MAJKA

My Mother's Story

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to the memory of my beautiful and inspirational *majka* (mother) Sofia Kolaczkos, and in honour of the Macedonian *deca begalci* – the *child refugees* of the Greek Civil War.

I reminisce about my mother with deep admiration and love, tightly holding the hands of the *deca begalci*.

From her beloved birthplace of Medovo, Macedonia to her new home in Mansfield Park, South Australia.

This is her story.

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* THE GREEK CIVIL WAR.

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Foreword

I was born in Poland, but my heritage is Macedonian. Both my parents were born in Aegean Macedonia, a naturally spectacular but contested Balkan territory marred by oppression, violence, closed borders and identity politics. As a family and as a people that identify as Macedonian, we have been severed from our land and endured enforced disconnect from our culture and language.

This has been occurring since Greece annexed the Aegean part of Macedonia in 1913 and adopted hostile policies of assimilating everything Macedonian into mainstream Greek society. The Macedonian population have had their names changed to Greek names and their village names altered to Greek derived ones. The people have lived through curfews and paid a heavy price if caught speaking their own language or even singing or dancing in Macedonian.

The Greek Civil War of 1946-1949 intensified the struggles of Macedonians in Aegean Macedonia, where many lost their lives fighting for their basic freedoms. Thousands of Macedonian children had to be evacuated from Macedonian villages and towns in Greece to avoid the terror and devastation of the war. They were taken to safety in Eastern bloc countries like Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Macedonia (then part of Yugoslavia). These child refugees are known as *deca begalci* (pronounced *detsa begaltsi*) in Macedonian. Even though protected from the ruins of war, the children suffered deep trauma from being separated from their homes and families. Many never saw their parents or siblings again. To this day, the Greek Government refuses to acknowledge

the Macedonian identity and the struggle of the Macedonian people, especially the *deca begalci*.

It is against this background that I write this memoir about my mother Sofia, who as a teenager showed immense strength in the face of adversity during the Greek Civil War. She was a *majka* (pronounced maika), which is the Macedonian word for "mother", entrusted with the enormous responsibility of shielding *deca begalci* in their arduous trek crossing the border out of Greece and onto safety.

Her bravery and the determination of her family to maintain their Macedonian identity, albeit on the other side of the world, inspired this story.

Helen Manou
April, 2021

The Gypsy

Helen Manou

The gypsy blocked my mother's path
To tell her what was in her heart.
Over water you will travel to a distant land
To transform the lives of your children.
Be gone and leave me alone, the young woman did mutter,
I have no need for your rantings today.
Years have now passed, my mother is no longer young,
But with a youthful smile on her face,
She reminisces … the gypsy was right.

Chapter 1

My Medovo

My name is Sofia, and I was born in November 1929, high in the mountains in a rural village called Milionas, northeast of Agios Germanos in the Prespa Lakes region of Macedonia. Previously known as Medovo, the village was forcibly renamed by the Greek government. My parents Risto and Mitra Konstantinovski, born in 1900 and 1899 respectively, were also forced to change our family name to Konstantinopoulos. They endured many hardships as agricultural labourers. Two of my younger brothers died in early childhood because they did not have access to medicine and my mother also miscarried twins after she fell off a farm cart while she was feeding livestock. I did have three siblings – an elder brother called Yane, a younger sister, Sondra, and the baby of the family, Pande.

Our village life was incredibly busy all year round. My family grew many crops including beans and a variety of vegetables. We dried meat, made sausages, white cheese and pickles which we stored in vats. Meat was cooked sparingly and a lot of the time our food was vegetarian. We ate roasted meat and stews only on special occasions. We kept oxen, sheep and a few cows, and donkeys and horses were

Konstantinovski Residence – Medovo.

used to till the land. From an early age, my siblings and I learned how to fish in the nearby lakes and rivers.

As a child I was very skinny, and my parents often described me as a high-spirited and stubborn tomboy. I was a proficient snake catcher and could break the back of a snake with a flick of my wrist. I also loved catching rabbits. One day, some of the oxen I was tending to crossed to the other side of the lake. I was crying and too scared to go home because I thought I would get into trouble for losing the animals. When my father found me, instead of yelling at me, he started laughing and reassured me that the oxen would return when they were exhausted. It was mating season.

The women in the village did all the domestic work without the luxury of today's modern appliances. We baked our own bread and even washed our clothes at the river's edge. Just a week after giving birth, a woman would be back cooking, cleaning and working with her family in the fields, only stopping to breastfeed. As the eldest girl in our family, I was always helping my mother. Sondra had rheumatic fever and was often ill. She was as fragile as a baby bird and quick to tears when she did not get her way. Behind her back I called her a *rasipan slab majmun,* or a spoilt skinny monkey. Pande was a bright and sensitive boy and, much to Sondra's annoyance, I enjoyed spoiling him. It was often my responsibility to look after my younger siblings

while my parents worked. I did not realise then that these tasks were preparing me for another more worthy and impending role in my life.

My father left Macedonia in the early 1930s to travel to Canada on *pechalba*. It was common for the men in the village to go abroad to earn as much money as they could to support their poor families back in Macedonia. From what I can remember my father went to Windsor in Canada. When he arrived there, he realised he had made a big mistake. At that time, the economy was in decline and unemployment was high, so he decided to try his luck in America instead. He encountered yet another problem there in that he did not have a passport, so it was illegal for him to enter. In Detroit, my father caught up with some of his old army friends who reported him to the authorities! His *dvajca soocheni prijateli,* or two-faced friends, were jealous of him because he had been an assistant to the surgeon in the Greek army and wore a Red Cross armband. These men were delighted when my father was jailed and then sent back to Macedonia in shame.

My poor father's life got worse when he arrived home. His cousin Krstin wrongly accused him of not repaying the money he had given him for the fare to Canada. It escalated to the point that he threatened to evict us from our own home. My father was left anxious and humiliated, even though he had already repaid his debt when he sold off some of our stock. I had never seen him so angry as when he said he was going to kill his cousin. I was shaking with fear. My mother even ran to the next village to seek help from her brother.

Both Mum and Uncle Stojo galloped back to Medovo on his horse. Even though he believed my father was telling the truth, Uncle Stojo offered to repay the debt. Krstin gladly grabbed the money and thankfully disappeared from our lives. My father's parting words to his cousin were, *da mi umresh vo racete, kuche shto lazhi* – may you die in my arms, you deceitful dog. After the distressing *pechalba* experience overseas and this upsetting incident at home, my father had a complete nervous breakdown. He would sit silent for hours on end, and much of the work fell to me, my mother and my older brother. Sondra and Pande were too young to help.

Many years later, my father heard a pitiful moan emanating from a ditch alongside a road. He was startled to find Krstin laying there, begging him to save his life. My father did not hesitate and did everything he could to keep him alive, but it was all in vain. His cousin did indeed die in his arms, just as my father had said. In his last moments, Krstin pleaded for forgiveness and confessed he had lied about the debt.

Having lived through profound family trauma especially with my father's illness, our whole village was also soon to suffer the terror and intimidation of the Second World War. Being only several kilometres from the Macedonian border, German and Italian soldiers would frequently enter Medovo to help themselves to our meagre food supplies. As children we were petrified of the soldiers. Pande was so distressed that he would hide under our mother's underskirts whenever they were nearby. The Germans were very stern and frightening, whereas the Italians soldiers were a little kinder. They would occasionally play with us children and give us gifts like chocolates.

At home we spoke the Macedonian language. However, officially the language was banned by the Greek government. For a brief period after the war, my siblings and I went to school to learn Greek. Going to school was a massive highlight for me. I loved learning and was never afraid to ask my teacher questions. However, I will never forget the day at school when I accidentally overshared information about my family. If it had not been for the quick thinking of my teacher, my father would have been arrested. He appeared at our doorstep soon after the incident, nervous and agitated. Even before exchanging greetings, he said to my parents: *"You must burn all of the Macedonian books in your house. Sofia has been telling her classmates that her father reads in Macedonian. If any of the children tell their parents and they give this information to the authorities, you'll all be severely punished."*

My teacher's warning to my family foreshadowed a darker and extremely tragic chapter entering our lives.

Chapter 2

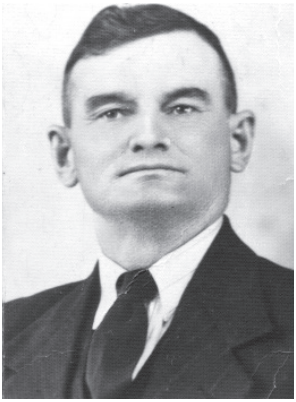
German

My father-in-law Vasil Kolachkov was born in 1897 in a village called German, renamed by the Greeks in 1926 to Agios Germanos. When he was seven-years-old his father was killed by a Turk. The murderer was never convicted. Some years later, when he was 13, relatives of his father's killer told him that he could seek retribution by killing a member of their family. They believed in the principle of an eye for an eye. Vasil was horrified – he could never do such a thing.

