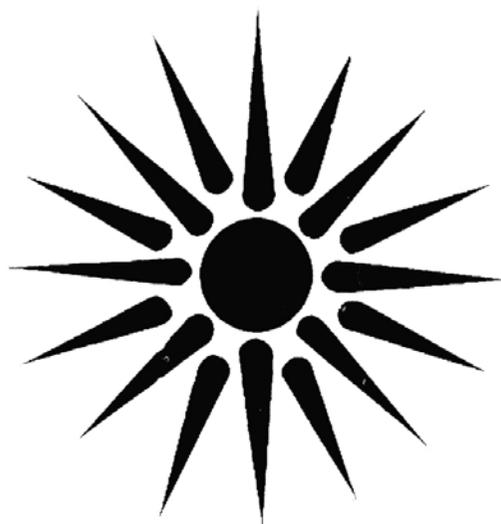


On the Road of no Return



A Novel

By

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

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A Novel

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BOOK REVIEW – ON THE ROAD OF NO RETURN - BY PETRE NAKOVSKI

Tatiana Pelivanova, reviewer

The novel ON THE ROAD OF NO RETURN is a story about thousands of Macedonians who, after the end of the Greek Civil War, found themselves scattered and dispersed throughout the Eastern European countries - from the banks of the Oder River in Poland to the desert in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. There their drama of being uprooted, their doubt as to whether they did well in the war and acted well in entrusting their fate to others, will continue. They are troubled by many questions about the war, their losses, the false promises, their delusions, loneliness and great nostalgia for their birthplace.

The author's attention, in this novel, is primarily focused on the Macedonian refugees in Poland, where they found a peaceful refuge in which they were healing the wounds inflicted on them by the bad times and where they remained nameless, but persistently and defiantly retained their name, affiliation to their roots, and their national dignity - they were what they were - Macedonians.

The novel ON THE ROAD OF NO RETURN is a novel about their defeat, a novel about their pain, resentment, lost homeland, faith in unfulfilled promises, bitterness, doubt, and about their defiance against all attempts at extermination and their persistence to defend and preserve their name and national identity. It is also about their sadness for their birthplace, their desires and urges to change their status. Their persistent efforts to study, master the professions and keep their lives from being empty and at the expense of others. It is about them striving to work hard and earn their living in their new environment which is very different from that in their home country.

None of them had ever lost the hope and desire that one day those who remained alive would gather around the family table, everyone

together at their place of birth. Even though they knew their homes were ruined and desolate they were very much attached to them, dreamt about them and wanted to see them at least one more time before they died. Unfortunately, for most time was against them. Over the years many lives were extinguished with dreams unfulfilled. For them the images of their past were conveyed only by words. At the same time their dreams and desires were buried with them in the cemeteries in foreign lands. Unfortunately, the bloody cross of martyrdom and eradication will continue to hang over them and over those who followed them, as long as their memories survive.

But, despite everything they experienced, a beacon of hope remained in their hearts and souls that nourished their spirits and eased their troubles.

Tatiana Pelivanova, Ma

*To my mother,
FIMKA,
Who, in her heart and soul, to the end of her
life,
carried the bloody cross of martyrdom,
extermination and separation and to all
mothers who were left with an empty
embrace*

*Mother Fimka had
Older and younger children
She gathered the older
And sent them to battle
She gathered the younger
And sent them to foreign lands
Mother Fimka was left
With an empty embrace
Mother Fimka waited
For the older ones to return from battle
And for the younger ones to return from the
foreign lands
Mother Fimka waited
To fill her embrace
With her older and younger children
She waited and waited... and waited
With pain, sighs and sadness
Mother Fimka waited to fulfill her painful
burning desire...*

Oh, my dear mother...

Petre Nakovski

PART ONE

It was March one thousand nine hundred and forty-nine (1949). The third year of the ongoing civil war...

Who planned this war? Where? Why?

Both sides were preparing for a decisive battle...

Place - the area around Vicho Mountain.

The two warring parties were taking final steps in preparing for a bloody showdown. The main DAG forces had gathered here, in this horseshoe-shaped region, where the defensive front line was located, and the enemy had aims for its complete destruction. And while one side was finalizing its defense the other side was preparing for the attack.

The only thing missing was the date when the attack was going to begin.

The villagers from the villages near the front and those even farther away were told, at rallies, for their safety before the battle began, that they needed to take what was important to them, including their livestock, and move beyond the mountains behind the front line where they would be safe.

