French newspaper Le Figaro arrived on the island and asked for permission to check if what the communists were saying was true or whether they were spreading propaganda about the island. Among them was the well-known journalist Dominique Okler.

That day they gave us better food. There was no screaming and insults. The soldiers, the policemen, the guards, and everyone else who wore a military uniform, was well-groomed, shaven and dressed in clean and ironed clothing. The paths between the tents were cleared and all garbage was collected. Everything looked shiny and pure. The women who had signed the statement of remorse, who they called the "true Greeks", were lined up outside. One of them, a more educated woman, was chosen to speak with the French journalists. She was instructed to assure them that everything was okay here on this island. She was to instruct them that only good things happened here and that we all learned plenty of things here in Makronisos and the Western world needed to know that. The

morning of the previous day, all the women who had been badly beaten, maimed, mad, sick and paralyzed were hastily transferred to the other side of the island and hidden behind the rocks. No one could see or hear them from the camp. They could yell as loud as they wanted and no one was going to hear them. Those were the rocks about which the Western press had written. We, the unruly and bad ones, were made to sit quietly in our tents and were prohibited from stepping out. Command thought that we did not know about the French journalists. Those who knew, however, had secretly informed us of the visit. Quietly, whispering from mouth to mouth, we spread the word that we were all going to come out of the tents, all at once and shout, run, jump on the barbed wire fence and attract all sorts of attention so that the journalists would notice us. We wanted to tell them what was truly happening here, on this island... we wanted to get out of our tents and shout, create a frenzy and let the journalists know what was hidden behind the curtain.

We waited and waited for the right moment but they kept talking with the officers, smoking cigarettes and laughing ... They seemed satisfied with what they saw. They were happy to shake hands with our tormentors as they left for their vehicles. And then something happened, something unexpected.

We rushed out from our tents shouting and breaking the silence. It was as if a storm had flooded the entire area and with a single loud voice called out:

“Ladies and gentlemen wait! Wait! Wait! They are deceiving you. They are not telling you the truth. Come back! We will tell you the truth. Come Back!!! They torture us here!!!” We screamed and ran to the surprise of the journalists. The alfamiti tried to stop us but we were an unbearable storm of women lashing riotously at a living wall of policemen. One woman managed to break through and approach the vehicles shouting in French:

“Madame Okler! Madame Okler! Stop !!! Wait!!!”

Surprised by our shouting Madame Okler came down from her vehicle and approached the woman and, as was later discussed, said in French:

“Madame Okler, help us. They torture us here. They beat and kill us here. Don’t trust them. We are slaves here. We are running to you to tell you the truth. Come with us; come so that we can talk. Come and see with your own eyes what is happening in these tents. Please do not go... Come; spend a bit of time here in this tent...

The officers tried to persuade Madame Okler that the woman was lying but she did not want to hear it from them. She wanted to hear it from us.

One by one we began to tell the journalist how they treated us here, how they tormented and tortured us, we told her about the pogrom on January 30, about the stones, about the abyss over the sea, about the women going mad, about us having to carry rocks, about the beatings, about the poor food... about this island being a torture chamber...

“Madame Okler, please listen to us. People are tortured on this island and some go crazy and others die from this torture. Please tell the world, tell free Europe the truth. Please tell the truth about what is happening here, save us from the hands of the torturers...” That’s what we said in hopes that, through Madame Okler, our truth would touch the European conscience.

The night after the French journalists left, the alfamiti declared a new war on us. They attacked us and beat and beat and beat us to no end. And that was not the only night that we had to endure the madness...

In Athens, in the meantime, a new government was formed and with the new government new hope was rooted in our thoughts... that perhaps this time the change would end our torment and we could all go home.

Unfortunately false hope was hard to swallow.

The officers repeatedly threatened us, telling us that the only way to go home was if we signed the statement of repentance.

They would say:

“Repent... if you don’t, then you will die here... The birds of prey will devour your bodies. They will tear you apart with their dirty claws and beaks and let the worms do the rest...”

Besides torturing us they used other forms of intimidation, which meant nothing to us so they continued to use torture and ran our lives with the butt of the rifle, stick, fist, whip, they made us carry stones, they constantly threatened us with violence... they also used nature to torture us. They made us stand in line in the heat and in the cold in front of our tents; for hours at a time. We stood in line three times a day, two hours each time... every day! The summer was a very difficult time for us in Makronisos, as if especially invented to torture us. It was not only hot from above, from the sun, it was hot from everywhere, from below from the hot sand and hot rocks and from the hot air all around us... there was not a tree anywhere that one could go under and cool in the shade... not even to shade one’s head. There was no water to splash one’s face with, wet one’s lips with, or soak one’s forehead...

One afternoon in late July, during one of the hottest days in Makronisos, command ordered us to form a line and then asked us to decide which we preferred: go back to Trikeri or stay in Makronisos.

Our answer was: “We cannot choose between two torture chambers!”

We said that we preferred to get off of this hideous island, as soon possible, but we did not want to go to Trikeri.

We didn’t have to wait long for their response. Two days later two cargo ships arrived and dropped anchor in the quieter coast of the island. They told us that the ships were here to take us away but would not tell us where they were taking us.

I was completely overcome with hopelessness.

* * *

In the morning of July 31, 1950, loud music broke out everywhere on the island. The loudspeakers were thundering with military marches. Then suddenly everything went silent, as if the speakers were disconnected. The silence was broken by some feedback noise and scratching followed by an announcement. A man's voice came on and ordered:

“The women who originally came here from Trikeri are to collect their belongings and line up in front of their tents...”

We collected our things and lined up... as ordered. We waited and waited under the hot burning sun. It was not until noon that the voice came back on and said:

“Today you are leaving. Today you are leaving Makronisos. We are sending you back to Trikeri...”

I felt joy for the first time on this island. Deep inside I was smiling, I was happy but I had to devour my joy because it made it somehow easier for me to breathe... but I wondered:

“Is it really true; is it really possible that we are leaving this horrible island... this hideous hell on earth? Is it possible that we will never again see the snouts of these hungry wolves?”

I must say that this bit of news cheered me up. We were going to leave Makronisos!

I was full of joy deep inside.

I could not help but be happy to finally be leaving this hell on earth... but then when I remembered that I was leaving this hell for another, all I could do was hope that the next hell wouldn't be as bad as this one...

My joy was replaced with anxiety and anticipation and my eyes welled up with tears.

The last days before our departure were unusually difficult. The alfamiti stormed our tents every night and beat us badly in the dark. It seemed like time was running out for them and they had to satisfy their sadistic hunger as much as possible.

We lined up and marched towards the ship.

As we climbed up the narrow stairs I could not help but think:

“What kind of mothers gave birth to such terrible people? Are there any words that can describe these monsters with human faces?”

I couldn't help wondering:

“In what kind of place did these alfamiti grow up? What kind of school did they attend? What kind of teachers taught them? In what churches did they pray? What kind of priests taught them to believe in God? Did they realize that they were committing crimes against God when they were killing us? Who gave them their military uniforms which they dishonoured by torturing helpless women? Who gave them military ranks and decorated them for being monsters and for supporting this horrible regime? How powerful could a country be if it rested on pillars built by horrid freaks?”

Woman behind woman, step after step, we climbed up. I was wearing wooden sandals. I made my way up without hanging onto the rope handrail. Let them hear the rumble of my wooden shoes, I thought. Let their sound thunder through the bowels of the ship. Let bursts of cannon fire spill beneath my steps and thunder and lightning beneath my feet.

“Hold your head up high!” I told myself.

“Forward! Up! Climb up, high, like you did on the peaks of Gramos...” I told myself.

“Forward!”

“Head up!”

“There is no space to charge the enemy here... There is only space for thought... to open a corridor of hope...”

“Head up! Forward!” I yelled at myself in my own thoughts...

After I climbed onto the ship I turned and took a good look at Makronisos. I then gave it the rude Italian salute while yelling, “This is for you Makronisos!”

There was much shouting, swearing, cursing and beating with rifle butts as the police tried to force us down into the ship’s stables. To avoid the whip, the stick, the rifle butt... we pushed each other, we fell and we walked over each other.... The stench of rotting fish in the stables was unbearable...

The water under the ship began to boil. The gap between Makronisos and the ship began to widen. We were moving away... It was true, we were leaving Makronisos... The gap became wider as we put more water between us and the black rocks of that cursed island...

The distance kept growing...

The ship kept moving. We were heading towards a lesser hell... we were headed to Trikeri.

A ray of sun was filtering through the crack of the ship’s window. I felt its heat on half of my face and it warmed my heart and soul. At that very moment I whispered to myself:

“The sun is shining! It is hugging my face! It is hugging me! It wants to warm me!”

I then whispered: “Shine, sun, shine! Enlighten the minds of the people so that they may know that here too, in Makronisos, they did not break me. They did not break my spirit and the spirits of thousands of other women like me.

“Shine, sun shine!”

Chapter - 6

They unloaded us on Trikeri in the evening...

They placed us in the cells in the Monastery basements. A week later they relocated us in tents that they had us put up.

Most of us were placed in old damaged America military tents that were riddled with bullet holes. We slept on bare ground and when it rained we were covered in muddy water. We later added olive tree branches to the ground to serve as our beds.

There was not enough room to accommodate everyone.

It was very hot on the island and the tents felt like hot ovens. We were burning in those tents. The intense heat dried us out. Sometimes we were able to sneak seawater to cool ourselves but that was rare. Camp administration considered it a punishable offense with two penalties.

Those who were caught sneaking water were ordered to stay and bake inside their tent from 10 am to 4 pm. This included everyone in the tent. That was one of the penalties.

The other penalty was to have all the women from the offender's tent stand in line from 10 am to 4 pm so that they would bake in the open sun...

There was not a single day that they did not line us up in front of our tents. This was every day of every month, in every season. We stood in line when the sun was burning hot, when it rained hard, when it snowed and when the winds of the sea wreaked havoc...

Talking in the line was forbidden... It was rare when we were allowed to move around in the space enclosed by barbed wire.

Often, during the hottest part of the day, during a rainstorm, when strong wind was blowing, they would order us to move our tents. And then, the moment the tents were tied down, they would order us to move them back to their old place. There was never a day or night

when there was no crying, moaning, whining, or groaning. Few were those who did not cry.

It was hot during the day and cold at night on Trikeri. There, even the dew froze. The police were not the only menace on this island. Nature was their ally.

* * *

Most of the women and girls imprisoned on this island were from villages. There were also a lot from the cities. Their husbands, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, etc., either fought in the ranks of the Democratic Army of Greece or were somehow associated with leftist commitments.

Because of their relatives being involved in such activities, the state decided to punish these women by sending them to the women's camp on Trikeri and to other Island camps. Some were scientists; teachers, professors in schools and universities, writers, painters...

When they brought these new women to the Island they looked healthy; well-fed, well-dressed, hair combed, well-groomed... No one in the camp had combed hair, wore a nice dress, or did not have swollen lips or puffed eyes. But, despite our pathetic looks, we were proud people; proud and dignified with similar persistence. Few were those who did not weather. They signed, took their contempt and went home. Not one of them contacted us to say how things were on the outside.