Vasil lived next door to a beautiful girl called Nuna. Her parents gave her a masculine name because they thought it would make her strong and protect her from evil. Nuna grew to be a tomboy, who loved climbing trees, catching rabbits, and even fighting. She later married Vasil at the age of 16. He was 18.

Soon afterwards, Vasil had to serve in the Greek army because it was compulsory. His Captain

Church of Agios Germanos German.



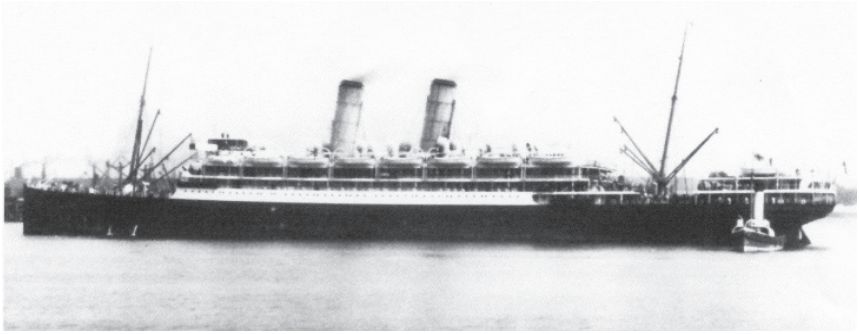
Vasil Kolachkov (Kolaczkos).

was fond of him and thought it was a pity that Vasil could not read or write, so he took it upon himself to teach him the Greek language. When Vasil completed his National Service, he returned to Nuna and they had three children within four years – Stojan, my husband Simo and Fana. The family survived on vegetables from their garden and meat from neighbours in exchange for their labour. They were extremely poor. Eventually, Vasil made the difficult decision to travel overseas to make some money. He did not know it then, but it would be 26 years before he would see Nuna again.

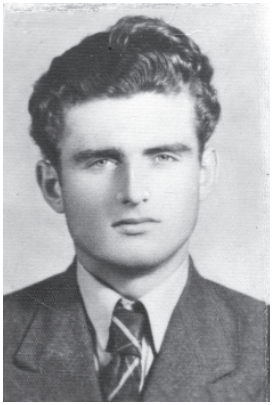
Just as my own father had travelled to Canada, Vasil left his homeland and young family in 1929 with the intention of going to Australia on *pechalba* for a few years. The only way he could get there was through Bulgaria. There, he changed his name to Vasil Kolatchkoff so he could get a Bulgarian passport to travel.

Vasil and his friend Jovan, on board the passenger ship *Orvieto*, arrived in Fremantle, Western Australia in January 1930. Even in the warm Macedonian summers, they had never experienced such searing heat. In contrast, the reception from the immigration officers was

The ship Orvieto, which brought Vasil Kolachkov to Australia.



frosty and unwelcoming. One of them told Vasil that his name was "un-Australian" and that he should be called "Victor" instead. The officer laughed even harder when he heard the name Jovan, telling Vasil's friend that "Ivan" was a more suitable name if he was going to live in Australia. Jovan turned to Vasil in disgust and said, "*these people have turned me into a wild beast*". In Macedonian the word Ivan means animal.



Simo Kolachkov (Kolaczkos) – son of Vasil and Nuna.

The two friends were hard workers and got jobs cutting timber. They lived in camps in Western Australia under intensely harsh conditions, but Vasil did not care about the blisters on his hands or the agonising pain in his back. When work got scarce because of the Great Depression, Vasil and his mates

Vasil Kolachkov (left) with Jovan (Ivan) Yankulov and Spiro (Peter) Cholakov in forest camp Western Australia circa 1930's.

moved to Darwin in the Northern Territory to work on the railways. Their timing was unfortunate though because it coincided with the Japanese bombing of Darwin. They lived to tell their grandchildren, in jest, that they put a sheet of corrugated iron over the top of their heads, so they would not be seen.

During the Second World War and later the Greek Civil War, communication with family was incredibly difficult. Vasil did not know the whereabouts or wellbeing of his dear Nuna and their children for years on end. Luckily, the Macedonian grapevine, even then, proved helpful – every so often he would cross paths with men from his village and its surrounds, sharing snippets of gloom and gossip about family and friends. Vasil intermittently wrote to Nuna in Greek so that his children could read the letters to her because she was illiterate. Receiving a letter from overseas was a special occasion because it took months to deliver. When funds permitted, Vasil would send parcels of clothes and gifts to his family.

While Vasil was in Australia, Nuna was both mother and father to their three children and also worked hard outside the home to make money for her family. In the winter months, the women would crochet and make bedspreads. Nuna's mother Sofia was an expert spinner and weaver, who made woollen products like jumpers, cardigans, socks, and mittens, so at least her children had beautiful, warm clothes.

Chapter 3

The Fight for Freedom

During the Second World War, German and Italian troops terrorised Macedonian villages and slaughtered many innocent people. By some miracle, my family escaped this period of war relatively unharmed. When the war ended, the world erupted in jubilation, but our own freedom from conflict and bloodshed was to be very short-lived.

The remnants of war stirred up social and political schisms that led to the Greek Civil War. My parents were scathing of the post-war government – they called them *eden kup amateri koi ne mozhat da go izbrishat zadnikot*, or a bunch of amateurs who cannot wipe their behinds. I had no interest in politics, whereas my older brother only had effusive praise for the communist-affiliated National Liberation Front and its military arm, the Greek Popular Liberation Army. I rolled my eyes when he proclaimed that the Communists would save Macedonians from oppression and restore our civil rights.

The Greek Civil War caused lifelong animosity between the different regions of Macedonia. Families were torn apart by opposing political views, neighbours betrayed one another and whole villages were upturned. It was not safe for my younger siblings to play on the wetlands – they became too scared to venture away from our house.

As Macedonians, we had limited options in a society intent on assimilating us. We could either become Greek by relinquishing our Macedonian identity or depart our native land and let Greeks occupy our homes. My brother, Yane aged 24, chose another more

dangerous path. He joined the Partisans to fight for the Macedonian cause, travelling to the mountains near Greece's northern border with Albania and Yugoslavia. Within six months of becoming a Partisan, Yane was killed, leaving behind his wife Sofia who was seven months pregnant with their first child. She gave birth to a son named Paul Konstantinopoulos, as only Greek surnames were allowed. My parents encouraged Sofia to remarry while Paul was still young, but she grieved for Yane for many years. My father never forgave the Americans for providing generous financial backing to the right-wing Greeks.

Simo's family was not immune from the scourges of the Civil War either. He and his brother Stojan both became resistance fighters. Stojan was very patriotic and was one of the first to sign up to fight against the Greeks. In 1946, he crossed the border and went to Serbia to train with the Communist Partisans, before returning to Greece to fight for Macedonian freedom. During a bloody battle with the Greek army just outside Florina (previously known as Lerin), Stojan was killed at the age of 25. After grieving Stojan's death, his wife Elena joined the Partisans and some months later was also killed. On the other side of the world, Vasil was gripped by troubling nightmares predicting the fate of his children.

I had heard the story that Elena was widowed prior to marrying Stojan. She had just become a young mother to a baby son when her first husband unexpectedly died while working in the fields. Her first husband's family refused to allow her to take her son with her when she decided to marry Stojan and move to his family home. This was often the case that a boy would stay with the paternal side of the family because he carried their name. I could not think of anything crueller than a mother being denied the right to her

Stojan Kolachkov – eldest son of Vasil and Nuna and Simo and Fana's eldest brother.

own child. Later Elena and Stojan had a baby daughter called Fotia, but she died from illness when she was only a one-year-old. I always thought of the especially tragic life of Elena.

Simo swore he did not believe in Communist ideology; he simply wanted to save Macedonians from subjugation by the Greeks. So, he too joined the Communist Partisans. Not long after, he was hit by a bomb in a place called Gornice, and to this day has shrapnel embedded in his shoulder. Several months after recovering, Simo was back in action, only to be severely injured again. This time he was taken to an underground hospital in Korca, Albania to have his leg amputated. He was just 21-years-old. Luckily, after two operations, his leg was saved. Two years later, he was repatriated by a hospital ship to Poland. When he awoke and took in his surroundings, he was shocked to see his mother Nuna holding vigil by his side, waiting to embrace him. Since her evacuation from German to Poland she had been desperately searching for her son. It was then that Simo vowed to never leave his mother and to always protect her. He could not have imagined that in Poland he would also meet his future wife, a fellow Macedonian.