Mitre was pondering whether he should padlock the front gate of his house and leave with the rest of the villagers or stay and wait? Everyone was overcome by the fear that was long sown into them. Who could forget the bombs the airplanes dropped from dawn to dusk over the villages controlled by DAG (Democratic Army of Greece). Who could forget the airplanes flying over the village, along the alleys, over the gardens, on top of the fields dropping

bombs and propaganda leaflets with dire warnings? Fear was constantly poured out of the heavens.

And so snake eggs were laid in every yard, in every field and in every garden. Hatred, revenge and fear were sown everywhere. No one was sure of anything anymore, anywhere. Rare were the homes from which no one was in the mountains fighting in DAG's ranks. Some people were even personally threatened by name. But they, on the other side, through their NOF (People's Liberation Front) and AFZH (Women's Anti-Fascist Front) activists and agitators, who mostly worked at night, said nothing during the large gatherings so as not to sow fear and hatred against their enemies. This was similar to their call for everyone to rise up, pick up arms and give it their all for the forthcoming promised victory which was to end the misery in every courtyard, alley and every village house, and bring order, peace and freedom to everyone.

Both sides were making threats and even bigger promises...

In the fires of the war that raged on for the third year, both sides rabidly attacked one another and, in an unintended sense, sowed fear that froze the blood in their veins, a fear which every day seeped down to their bones. This fear could be seen in the faces and eyes of every villager. This was a fear that refused to go away and like a shadow followed them around everywhere, slowly oozing down to their soul.

The newspapers in Kostur and Lerin and those in the south of Greece foolishly slandered and cursed the people, threatening them on the front pages in large letters day after day and loudly calling for revenge. Everywhere and every day they spilled the serpent's venom of malice and hatred with the sole purpose of deeply embedding fear in the consciousness of everyone who wasn't of their race and who was still walking on the land that was yet to burn...

Among other things the newspapers also wrote: "Nobody, in whom our blood doesn't flow, will be saved from being shot, slaughtered, hung, beaten, sent to prison, their house being burned... and if they want to stay alive then there's only one thing for them to do – leave this country... If they feel that they aren't part of us they should go

far away beyond our borders because they aren't worthy of bearing our great sacred name... Let them leave, escape is their only salvation, or move them to the dry and rocky islands... This is where these snakes belong, among the snakes and let them live by eating snakes..."

Fear overwhelmed people. It drove them crazy but it was demanded of them – to be filled with fear and nothing more. It was precisely this that led to violence – an incurable disorder of the mind, soul and body. With all this in place eradication should be easily accomplished...

So, during all this time, terrifying and humiliating fear was being sown and spread, delivered into the hearts, souls, brains and bones of the simple village people, that wouldn't only squeeze them by the throat, chest and heart, but also allowed them to say words that couldn't be said without fear and do deeds that couldn't be done without fear. The fear and hatred spread on both sides was an ingenious weapon through which a person's spirit could be destroyed.

The people were already used to fearing the government army each time it approached their villages. Fear made them feel as if they had no choice but leave their homes and seek salvation in the dense forests and rocky caves of the mountains. This was an ingrained fear that had seeped into their souls from the centuries-long enslavement they and their ancestors had endured at the hands of evil. Every village had its own story to tell of how people, at one time or another, escaped capture by fleeing to the caves and dense forests where they stayed for days and nights, waiting for the bad to pass. And even though they escaped personal torment they were still tormented by the fact that their homes were looted and damaged, knowing that some personal things they cherished could never be replaced. But the people continued, with patience, sweat and tears, working hard they rebuilt their lives and replaced their stolen items. The fear of being attacked, however, remained with them and was passed on from generation to generation and so were the ways of how to find salvation in the forests, caves and dens. That was in the past when people did find salvation, but now...?

They were frightened but were they frightened enough, as the others wanted them to be? They endured everything in the three-year storm. They endured pain, fear and humiliation but they also experienced courage and perseverance. They suffered the pain of having lost family members, having their homes burned down, having their houses plundered, living in poverty, working under hazardous conditions digging trenches, carrying huge logs for building bunkers, and so on.

Now, as the final battle between the two warring parties was approaching, there was great anxiety... The people were left holding their naked lives in their own hands.