The women and girls from the cities were gentle and sensitive and had greater difficulties with the conditions on the island created by the police and by nature. They were well-groomed people without wrinkles. They could hardly stand the physical effort. But they were very strong in spirit, in faith and in their commitments. They were able to endure the beatings and humiliation and cursed back. They did not cry but swore and spat to express their resistance. They were more educated compared to us village girls but we were more capable of enduring the beatings, the physical effort, the spiritual pressure, the bad food, the cold, the heat and the satanic weather. We differed greatly. We were resilient. We acquired our resilience

from the mountain, from the war, from when we were beaten by nature and pounded by our opponent. We were accustomed to the rain, the snow, the cold, hunger, lice, fear, trenches, bunkers, night marches, charging the enemy... The city women were astonished watching us endure while being beaten. When they were beaten they cried and yelled far louder than we did but they swore and cursed their tormentors with less fear than us. About the mountains, the forests, the mud, the cold, the hunger, the charges against the enemy... about us the partisans... they only knew what they had heard and read... They hardened in the camps the same way we hardened up on the mountains.

There was a great difference between the city, the mountains and the island. The island was surrounded by water and stone. Grass rarely grew on it. The sky above was mostly blue but sometimes black, filled with thunderclouds. One felt claustrophobic on the island, like they were in the grip of a giant paw. The mountains were vast with broad latitude that overlooked the land below. One felt like being closer to eagles, to the falcons, to the sky and to the stars. One could not collect the entire width in one round... One did not have enough steps or days to catch the end of the mountain... Whereas one could easily find the steps to measure the parched land on the island where grass rarely grew... where one could fry on its rocky shores and crashing waves under the blazing sun.

If you were to look into the distance from the top of the abyss, far away you would see a grey line merging the sea with the sky. Past that you would see only grey mist.

That's all you would know about your world. It was forbidden for the women imprisoned on this island to see more...

There were all kinds of people in the camp; educated, skilled, literate, semi-literate and illiterate. I was among the semi-literate. I did not even have primary education. I was in grade four when Italy declared war on Greece and the schools closed down. Since then, since October 1940, the school in our village never reopened. The school, along with the entire village, was burned down in the fall of 1947.

There were also those who had never seen a school bench or held a book in their hands. Their first encounter with a teacher was here in Trikeri. They learned their first letters here... There were those who only knew how to write their name. For them and for others Trikeri became a secret school, a great secret night school, well hidden from the eyes and ears of the police. They were not only taught to read and write but also other subjects, similar to those provided by the educational system in primary and secondary schools. There were also professors who prepared students for university level education and tested them on it. The majority of the women studied dressmaking, sewing, embroidery, knitting, crafts... practical things that would help them earn a living when they were free.

Besides reading a lot at night, I studied dressmaking, sewing, knitting and embroidery. I liked to embroider and knit a lot.

I was taught dressmaking by Madame Olga. That's what she wanted me to call her. She was a city woman from Athens and often talked about her fashion salon. She spoke with excitement when she told us that in her salon she made dresses for the wives of ministers, diplomats, bankers, generals and rich merchants and that her designs came straight from the latest Paris fashions. "At that time," she said, "Paris was the heart of fashion, Paris and Athens were separated only by the time it took the post office to deliver the magazines with the latest fashion dresses, hats, gloves and hairstyles." When she was talking about fashion and models she would pause, lift her finger and say: "To be good at your craft you need to know the French language because fashion comes from Paris. In addition to teaching you tailoring, I will also teach you French. You will need to know what kind of dress to wear to the theater, to the opera, to a concert, or when going out to dinner with important company and so on... You will learn from me... It is difficult to learn but you need to know things..." Madame Olga would then pause, take a deep breath and remind us that this was what she did in Athens, at the most visited fashion salon, which was destroyed by the Germans because her husband disobeyed them and raised his rifle against them. In the middle of her lecture Madame Olga would interrupt and with each long interruption she would tell us how she conquered hunger in Athens for years. "Every day," she would say, "hundreds of people died in Athens from starvation. But I, with my dear sister along with

other women, went north. People said that there, in Macedonia, there was enough food for everyone and we went there to seek relief from hunger. We went to the villages in Kostur region and begged the people for a piece of bread. In many villages the people did not understand us because the women and older men there, and sometimes the children, did not speak Greek and we did not understand their language. But it was a miracle because, even though the people did not understand us, they gave us bread, cheese, beans, flour... But in the villages where prosigni (Christian Turkish settlers and colonists) lived we were chased away. They swore at us and sent their dogs after us, telling us that it was our fault that they had lost their homes and properties in Turkey. We were Athenians and it was our fault for them being here in Macedonia. But among them were also the endopie, the native people, who had compassion and gave bread. They were good, gentle, compassionate people... those endopie. Something good happened to me there in one of those endopie villages, which I call a miracle. It was raining hard one night and we were forced to sleep in a barn. I got sick with a fever. My sister went to get help from one of the closest houses. An old man came over but we had difficulty communicating. We did not understand a word of his language and he understood nothing of ours. He put his hand on my head, said something then picked me up and took me to his house. There he dressed me in warm clothes, rubbed my body with tsipouro (rakia) [alcohol] and covered me with a blanket. Occasionally he wiped the sweat off my body and gave me hot chicken soup to drink. He looked after me for two days. Then, in the afternoon when I was feeling better, he gave me a sack full of bread and sent me off. Before leaving I wanted to thank him but I did not speak his language. As I waited at his doorstep I thought about what I was going to say to him... But all I could think of was “efharisato” (thank you in Greek). I said it with much excitement and tears... I think he understood me. Then, as I caught up to my Athenian beggar companions, I carried with me a bag full of bread and kindness on my shoulders...” After pausing to reflect on her experience, Madam Olga would often say, “I still remember that kind old man and his wonderful house...”

Madame Olga’s stories always took me back to my time, to when I was thirteen years old.

I remember when grandpa brought a sick woman to our home and my mother looked after her for two days...

I remembered...

* * *

I did my knitting with one needle, chingulaki; I like it that way. A wonderful woman taught about a dozen girls. She was eighty years old and came from Crete. They brought her here because her husband had participated in the resistance movement and fought against the English in Athens. He was imprisoned in Makronisos.

There were many women in our cell, sometimes forty, sometimes more. They were different ages, from various places in the country with different professions and occupations. They were housewives, high school students, university students, teachers, high school teachers, university professors, villagers and farmers. While some were well-educated many were illiterate. Each, however, was unique in personality and character. Even though we were separate and of different character, we respected and helped each other. Life here on the island forced us to cooperate in order to survive. We were in solidarity with each other on just about everything. Those who received food packages from home, or from their friends in the outside, shared them with the others. They read their letters to each other out loud. We were happy being together; we cried together, mourned together and shared our joys and sorrows together. This made life a bit easier to live in exile.

Among all those women I became close friends with one of them. She had a peaceful look about her and a very calm gaze in her eyes. She was mild mannered, good natured and had a calming face. Her hair was blonde. When she smiled, this was a rare occasion on this island, her whole face lit up like a flower blooming. She did not talk much and always sat in the corner. She gathered her knees under her chin and, while holding a notebook and a pencil in her hands, always wrote about something, mostly poems. She read them to me at night. They were filled with humanity and closely described our hopes, desires and dreams, and the kind of life we lived in Trikeri. We slept next to each other and whispered about things, mostly

about our hopes and dreams. Her soft and gentle voice was soothing. Her words were like velvet, flowering from pencil to notebook and from notebook to our ears and from our ears to our hearts and souls.

We listened to the silence and felt bewitched.

Her name was Victoria Theodorou. She was from Hania, a city located in Crete.

One day, before we became good friends, during an early morning stroll, I caught up to her, greeted her and told her I could not sleep all night because of the excitement I felt from her poems. I told her that her words took me away and carried me to my hometown and that I mourned a lot all night. She looked at me gently, grabbed my hand, and quietly said:

“You are from Macedonia...? I know you are from Macedonia...”

“How do you know?” I asked.

She said, “By the way you pronounce the Greek ‘L’. We Greeks pronounce it like the French, soft. You Macedonians pronounce it like the English, hard. My father who was from Veles pronounced it the same way you do. My father was a painter, an iconographer. He came to Hania, to Crete, to seek work. Our neighbours sometimes called him Servos (Serbian) but you are not from that part of Macedonia are you? You’re from this part, right?”

“Yes I am, I am from one of the Kostur Region villages...” I replied.

She stopped walking, looked into my eyes as if begging for my help and quietly said:

“I want very much to one day visit the city where my father was born... Veles, the city is called Veles.”

“I have been to Veles but only very briefly,” I said. “I was sent there when I was wounded. They sent me, along with other partisans who were wounded, to a hospital near Skopje. The place is called Katlanovo...”

“You were a partisan?” she asked sounding surprised.

“Yes I was... for two and a half years...” I replied. “The second time I saw Veles was when they sent me back from the hospital to the front line, with my wound not quite healed. It was during the night, past midnight. The truck stopped on the hill before we passed through the city. We went to the toilet in the outdoors. I looked down and saw the city lights and, in the light of the full moon, I could see a river crossing through it...”

“That’s what my father used to say...” she said and then went quiet. I too stopped talking as we silently ended our “permissible” walk in the concentration camp.

During our next walk, somewhat unwelcoming, she asked:

“What is your name?”

“Kalina...” I said, “I was named after my grandmother...”

“And what is ‘kalina’?” she asked.

“It’s a name... my name,” I replied

“I know it’s a name... But what does it mean?” she asked.

“Kalina, kalinka is a fruit, a pomegranate...” I replied.

“Now I understand!” said Victoria. “But do you know what ‘Kalina’ symbolizes? I will tell you... the fruit ‘kalinka’, as you call it, has many meanings symbolizing power, victory, perfection, immortality, resurrection, a gift from God, virginity, femininity, purity, love, hope, fertility, blood, life, wisdom, harmony, fidelity...” Victoria counted on her fingers with each meaning she mentioned.

“Wow... so many meanings?” I said surprised.

“It is a gift of nature, Kalina... it is the source of many meanings and values...” she added.

This is how I befriended Victoria, the daughter of the artist from Veles, who lived on the island Crete, in the city Hania and who died there at a young age, leaving her orphaned to grow up in the orphanages.

Our acquaintance turned into a reliable and durable friendship. She had enough confidence in me to trust me with her notebooks, which I hid in the roots of an olive tree. Our friendship became permanent after we were released from the camps. We kept in touch through correspondence...

Her warmth, kindness, soft voice and calm, but very sad eyes had an effect on me. I felt calmer and safer around her. I felt like my bitterness and troubles melted away...

What did Victoria write in her notebooks?

Everything... everything that happened in the camps, everything we survived and experienced... she wrote it all down... I will never forget when, in one of her notebooks, I read:

“Το Μαι του 1949 αρχισαν επισης να ερχονται οι Σλαβομακεδονισες, κοπαδιαστα, πεντακοσιες τοσες σε καθε αποστολη” (The Slavo-Macedonians began to arrive in great numbers in May 1949, five-hundred and even more with each shipload).

At another place in the same notebook Victoria wrote:

“During the night a Slavo-Macedonian woman gave birth to twins - girls. The first we christened Eleftheria. Sadly the second girl died at birth... Eleftheria died two days later...”

Unfortunately that was all Victoria wrote about the fate of the twin who survived and whose eyes shone in the sun for only a very short time. That too was all that she wrote about the poor mother who forever was labeled a Slavo-Macedonian woman. She never did write her name. Only that she was a Slavo-Macedonian.

She was one of many in this camp...

Few words, a lot of pain...

Victoria wrote many things in her notebooks including all our pains. We and everything about us was recorded; our torture, our torment, our sickness, our pain, our durability and our ability to stay alive unbroken...