Simo's sister Fana was 16-years-old when she was dragged by authorities from her bed in the middle of the night. She and three of her friends were imprisoned without trial. Their crime was supposedly knitting socks for the Partisans. She was branded a political prisoner and brutally beaten in prison every day. Due to these assaults, she lost her sense of smell and taste, had hearing problems and suffered from insomnia for the rest of her life. Her father Vasil was left in despair in Australia, only hearing about the grim atrocities upon his children back home via the Macedonian grapevine. By some miracle, he obtained the address of the jail in Florina where his daughter was imprisoned. In years to come, Fana delighted in telling the story of how surprised she was to receive a parcel in jail from her father. Inside was a beautiful green dress, about four sizes too big. She kept looking at the address on the parcel, imagining her father in this strange, distant land called Australia.

After 18 months in prison, Fana and her friends were released on the grounds of insufficient evidence. The girls told the judge that they were homeless as their villages had been deserted; their families and friends had escaped the incessant bombing to the safety of Yugoslavia. The judge's brother, who worked as a social worker, opened his home to the girls. I could not understand why a Greek family would be so kind to four Macedonian girls who had been detained as political prisoners. Simo later explained the judge's forebears were Vlachs, originating from the south of the Danube, which is now southern Albania. Even though they saw themselves as Greek, the brothers never forgot their ethnic origins. Before forced assimilation, the Vlachs were tortured and killed, and their villages burnt by Greeks.

The four girls lived with the judge's brother and his mother for two years. When roads to their villages reopened, the girls went back to find only the elderly and infirm still living there. Fana settled in Lemos, a village adjacent to Medovo and German. Her childhood friend, Jim Ouslinis (former name Mitre Ouslinov), who avoided conscription by claiming he was mentally unfit for army duties, was

Fana and Jim Ouslinis on their wedding day in Lemos 1950.

Fana and Jim in Lemos 1951.

Fana and Jim Ouslinis with their first son Alexander born in Lemos 1951.

also living there. Their reunion was a happy one and after a short courtship they were married. Within a year, their eldest son Alex was born, followed by John the year after. They would later have one more son called Vic, named after Vasil.

Chapter 4

Mother to Child Refugees

The Greek army, backed by the British and Americans, relentlessly bombed the villages near the Prespa Lakes and the surrounding regions. Its aim was to prevent Macedonians escaping from Greece. The Partisans and the Greek Opposition joined forces by devising a plan to evacuate Macedonian children from villages in the war zones. This plan for the *deca begalci* or child refugees changed my life and forever marked my destiny. Women who were selected to escort the refugee children to safety were called *majki*, meaning mothers in Macedonian. They were responsible for the wellbeing of children as young as two-years-old to ensure they were protected, fed, clothed, and bathed. The heartbroken parents placed all their trust in the *majki* to lead their children safely away from the intense ravages and bombing of the Civil War. Romania agreed to take the bulk of the Macedonian children and other vulnerable groups. Later, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Macedonia did the same.

I was only 18 years old when the village elders asked me to lead the evacuation of children from Medovo. My parents were proud of my role as a *majka*. I overheard one of the elders telling my mother that he thought I was a brave and reliable young woman. I was flattered that they had so much faith in my ability to take care of the children.

A few of us women from the village took a group of children to German. There, we met officials of the Communist Party of Greece, who coordinated our journey into Yugoslavia. As a group we hid in

the forest for two days in bitterly cold conditions until it was safe to cross the border. During this time, I was terrified, but I didn't want to show my fear to the homesick young children who were crying for their mothers. We were all hungry and at night, the forest was a haunting symphony of squeaks, screeches and squawks. I had to stop the older boys teasing the younger children that a hungry, lurking lynx could eat them at any time.

When it was safe to continue our journey, we trekked towards the border through the heavy snow. Some of us lost our shoes and had to walk barefoot in the bitter cold. After much struggle, we reached our destination with the Red Cross waiting for us. Transit camps were set up so we could recover, and medical workers treated our cuts, bruises and injuries. When the children were fed and clothed, they were put onto trains and sent to countries through Eastern Europe. A lot of the children ended up estranged from their parents forever; only the lucky ones were reunited after many years. The right-wing Greek government spread rumours that the Communists had kidnapped the *deca begalci* to brainwash them with left-wing ideology. They even published a booklet called, *"Iron Curtain Holds Greek Children Captive"* to enlist international support for their propaganda.

But I was not a kidnapper.

I saw the tears. I felt the pain. I absorbed the despair and grief of children, even young toddlers, leaving the loving arms of parents and grandparents. My family had experienced our own loss during this war. I knew the grave danger the children faced if they stayed. I made so many sacrifices to evacuate the children to safety. I was young myself, only a teenager, but I carried out my *majka* role with pride, conviction and above all compassion.

For two months, I was stationed not far from the village of Ljubojno where my cousin lived. On my days off, I would visit her rustic home and she would nourish me with *tavche gravche* (baked beans) and *chkembe chorba* (tripe soup). One day, a new group of child refugees arrived. I flinched at first, reliving my frosty nights in the forest, but as the group got closer, I saw a female teenager

wearing my red pinafore dress, my mother's thick brown cardigan and moccasin-like leather shoes, which were laced up over thick woollen socks. Peeping out from a yellow scarf were two dark plaits – it was my sister Sondra! Next to her was my baby brother Pande, looking very grown up in a pair of grey trousers and a brown leather jacket that was a couple of sizes too big. This was contrasted by a cute woollen hat on top of his dark curly hair. We embraced, and I couldn't contain my tears and laughter. I then ushered them into a tent for the Red Cross workers to give them a health check. I wasn't going to let them travel to the Serbian transit camp on their own, so I decided to go with them.

The train journey to Serbia was a nightmare. Our carriage was overcrowded and filthy. The sound of children crying was also heart-wrenching. Sondra and Pande kept whining that I was to blame and that our parents would smack me for taking them away. I was sitting next to Mara, a young mother with a baby and a small girl no older than five-years-old. She was trying to pacify the wailing baby by breastfeeding when the train stopped at a railway station near the Yugoslav border. On the platform was a cart of bread generously left there for the *deca begalci* by the townsfolk. Mara quickly handed the baby to her daughter and the both of us raced onto the platform to gather loaves for the starving children. Suddenly, Mara screamed. While we were feverishly grabbing the bread, the train had left the platform. We started waving, yelling and running after the train but it was no use. I pinched myself hoping that it was a nightmare about to end and that I would awake to see my brother and sister next to me. I tried to console Mara, but my panic only exacerbated her anguish. She was inconsolable. Her shrieks pierced my soul.

Stranded far from home, we scavenged rubbish bins for food and squatted in deserted huts for shelter. Mara suffered a breakdown and was befriended by parishioners of a local Orthodox Church, who took her in and cared for her. I often thought of her, and believe she was eventually reunited with her children.

All I wanted to do was to find Sondra and Pande. I loitered

around the railway station, hoping I would establish contact with the *deca begalci* operation. Eventually, I did. I was once again a *majka* escorting child refugees to safety, searching for my siblings in every transit camp in the process. In Romania, I received a letter from my father. Gossip had reached my parents that while I was dallying with men from the Red Cross, Sondra and Pande were kidnapped by Gypsies. How could my parents believe such lies? I was heartbroken. I confided in the superintendent of the nearby transit camp, Stelios. I told him that the train left the platform while I collected bread for the hungry children. Stelios shook his head and hugged me tightly, promising that he would do whatever he could to reunite me with my siblings. His words sounded hollow as I had lost all hope. Four months later, I realised Stelios remained true to his word.

Chapter 5

Reunited in Poland

In 1949, I landed in the pastoral town of Płakowice, located in the southwest corner of Poland, sandwiched between Germany and the Czech Republic. I got a job as a *majka* at a *dom dzieci* or children's home. The building of the home was formerly used as a sanitarium established by the Germans. When I started working there, it was home to 3,000 children, some of whom had physical and psychological injuries.

After three years of travelling in filthy freight trains and living in transit camps, I finally had my own private space with a bed. My role was to look after a cohort of children – get them ready for bed, wake them up in the morning and feed them. They had various extracurricular activities including singing, dancing and gymnastics. On weekends, we had picnics on the banks of the Bóbr River and travelled to historical sites like the Renaissance Płakowice Castle and the wooden windmill in Lwówek Sloski Londec. Without fear of retribution, I taught the children the Macedonian language.

Two months later, I was relieved to be finally reunited with Sondra and Pande. When they arrived at the children's home, they handed me a note from Stelios which read: *"This Greek always keeps his promise. You will get another surprise soon. Respectfully, Stelios."* Another three months later, my parents were repatriated to the safety of Poland with other refugees from their village. They settled in

Zgorzelec approximately 60 kilometres from Płakowice, but despite being far from our Medovo home, we were a family once more.

Life in Poland was vastly different to Macedonian life in Greece. We were glad to be far away from war, fear and punishment. My father brought with him his greatest treasures – books in the Macedonian language, the very books he had tenderly buried in our garden after I inadvertently outed him to my school classmates. My family slowly acclimatized to life in Poland and quickly learnt to speak Polish, but we all lamented our Macedonian homeland. We couldn't return because we were considered "traitors" for fleeing, even though it was from war, violence and danger. My parents were at least happy that Sondra and Pande would get a good education and the chance of a high-paying job in Poland. In Macedonia, they would have been made to leave school after only eight years.