The villagers were repeatedly told that when the government army started to approach their village they must run away because if the army caught them they would lock them up in the city prisons and use them to blackmail their children to stop fighting on DAG's side. They were told that the government army would force them to write letters to their sons and daughters begging them to toss their rifles aside and stop fighting. And if they didn't surrender their parents couldn't be saved. But if they did toss their rifles away and surrendered they would not only be saving their parents but themselves as well. And this was exactly what the Greek government offered the villagers. But, as it turned out, the other side of the warring faction imprisoned the parents of those children who surrendered to the government army. The village Drenovo, located on the shores of Little Lake Prespa, was turned into a prison camp. After their properties and family possessions were taken, the relatives of those children who surrendered were jailed and forced into slave labour, digging tunnels for DAG to hide its weapons and ammunition.

It wasn't an individual fear but a general fear, a fear whose vice would be squeezed with intent from both sides...

August was approaching and the wheat kernel was baking in the fields under the hot August sun. The bread in it was ripe. But the reapers didn't reap; instead they dug trenches and built bunkers on the hills. There was a general mobilization in the spirit of the slogan "The enemy will not reach Vicho".

Well-trained messengers were dispatched on foot and on horseback to go to the villages, knock on doors and shout in the streets: “Leave, the front has been broken, the Greek army is coming!” They began to harvest what was earlier sown. The great fear sown over time that revenge was upon them was enough to scare people to leave their homes and run for the road to the Albanian border.

The people in the surrounding villages packed in bags what they could carry or what they thought would be useful to them.

How much would they need? How much of their assets and property could they carry, which they had accumulated over generations? What should they take from everything that was part of their home for which they had worked hard to accumulate? What was most valuable in this kind of situation? With trembling hands they picked and picked. They only chose the most urgent items in the time they had - covers, blankets, plates, photographs of their dead, of soldiers who had served in foreign armies and wars, of those crippled in prisons and camps... They took the letters and addresses of the migrant workers living in palaces. They took their photographs in their suits, with gold rings on their hands and carefree smiles on their faces... They tied everything in bundles, placed them in bags, sacks and saddle bags. From all the property they had amassed themselves and from what was left to them by their ancestors, they could only take what they could carry on their backs and shoulders.

“Mitre, you open the secret pit and I will take whatever household items we need from it. Do it now!” insisted Mara while pulling out and collecting bed covers, pillows, pillow cases, small rugs, basins and other household items. She didn’t forget the old cradle she had kept for her new grandchildren. She put the big pot and kettle to the side beside the already filled bags. This is where she had put the most valuable and most needed items.

From all the items collected over the years, what should they take first? What should they take from the closets, the cellars, the large boxes in the barn, the cauldrons, the rakia and wine barrels...? No matter how much they took almost everything they had would be left behind!? And what would they do with the ten sheep they had in the great herd? And what about the two oxen and the milking cow...?

The secret pit was very old. It had been dug deep under the house foundation by Mitre's great-grandfather who needed it to hide valuables from Ottoman raiders, plunderers, Greek Andartes (Greek armed gangs, so-called Macedonian fighters attacked the Macedonian villages, carried out massacres and looting), Greek soldiers during the Balkan Wars, French and English soldiers during the First Great War. It was later needed to hide valuables from the Madzhiri (Greek refugees from Turkey after the defeat of Greece in the war with Turkey (1918-1922), about 600,000 who settled in the Aegean part of Macedonia) who, after the Second Great War, looted Macedonian villages.

“What do we do with this?” asked Mitre while pointing to the gium (a large vessel used for storing and boiling water). “Did you forget this?” “Are we hiding it?”

“No, Mitre, I haven't forgotten it. We will take it with us. We will need it. Wherever we go, we will need it,” replied Mara and then asked, “Did you cover the pit well? Check again...”

With a heavy heart she, like the others, put a padlock on the front gate and walked away... Suddenly she stopped, turned around, looked behind her and ran back home. She unlocked the front gate, ran up to the guest room and, while trying to catch her breath, took the icon down from the corner, took it with her, locked the front gate again and ran back to catch up with the crowd of villagers that were leaving. She looked ahead and noticed the cloud of dust being raised on the road by the feet of the people and the herds of cattle and sheep walking away from the village.

It was August 10, 1949, five o'clock in the morning.

It began!

The airplanes didn't leave the sky from dawn to dusk. The cannons thundered nonstop all day long. Fires were burning beneath the mountains and the hills were all aflame.

Above, under the burning sky where it met the hills and peaks there was smoke and flames and above them it thundered steadily... There were strong flashes and flames followed by the rumbling of thunder. The thunder was carried from hill to hill, from peak to peak and the earth trembled and lost its breath in its presence...