I read her notes secretly, while holding my breath with excitement, and then hastily clawing at the roots of the olive tree to hide them... I realized that not much was known out there about the women prisoners in Trikeri and in the other camps, and how important it was for our experiences not to be forgotten. Recorded events are not only permanent but also accurate and will remain alive for a long time, much longer than we will, and will perpetuate what happened to us; a record of our thoughts and experiences.

I personally did not write things down on paper but I made sure to remember everything. I used to say to myself if I ever got out of this hell with a clear mind and with my memories intact, I would tell my stories to everyone who was willing to listen, just like my grandparents told me their stories.

Often I thought and wondered if I would be able to find anyone who would have the patience to listen to me and to record everything I told them?

I told myself: "What happened here, to us, must be told, must be written down... Nothing about us was known up to now... Everything that happened must be told and written down so that it is permanently preserved..."

My thoughts guided me this way... Things that are written down last... they are permanent... That's what remains from a person... from time... from the world...

I decided to remember everything, to forget nothing, to miss nothing of this heinous time...

Many years later an airplane flew from Hania and landed in Kostur airport. On her way to the Struga Nights, Victoria passed through Kostur and paid me a visit. During one of our conversations she said:

“Why don’t you come with me to Veles? We will look for my father’s roots together... Please come with me and help me... translate for me when I meet my relatives in Veles.”

Victoria found the graves of her father’s parents in Veles. She then wrote a poem about them and read it at the Struga poetry festival...

* * *

Special measures for endurance were introduced in the camp for line ups and running.

During the hottest or coldest days, or when it was raining or snowing a lot they would order us to line up outside, in the morning or in the afternoon, and leave us to stand at attention for two or three hours at a time, hungry, thirsty, exhausted... then they would force us to run...

When the rains became more frequent they brought large American military tents and lay them in the mud. The tents were full of holes, mostly bullet holes. When it rained, water dripped on our heads... About 50 to 60 women were placed in each tent. We sat and slept in mud for days, mud which dried on our bodies. And when it rained a lot, the mud swam in the water. And we sat in the mud. We were not allowed to get out of our tents. There was an armed policeman at each tent entrance.

Sometimes we heard gunshots echoing in the night...

When the sea was stormy and the wind blew hard, the tent ropes often broke and we were left naked under the sky in the mud.

There was not a single time, in all seasons, that the silence was not broken by tearfully stretched cries and screams of horror and despair in the dark of night.

Not once did we ever welcome the dawn without a great and terrible cry in the night...

Whose cry was it?

Whose voice was suddenly diminished by the crashing of waves?

We did not know... we could not recognize it. But the cry of horror remained imbedded deep in our consciousness... the screams of horror many have vanished, lost in the raging waves and swallowed by the sea but the cries of horror remained with us... in our consciousness...

During the most horrible nights they would take one woman or one girl from a tent and lead her to the highest point above the coast. And that's where her footsteps would end. All that would be left of her was the crying and screaming in our consciousness, which would keep us horrified and awake all night. This was one of the measures they used to break our spirits.

Many women were unable to endure such horrific nights, full of screams of horror, and signed the statement of repentance just to avoid them.

A day or two later they would be gone from the island. We sent them off in silence with some respect and compassion... At night we would often hear voices and screams of horror and they then would disappear in the eerie noises of the waves. One night a strong wind blew away one of the tents that was set up near the coast. We were ordered out in the dark to look for its unfortunate occupants.

The winds, the rain, the large waves, the cold... all of our torturers' allies, were going wild that night. It seemed like nature was allied with our tormentors...

We had no choice but to obey command, which demanded unconditional execution of its orders. Even the slightest attempt not to comply with its orders was punishable by severe beatings,

running barefoot on the steep hill laced with crushed stone, deprivation of meals and water, standing in the rain, in the sun, and deprivation of sleep...

There was only one well in the camp. We waited for hours for water to collect... but there never was enough water to drink, let alone for other needs...

* * *

After some time the authorities allowed mail service to operate. Twice a month. This gave the women a chance to write letters to their families and friends.

In the beginning I sent a letter but it came back unopened, telling me that there was no one there to receive it. I assumed that my family was no longer in the village. I then sent another and it too came back. This one was stamped "recipient does not exist".

Besides letters, the women in the camp also received packages, special packages that contained desperately needed items such as bread, canned foods, candy, homemade sweets, chocolates, dried fruits, books, newspapers... For many these were not the most important things. The most important things were the joy they received from hearing from their relatives, from opening that letter that came with the package and from reading it. Every time someone received a letter or a package they ran around full of joy and could not wait to share the information or the contents of the package with the others. Every letter and every package carried a lot of love, joy and hope. Every letter, every word written in every letter carried with it love, care, sorrow and pain... of a mother, of a sister, of a relative... Those receiving them saw the face of their loved ones in every letter, in every package... A feeling of great concern, pain, waiting, hope... poured out of each one of them.

But besides bringing joy, the letters and the packages also brought sadness and more pain... They reminded the women of their loneliness and separation from those they cared for the most. They were a reminded of their former lives. The letters also contained bad news, well-hidden news, of arrests, trials and killings of loved ones.

Many of the prisoners preferred not to receive letters and packages because on the island, together with good news, they received bad news and disappointments which broke their spirits. With their faces hidden, many cried day and night, mourning their loved ones who died in the mountains. They pulled their hair and sobbed for their loved ones who had died; fathers, brothers, close relatives...

I received no letters and no bad news but that does not mean that I did not suffer. I was always close to those who suffered and I did my best to comfort them. Their pain was my pain when they turned to me and wept... I silently cried with them and felt their pain as much as they did.

Both letters and packages, besides stirring joy, stirred sadness and pain in the women, opening emotional wounds. I could see that in the women's eyes and the mood they were in. During such moments I tried to get away, hide... spare myself from the suffering that sprang from the tear-filled eyes...

Sometimes the letters and packages sat in the post office for a long time. The police wanted to read every letter and inspect every package. If they found anything suspicious they confiscated it, if they found something written which they did not like, they erased it with black ink. Newspapers that they did not like they burned. Sometimes letters and packages were left the way they were. This was done to punish us. It was yet another measure of mental torture to shatter our nerves.

I never received a letter or a package but I was always looking forward to receiving something... anything.

The day when we received mail was difficult. Everyone was anxious as everything had to pass through strict control, which sometimes lasted for days.

They gathered us all together when they distributed the mail. We all we had to stand in line. If someone was late to stand in the line then they had to wait for days before receiving their mail...

The camp commander personally handed out the mail. At the end he distributed the letters that had information about the convicted, jailed and shot. But before distributing them he read them out loud and then watched who was sobbing and crying. But it was not only their relatives who cried and sobbed but everyone who felt their pain. Sometimes there was an entire echo of crying and sobbing. Sometimes we all cried. In pain and in crying we were all one body, one thought, one pain...

Before opening a letter the commander would ask:

“I am sure that now you will sign a statement of repentance?”

If the unfortunate person agreed to sign then the commander would immediately give her the letter without reading it. If she did not want to sign then he would say come back tomorrow and take your letter.

What did he do with that particular woman the next day? He intimidated her and had her beaten.

The prisoners had the right to write a letter once a week. All the letters were read before they were sent out. They were always censored. Command was suspicious of every word and every word it did not agree with was erased with black ink. Every letter that arrived or left the island was checked. Every letter that had anything in it that was questionable was erased with black ink. Anything that had any important news about what was happening outside of the camp was erased. There were many cases of letters and packages waiting for days, left waiting in the post office, as a means of punishment.

The letters were not allowed to have more than twenty lines of text. Excess lines were erased with black ink or the entire letter was torn to pieces and burned in front of the person who wrote it.

Letters were sent and received with joy, hope, courage, love, expectation but also with pain and sorrow, ending in tears, crying, groaning, cursing and anathemas that lasted until the next arrival of mail.

I too wrote again and again but received no reply... All my letters were returned...

* * *

Every month, for one day, the police brought an official photographer to the camp to take group pictures. He never once took a picture of an individual, only group images.

Before taking the picture, command ordered us to wash our faces, comb our hair and wear the clean clothes given to the camp by the Red Cross.

We were ordered to smile for the picture. We had no choice but to smile in spite of how we felt.

The smile was there to make us look pleased and happy.

The police gave these photographs to journalists who in turn published them in their newspapers with appropriate comments, describing our situation in the camps as pleasant, and telling the public that we were satisfied with our lives and with the behaviour of our jailers towards us. Naturally, this was confirmed by our smiles in the photographs.

But that broad and bright smile had a different aim for us here in the camp. By releasing the photographs to the public with our smiling faces, the police censors were inadvertently letting our friends and relatives know that we were still alive.

I always smiled for the camera in the group photographs but behind that smile hid my concern that I may look too cheerful and happy, but my smile never made it to my relatives. My letters with my group photographs always came back, stamped with the words “recipient does not exist” on the envelope.

From this I knew that none of my relatives were at home back in my village...

The more I tried to smile... with a brighter and wider smile, the more I sank into sadness and despair... I was in pain... But those who were forcing us to smile for the photographs did not care. They wanted us to smile... more... and watch the pain in our eyes. They wanted to hear a silent scream of horror coming from our lips... they wanted to see fear in our eyes... they wanted to watch our miserable cheeks covered with a forced smile... because this too was part of their job... well done. But they could not understand that in those saddened eyes, in those silent screams, in those miserable cheeks... was our endurance, our hope... as we waited for an uncertain tomorrow...

The day before the photographer arrived in the camp, we practiced smiling in our tents and cells. We had a small sliver of a mirror in front of us where we all tested our miserable smiles, trying to look cheerful, mild, meek, satisfied and hopeful and did everything to hide the pain sewn into our souls.

Before each picture was taken the police inspected us to see how we were dressed, how well those dresses from the Red Cross fit, whether our hair was properly combed and so on. They also had orders to make sure that we looked good for the pictures and that the pictures came out well. The world determined how we were by how we looked. A clear picture with smiles and good looks was a portrait of joy and happiness... All that... had to be reflected in our smiles, dresses, hairstyles and make-up...

We were checked to make sure that we had no bruised cheeks, swollen eyes... We were checked so that those seeing our picture knew that we were not only alive but happy and free... But the women who signed the dreaded statement of repentance and who were out there knew better. They knew what horrors, fear and death, lay hidden behind those smiles and what we had to do to get some peace through the nights.

While they were taking our picture, our eyes, cheeks and lips were full of smiles and joy but afterwards they were filled with tears of pain and sorrow...

And there, at home, those who saw our images certainly thought and were convinced that here, in the camps, their loved ones were so happy because that's how we looked in the pictures... Only our pupils revealed our pain of suffering...

And so, along with everyone else, I too practiced for my next photo-op, wondering if I would still be alive for it...

This is what was ordered for me... a fist, a whip, a stick, a club, a lot of swearing, humiliation, fear... But then all that could be covered and hidden under a forced smile...

The photographs were well-reviewed and those who were not smiling or did not look cheerful enough were summoned to command the next day and returned to their cells and tents with bruised faces...

That chance did not pass me by...

* * *

There were many diseases on the island. The most common was dysentery. Many in the camp were taken to the camp hospital, but before they were taken they were asked to sign the statement of repentance.

There was the old saying: what does not kill you will make you stronger. That was also true of the daily physical slave work we did day in and day out. Everything that the ships delivered was our burden to unload and take up to the monastery.

We carried everything on our backs up a sharp and steep hill.

We suffered a lot from the cold, hunger, thirst, filth, uncertainty, fear...