Most girls from my village married at the age of 15. When I started working at the children's home, I was 20. I knew that behind my back some of the older women were calling me a *stara sobarka,* or old maid. One day, my father announced that his sister Sofia had found a husband for me. Before fleeing Macedonia, my Aunty Sofia lived in German, close to Nuna's house. She had a lot of respect for the Kolachkov family and told my father to encourage me to marry their son Simo. At that time, arranged marriages were the norm and in my heart, I knew that my father wanted the best for me.

Buildings at Children's Home, Plakowice, Poland.

The Konstantinovski family Sondra, Pande, Sofia widow of Yane and her son Paul Konstantinopoulos, with Baba Mitra and Dedo Risto.

Nevertheless, I was incredibly nervous. The arranged marriage brought back memories of my beautiful friend Jana who, when she was just 16 years old, was matched with a man twice her age. She met him only a few times before the marriage ceremony. Jana said it wasn't important that her groom was older and unattractive – he was rich.

I was reassured when I first met Simo. He was nothing like Jana's groom; he had intelligent eyes, a handsome face and was only two years older than me. A couple of weeks after our first meeting, we went to the registry office to find out what we needed to do to get married. After leaving the registry we were feeling romantic. One kiss led to another, so we wandered to a nearby field to "get to know each other". I'm not sure how far we walked because we were soon approached by two German soldiers. They asked to see our papers and wanted to know what we were doing on German territory. When we told them, we were getting married in two weeks, they just laughed and told us to make babies on Polish soil.

Even now I lament that I didn't have a traditional Macedonian wedding ceremony. As my wedding day approached, I reminisced about Jana's celebrations, steeped in centuries of Macedonian customs, traditions and decorations. I remember she wore a heavy woollen dress with a sleeveless, embroidered jacket and around her waist was a large metallic belt. On top of her headdress were vibrant flowers. The betrothal ceremony was in an Orthodox Church with beautiful Byzantine icons. I just loved all the romantic rituals like

Sofia (far right) with her children in Poland.

the priest tying the hands of the bride and groom together and then placing gold crowns on their heads. The festivities that followed were extravagant. There was non-stop dancing, mountains of food and drink, and musicians played the fiddle and bagpipes.

Our wedding on the other hand was quite ordinary. It was a civil service in a modest registry office in Zgorzelec on 25 August 1951. I wore a simple day dress, which I already owned, bobby socks and my flat work shoes. My wedding bouquet consisted of paper flowers and for the feast my mother cooked a rabbit stew. Simo and I spent our wedding night under the same roof as my parents. I am not bitter that our celebrations weren't more elaborate and festive. A loving and long-lasting marriage is far more important.

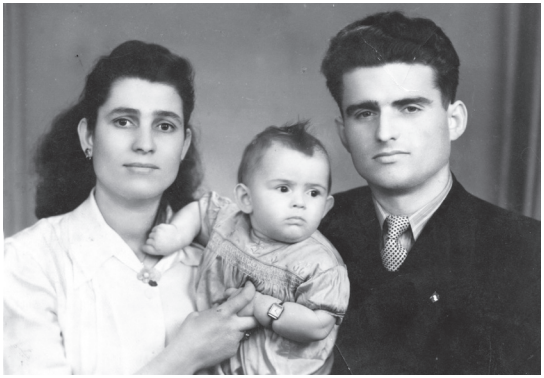
Chapter 6

Motherhood

For the first month of our married life, Simo and I lived 114 kilometres apart. I continued working at the children's home while Simo was in Wroclaw, training for his boilermaker and welding qualifications. We did have some privacy on my rostered days off as my mother-in-law lived in a retirement home in Zgorzelec with my parents and Androtsa, Elena's mother. Simo's brother Stojan and his wife Elena sacrificed their lives for the Macedonian cause, so Nuna and Androtsa found reassuring solace in reminiscing about their deceased children together.

Mood swings, nausea, exhaustion, sore breasts and a missed period. I soon found out I was pregnant and would become a mother. Simo was incredibly happy. He kept repeating *ke stanam tatko,* I am going to be a father. As soon as we could we went to Zgorzelec to share the news with Nuna and my parents. We all celebrated the announcement with *rakija* (brandy), *selsko meso* (village style meat) *and ravanija* (syrup cake). The manager of the children's home was sympathetic when I told him how difficult it was living so far away from my husband. He gave Simo a job as a sports master and general handyman. Nuna also came to live with us to look after the baby so that I could return to teaching as soon as possible.

Our new home was inside Building Number 10 at the children's home. It was an austere space, containing two beds and a small stovetop, which I used to warm up the baby's milk. All meals were



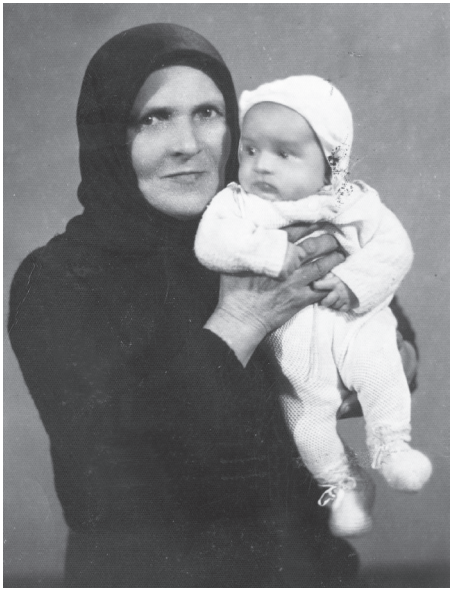
Sofia, Simo and Helen.

Sofia and Simo Kolaczkos on their wedding day.

eaten in the common room with the children and other staff. Simo became a father figure to the children at the home, and all the Polish women flirted with him.

In May 1952, I experienced severe pain radiating across my lower body while at a teacher's meeting. Even though I was scared, Nuna reassured me and kept me calm. The next morning, I was the mother of the most beautiful girl. Nuna had told everyone that I would be having a son, but her disappointment vanished when she held her granddaughter. At Androtsa's request, we named our firstborn Elena to honour her late daughter's memory.

A year later, we found out that my father-in-law was negotiating with the International Red Cross to help us migrate to Australia, as part of the post-war family reunification scheme. All I knew about Australia was that it was thousands of miles away from Poland. Simo and I decided against telling anyone that Vasil was trying to get us out of Communist Poland. Many of our Polish friends would have been affronted by the idea that we were choosing to live in a capitalist country after all that Poland had done for us. Most of them did not know that Nuna and Simo had not seen Vasil for well over two decades.



Baba Nuna with Yane (John) Kolaczkos, Legnitca 1954.

In preparation for our "great adventure", we discreetly severed our links with the Greek Communist Party by resigning from our jobs at the children's home and moving 45 kilometres away to Legnica. Located along the Kaczawa River in the western lowlands of Silesia, Legnica was a densely populated city with many shops and eclectic buildings, dating back to the medieval period. It was definitely different to the sleepy, rural Płakowice we knew. We lived in an apartment on the lower ground floor of a multi-story building on Tatarska Street. It was open plan with the bedrooms at one end and a kitchen in a small annexe. It was a tight squeeze, but we made do.

Our apartment became even more crowded in May 1954 when we welcomed our second child, Yane, who we later called John and was affectionately known as *Nana*. We named our son after my brother who had died during the war. I had spent my formative years looking after other people's children, it was now time to focus on my own. My daughter Elena, or Lena as we called her, was a cheeky monkey. My earliest memory was of her yelling out our family name "Klatchko" when the postman delivered mail to us. Little did she know that her mother and father were waiting for a letter that would change all of our lives forever.

A few days before we left for Australia, I decided to go into town to do some last-minute shopping. There, I was accosted by a Gypsy, who said she wanted to tell my fortune. I was in a hurry, so I brushed her aside, demanding she leave me alone. She was persistent and

would not take no for an answer – even saying she did not want any money. As she followed me home, she predicted that I would soon leave Poland with my family to live in a distant land, many oceans away. She also told me that a female child with a name starting with the letter "E" would be lucky in her life. She scared me because she knew too much. Was she a Communist spy? My suspicion of the Gypsy was mainly based on my mistrust of Communist officials as we were in the throes of leaving Poland. Our departure had to be cloaked in secrecy, and the only people who knew we were going away were my parents and siblings. Our paranoia was such that we destroyed many photos and papers linking us to the Greek Community Party. With the benefit of hindsight, I would often chuckle at the thought of how accurate the Gypsy's predictions were!