The enemy, about which was boasted all year that "it will never reach Vicho", destroyed bunkers by day and overran trenches by night. The enemy, which was never to reach Vicho, climbed bloodily over the Vicho hills and trampled on the corpses of the DAG fighters who were bleeding and dying defending the mountain...

At the very top of Lisets Mountain was a big bunker which housed the XI Division Headquarters commanded by Pando Vaina. This is where, during the night of August 11, 1949, it was decided to withdraw.

The enemy did reach Vicho...

It broke the front.

That was the time when the villagers from Kostur, Lerin and Prespa Regions were told to flee and save themselves. They were told they would find salvation in Albania and were pointed in that direction. They were told to take the trails through the forests and over the hills which would lead them to the Albanian border. Their children who had abandoned the battles were also fleeing in panic in the same direction.

There was a blackness of people and their herds of livestock. Above them were screams and clouds of grey dust. Moving crowds roared, rumbled and swarmed, filling all the paths with chaos, piercing

through the forest thickets where new waves of men and women, carrying bundles of what they needed most, joined them.

Their flocks of cattle and sheep traveled in front of them. The ruthless and angry crowd pushed on. It grew and swelled as it pulled more people into it. It rippled, squeezed, swelled and thickened as it gained momentum and pushed its way towards the border. As the people moved on at a rushed pace some groups broke apart and scattered. There were constant shouts. Someone shouted loudly. The shout drove the crowd into a frenzy making it run even faster towards the hill. People were screaming and crying. There were screams and cries of women and children, children clinging to their mothers. A horse roared as it pulled away from its bridle – running wild stamping on everything in its path. There were scattered herds of cattle, scattered flocks of sheep... A hoarse voice was heard yelling:

“Run!” This was the only word heard along the road from Zhelevo to Smrdesh...

The people from Prespa, with all they could carry, made their way along the road that took them to Markova Noga hoping to make it into Yugoslavia. But instead of being welcomed, the Yugoslav army greeted them with machine gun bursts and loudly yelled:

“Back! Go back and take the road towards the Kulata, cross the bridge to Vineni and from there go to Albania. Go back! It is forbidden for you to come here!” shouted a loud voice while bullets fired by machine guns whistled over their heads.

A group of older women went towards the machine gun barrels pointed at them and in kind voices begged:

“Please let us pass... There,” pointing with stretched arms, “in Dolno Dupeni, Liuboino and Braichino we have our relatives... They will open their doors for us... They will take us into their homes and when all this is over we will return to our own homes... Please let us pass...”

“No, you can’t go to Tito!” said the detachment commander as he stepped forward.

A woman with a baby in her arms knelt in front of the commander and in a crying voice said:

“Let me go, son. I have a daughter in Dupeni. She’s married there. This child belongs to my younger daughter. She’s now with the wounded...”

“No, people, we have our orders. You can’t go to Tito...”

“Well, I,” said the woman, “I will go to Dupeni to my daughter, not to Tito. Now get out of my way, I am going to my daughter...”

The soldiers let out a burst of gunfire in which the voice of the woman and those of the crowd, which were getting louder and louder, were lost.

“Let us pass!” insisted the women. “We’ll go to our relatives in Dupeni, Liuboino and Braichino. We have relatives there. They will take us and when the storm is over, we will return to our homes...”

They wouldn’t let them pass. They fired machine gun bursts and forced them to return to Prespa via the road leading to Vineni. And as the unfortunate civilian refugees ran down the dusty road the airplanes flew over them and fired bullets and dropped terrible burning bombs on them. Those bombs were terrible...

The people ran...

“Run!” a person was heard shouting. The people, overwhelmed with fear and panic, ran as fast as they could.

“Run!” another person yelled out loud.

The people kept running...

Crowds of people running behind more crowds of people.

They were running and dragging with them the things they had brought from home...

They were crying and screaming... it was madness... it was chaos...

It was darkness...

Above them thundered a black cloud from hell. Cannons fired at them, airplanes dropped bombs on them and everything around them, the stones, the trees, the rocks, the grass and the earth burned. The water was evaporating from them and from everything that was touched by the hell fire. Flames and smoke were rising and only ash was left on the ground...

And as the thunderstorms intensified and the flames grew higher and howled, above them a cloud of black smoke was growing, becoming larger and pushing its way higher into the Prespa sky.