Even the flies caused us distress. The filth in the camp gave birth to swarms of flies which spread diseases and infected our wounds. We couldn't defend ourselves, especially when we stood at attention in line or when we were in line getting our food. We could not defend

ourselves because we were not allowed to move. The flies flew in our food and even crawled on our lips.

The swarms of flies were unbearable. They gathered at the filthiest places and brought the filth with them when they landed on our bodies, eyes, lips and open wounds, where they deposited all kinds of diseases including dysentery. Diseases were common in the camp and those who were exhausted seemed to catch them the most. Typhus too was present, originating from the muddy well water and from the poorly washed vegetables.

* * *

There was not a month that went by without an invitation to trial. It was usually at night, after midnight, that they took women from their cells and tents.

Our nights were turned into nightmares when the police knocked loudly and opened the doors of our cells or stormed our tents shouting loudly, calling women by name and ordering them to get out, with only five minutes to pack their belongings...

We know why they were calling them.

And those who were taken, left behind pieces of their clothing, pictures, letters, books, earrings, combs, mirrors... as souvenirs.

We sent the women in solemn... We gave them a bit of the hidden water to wash their faces... we helped them adjust their hair and clothes... to look beautiful... and we gave them words of encouragement. We encouraged them to be brave when they left the camp.

One night two girls were called out from my tent. They were ordered to come out quickly. We all got up, quickly tossed some clothes over our bodies and followed the police officers.

There was a strong wind blowing and rain was pouring. We could not see where the ground started and where it ended. We could

hardly hear the waves crashing on the shore, from the furious rain and wind storm.

The night was pitch black; you could not even see your finger in front of your eyes. The sky was dark and the sea was sliced by the brilliance of lightening and by the roar of thunder blasting over us. We started shouting but our voices were lost in the roar of thunder.

They always took girls in nights like this.

Always, be it at night or at dawn, we always went to send them off on their last trip, singing:

Farewell, goodbye sad world,
Goodbye, farewell sweet life...

The women being sent to trial walked upright and tall and we ran behind them, many of us, escorting them to the shore before being prevented by loaded guns pointed at us. We stood on the high bank and, for as long as we could see the ship in the sea, we sang and clapped our hands for them.

With that we wished them a safe trip and good luck...

Our song accompanied them to the last step and breath along the wall of the shooting range.

That's all we could do for those who were taken in the dark, when the winds and storms were most crazy, when the shore was smashed by the mad waves, when the island was beaten by lightning and thunder, when heaven and earth became one in the dark... that's all we could do for them...

We felt drained, dead drained, broken and silent in the days they took the women from us... No one felt like talking...

In days like that everything seemed less important... questions about what would happen and what would become of us didn't seem to matter. None of us were even sure if tomorrow or another day they

would be calling us... none knew which day they would be called... so every day was a day of anticipation and anxiety.

* * *

We had visitors come to the camp including government ministers, senior military and police figures, priests and bishops. They even brought deserters who had deserted the Democratic Army of Greece and some of those who left the camps as a result of signing the statement of remorse.

They all promised us one thing:

“If you sign a statement of repentance, you will immediately go home. If not, then you will die from starvation, disease, work, thirst, heat, cold, moisture, fear, hopelessness, loneliness...!”

Repent!

That’s what they said standing under in the shade while we burned lined up in the sun, while we were pelted by falling rain or frozen in the snow... standing there rigid waiting for them to be done deciding our fate...

* * *

Besides the many ways of creating despondency, the police also brought mothers to the camp to persuade their daughters to sign the statement of repentance.

I once heard a conversation that went something like this:

The mother said: “My dear child, sign, they will let you go...”

The daughter then replied: “No mother, I will not sign. I have been tortured far too much to forget the villainy. They want to bring discord between us... They want to give up on us, on all of us. They want me to be nothing ... They are now tormenting you with my pain. They are taking my and your happiness away. You must hold

hard mother, don't let them see you hurting. Don't give them the pleasure to see us broken... don't give those dogs the satisfaction..."

The girl knelt in front of her mother, took her mother's hand in her hand and all the time they hugged and kissed warm tears ran down their cheeks relieving their pain and all the weight from their shoulders.

But what hurt me the most was listening to them sigh...

* * *

The space where we were allowed to move was very tiny. It was marked by two rows of rusty barbed wire. The time that we were allowed to spend out there was really limited; just two hours a day. One hour in the morning just before noon and one hour in the afternoon. We were guarded by armed police at all times. They monitored our every move. We were not allowed to stare at the sky, the sea, or the hills beyond the barbed wire.

Women who received money from home were lined up in front of the wire fence facing the merchants on the other side, who were more than willing to take the hard earned money their relatives had sent them, in exchange for some soap, a piece of clothing, thread, pins, needles, pencils, envelopes, paper, candles... and of course all this was done under the watchful eye of the police.

I never bought anything because I had no money. But as long as this petty trade was taking place I used the opportunity to hide Victoria's notebooks in the roots of the olive tree, while pretending to collect flowers in the olive grove. I usually gave the flowers I collected to the older women. They were fond of me. Some dried the flowers and sent them to their relatives with their letters.

I too sent dried flowers with my letters to my native village in Kostur, but the letters always returned... unanswered... silent... in pain...

* * *

Even though we were forbidden, some nights we gathered together at a secret place and quietly, almost whispering, sang joyful and sad songs. Loud and long sighs were always heard when we sang sad songs filling the place with sadness, reminding us of our pain.

The song that caused us most grief and pain was called “Καποια μανα αναστεναζει” (A mother sighs a difficult sigh). The words and melody were very sad and even sadder for us in our situation. Even a mention of the song brought us to tears stirring sad memories and pain. It not only saddened us, it saddened the policemen who secretly listened to us singing. They allowed us to continue singing because they did not want us to see them looking sad.

* * *

We always observed national and religious holidays in the camp. We celebrated the national holidays with songs, dances and plays. The songs and plays had to be pre-approved by camp administration before we could sing and act. And, while the celebration was going on, the police stood on the side and carefully followed everything that was happening on the makeshift stage and everything the prisoners did, making sure the script was followed to the letter.

The days when we celebrated the religious holidays were very sad for us. We were in the camps on Trikeri in body only, our spirits and thoughts were always at home...

You sit on the bare floor and you imagine that you are at home. Your eyes are soaked in tears as you reflect on everything that was done at home before and during the holiday. The day before Easter all the girls in the village would get together and visit the forest and meadows to pick flowers to adorn the large icon of the Virgin Mary placed in front of the church just for this occasion. Everyone at home helped out with the preparations... clean the house, sweep the yard, knead and bake the bread, bake the cakes, bake the cookies... Then all these goodies were placed on the big dining table in the centre of the room... Everything that God provided for us was there... breads, cakes, cookies, roasted meats, boiled meats, red wine and, of course, a basket full of red Easter eggs... The oldest

person in the house, usually a grandfather, would raise his glass of red wine and toast:

“Cheers! May we live happy and healthy lives for many years! Joy to us all and more joy to us in the future!...”

Then all would raise and clink their glasses with sparkling wine and say cheers...

In my village, in the afternoon we would go to the Sv. Atanas Church and I would swing on the swing hanging from a thick oak branch. I would take turns swinging with other girls and sing a song dedicated to the Virgin Mary or, as we used to say, on the one watching and on those watching her...

Life was great... We were happy... We were cheerful... The times were festive...

That's the way it was...

Sitting down with her chin between her knees, I would imagine seeing my new friend in our guest room at home, and my loved ones would all dissolve in the tears in my eyes.

And all this, here in the camp, was only a memory arousing in me grief and bitter pain.

In moments like these I felt very lonely and thinking about my past, in view of the torment I had been through, made me feel enormous pain, stronger than a policeman's punch, stronger than a blow from a rod, stronger than the lash of a whip... I celebrated the holidays alone, in my own mind, and the holiday became warmth, a dream, a desire pronounced with a long sigh... a happy holiday... Lord, please free us so we can go home soon...

We were celebrating Easter that day but we did not finish the celebration...

Suddenly the cell door flung wide open and our wishes were ended...

They gave us an order... Every time a policeman stood at the door we were expected to stand up, on our feet, and stand at attention. I was the last one... and late to jump to my feet. The policeman grabbed me by my hair and pulled me out into the hallway. He beat me pretty hard. I was in pain and bleeding. But that pain did not hurt as much as the pain from my desire to be at home, to celebrate Easter Sunday at home...

It was Easter and we always celebrated Easter...

For many, many years...!

* * *

One day they moved us out from the cells in the monastery and relocated us in tents along the coast, only a few steps away from the edge of the cliff. When the south winds blew we could hear the waves smashing against the rocky coast. It was an eerie sound that caused us terrible fear. I was afraid the sea would rise up, wash us out and draw us in its deep murky waters.

The blowing north winds were even more frightening. That's when we opened the tent flaps on the north and south side, so that the wind could pass through the tent freely. Otherwise both the tent and us might take flight and be blown away into the sea.

One night sometime after midnight, along with the whistling wind blowing and the waves crashing against the shore, we heard an eerie sound full of terrible screams and calls for help. Our neighbouring tent had been blown away and the women were clutching at the posts and ropes.

It was very dark and noisy that night. The wind was strong and the pounding of the waves frightening. The screams from the women were even more frightening... their shrieks were horrible. The wind and the darkness had swallowed the terrible screams, which further heightened our fears. But we found them... Some were kneeling, some lying down... We found them, grabbed them and pulled them away... only steps away from the abyss. They were all there...

None of them was taken by the abyss... This time...

* * *

In one place, about three or four metres away from the tent, there were about a dozen graves. The men buried there were victims of the camp, brought here in the past.

There was cross made of chiseled olive wood located in the centre of the cemetery. My tent was located just three steps away from it. These graves were larger and different from the smaller graves located nearby. Young children were buried in the smaller graves. These children had been brought here with their mothers. There was a tiny cross on each, made of two olive branches tied together. Some had fallen over in the mud, probably blown down by the strong wind. There was mud covering the children's graves.

My bed, consisting of a single old blanket, was closest to the smallest graves. I could almost reach out and touch them. These were the graves of the twins - Eleftheria and her nameless sister. I often caressed them... when I was awake and in my dreams... In the most difficult moments of my life, when I was overwhelmed with hopelessness, I often sat down near them, touched their graves and sang lullabies to them. I sang the lullabies that my grandmother and mother used to sing to me. I wanted them to have peace and calm their souls... With a quiet whisper I sang lullabies and wished them best wishes. Then I prayed for them to have peace in this barren and salty island...

Sleep my dear, my tiny little babies, my souls, sleep...

Sleep and dream of sunshine with me...

Chapter - 7

April. Morning. Nineteen fifty-four.

I came out of my tent to a surprising silence. It was sunny outside. A gentle breeze was blowing the rare few green, sun-burned, wind blown blades of grass that grew between the stones. The olive trees were flowering and spreading their beautiful aroma.

It was a surprising silence because the morning camp trumpet did not sound. The flag was not waving on the flagpole... There was no flag to wave... What surprises were waiting for us now? I returned to my tent, and found all the women huddled together, looking through one of the half-opened flaps in the tent. We all felt uneasy... We waited and there was nothing but silence. There was no movement. The silence was eerie and tense. Moments like these were difficult and full of uncertainty... What were they waiting for? The tension grew even more with the uncertainty. And suddenly - thunder. The camp loudspeakers thundered and shortly after that, orders:

“Attention! Attention! Attention! All to rally! All to rally! All to rally!...” These announcements were repeated every few minutes. There were no military marches here? I found it surprising that they would be calling us all to a rally. I also sensed that the announcer’s voice was not right... it was somewhat less enthusiastic... less loud... Frightened, everyone came out of their tents and cells. A big crowd began to gather at the meeting place. We all lined up and waited. There was uneasiness in everyone’s eyes and burning questions on their lips... What is happening? What awaits us? What will they do to us today? Insecurity and fear kept growing with every passing moment.