After so many other separations during the war, my mother could not bring herself to see us board the plane on our journey to Australia, so we hugged and kissed at home. A flood of tears blurred my vision and my whole body was momentarily numb. The most heart-wrenching part about leaving Poland was finding the words to say goodbye to family. My mother's parting words were: *"You will never understand how much I love you until the day your children leave you. Until then, remember that no matter where you are or what you do, I will always love you."* My father travelled with us to Warsaw by train to help with our luggage and to farewell us. Months later, he wrote to me that after we boarded the flight, he sat for hours at the airport paralysed with grief. He did not want to be apart from us and he was also overwhelmed with guilt for putting me through so much when I was young.

It devastated me to hear about my parents like this. I felt that we had endured so much separation and loss as a family. We had also seen so many of our friends estranged from family and homeland. Yet, I was also thinking about Simo and my children, and in my heart, I knew that we were giving our little Polaks a safer and better life in Australia.

Chapter 7

Reunited in Australia

It was an exceptionally long journey to Australia. From Warsaw we flew to Zurich, with a brief stop in Prague to pick up more passengers. In Zurich, we caught a train to Milan. Lena and Yane were hungry and crying but being naïve travellers, we did not realise that we had to exchange currency to buy food on the train. The train guard selling food belittled us and made us feel like we were bad parents. His attitude outraged the other passengers so much that they bought our children some milk and food. In Milan, we had an hour before our next train departed for Trieste. I was busy changing Yane's nappy when Lena suddenly disappeared. I closed my eyes and put my hands around my ears, remembering Mara's piercing screams at the train station. Just 20 minutes before the train was to leave, we found Lena. I did not know whether to smack or kiss her.

We arrived in Trieste two weeks before our ship was due to leave for Australia. Exhausted by the train trip, we made time to recuperate at a luxurious quayside hotel. It was unlike anything we had ever seen before! We knew that we were different to the usual types that frequented the hotel, especially with Nuna dressed head to toe in black. But we still did not expect the cold attitude from some of the staff, which made us feel inferior. Simo and I had both endured so much physical and psychological pain because of the Greek Civil War. So, one afternoon while Nuna was looking after the children, we visited a glamourous boutique with dresses fit for the Hollywood

red carpet. Simo insisted on buying me a beautiful salmon pink floral gown, which made up for the shabby dress I wore on my wedding day.

It was finally time to board the migrant ship *Flaminia*. The journey to Australia took a month but for me and my mother-in-law it felt like an eternity. We suffered from unrelenting seasickness and were confined to our cabin for most of the trip. While we were throwing up, Simo got plenty of exercise chasing after three-year-old Lena and 18-month-old Yane. Their shrieks of happiness reverberated throughout the entire ship. Luckily, the captain was a tolerant man who loved children. He gave our Lena and Yane special treats and deflected complaints about our unruly kids from cantankerous fellow passengers.

Simo easily made friends with the other migrants, including a single Macedonian man called Vite Tanevski who was also travelling to Adelaide to reunite with his father Michael. Friendships forged during challenging times last a lifetime. The Kolaczkos and Tanevski families became lifelong friends. One day, Simo asked his friend why he looked so sad. Vite said that he was lovesick because his fiancé Vesa was still in Macedonia. Eventually when he married Vesa, he asked Simo to be his best man. We also became godparents to his three daughters, Mary, Diana and Helen.

Upon arriving in Melbourne in November 1955, my family and I were featured on page 21 of *The Sun* newspaper. Anyone would have thought it was the Kardashians arriving in Australia not the Kolaczkos family from Poland. They published a photo of my son Yane along with this description: *"This chubby little migrant boy was well prepared for Melbourne's hot*

change yesterday. Wearing a woollen jacket and with his woollen pants tucked into his shoes, he arrived on the Italian Migrant Ship Flaminia. He was wearing his mother's sun hat and holding her handbag while she cleared their passage through Customs." We stayed overnight at a friend's home in an inner Melbourne suburb and the next morning, we boarded the Overland train for the last leg of our trip to Adelaide.

An eager and nervous Vasil was waiting on the platform to greet us. When he saw Nuna for the first time in 26 years, he said, "you have aged!", to which she replied, "you too!". It was a joyous reunion although everyone was a little apprehensive. Simo found it especially difficult to call Vasil *tatko* (father) after so many years apart from him. My husband had no childhood memories of his father and had only seen photos of him when they started writing back and forth many years later. I could only imagine how Nuna felt! Even I was overwhelmed because I was meeting some of Simo's family members for the first time. Also, now that Nuna was reunited with her daughter Fana who had settled in South Australia earlier in 1952, how would my relationship with her change? My brother-in-law Jim had avoided the army, and I wanted to know why. Their kids Alex and John immediately started making friends with Lena and Yane, who were cranky from the long journey to Adelaide.

When we arrived at our new home in Mansfield Park, Simo and I were both taken aback at what we saw. On a large block of land there was a wooden house, a fibro shed and what looked like concrete foundations for a house. Vasil tried to explain that one day soon, he would build a house and a shop on the land. The house would be the envy of all Australians and the shop would be a delicatessen to cater to other "New Australians". My father-in-law tried his best to make everyone feel comfortable, but I was already beginning to regret coming to Australia. The sheer ugliness of my new home was a complete shock after having lived in picturesque places like Zgorzelec, Wroclaw and Płakowice. Even when I lived in Medovo we had a two-storey house made of stone. At Mansfield Park, Simo and I shared our bedroom with Yane in the wooden cottage, Lena's

bed was placed against the wall of her grandparent's bedroom in the fibro building behind our cottage. The laundry, washing facilities and shower dispensing cold water was next door. I felt guilty that both my young Lena and I had to be separated through necessity. This was our life for four years.

A lot of us migrants settled in Mansfield Park because the houses were cheap and relatively close to the factories where we worked. In those days, we were called some awful names like *dagos*, *refos* and *wogs*, but we knew how to ignore them considering we had survived years of verbal abuse from the Greeks. We were quite close to our neighbours. The Figurski's, a Polish-German family, lived next door to us, while the Nesterczuk's, also Polish, lived across the road. We slowly started to feel at home because we could communicate with everyone either in Polish, Macedonian or Greek.

In 1965, we became Australian citizens. Even in Australia we felt pressure to change our European names to Anglo-Celtic versions. We started introducing ourselves as Simon (Simo), Jim (Mitre), Fay (Fana), Helen (Lena) and John (Yane). We felt like Australians, but a part of Macedonia continued to live in our hearts.

At first, Simo and I struggled with the English language because of the complex spelling and grammar. We went to night school at the local Mansfield Park Primary School, so we could learn to communicate with our work colleagues. Steadfast as ever, Nuna refused to learn English just like she refused to learn Greek and Polish. This did not faze her at all – somehow, she could still hold an animated conversation with a Maltese neighbour using Macedonian words, hand gestures and facial expressions. When we got our television, she also had no problem following the drama of the soap operas.

Simo got a job as a boilermaker-welder at a pipe manufacturing factory at Outer Harbor. He worked with our neighbour Adam Nesterczuk, who would often give him a lift to work on his motorbike. On the days Simo stayed back doing overtime, it took him around two hours to get home, catching the train to Port Adelaide and then cycling to Mansfield Park. Finally, in 1964 we bought our first car,

Sofia front left at Simpson Pope factory Christmas party late 1950's.

an aqua blue and white Holden, which allowed Simo to drive to work. Fana and Jim worked at the Simpson Pope factory opposite the Cheltenham Racecourse at Finsbury. Their boss hired me as an interpreter for the workers who could not speak English, after Jim told him that I could speak several languages. I also worked on the assembly line making motors for washing machines. It was fiddly, intricate and tiring work. We did overtime quite regularly to get ahead; the factory had a bonus scheme, where the more parts you made the more money you earned. This caused some rivalry especially amongst the women. I am convinced this repetitive work contributed to my rheumatoid arthritis later in life.

While we were working in the factories, Nuna would often sit on the back veranda, crying, rocking and wailing. Sometimes she would retreat into her own personal dark space and I am certain she suffered from depression. Living in our multicultural enclave, no one ever commented on Nuna's trademark black clothes. Our neighbours all understood that she was mourning family members who died back home. When we did venture out of Mansfield Park, people stared at us

as if we were aliens from another planet. I heard them say, *"why don't these lazy wogs learn English and dress like Australians"*. In response, Nuna would call them *nekulturni budali,* or uncultured fools.

I appreciated Nuna's support, but she could be very stubborn. Two strong women in one household often resulted in robust arguments. My father-in-law made a great dispute resolution official and mostly supported me. On the other hand, my relationship with Fana and Jim was always harmonious; we were inseparable and had a unique bond. Even though we lived a street apart it felt like we were a single household. We would often join forces to bottle tomato sauce, pickles, and to make wine and sometimes, something a little stronger! We also pooled our financial resources for family parties and for Vasil's annual name day celebration on New Year's Day. We would have an open day fuelled by much drink and food, and family and friends would drop by to join in. Simo and I would set up long tables laden with *maslinki, sirenje, zelnik, turshia and blagi (olives, white cheese, savoury pastries, pickles and sweets)*. We kept up the tradition until the day Vasil died. We were so far away from our beloved Macedonia, but in so many ways we were emulating the family lifestyle and sense of community from back home.