With a bloody bandage on his head and left arm, a dirty machine gun over his right shoulder, a man was limping and dragging himself behind the crowd. Occasionally he stopped walking, stood upright and in silence, with bloodshot and blurred eyes, gazed at the vastness of the crowd feeling gripped by darkness. His mouth was blackened. It felt to him that it was bubbling. The long-burning slogans that were shouted establishing his belief in a better tomorrow, with which he had grown up, were coming out and being torn out of him. He was told that life would change for the better for him and for everyone around him. And he stood there stunned, listening with a smirk on his face and an open mouth. Maybe that was why he got into this whirlwind without thinking about the consequences. Obedience, faith and trust in the leader and in the party - were a roadmap for him. They taught him everything from top to bottom. They convinced him that the leader was everything. The leader was smart and responsible for thinking and performing everything. But now he was forced to face reality, to witness before him not the beautiful future he had imagined which was deeply rooted in him by the uneducated party secretaries, but the despair with no end. He seemed confused and hoped that there would be better times ahead. And where did that flawless, unconditional, unwavering, blind, hard, huge and unbreakable faith go now? He

looked hazily around at the shouting and weeping crowd of refugees that looked like a huge black cloth covering the landscape. Again and again it seemed to him that a mysterious voice of reason, conscience and condemnation would reach out to him somewhere from the heart of the thick and centuries-old oak trees growing on the opposite side of the ocean, and ask: WHY? WHOSE VOICE DID YOU LISTEN TO AND WHO DID YOU OBEY?

He was unhappy, naked, torn and betrayed. He felt empty, lost and deceived. Now he didn't know what to believe in and what to hope for. Had he made a mistake? Had he picked the wrong side? Had he taken the wrong road? He was unable to get these questions out of his mind; they felt like an open wound, like a blow after a blow, and the pain, the torment and the grief... were layered and layered.

His lost hope was painful. He was stunned, betrayed, defeated, embittered... everything was bothering him. He was standing on the hill depersonalized, naked and discouraged. He understood clearly that there was no escape from the evil that had already been done...

He saw desolation in front of him, and desolation behind him!

Everything was burned to ashes.

As the sun began to set, he stood there dumbfounded before the lamenting black multitude.

That day enemy airplanes flew low over Prespa. Their loud noise and the loud thunder of exploding cannon shells and napalm drowned out the weeping, wailing, screaming and cursing. Fire poured out during the day and the night breathed with bloody open wounds.

The dirty forces of hell opened the way to fear, suffering, misfortune and incurable diseases.

That day was the Great Mother of God holiday. The bells didn't chime that day. And instead of them being gathered in the yards of churches and at big fairs, that day the believers ran through the narrow forest paths and up the mountain beaten down by exploding cannon shells and machine gun fire...

“Run!!!” called those who until yesterday had loudly promised and preached freedom, but were now the first to cross the border.

“Run!” called those who yesterday had taxed the people's lives, property and goods for the sake of the struggle.

“Run!” called those who had first gathered the older children and sent them to the mountain battlefields to be slaughtered. Then they gathered the younger children and sent them across the border, and since then no one had told their parents where they were and how they were doing. The only thing the people were told was that the enemy would be driven out soon and the children would return. The people were even promised that every single sheep and oxen taken from their flocks would be returned.

“Run! The enemy broke through the front!”

“Run!!!” yelled the messengers running through the streets.

“Run!!” yelled the voices of fear.

The same voices were strong and powerful in making promises during village gatherings.

So, what happened to those promises?

The villagers believed those people and their promises. So, what had happened to that flawless and unconditional, unwavering, blind, hard, vast and unbreakable faith? Those who were now leading them vaguely looked at the shouting and crying crowd of refugees. Again and anew it seemed to them that the mysterious voice of reason, conscience and condemnation was reaching out to them from the heart of the great centuries-old oaks standing tall above the altar on the opposite side, and they seemed to be asking: WHERE? WHY? Whose voice did they listen to and obey which created the conditions that tore the people running in front of them from their hearth and sent them naked into despair, that made them feel empty, lost and deceived? What was there to believe in and what was there to hope for? Their beliefs crumbled and they became disillusioned. Had they made a mistake? Had they joined the wrong side? These difficult questions wouldn't leave their consciousness. They felt like an open wound, a blow after a blow. Their pain, their torment, their depression was layered and layered as they searched for answers. They were bewildered and crushed and everything, even words, became bitter. They became depersonalized, naked, discouraged and understood that there was no deliverance anymore. People were abandoned in front of them and behind them. They silently walked with a view laden with uncertainty, dark screams and cries, before a setting sun.