We stood in line in silence and waited - tense, twisted, scared...

It was noon. The camp commander climbed onto the stage. Every eye in the line was glued on him. He kept staring at us from up there, swallowing us whole. Finally he sighed deeply and said:

“Listen you...” he then paused and slowly looked at the entire line. For him we were just a line. “Listen and remember this long and well. As of today your beloved homeland is forgiving your evil deeds and is taking you back in her arms. From today onwards you are free. Gather your rags, you are going home...” That’s all he said and then walked away.

Was I surprised?

I was more scared than surprised... We all were...

Trikeri was emptied in the next few days. And for the time we were still there, after the announcement was made, it seemed to me like the sky above the island was brighter.

It was bluer, warmer, greener, the olive tree flowers released more aroma and it seemed like there was a glaze of dew on the sunburned, bluish grass that grew between the stones...

We left Trikeri, the island of torture and suffering, the island sowed with the pain and watered with the tears of thousands of women and girls and... with my own...

On Trikeri... We left behind the old American military tents. We left behind the damp and moldy cells in the monastery basements. We left behind the blooming olive trees, the booming waves, the crazy sea winds, the sunburned and rain washed boulders and steep cliffs, the hatred, the terrible cries in the cellars, the corpses of the mutilated and crazed, the begging, the suffering and the curses.

Behind me I left a petrifying silence under the blue sky and, in it, a spark of infinite, unbroken, great comforting joy and tears.

Trikeri remained behind me - burdened with the weight of the pain of the thousands of women tortured... including mine.

I dreamed and now I began the long-awaited journey to my dreams.

I was sent home without signing the dreaded statement. I have contempt for those sent home, for the many women and girls who

signed the statement. But I also have deep compassion for them. Many were sent to trial and shot by a firing squad. I have much admiration for them ... I bow before their remains.

They are all in my thoughts. Wherever they are, I love them and wish them luck...

* * *

For every woman who was sent to the camps for women, be it at Hios, Trikeri, Makronisos... there is a story... about what they experienced, how much they suffered and how much they had to endure... The stories might be similar but each experience is different...

Mine too was similar to the others, but at the same time it was different...

There, in the camps, they demanded that all of us to give up on our husbands, brothers, sisters, relatives and in the things that we believed...

But they demanded more from me...

And so the days and nights, weeks and months, passed and turned into years...

One thousand nine hundred and fifty-four!

That was the year the camps for women closed...

Goodbye Trikeri...

Chapter - 8

The main directorate for the women's camps, based in Larissa, was located on the second floor. They brought me to the office of some chief who, without even saying hello, looking sullen, kept staring at me persistently, measuring me from head to toe. Some time later he took a blue folder from the shelf, opened it, turned a few pages and then said:

“You are going tomorrow...”

“Where am I going?” I asked.

“To your small homeland,” he replied.

“Are you saying I am going home? To my village?!” I asked

“Yes! Home! To your village in Kostur Region. Are you not from there?” he asked, paused, looked at me and continued:

“I have no idea where you will be staying there...” and left it at that.

While the Chief gathered his papers and put them back in the folder, which I believe was my record, it occurred to me, given that he said there was nowhere for me to stay, it was possible that the police were sending me to Kostur to arrest me and put me in jail.

The Chief put the folder back in the large brown envelope, took a long look at me and said:

“Go on, go now... gather your belongings and have a good trip. From today on you are free. Your fatherland has forgiven you... Go... today. Get your things and when you are ready come back and take your release papers... the certificate of your release from the camp...”

“I have nothing to get. Everything I have, I have here with me... in this bag...” I said.

“You have nothing else? Only that bag?” he asked acting surprised.

“Yes... Here, have a look,” I said and opened the bag. “I have a small comb, a mirror and two hairpins... That’s it!” I added.

I did not tell him who gave me the bag. I did not tell him that I always carried this little bag with me and that it was full of pain, suffering and tears.... and that when I returned from Makronisos the bag was full of dreams, expectations and hopes... I did not tell him that in it I carried everyone’s pain from the camps, both physical and mental, including my own pain...

“No, not like this, not in those rags and in those military boots... you can’t go like that. What will the world say, eh? Do you want to give the domestic and foreign journalists reasons to spread lies about how bad the camps were and how badly you were treated there, eh?” he said.

He then lifted the handset and with a vitriolic tone of voice, shouted:

“Duty officer come here!” After that he turned to me and said: “You must dress nicely so that you will look good... not like this!”

“Your orders Colonel, Sir!” reported the duty officer, standing at attention.

“Take her to the store and let her pick a dress, shoes, a head kerchief and a hat... the kind she likes...”

The duty officer took me to the store. There were a pile of dresses on the floor. Further over there were shoes, hats, scarves, shawls, jackets...

“What is this?” I asked the duty officer.

As you can see it’s a store... a warehouse full of clothing...” he replied.

I stepped over the threshold and went inside. I slowly approached the pile of dresses. I grabbed one, shook it and looked at it. I then felt the floor under me move like a ship, lifting, falling, swinging...

I felt like the walls were closing in on me, the ceiling rising, the windows rolling, making funny circles. Cold sweat began to form on my forehead. My throat tightened. I was gasping for air. Everything was melting in the fog... spinning... spinning... I felt like I was going to pass out. I shivered and slowly came back to consciousness. My view was obstructed by my tears but as soon as they began to drip out of my eyes I looked at it again... In my hand I was holding a dress with blue flowers that had a large stain of dried blood on the upper half.

“I recognize this dress...” I gasped. “It belonged to Anthoula.”

I had met Anthoula in a cell at the main office for the women’s camps. She was a happy sort, brownish complexion, about twenty two years old, a teacher from Athens. She was badly beaten and bleeding. She was the kind of woman who yelled at her torturers when they beat her and the harder they beat her the more she yelled:

“Hit me coward, beat me weakling, hit me, you like to beat girls and to torment women... don’t you? But I, I am Greece, I am its Caryatid, not you...”

Anthoula and five other women from my cell were court-martialed and executed... their hopes and dreams extinguishing... which they readily shared with us in the cell...

Before Anthoula left the camp she gave me this little bag.

“Take it,” he said, “as a souvenir to remember me by...”

All the time I was in Trikeri I carried it with me. I took it with me everywhere I went... that little bag... full of pain, torment and tears.

It also carried Anthoula’s dreams...

That little bag was always full of dreams, expectations, hope... It was a joy to have it and I felt happy like a bird on its first flight...

When I was lonely and suffering it kept me company and gave me support. It kept the evil away and brought me good thoughts and memories... in all the camps I was held prisoner...

I folded the dress very slowly, like I was folding a garland and put it back on the pile of clothes. I then stepped outside of the store carrying with me only my memory of Anthoula and the other women whose clothes were returned to this store after they were shot...

“No...” I said to the duty officer. “I don’t need anything from here. Take me back to the Chief...”

I could hear my prison shoes echoing as we moved along the long hallway, seeming like Anthoula was yelling:

“I am Greece, I am its Caryatid, I carry the sky, stars, the moon, the sun... everything... I am Greece!...”

I stopped, but very briefly, looked up and whispered:

“We all are Caryatid...”

The Chief saw me from his half open door and called me in.

“Did you get what you wanted?” he asked.

“No Sir, Chief...” I replied. “I don’t need anything. I am alright like this; I am not naked or barefoot...”

He looked at me sternly and tightened his fists.

“Take her to the Red Cross store!” he ordered the duty officer and then cursed my Holy Cross and Virgin Mary and slammed the door shut.

* * *

When the door slammed behind me, sounding like a great iron gate, I was not startled; I only felt chills and cold sweat all over my body.

But I quickly recovered... I tightened my shoulders, clenched my jaw, tightened my belly and chest... and my whole body shuddered. The entire experience felt like an unexpected blow. That's how it felt, the same way as I felt after each interrogation.

I found myself in a wide open space. I stood there and looked around. I felt a lot of emptiness in my hands and in my soul. I had nothing with me. I looked at the vastness in front of me and swarms of thoughts began to fill my head.

Where? With whom am I going? Who will be waiting for me?

Where I am going, will someone be there to meet me, hug me and ask how I am?

There were people walking on the street. They were rushing, going somewhere, some were turning to look, stare at me. They must have wondered why I was standing alone in front of the prison. I took a few steps away. I stared at the sky. A bird was flying high above me. I followed its flight. It gave me courage. I continued to walk. I did not look back... I told myself - go - go - go, mix with the people...

I walked and walked and walked but I felt unsure about my walking. Fear began to creep all over me. I felt the rumble of old military boots that persistently and stubbornly followed me, like the times I had left behind. I took a deep breath still not believing that I was free and out among the people...

Women passing by me were wearing clean clothes, had nicely combed hair, smelled of perfume and wore make-up. Some were smiling, others were joking, laughing, hugging, and stopping to have conversations. Children were dashing around them, shouting. I watched everything with astonishment and wondered:

“Is this the real world? Has the world changed so much in the five years of life I spent on the dry island surrounded by barbed wire, behind bars, in the dark, cold and damp cells, in torn-up tents on the coast near the deep chasm? The five years I spent under the scorching sun, under the rainy skies and in the cold clammy cellars of torture? The five years of my young life that I spent in the claws

of my interrogators and torturers? Where day and night I faced the fists of my torturers and tasted my blood?"

I mingled with the people and walked among them wondering if any of them, whom I now left behind, were responsible for my torment... Did any of them hug their mothers, wives, children, loved ones... with the same hands they tortured me? Would they caress their children and touch their foreheads, cheeks and lips and wrap their arms around their little bodies with the same hands that beat me? Do their mothers, fathers, wives, daughters, sons, friends, lovers, acquaintances... know what they have done?

Did they know where to hit us with their fists, during the interrogation down in the dungeon cells, in order to hurt us the most?...

I kept walking, walking and did not believe that I was not walking down the bloody basement stairs to the cells. But for some reason, I felt insecure walking in the open space among the people. I guess I was unaccustomed to being free. I was unaccustomed to seeing so many people walking, without bruises and black eyes, walking with a sure step, smiling, saying hello, stopping for a brief discussion and resuming their walk.

Was this freedom?

Whose freedom was it? What kind of freedom was this?

I kept walking and my thoughts kept swarming in my head. Where was I going?

What did I have?

Yes, in my pocket I had an envelope and in it was a piece of paper with a signature and a seal. The seal and signature confirmed that this person, who still had scars from the blows under their eyes and on the cheeks... that this person, me, was free to go home because their sins were forgiven.

I had another piece of paper. It too had a signature and seal. This one said that I had to surrender myself to the police responsible for me at my residence as soon as I got there...

The chief also gave me another, a small envelope, which contained money. I did not count it.

“Have a safe trip...” he said quietly and shook my hand.

I did not answer him.

When I went down the hallway I spat on my hand and rubbed it against my shirt to sterilize it... from the handshake...

Chapter - 9

It took the old bus two days to bring us to Kostur. It offloaded twelve women at the police station yard. Two guards ordered us to line up and, while we carried our meager possessions in our hands, they escorted us inside the police station where we had to surrender our records.