Unfortunately, Vasil's dream of owning a deli was never realised because the Starline Drive-in, Woodville North was built on a parcel of land and rendered our street, a dead-end. Instead, our new home was built on the existing foundations close to the front fence and anyone walking by in summer could hear dad snoring at night. Compared to our previous dwellings, this house was a palace with four bedrooms, a large living room and a bathroom. The kitchen had a hutch so that food could be passed into the living room. All the ceilings had decorative plaster mouldings which held the light fittings, and the bathroom had pink tiles with a black frieze and speckled terrazzo floors. The best feature was the hot water taps for the shower and bathtub. My grandchildren will not appreciate how wonderful it was to finally wash in hot water. The laundry was next to the back veranda – a sheer luxury compared to washing clothes in

the river as I did when I was a young girl. We even had a front garden with an emerald-green lawn, concrete paths around the perimeter and fragrant roses in a variety of hues.

We were a three-generation household all living together. Nuna looked after our children. I loved our house because it was always full of people. Friends from the old country would drop in unannounced knowing Nuna was home. I would arrive from work on my bike feeling tired only to be greeted by a house full of people. Sometimes I complained to Simo that I never had the house to myself.

Most weekends, Nuna, Fana, Lena and I would gather in our large kitchen and make our delicious pastries. We never used frozen pastry and made it all from scratch. Fana and I would roll out the pastry with a thin rolling pin (*sukalo*), and Lena and Nuna would sprinkle the sheets with melted butter, olive oil, and white feta cheese or other scrumptious fillings. My specialty was Polish cuisine. When I lived in Poland, I developed a love of cooking and regularly made dishes like poppy seed cake, pierogi and bigos.

While the women were busy in the kitchen, Vasil, Simo and Jim kept busy with their DIY projects. Vasil grew peppers, cucumbers, zucchinis, tomatoes, beans, carrots, potatoes and various other leafy greens and herbs. There were also grape vines of different varieties along the fences with both neighbours as well as a variety of fruit trees. We were as self-sufficient as possible, like when I was young. Simo had *zlatni race,* or golden hands, and was a jack of all trades. He even welded an iron wagon for the children, which they loved racing down the concrete path between our house and that of our neighbours. Mr Figurski would often be stirred from his sleep by the thundering noise of the wagon and the screams of the kids. Whenever he saw Simo, he would shout: *"Damn it! Shimon, thank you for making the bloody wagon for your kids to keep me awake. You know I work the night shift."*

Chapter 8

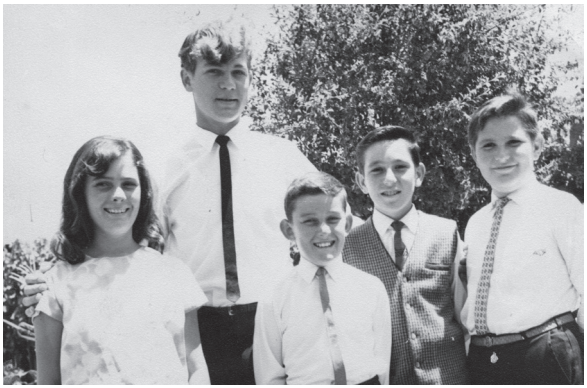
Our Australian Life

On hot summer nights, Lena, Yane and their cousins would sleep under the stars. None of us had air-conditioning and the house would get extremely hot. They also spent many summer days at the beach. Together with Nuna, they would catch the bus to Port Adelaide, and then another to Semaphore Beach. From their home, Fana and Jim had an unimpeded view of the Woodville North drive-in screen that was especially popular with the kids. At the interval they would buy ice-creams, lollies, drinks, and hot chips and when the film finished, they would walk home down the alleyway. I always lectured them to be careful because the alleyway attracted drunks, who would sit there watching the movies for free. When the kids were older, and more daring, they took folding chairs and blankets to sit at the drive-in gates. Sometimes, one of them would jump the fence or burrow underneath to crank up the speakers.

The children loved to play in the backyard of our Greek neighbour, Yanni. They were obsessed with the TV show, *Bonanza* about a family of cowboys. Yanni's block was the perfect scene for their games because it was covered in prickly bushes and dry grass, resembling a desert terrain. One day, they decided to send smoke signals to another "tribe" in the area. This did not end particularly well. They accidentally started a fire, which spread rapidly over Yanni's paddock. Our neighbour charged over, looking for the naughty suspects. I was indignant; my children were not pyromaniacs; they would never play

with fire. Days later, Lena confessed that they had fanned the fire in Yanni's paddock too vigorously with old rags. Realising the blaze was out of control, she ran home and hid under her bed. I did not tell Simo or Nuna about it because I did not want to discourage Lena from telling me the truth in the future.

Without his father's permission, Alex, aged about 13, had been driving the family's Ford Consul on the block adjacent to their house for several months. He believed himself to be an experienced driver, even though he did not have a licence. One day, he decided to teach Lena how to drive – he started the motor, put the car into the correct gear and told her to sit in the driver's seat and start steering, with Yane and her cousins in the back. Lena had never driven a car before and had trouble reaching the pedals, so in sheer panic she drove straight into a cabbage patch. They all knew they were in big trouble when they saw the damage. The paint on the driver's side door had been scraped off. Nana and Johnny, who had experienced discipline from their Baba Nuna before, took flight and hid at the far end of the block. To cover up the scrape, Lena and Alex found a tin of blue house paint, slightly darker than the colour of the car, in the garage. They seemed quite pleased with the result until their Baba Nuna appeared behind them. The paintbrushes dipped in blue paint and the car lodged between the cabbages was enough to betray them. Nuna ordered them into the house and set off to find Nana



Cousin Paul Konstantinopoulos' visit to Adelaide in mid 1960's with Helen, John and cousins Alex and Johnny Ouslinis.

and Johnny. No one was going to escape Baba's wrath and hands the size of spades.

Vasil was a beautiful man. The kids called him the "lolly man". They would wait for him to return home from work on his rusty old bike, as they knew that every payday he would dole out lollies to them and to all of their friends too. Due to unfortunate circumstances, he had sadly lived much of his life alone. Choking up, he would often say that family was the most precious thing.

In the early days, the Greek Orthodox priest from Port Adelaide would visit the Greek families in our neighbourhood. He would also call upon our family. Nuna would make him Turkish coffee and force the children to kiss his hand. The priest soon realised that he should only visit when I was home, as Nuna could not speak Greek. I am still unsure why he came to our house knowing we were Macedonian. Was he trying to apologise for the pain Greeks had inflicted on my family, or was he trying to convince us to join his congregation? Perhaps the latter. I know he delivered religious instruction to the Orthodox children at Mansfield Park Primary School. I also know that he regularly removed my children and their cousins from the classroom because they could not speak Greek. Why didn't he evict the Russian or Ukranian Orthodox children? Lena and Yane happily played tennis outside while the priest ranted in Greek about sin and damnation.

I wanted the children to immerse themselves in Macedonian

Macedonian Folk Dance Group – Tanunda, Barossa Valley S.A. 1968. Helen and Alex third and fourth on left, with Johnny (back) and Nana (hands folded).

Aunty Lina and Uncle Pande with cousin Yane – Skopje 1970.

customs and traditions, so I encouraged them to join the local dance group. As enthusiastic dancers, they regularly showcased our vibrant folklore at multicultural festivals across Adelaide. They would burst on stage with quick, rhythmic steps and colourful costumes, with red, black and white geometrical shapes and flowers. These beautiful costumes were often sent from Macedonia.

Fana's children had a Kelpie dog called Ringo, also known as Rinny. He was named after Ringo Starr from the Beatles. Lena loved to tell her friends that her Baba Nuna taught Rinny to understand Macedonian. His number one enemy was Lena's cat Tipsy. When the two first met, poor Rinny came off second-best. This stand-off taught him to keep his distance from Tipsy. Rinny died at the age of 16. The cousins wrapped him in a blanket and buried him along the fence behind their yard. They said a little prayer and placed a cross with his name to mark his grave.

Ringo (aka Rinny) with Helen in her backyard – mid 1960's.

Chapter 9

Reunited in Macedonia

My parents wanted their final resting place to be on Macedonian soil, but they were apprehensive about returning to Medovo, which was then part of Greece. Their property had been confiscated because they had fled to an Eastern Bloc country, and their son being a Partisan, made them "undesirables" in the eyes of the Greek government. After much soul-searching, my parents decided to leave Poland and rebuild their lives in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, where they could live out their lives amongst Macedonians.