They called us up to the front one by one. They did not interrogate us. By our file they knew who we were and where we came from. The long and menacing glance I received from the Chief was enough testimony about who I was and what I had done. After looking at me for a second time he asked:

“How was your stay over there?”

“It was okay...” I said, “It was okay and very nice... like never before...”

I don't know if he did not hear what I said because, without interruption, he kept tapping his pencil on my record and, at the same time, kept hitting the floor with his heavy boot.

Tap-tap-tap-tap with his pencil on my record...

Boom-boom-boom-boom on the floor with his boot...

It was driving me crazy... it was similar to the interrogation techniques they used in the prison cellars at central administration and in the cells at Trikeri... before they sent us to solitary confinement...

Tap-tap-tap-tap with the pencil on my record...

Boom-boom-boom-boom with the boot on the floor...

A painful reminder of my painful past...

At that moment I felt a little ill. It seemed as if heavy drops of cold water were falling from the ceiling and hitting me on the head, just

like they had in the prison cells. He kept up with the ticking and the thumping, occasionally raising his eyebrows and gawking at me with the look of a hungry wolf. Malice and hatred was hiding behind his eyelashes. His breath rustled like a snake ready to attack. His eyes, half squinting, were full of spark and the desire to attack. His left fist was tight and bulging, ready to strike.

“Yes... And now it’s time for you to hear the rules and the provisions of the rules that you must follow...” he said, sounding like the tapping of his pencil and thumping of his boot.

He took a book out of a drawer, spit on his finger and began to read:

“According to the existing rules you must strictly adhere to the following orders. For starters you are obliged twice a week, Monday and Friday, at ten o’clock in the morning or at seventeen hundred hours in the afternoon, to report to the police station... meaning here. You are prohibited from traveling at night from seven in the evening until six o’clock in the morning. You cannot travel more than five kilometres. You will require permission to travel outside the specified area. It is compulsory that you register your place of residence with the police, meaning your address. You must allow the police at all times, day and night, to access to your place of residence to perform searches. You are not allowed to participate in any protests, public manifestations and even concerts. You are not allowed to become a member of any organization. You must report on everyone you meet, what books, magazines and newspapers you buy and read, and letters and other mail you receive. You must report where you work, for whom you work and how much money you earn. You must report all encounters; with whom you meet, where, why and what you talked about...”

While he was reading the rules I counted up to ten on my fingers.

He looked at me sternly and hit the book with his finger, which reminded me of the Ten Commandments, then he added:

“A declaration of loyalty must be signed. All endopii (natives) are required to sign such a statement. Tomorrow you will receive this statement and you must sign it without objecting. If you don’t sign

it, I will remind you right now, so that you don't forget, the road you came on is not closed and that the islands you came from are still there... Do you want me to write down in a letter everything I told you?"

"No," I said, "I have a good memory."

"Okay then? But I am warning you, don't forget... Unlike where you were, here we have different rules!" he added.

In the reporting piece of paper, which also served as my identity card, he wrote down the days and times I was expected to report at the police station and stamped it hard like a hammer hitting a board. He signed the paper and, with a wide swing, tossed it in front of me along with a ton of orders to remind me not to forget ...

He then asked: "What did you say your name was?"

"Kalina..." I replied.

"Kalina... Kalina... ..That name has no meaning... It means nothing to me..." he remarked.

"Yes it has meaning!" I replied

The Chief called in the floor sweeper and asked him:

"In your Gypsy language, do you know what the word 'kalina' means?"

"Kalina... kalina..." the sweeper said out loud as he thought. "I think it's a fruit"... "Ah, kalina... Chief, Sir, kalina is a fruit... Reddish on the outside with red juicy beans inside..."

In a loud, mocking voice the Chief laughed and said:

"What a name... That's not a Greek name? They named you after a tree, a fruit! That's the same as naming you after a pumpkin, a cucumber, a cabbage, onions, beans, lentils, green beans..."

“They probably could have...” I said, “But they decided to call me Kalina. They also affectionately called me Kalinka, Kalino and Kalinche... They named me after my grandmother...”

“It’s an ugly name, you can’t call yourself that,” said the Chief. “It is shameful for a beautiful girl to be named after a tree, or a fruit. It would be for the best if you chose a beautiful Greek name. The best Greek names are Persephone, Andromache, Aphrodite, Antigoni, Friederike, Pinelopi, Eurocity, Eurydice... Do you hear how nice they sound...? They are all names of goddesses, not like yours, Kalina, a vulgar name without meaning and beauty... Tell me, which one should I write down for you?”

“Kalina...” I replied.

“Think about it well...” he said then asked: “Is this a Slavic name?”

“It’s a Christian name from our region...” I replied.

“You mean endopio (native)?” he asked and then barked: “You must change it!”

“No!!” I replied firmly.

“Well then, too bad for you and too bad for your name!” he said and then asked: “So, tell me, is there any significance to that name?”

“Yes there is...” I said, remembering what Victoria had told me about the pomegranate and its symbolism, which also applied to my name. “Yes there is Chief, Sir, yes there is and it’s very important,” I added.

“Sure it does...” he said ominously. Then added: “In other words you will not give up this pagan name, right?”

“Right! I will not give it up...” I replied.

“Too bad young lady! Too bad for you and too bad for your name...” he said.

He threw the registration brochure in front of me and, in a raised tone of voice, said:

“You are free to go now! But you have to be back here in three days; twice a week, in accordance with your instructions and the law.”

“Under those conditions...” I remarked.

The Chief looked at me and said: “I said you are free to go...”

He gave me a piercing look and said:

“You should know that I personally knew your father. He bravely fought on the Albanian front for Greece, do you understand, he fought for Greece...”

I then locked my own eyes on his ugly face, gave him a hard look and, as mildly as I could, firmly said:

“I fought for Greece too but for a different Greece, not the one with Trikeri and Makronisos... and signing statements of repentance and pledging loyalty... and for your Ten Commandments...”

He looked at me with a murderous look in his eyes, slammed his fist on the table, and yelled out loud:

“Exo, paliovulgara!!!” (Get out you ancient Bulgarian!!!)

* * *

I found myself on the street. I was lonely, bitter, burdened by the weight of loneliness and uncertain about today and tomorrow.

The street with the fewest people on it led me to the fish market. I sat on a bench next to the lakeshore. I smelled the aroma of fried fish coming from a nearby tavern. I could hear a mandolin playing quietly. I inhaled a deep breath of fresh lake air along with the aroma of fried fish. The aroma reminded me of how hungry I was. I had not eaten since yesterday morning. I went to a nearby bakery and bought a loaf of freshly baked bread. I then went back to the

same bench and started eating it, watching the pigeons squabble over the crumbs I dropped on the cobblestones.

I spent the night on the bench. The cold did not bother me much. I had become accustomed to sleeping outdoors on a hard bed in the cold, in the whirlwind of war and in the island prisons. I was awake most of the night but fell asleep at dawn. The pigeons woke me.

It was a new day. The sky was clear, the aroma of spring was in the air, a cool breeze blew over the lake and gently rolled the water into tiny waves, making them sparkle like countless pearls in the morning sun. There was an acacia tree in full bloom near the tavern. The air was fragrant with the aroma of lilac. There was a nightingale resting on a branch of a plum tree, singing its song, pausing to listen and then resuming again. It jumped from one branch to another and started its song anew. I noticed small white flower petals falling down from the fully blossomed plum tree.

For me this was a new day away from the island, outside of the camp cells and torture chambers, and away from the police station. I was in a new day in the middle of the surrounding mountains, which many times I had climbed in the midst of war. Today there was no shouting, swearing, no uniformed policeman, no rusty barbed wire, no crazy winds like those in Trikeri and Makronisos, no rocky chasms being wildly beaten by the waves, no threats of humiliation, no torn up smelly American tents, no women and girls with whom to share a common martyr's fate... They had all sailed home.... On a calm sea... may gentle winds and clear skies let them find their way home...

The pigeons were all around me interacting, jumping from place to place, making their pigeon sounds, filling the cobblestone pavement with life... with me in it.

The ring of a church bell startled the pigeons. The entire flock soared into the sky, spinning in wide circles over the lake. When the bell stopped ringing the cobblestone pavement, once again, became a living, speaking grey carpet.

“Is this freedom?” I asked myself.

The church bell rang, calling...

It was Sunday.

A day of Prayer... A day to ease the soul... A day of meeting and union with God...

I stood up and joined the people on a walk to the church. Believers quietly walked in front of and behind me, conversing... saying something. The women carried baskets with foods to be given out... food for the souls. After I lit a candle I stood in front of the large icon of the Virgin Mary and, for the first time in several years, began to cross myself and pray. I prayed the way I was taught by my mother and grandmother, with my heart and soul, with my thoughts, desires and hopes... I prayed for the souls of the boys and girls whose bones remained in the mountains... I prayed for the crippled and maimed in the prison cellars, on the dry islands... for those who went back home... for the brave and for those who were afraid... and for those who were forced to the roads and to unfamiliar countries...

I prayed and prayed...

Everyone in the church was quiet and peaceful... the light was eternal... I prayed to the Virgin passionately...

When service ended the priest closed the royal gates behind him and disappeared into the altar.

The people crossed themselves again and slowly, step by step, left the church. The caretaker extinguishing all the candles then gathered the partly burned ones and placed them in a basket. He then extinguished the large candles glimmering in front of the altar. Then he, along with the priest, came out of the church and locked the church door with a big metal padlock.

No one checked to see if anyone was still inside the church.

I squatted in the corner staring at the Virgin Mary's sad face.

Surrendered and subdued to my begging prayer, I passionately and charmingly spent the night in the church with Mary and Jesus Christ and with the angels and saints...

I prayed for a long time and for a long time I could not close an eye.

* * *

I went to look for work. I went knocking from door to door and when they opened the door, I asked for forgiveness for bothering them, saying:

“Pardon me; I am looking for work... Do you need a cleaning lady, a maid, a nanny...? I can do laundry, clean... I can look after small children... I don't want a salary, only a corner to sleep in and some food to eat... I don't mind eating leftovers or scraps off the table. That's all... Please...”

Some looked at me with pity, some slammed the door on me, others told me to come back tomorrow and we would see. Some asked me where I was from; where I come from? I did not hide anything and I did not deceive them. And then they slammed the door on me.

The next day some said: “No! We don't hire those released from prisons and camps, no...”

Only one woman said: “You are wasting your time knocking on doors. The police will not allow me to hire people like you...”

I was all alone in the city and feeling lonely. The streets were empty, deserted. In that kind of solitude I had a great desire to meet someone... with a big warm smile... so I could smile back at them... someone who would hold out their hand and greet me... speak to me... but that was not happening... I felt like cold air was blowing from every window, from every half-opened door. I felt like people were watching me suspiciously from every corner, from every narrow alley. I wondered:

“Why have people lost their warmth and sight of the world? Who among them sowed so much fear? Why is there so much doubt? Why so much distrust? Why so much hate? Why so much disgust?”

I did not despise them.

I only sympathized with them.

* * *

One day I was passing by the football club administration building and saw a face that seemed familiar. I was not sure who he was so I asked a man passing by:

“Who is that man?”

“He is the stadium administrator...” the man replied and quietly continued on.

After looking at him for a while, I recognized him. I said to myself: “A familiar face...” A man from my village.... I went closer. He kept looking at me as I approached. Then there was a sudden surprise. He recognized me but looked bewildered. He said:

“You’re alive?!!”

“Yes I am...” I replied.

“Where have you been?” he asked. But before I had a chance to reply he asked: “What are you doing now?”

Briefly I told him where I was and what I was doing.

He kept looking at me, measuring me from head to toe. His cheeks began to vibrate when he whispered:

“Bleak and terrible times...” He then asked: “Where do you live... Where do you work?”

“In the city, on the streets... looking for a job...” I replied.

“Don’t worry. Tomorrow... Come back here around this time tomorrow... we will think of something,” he assured me.

The next day I saw him coming out of the police station. I don’t remember exactly but I think he was one of those village informants who managed to escape to Kostur when the partisans were recruiting young people from the villages and sending them to Gramos. I asked another man about him yesterday and he said:

“There are people who say that he is a bigger policeman than the policemen. He joined the volunteer paramilitary squads during the war and fearlessly fought against the partisans. He was given many awards for his loyalty and services, including a house in the city that belonged to someone else and a job as a manager in the stadium...” That’s what the man whispered in my ear before he disappeared into the narrow alley.

I knew why the man quickly disappeared into the narrow alley. Because in every bar, tavern, store, workshop, street corner, intersection, kiosk... there were eyes and ears lurking in the shadows. The shadows behind the shadows took turns watching and making notes of who did what, who said what to whom, who winked at whom, whether they winked with the left or with the right eye, who crossed into whose yard and whether they crossed with the right or left leg first, who bought a newspaper and who spoke to whom.

Beware of the shadows lurking in the shadows...

Now that I knew who I was dealing with I thought that maybe he was not the same kind of trash as those on the islands...

I arrived on time at the agreed place, went inside the stadium administration office and waited for him. When he arrived he greeted me and said:

“I found work for you.”

“Thank you and God bless you!” I replied.

“You will work here with me. You will work as a cleaner... I don’t have a better job...” he said.

“Oh, thank you... That will be fine...” I replied.

He took me to a small room from where he took two buckets, some rags and a broom.

“You will work from seven in the morning until five in the afternoon,” he said. “You will be cleaning the toilets in the stadium and at the market... We will agree on your salary later... Where do you live?” he asked.

I shook my shoulders and pointed to the sky.

“We will solve that too,” he said. “There is a small room on the other side. The guard sleeps there once in a while. Come and have a look...”

There was a window high up under the ceiling and an iron military bed under it. The pillow was dirty. There were two blankets on top of the bed. There was a tap and a sink on the opposite side. The floor was covered with tiles. It looked like a prison cell...

I accepted the job, the room and the shadow of the man from my village.

* * *

On market days when I had some free time from my cleaning job I took a stroll through the market, not to buy anything but to look at the people, so that I was not alone all the time. I felt better there...

A counter was set up and lying on it were laced doilies for sale. They were made to be used on top of a table on which to set drinking glasses and pitchers. Behind the counter sat a woman knitting them with one needle. Women passing by were looking at the doilies, touching them, turning them over, measuring them, asking how much they cost and haggling. Some made purchases

while others made special deals. As I watched the woman knit I remembered the other woman, the one from Crete, in Trikeri, who taught me to knit with a single needle. With a chingulaki, as she called it. I will never forget her love, her perseverance... knitting in the dark... staring and straining her eyes... It gave me a certain desire to live... to pray... Watching her knit made me feel good... warm all over... She taught me to knit and always made me think of and invent new patterns... those of roses, leaves of various trees, grapes, figs, blossoming flowers, birds in flight, deer, lambs, exquisitely dressed girls, playful children and so on...

The only thing that was different about these doilies sitting on the counter with those I was familiar with and made myself were the laces tied on them. This got me thinking, so I said to myself:

“What’s to stop me from doing this myself... knitting with a single needle?”

I decided to set some money aside from my first payment I received from my job and with it I purchased two reels of white thread and a needle. And then I began to knit at night by candle light... About a week later I went to the market and set up a counter with my wares.

When the woman, who challenged my knowledge of knitting, saw what I had to offer, she stood there frozen with her finger in her mouth.

My doilies sold quickly. The poor woman was so embittered that she reported me to the police. They called me in and asked me for my work permit. When I said I did not have one, they fined me and took away half my earnings from the sales.

I stopped going to the market. The women who wanted to purchase my wares came to me, here to my room, where I knitted the materials. They placed orders not only for doilies for the table, but for other wares including knitted curtains. I custom made for them whatever they desired.

I did very well with my knitting, enough to quit my job cleaning toilets... I also moved out of the little room and rented an apartment.

I continued to function as was required of me by the police until year end with my loneliness as my only companion. Loneliness was a terrible thing and tormented me most evenings. I had a great desire to meet someone who would smile at me and shake my hand... I watched people pass me by and to me they looked depressed, somewhat slumped, with no warmth in their eyes, without kindness on their faces... full of visible fear and suspicion...

Deep in my own thoughts I existed in silence. When I took a break from my knitting I often walked to the top of the hill that rose above the city. There I sat on a stone facing west and looked into the distance...

In front of me, right and left, were the hills and mountains Bikovik, Vicho, Lisets, Mali-Madi, Stenite, Orleto, Odreto, Gorusha, Krusha, Aliavitsa and far, far away was the peak of Gramos.

I watched the hills and mountains... and myself in them... and the young men and women whose bones were left there... and then I wondered where were those who were left alive? Where did the whirlwind take them?

This is what I did in my spare time and this is how I escaped my loneliness... This was not regret but the cold, frozen truth, which was difficult to melt away. There was no joy in loneliness. And I loved the feeling of joy... big and small joy. Feeling joyous brought me greater relief. I loved the feel of joy. I preferred to feel great joy but feeling even a little joy brought me closer to dreaming, hoping and driving away the pain and sorrow...

Good memories always bring joy and are good for the soul...

I stared at the mountains and hills with excitement and often wondered:

“How many times had death smiled at me up there...?”

* * *

The fall of one thousand nine hundred and fifty-four marked a big event. Marshal Papagos came to power and gave us amnesty.

At the same time let us not forget that it was Papagos who crushed us (the partisans) at Vicho and Gramos.

The “Ten Commandments” imposed on me by the state, impeding on my freedom... were gone. Those exiled and imprisoned in the prison camps were released and sent home. Many returning to their villages found their homes, even their entire villages, in rubble. Others found a padlock hanging on the front door of their house with no one at home. Those returning were filled with hope but all they found was wasteland and desolation...

A great white ship arrived in Solun and offloaded hundreds and hundreds of women returning from the countries which they now called “countries behind the Iron Curtain”. Many of these women, whose husbands were migrant workers in Australia, Canada and America and who had fled, mostly to Romania, were returned.

The authorities took them to shelters where they were questioned for weeks and were helped to connect with their husbands. After that many were taken to Kostur. They were not allowed to go home to their villages. The women were told to wait until their papers arrived, meaning their passports and approval for settlement abroad with their husbands. Among them was my aunt Stoina, my mother’s first cousin. I found out from her what had happened to my own parents. She told me they were settled in a small town in Romania called Falticheni, where they remain to this day.

The news of my parents’ whereabouts was very painful for me.

Because I knew it would be impossible for them to return home.

My aunt Stoina also told me that all those who had left during the war sent letters to the Greek embassies in the countries they were in, asking and demanding to be returned to their homes. They waited for an answer from Greece but such an answer never came. The only answer they received was that of the Greek Communist Party

leadership which promised that everyone was going to be sent home, but collectively, not individually.

They only allowed the women from Kostur, Lerin and Voden Region, whose husbands were working in Australia, Canada and America, to return.

Later there was talk that it was at the request of the migrant workers in Australia, Canada and America that these women and their children had been collected from behind the Iron Curtain countries and sent abroad...

* * *

One day I saw a man in the market whom I thought I knew but I was not sure. Out of curiosity I went closer and had a good intense look at his face. There was a scar on his left cheek. His eyes were sunk in. He had thick black eyebrows. Then I remembered. It was Kostas. He was a wounded government soldier whom we had captured. I remember my commander ordering me to carry him on my back to a safe place. He was wounded in the chest; he spat blood and begged me not to shoot him. I took off his shirt, tore it into three pieces and bandaged his wound. He stopped bleeding. I fed him for two days with my own bread and gave him water to drink from my own canister. I consoled him, telling him his wound was not so bad and that any time now, together with the other wounded, we would be sending him to our partisan hospital. Lying in the ditch next to each other we talked as if we were old friends.

It was really strange...

Until yesterday we were in two opposing trenches, now we were in one. As I watched the wounded man I wondered what kind of fate is a fate that binds kindness between enemies. One of us shot him and yet here he was now depending on me to save his life...

Why is it like that? Is it because this is what war does... fate brought by war?

I found out the man was from one of the Kostur Region villages located near the city. I told him that I too was from Kostur Region. Perhaps that's what brought us closer together?

I was now certain that the man I was looking at was Kostas. The man I carried on my back when he was wounded. The man I took to a safe place and looked after for two days... It was him alright, the man we captured when he was wounded... a sergeant in the government army.

I moved through the people in the market and intentionally bumped into him.

"Excuse me Sir," I said and stared at him penetratingly. I noticed a surprised and puzzled look on his face. He was trying to identify me.

We stood there facing each other... looking at each other...

His cheeks began to tremble, but barely noticeably. A smile formed on his face. He kept looking at me... and finally he said:

"It's you! You! You, Kalina? You are Kalina, right?"

"And you are Kostas! Kostas..." I replied.

We hugged each other.

This was a moment in my life when for the first time in a long time I felt joy and, whether it was out of joy or not, to this day I don't know, I shed many tears. Why? It was certainly not because years ago we watched each other through the sight of our guns...

My tears welled up and I did not know why.

Kostas slowly pulled away from our embrace, took a small step back, looked me in the eyes and, with a trembling voice, said:

"Kalina, I thought about you a lot. I looked for you after the war ended and for many years I kept in my heart a couple of words I wanted to say to you... Well now, after so much time has passed

forgive me for the tardiness, I can now say ‘thank you...’ Thank you for saving my life... You saved my life... I will never forget that. And there in Uzbekistan and Tashkent in the barracks, which the Soviets, before we arrived, used as prisons for the Japanese, every night exhausted from digging canals, lying on the iron military bed, I was constantly thinking about you. All the time I looked for you, asking everyone. I searched everywhere through the Red Cross and through the Party... In response they wrote back ‘the person you were looking for does not exist’...”

I silently held onto his hand listening to him speak for a long time.

Kostas put my fingers together, bowed forward and kissed my hand... covering it in tears...

I tilted my head and placed it on his shoulder and there I poured out my own bitterness...

* * *

I had a second life in notebooks... Everything was written down in notebooks; about me and about the others. Everything I did and everything I did not do...

The first notebook was held by the police... I was a suspicious person and dangerous for the state. Punishment for that was prison or concentration camp...

The second notebook was held by the Bureau of the Headquarters of the Democratic Army of Greece. It was a thick notebook about reconnaissance and counter-correspondence activities. This notebook also contained parts of the information supplied by the battalion’s political commissar.

When in doubt always consult the notebook... the first place to look...

One time, only by accident, I peered into the commissar’s notebook and read something he had written about me. It read:

“Voluntarily entered the ranks of the Democratic Army of Greece”

I was really surprised!

“Since when did I join voluntarily!?” I yelled out loud. “Did you not ‘abduct’ all the girls from my village, including me, at night?”

A girl who was standing near me whispered:

“You crazy girl, don’t say another word because they will put you in their sights and you will always be watched. Drop it. Let them fill their notebooks with whatever they want. Just be careful and don’t say anything. Least of all don’t ask any questions...”