My sister Sondra was enjoying her life in Poland. She was working as a radio operator and was head over heels in love with a Secret Police officer. When my father told her that they would be returning to Macedonia, she just laughed and told him that she intended to stay in Poland to marry Kazik Michalik. Her defiant attitude infuriated our father. He could not understand why Sondra would choose some Communist *Poljak* over her parents. In his anger, he told her that she would be sorry about her decision – love would fade, and the Pole would leave her one day. My father, defeated, found consolation in the fact that my brother Pande stood by his side, ready to relocate to Skopje.

Sondra and Kazik were married in Katowice in 1956, and they placated our father with regular visits to Skopje. Their only child Zbigniew, nicknamed Zbisho, was born three years later. For 20 years their marriage was mostly harmonious, but Kazik slowly grew tired of

spending their holidays in Macedonia. He preferred that they relax in a nearby resort town. Eventually, Kazik saved enough money to pay for two weeks away, but Sondra refused to go. While she visited her parents in Skopje, he went on his holiday alone and it was at this time that he met another woman, who he left my sister for. Father's words came back to haunt Sondra and she lived out the rest of her life, alone in her apartment in Katowice.

After years of living in Australia without the presence of my side of the family, I had been pining to visit them in Macedonia. In 1966, I left the kids with Simo and their grandparents and flew solo to Skopje. I felt the tears well up in my eyes when I was reunited with my parents, and Pande and Lina who lived with them. It was an incredibly exhilarating feeling seeing them all after being separated for so long. Even Sondra arrived from Poland with Zbisho. I also got to see my very dear friend Tina, whom I had not seen for many

Family Reunion Skopje – 1966. Pande, Lina, Sofia Kolaczkos, Sondra, Aunty Alexandra (Sondra) first cousin – daughter of Stojo (Baba Mitra's brother), Dedo Risto, Zbisho and Baba Mitra.

years. We giggled like teenagers as we planned our itinerary to see the picturesque Macedonian countryside.

Pande took me around Skopje to see the ravages of the 1963 earthquake. The natural disaster had measured 6.9 on the Richter scale, destroying about 80 percent of the city and killing thousands of people. I noticed construction sites all around Skopje; with financial aid from the international community, Macedonians were able to start rebuilding their city.

I visited my family again in the mid-1970s, this time with Simo. We were both financially secure and our children were adults, leaving us with more freedom than usual. Air travel did not really agree with Simo, who suffered from jetlag and food poisoning. This meant he had to rest at my parents' place in Skopje, sipping coffee and smoking with my father and his friends for hours on end. The pungent smells made my poor husband even more nauseous, and he decided then and there to stop smoking "cold turkey". He would often say that the perfect antidote for smoking was to visit Macedonia.

When I saw my parents in Skopje, I was surprised at how much they had aged. I felt guilty that they were not closer to us and asked them to relocate to Australia. They refused almost immediately, saying it would be an insult to my brother Pande and his wife Lina whom they lived with. Shortly after Simo and I returned to Adelaide, we were told my mother had died. I was devastated, but also glad I had the chance to see her.

In 1980, I was invited to my nephew Zbisho's wedding in Katowice. I accepted without a second thought, but as soon as I landed in Warsaw, I had flashbacks of the Second World War and the Greek Civil War. I had arrived in Poland at the peak of Solidarity's fight for worker's rights. Soldiers stormed the plane and lined the aisles with their rifles at the ready. My whole body trembled with horror when an arrogant soldier yelled at the passengers not to panic. After several hours we were permitted to alight the plane. I was met by Sondra and Zbisho who tried to comfort me without much success. I finally calmed down when we reached my sister's apartment.

Zbisho's wedding was intimate and simple. His beautiful bride Basia wore a modern gown with a short veil. The reception was in the Adria restaurant in a Katowice hotel. Sondra had told me that Basia was a very sensible young woman who did not believe in wasting money on frivolities.

Even after my visits to Macedonia and Poland, I still yearned to go back to my birthplace. On one of my visits to Macedonia, I travelled from where my parents were living in Skopje to Medovo to reconnect with the land of my ancestors. I was feeling very apprehensive leading up to my trip. I could have very easily been arrested upon entering Greece because of my role as a *majka* during the Greek Civil War, but I decided the risk was worth it. Before I left Adelaide, Simo contacted his cousins in Lemos who agreed to look after me while I was in Greece. I knew I would be stopped and questioned at the border and wanted to be prepared. Just as I had expected, the guards surrounded me at the Greek border. I told them truthfully that I was visiting family and lighting candles in church to honour my dead relatives, and they surprisingly let me through. It may have been a quite different scenario if I did not have Australian citizenship.

I had been thinking about my visit to Medovo for as long as I could remember. When I finally arrived after some decades, I was overwhelmed with emotion. As I stepped onto the soil of my birthplace, my childhood memories washed over me. I recalled treasured fragments of how beautiful my village was. I felt like a young girl again, catching snakes and rabbits, and freely running around. I walked over to my old church and fell to my knees, thanking God for protecting my family and gifting us the safety of a new life in Australia. Visiting my Macedonian homeland was like a great weight lifted off my shoulders. I sensed that I could move forward with my life and put some of the ghosts of the past to rest.

Epilogue

My mother Sofia always shared her life story with me as her only daughter. As she advanced in age, I felt it was my responsibility to record her experiences to ensure that her courage and strength endures. As we approached the new millennium, my mother asked Arthur and I to travel to Skopje on her behalf in 1998 to attend the 50th anniversary commemorating the mass exodus of the *deca begalci* from Aegean Macedonia. Unfortunately, she was not able to go herself because of her debilitating rheumatoid arthritis.

The anniversary event was organised by the World Congress of the Refugee Children, which had been established to lobby the Greek government to permit the *deca begalci* to re-enter Greece. A reunion was held at a function centre in Skopje and attracted child refugees from all around the world, including Australia, Canada, the United States, Poland and Romania. Even Uncle Pande, who normally steered clear of anything political, attended the official ceremony. There was singing, dancing and speeches by various dignitaries – a fitting tribute to the thousands of refugees who had fled their homes during the Greek Civil War. I felt privileged to be there to represent my mother who had played such a pivotal role in protecting so many *deca begalci*.

A photographic exhibition of the *deca begalci* was held at the Skopje Railway Station. Kiro Gligorov, the then President of the Republic of Macedonia, was present. I watched with great interest the way the bodyguards protected him. The scars of an earlier assassination attempt were permanently etched on his face. I became emotional and overwhelmed when I spotted a photo on the wall of my mother

Helen and Arthur at photographic exhibition at the Railway Station in Skopje in 1998 as part of the 50th Anniversary of the Deca Begalci showing photograph of Sofia with her small charges – Sofia far right of the photo in plaits.

and three other women, in the company of small children. As I was wiping away tears a cameraman pointed his camera at me. A television reporter asked why I was crying, and I looked over to the photo of my mother. Little did I know this footage was to appear on Skopje's news that evening.

In Skopje, Arthur and I stayed with my Uncle Pande and his family. When we arrived, he asked me in his broken English how we would like to communicate. I replied: *"In Macedonian, the same way I communicate with my parents and grandparents."* My Uncle's

Helen, Yane, Uncle Pande and his grandson Goce (George) in front of their home in Skopje 2008.

house was crowded with relatives, but my mother would have been disappointed if we stayed in a hotel. Besides, it was the first time since I had left Poland as a three-year-old, that I was reunited with my family. My Uncle was very witty and charming. He used to work as a language teacher and later worked at the central library in Skopje transcribing manuscripts that had been discovered in old Orthodox churches. His wife Lina was an elegant woman and warm and welcoming. She was a biology teacher with an interest in gardening. My only regret is that as an adult I never got to see my maternal grandparents, Baba Mitra and Dedo Risto.

Uncle Pande's son Yane was good company. On the other hand, his daughter Mare was a quiet, shy girl and I did not have a lot of success befriending her. She preferred the company of her mother and Aunty Sondra. Yane was a qualified transport engineer and had studied in Bitola but eventually decided to join the church as a monk. He could not have been more opposite to Uncle Pande who had lived under Communism in Poland and did not believe in organised religion. I spent a lot of time with Yane while Arthur and Uncle Pande explored local bars when we had a break from sightseeing. Yane refused to go to these establishments and we often stood outside waiting for the other two.

During my stay I really enjoyed sightseeing in Macedonia, despite the country being poorer compared to the rest of the Balkan region. However, its natural beauty and spectacular landscapes were undeniable. I was fascinated to see the Turkish influence reminding us that the Ottoman

Helen at Monument of Mother Teresa at Skopje 2008.

Empire controlled Macedonia for over five centuries. In many villages, I was surprised to see churches and mosques in close proximity to one another. Whilst in Europe, Arthur and I also made time to visit my first cousin Paul in London. He was the son of my late Uncle Yane. Paul had married a girl called Mare from Bitola, and had two sons called John and Theodore. They were living in London and running a successful business there.

A decade later I went on a Bohemian Tour of Europe with Arthur's cousins Suti (Sulta) and her husband Peter, my dear friend and bridesmaid Sonia who lives in Geelong and several other friends. I was looking forward to retracing some more of my family history and birthplace. Sonia and I ended up visiting my Aunty Sondra in Katowice in Poland. Her son Zbisho became our tour guide even though he could hardly speak English and I spoke little Polish. Once the formalities evaporated, we all started singing Zbisho's favourite songs by Kylie Minogue and Barry White. His wife Basia also made us feel very welcome. Zbisho drove us around in his little green work van, taking us to many landmarks including the Goldstein Palace and the Silesian Insurgents Monument. I loved all the nearby rural villages nestled in lush green valleys and was surprised by the hot weather. I found it difficult to imagine that in winter the nearby mountains would be transformed into impressive ski slopes, crowded with brightly clad tourists. Zbisho later took us to Legnica to see where I lived as a tiny child and where my brother was born. We visited

Sonia and Helen at Mavrovo 2008.

Sofia, Prosha (family friend) and Nuna holding Lena in front of No. 1 Tatarska Street Legnica.

Tatarska Street where I used to ambush the postman with my cries of "Klatchko".

The trip would not be complete without visiting Płakowice. When I had told my mother that I wanted to visit the children's home where I was born, she was quite dismissive, telling me that all I would see is ugly barracks. When I arrived at the home, I was surprised to see picturesque buildings in a secluded forest. It was like a picture in a fairy tale book. On reflection, I realised that the children's home would have re-awakened many traumatic memories for my mother, who was just 18-years-old when the village elders asked her to be a *majka*. She started working at the children's home only three years after that. She must have been overwhelmed by the magnitude of her responsibilities at such a young age. No one provided my mother with trauma counselling and she did not have access to psychologists and counsellors. She had to develop resilience on her own.

As I walked through the woods surrounding the children's home, I saw a monument in both Korean and Polish. It read: *"We, Korean War orphans from North Korea, studied at this school from 1953 to 1959. We appreciate the Polish teachers for their parental love and care and will never forget them. By Korean War orphans on July 30, 1957."* In the mid-1950s, the children's home hosted at least 1200 Korean War orphans sent there by the North Korean regime. My birthplace was an enduring haven for children impacted by war. I felt a stronger bond with my mother after visiting the home and felt guilty about the many times I had questioned her sage reflections and advice.

Following our visit to Poland, Sonia and I travelled to Macedonia. After a quick trip to Skopje to visit my family, we joined our long-time friends Foti and Olga in Ohrid. Before relocating to Canberra, they had lived in Adelaide. Our daughters were born twelve days apart and Foti is a cousin of my closest friend Mary Velliaris, whose

Helen with Fana, Sofia and Stoja (friend of Fana) at Grange Hotel to celebrate Helen's retirement in 2010.

mother was incarcerated with Aunty Fana during the Greek Civil War. My highlight in Ohrid was the Monastery of Saint Naum and the relaxing boat trip on this beautiful waterway back to the city centre. Some days later we travelled to Bitola and stayed at Foti and Olga's apartment which had incredible views of the nearby Pelister mountains. While in Bitola we visited Sirok Sokak and the ancient city of Heraclea. We also spent a relaxing day in the Pelister National Park. Much to Sonia's delight we found the house where she was born and the owners, who had Australian connections, gave us a tour of the inside.

The rest of my trip involved spending quality time with Yane and his family visiting Dubrovnik, Croatia, and Belgrade, Serbia. It was interesting for me to see other parts of the former Yugoslavia such as the Plitvice Lakes, Sveti Stefan and the Bay of Kotor. As a tourist these places are extraordinarily beautiful, but the locals have a different experience. One day in Dubrovnik I had spent all my money on an exorbitantly priced bottle of Aloe Vera gel for Yane's sunburn. When I tried withdrawing money from an ATM, my credit card got stuck and, in my frustration, I exclaimed that I could not buy food for the day. Mare retorted, *"now you know how we feel every day"* and continued to lecture me about how lucky I was to be living in an affluent country like Australia.

In 2011, Arthur and I were invited to the wedding of Aunty Sondra's grandson, Tomasz, and his fiancé Kasia.

Helen and Arthur's grandchildren - Connor Angelovski, Cooper Manou and Jaida Manou.

Helen, Yane, Arthur and Zbisho at the wedding of Tomasz and Kasia in Katowice in 2011.

I met the young couple when Sonia and I were last in Poland. Kasia could speak English and acted as our translator. My cousin Zbisho and I muddled our way through conversation with a combination of Macedonian, English and a little Polish. Unfortunately, Aunty Sondra never recovered from the breakdown of her marriage to Kazik. She obviously still had feelings for him, but she was ashamed that he could not attend the wedding of his only grandchild. Arthur and I travelled from Australia to attend the wedding and Aunty Sondra told us that my cousin Yane would also be attending, which was a great surprise. Tomasz and Kasia's wedding ceremony was held in the Catholic Cathedral in Katowice. The reception was as extravagant as the ones in Australia. There were copious amounts of food and vodka, and it seemed like all the vestiges of Communist Poland had disappeared. The Poles had a great appetite for Western affluence, and they were not shy about flaunting their new wealth. Later in the

evening we were honoured with an *oro* or traditional Macedonian dance, with the Polish guests all joining in.

Even though Zbisho was busy with the wedding arrangements, he made time to drive us to Legnica and Wroclaw. It felt surreal walking along Tatarska Street and the banks of the Kaczawa River in Legnica, a city which I had visited not long before. We strolled around Rynek Square in Wroclaw, a popular destination for German tourists. The Square was lined with buildings painted in bright colours, and I tried to imagine my father Simo living there as a young man. I was delighted when Zbisho suggested we drive to Krakow. When I was a child, I had been given a Krakowatch, a doll dressed up in the national dress of the Krakow region. She was my favourite toy.

The memories I made on this trip to Poland will stay in my heart always. I cherish the moments I spent with my family reconnecting after years of distance and separation. It was so special to be with

Helen with her Baba Nuna in 1992.

Helen, Zbisho and Aunty Sondra in Krakow.

my maternal cousins from Macedonia and Poland. Although they were considerably younger than me, they made me feel like I was with my paternal cousins who I had grown up with. Our familial bond transcends all barriers including language and politics. I still remember sitting with Arthur and my family in Poland, sipping fruit compote and nibbling on cherry cake. It was then that I decided to write my mother's memoir.

My mother died in September 2016. Her favourite saying was, *"the truth, like oil will rise to the top of the water"*.

My hope is that our Macedonian legacy is forever treasured and never forgotten.

In Loving Memory of

Sofia Kolaczkos

Born in Medovo, Macedonia
10th November, 1929

Passed away peacefully
in Adelaide, S.A.
25th September, 2016

Aged 86 years

VECEN I SPOMEN

Loving and adored wife of
Simo for 65 years

Cherished mother
and mother-in-law of
Helen and Arthur,
John and Helen

Adored Baba of
Diana and Michael,
David and Melanie,
Vanessa, and Stephanie

Baba Stara of
Cooper, Jaida and Connor

Admired and loved by
her family and friends

Mother to the Deca Begalce

Your thoughtfulness is appreciated
and will always be remembered

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I acknowledge the adversities that my mother, Sofia faced at such a young age as a *majka* to countless refugee children. I admire her courage and sacrifice and the resilience she displayed to move forward in her adopted country of Australia. I hope that I have made her proud with this memoir of her life.

Mum, you will forever remain in my heart. Our whole family reminisces about your love and dedication with sincere warmth and fondness.

To my dear father Simo and my Aunty Fana, thank you for your constant love and never-ending support. Both of you have always been my role models and heroes. I respect your wisdom and strength and your inherent ability to forgive those who have wronged you.

With great affection, remembering my Uncle Stojan, Aunty Elena and Uncle Yane and all those who courageously and tragically lost their lives fighting for the freedom of Macedonians. Your sacrifice was not in vain. I, and generations of Macedonians, are proud of our heritage and we will not let anyone take that away.

I deeply appreciate the loving and caring reassurance and guidance of my husband Arthur, our children Diana and David with their families, and especially our grandchildren Cooper, Jaida and Connor.

My family and I owe an immense debt to my wonderful grandfather Vasil Kolachkov, who after enduring so much pain and hardship, paved the way for us all to live an incredible life in Australia.

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To Meto Koloski, President of the United Macedonian Diaspora (UMD), it was fortuitous that we corresponded over a Facebook photo of *deca begalci* boarding a train. I am grateful to you and UMD for your support. Heartfelt thanks are due to Vera Sekulovska, UMD Australia director, and her daughter Natalie for undertaking the final edit of my book.

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A powerful and authentic account of a young woman's life and her struggle to protect Macedonian child refugees during the Greek Civil War.

Sofia Kolaczkos (right) with Macedonian child refugees.

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