I took her advice and since then my words were measured and few. But, in spite of all that, there was no one and nothing that accompanied me more than those notebooks. They followed me wherever I went. They were always there... always in the shadow of the police...

* * *

One day the police escorted me to the police station. The Chief handed me a printed piece of paper with the title:

“Declaration of loyalty”

“What does this mean?” I asked:

He said: “Sign it first then I will explain...”

“And what law of the state am I breaking that I must sign such a statement?” I asked.

“This is not about whether you respect or break any laws, this is about signing and you must sign the statement,” he said. “All endopii (natives) must sign the declaration of loyalty.” I said to him: “No, I will not sign!” He then threatened me with exiling me to the islands in the Aegean Sea and asked me if I remembered the islands. He also reminded me that the islands were still there...

With a completely calm voice I said to him that I had a good memory and that I had not forgotten how it was for me on the islands.

Several months passed and again I found myself in the police station.

The Chief said to me: “Miss, I called you here for a very important job. Next week the villagers in several of the Kostur Region villages will be taking an oath not to speak the local Slavic dialect. For your sake I advise you to swear that you too will never speak this language.”

I could not help myself... I laughed out loud.

He then said: “We can easily turn laughing into crying, Miss...”

“Oh, yes!” I said. “You are perfectly capable of doing that... Chief... Sir! What else are you going to find next to torment us with?” I said and without requesting his permission, I left the police station.

A few months later I was again in the police station.

“Miss!” the Chief addressed me with a slimy tone of voice. “As far as I know you don’t have a good job here, the kind that will raise your standard of living. Look, I am happy to inform you that there is an opening, a beautiful opportunity for a great job with higher earnings...”

“Where?” I asked.

“It’s your choice,” he said, “in Australia, Canada, or America. All you have to do is call one of these agencies and they will sort out all the necessary documents. Everything will be free to any one of these countries... Yes, everything is free but in one direction only... Call them...”

“No thank you!” I said.

“What then?” he asked.

I did not answer him. Then, after a short pause, he began to threaten me again... with sending me to the islands.

At the same time a large number of people, especially from Kostur and Lerin Regions, accepted these offers and emigrated in large waves. The waves were moving in one direction.

How many chimneys went cold in the Kostur and Lerin Regions?
How many padlocks were hung on the doors and gates of
Macedonian homes?

HOW MANY?

* * *

Milder winds began to blow during the late 1950's. They told me that I no longer was obligated to report to the police station and that I was free to go wherever I wanted.

I asked if I could go to my village and they allowed me.

So I went.

In my village, a place where many people had lived, I only found Dedo (grandfather) Giorgi, an old man whom I had met in the city on several occasions.

It was a joy for me to see someone I knew.

Dedo Giorgi was placed in a nursing home but he did not like being there so he often went back to his village. Unfortunately there was no shelter and no one to look after him in the village. Eventually they would take him back to the home but again he would flee to the village. He did not want to go anywhere else. He felt uncomfortable everywhere. Giorgi even refused to leave his village during the war when battles were raging inside it. He stayed there when all the villagers were forced to flee to Albania.

I often visited him at the nursing home. I brought him food and fruits and sometimes wine and rakia. He begged me to sit next to him so that he could tell me stories. He often said to me:

“I constantly tell these people here that when I die I want to be buried in my village... Under the oaks... nowhere else...

We sat on the stones of his destroyed house and sank into silence, staring at the ruins that once were his home. The reality of time began to unravel in me, flooding my mind with memories, burdensome memories, reminding me of my mother and father, my grandparents and my brother who we lost and whose bones lay on one of the hills on Gramos... and of everyone here who was forced to leave... destination unknown... fate unknown... hope of ever returning... unknown...

I felt a spasm in my throat, tear bulging in my eyes and pain...

The silence was interrupted by Dedo Giorgi.

“Let me ask you, my child...” he said.

“Please do, Dedo...” I replied.

“Please tell those at the nursing home to bury me here, in the village cemetery under the oaks, when I die. I don’t want to be buried somewhere else... Please don’t forget to tell them, okay? Don’t forget ... under the oaks... tell them that...” he said.

“I promise you I will not forget,” I said.

I then reached over, took his hand, kissed it, got up and went to the ruins where my grandfather’s house used to be. This was our house. Memories began to boil and with them burning and pain...

Among the rocks overgrown with grass I saw a piece of cloth. I pulled it out and shook the soil off it. I shivered. Holding in my hands was part of my mother’s malina (knitted woolen dress)... I sat on the ruined stairs. I covered my knees with it, caressed it, kissed it

and covered it with tears. A string came off the black malina and fell on my feet...

At that very moment, while looking at the black string, I remembered a story I was told in Trikeri by a professor from Athens.

The story was about Ariadna.

It was a story about Ariadna's thread. (Ariadna in the so-called "Greek mythology" was the daughter of Cretan king Minos and Pasifeia. When Theseus set out to kill the Minotaur, before entering the maze, Ariadna gave him a ball of thread. Theseus tied the thread to the entrance of the maze and unraveled it while going through it. After he killed the Minotaur he followed the string and found his way out of the maze. This myth in contemporary culture has given rise to the expression "Ariana's thread" as a symbol of getting out of difficult situations.)

The thread of assistance, the thread of salvation and hope...

The thread of exit from evil...

My torn thread behind me and my mother's torn black thread from her malina, on my feet... Our black... our black torn thread...

Our cursed time in which no one gave me the thread of exit from evil...

That day I did not return to the city. I remained in the village.

I spent the night in the church, in our church, in Sveta Nedela (Holy Week). A beam of moonlight entering through the little window faintly illuminated the faces and eyes of the images of saints and angels. They were watching me and following my every move, seeming like they were silently asking what I was doing there. I kept quiet, being drowned in countless questions about the many things that were and that are.

I lit candles for the living and for the dead, for those who were gone and for those who remained. In my thoughts I kept returning to the mountains, hills, trenches, bunkers, ditches, long nights of marches, and there I found the fighters... I sat with them and caressed the soil that lay over them and again returned to my place of birth, a place that once was a house, a home, a garden, a chimney from which a pillar of smoke rose straight up letting the world know that there was life there.

Now I am the sole person alive to walk on this desolate piece of land, on which only thorns and weeds grow... I now have a desire to contact Madame Olga, down there in Athens, and tell her that the good people and the house of goodness are gone...

They are gone...

Why...?

* * *

Dedo Giorgi, a man with long roots and with a very large family, was left all alone waiting to die... He died in the nursing home...

They told me that they buried him at the end of the cemetery, where the rich from Kostur bury their pet cats and dogs.

Dedo Giorgi wanted to be buried in the village cemetery where his ancestors were buried. He wanted to be buried among the century-old oaks that weathered great storms... and flourished...

It was his final wish... an unfulfilled last wish.

I visited him... his grave in Kostur, on a weekly basis...

I always left a piece of bread and a small bottle of wine near the headstone with no name...

Chapter - 10

At that time I remained true to myself, to my own thoughts, in body and soul. Not in some strange place but in my grandfather's yard, firmly sitting exactly where the foundation stones were set...

I grew up here on this scorched piece of land, which now is my home... even though there was nothing left of the house, not even a foundation... I am at home; I am in my home...

Above me is the blue sky and below me are the ashes of my house covered with weeds and thorns...

And from here, from my home, I stare at the mountains, hills, rocks, stones, forests, meadows... all covered with pain, bitterness, deceit, disappointment, sadness and the blood spilled during bad times... where, after many years, nature covered them with colours and restored their beauty.

There is nothing there to remind us of those burning days. Everything is covered with greenery, grass and trees, the colors of flowers... The history of the living and the stories about Orle, Gorisha, Krusha, Kotelkata, Kula, Kopanche, Odreto, Sveti Ilia, Aliavitsa, Krastavets, Charno, Goliot, Kamenik, Gramos and all the other dozens and dozens of hills and peaks that have disappeared in the deep blue sky...

The mountain landscape with its open space is an illusion making everything seem possible, even to reach the farthest light on the horizon...

When I go there, it is my time, a time for thought about the spiritual dimension of humankind, about dignity and understanding, about human value and the fate of all those who took the road to war, to defeat, to the exodus and to the salty waters that led them to the camps...

That's where we were, that's where they remained, they who I constantly think about and want to be in our thoughts and to shine in our memory with honour...

My pain of the memories of those lying here in the Macedonian mountains is great. Every step I take takes me back, to the past, and every hill, every stone, every broken tree, uncovers history and opens festering wounds...

Who, today, speaks for those who died and for those who wasted in the island prison camps?

Very few of us from my partisan generation have remained...

Our partisan generation is slowly going...

... it is leaving betrayed and disappointed...

I keep all of them in my memory and pray to a merciful God to receive them in his bosom...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Petre Nakovski, a novelist and translator, was born on July 17, 1937 in the village Krchishta, Kostur Region, Aegean (Greek occupied) Macedonia. He completed his pedagogical education in Poland and his Philosophical education at the Faculty of Philology in Skopje. He received his PhD from the Institute of Political Sciences at the University of Vroclavskiot in Poland, with the thesis entitled “Macedonian children in Poland 1948-1968”, published in Skopje in 1987.

Petre was a journalist for “Vecher” and “Nova Makedonija”. He worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Petre was the first Ambassador from the Republic of Macedonia to serve in the Republic of Poland (1995-1999).

He has been member of the Macedonian Writers’ Association since 1989.

He is the author of several short stories published in Macedonian periodicals as well as the books: “Postela na chemernite” (a novel 1985), “Makedonski Detsa vo Polska 1948-1968” (doctoral thesis 1987), “I kamenot e zemia” (a novel 1988), “Golemata udolnitsa” (a novel 2003), “Golemata izmama” (a novel 2007), “Makedonskite begaltsi vo Polska 1948-1975” (a selection of documents 2008), and “Na pat so vremeto” (a novel 2010).

All of the novels mentioned above have been translated from Macedonian to English by Risto Stefov for free. The printing of 100 copies of the novel “On the road of time” was paid for by Dr. Lefter Manche.

Petre has translated and published 46 literary works and numerous other papers from Polish to Macedonian. He has also translated numerous poems and stories by Macedonian authors into Polish, including the drama “Tsrnila” by Kole Chasule (performed on stage in the Polish city Katowice (1971)), an anthology of contemporary Macedonian poetry entitled “Pesni od Ohrid”, published in Krakow in 1974, a selection of poetry by Rade Silyan “Tragi na vremeto”

(2010), and “Pragot na minatoto” by Traian Petrovski (2014) published in Torunie by the publisher “Adam Marshalek”.

Petre has won the “Golden pen” and the “Kiril Peichinovich” awards for his translation opus. In Poland he was awarded the “Gold Medal of Merit for Polish culture” (1976, with the ZAiKS (Association of all Polish authors (1982) award), the “Golden Marshal Award” (1999, the President of Poland distinguishes successful ambassadors with this award) and the medal “BENE MERITO” awarded to Petre by the Republic of Poland Ministry of Foreign Affairs to strengthen cooperation between the two countries (2010).

Petre is married to Ditta (Aphrodite) and is father to two daughters, Milenka and Tatiana.

Petre Nakovski’s novels were the subject of Tatiana Pelivanova’s master’s thesis entitled “Literature of fact in Peter Nakovski’s novels”, defended on February 14, 2014 before a committee consisting of Professors Dr. Venko Andonovski, Dr. Christina Nikolovska, and Dr. Vesna Mojsovska-Chepishevska at the University of “Sv. Kiril i Metodi” under the mentorship of Professor Dr. Kristina Nikolovska.