Until yesterday that same voice adorned the people's lives with great promises, too many to count or remember, and the people listened to it and believed it. At every gathering, they were strengthened and faith was instilled in them from the promises made at party plenums and consultations.

In the storm of many voices shouting Vera's was the most recognizable. Her voice was often heard at village gatherings where she promised people that there would be happy days ahead after the

people achieved the ultimate victory that was needed. She told the women not to mourn the lives of their husbands, sons and daughters who had heroically sacrificed themselves for victory. But in order to achieve victory, necessary sacrifices had to be made. She repeatedly reminded them that they needed to give more... everything for this victory – their lives, their possessions, their clothing, their furniture... everything. And with the slogans “Death to Fascism”, “Freedom to the People” and “Long live our most Beloved Leader” she departed from one village and went to another to give the same speech. She was often seen wearing a military belt, a leather shoulder bag with pencils strung on it and dirty, high heeled shoes. She was also remembered for her persuasive talks to parents to let their children be collected and sent outside of the country. A year later she visited the boarding homes in the Eastern European countries where the children were living and, with her victoriously persuasive voice, influenced the fifteen and sixteen year-old boys and girls, convincing them that they were needed to go back home and fight to achieve the ultimate victory.

“We are ready! Lead the way!” yelled the children happy to oblige her, convinced that without them there would be no victory.

So, once again all the Macedonian people, young and old, male and female, were summoned to give their all for this promised victory... During AFZH and NOF rallies and meetings Vera was heard shouting: “All to arms! Not a single Macedonian man or woman must be left without a rifle in hand...!” Now, in a hoarse voice she was calling on them to “run”. But the people couldn’t get her voice out of their heads. Only yesterday she had a powerful, resolute voice calling, stirring, encouraging and promising... This is what she and others like her were doing before the enemy broke the front. The people of Kostur, Lerin and Prespa Regions trusted her and all the others like her and looked after them more so than they looked after themselves. Every time they visited their villages, the people made sure a feast was prepared for them. They were given the best and warmest beds to sleep on, even in the inn, and it was all free. They came at night and left at dawn. The villagers made sure their bags were filled with food and other goodies before they left. They were treated like kings and queens. Everything was about the struggle... about the victory... The people gave everything they had because

they believed and trusted Vera and all those like her and hoped that what they were talking about at the village gatherings would soon come true. Their mouths were full of words about the good victory would bring if everyone fought in the battles. “And who doesn’t love good things?” the villagers whispered to one another. “They speak to us, well may God bless them and give them good health and a long life...” This is what these poor people were saying and wishing until yesterday... and now?

Now they were cursing...

Until just a few days ago, that voice was a voice of hope, now it was a cry of despair, a voice of despair, a memorable voice, which sowed not only faith but also hatred and fear in the villages. Not individually, but generally. With wide waving arms and malice on its face, in long speeches, that voice darkened the minds of the people and filled them with hatred for the enemy, instilling in them the uncertainty of day and night.

That voice made many promises.

Was it now the voice of salvation or the voice of despair?!

Those flaming eyes, from which only yesterday it seemed like lightening was bursting, and those broad waving arms, threatening to hunt down and kill the enemy, were no more. They fell down like a house of cards and all the best these “prophets” could do now was yell for the people to “RUN!” And among them, those who yesterday were building pillars of hope now looked like shadows of frightened foxes...

Run!

One crowd was chasing another.

The men were swearing and the women were cursing. Anger poured from their swearing and cursing. Anger that all was lost and every promise was a great deceit...

They fled frantically, scared, lost, mourning, wailing and swearing. Eyes filled with tears and great frowns on their faces, they cried out, calling names and searching for one another... and most of all cursing...

“Run!” cried the voice of despair loudly.

They ran back to the border as fast as they could. They ran up the steep hill as fast as possible and then down because they were told that there they would be saved from the avenging evil... They quickly ran down, down the slope where they would save themselves and stay alive... Running uphill prevailed. They ran downhill - steep, hard, stony, grueling, dusty, thorny. They ran but didn't see anywhere in that valley the lighthouse that would show them the way and illuminate their path to return.

In those desperate times, while trying to escape death there was no time to think where this path would lead them and where their lives would end. They had no idea where they were going and where the path they took would lead them.

They had no idea if they could even catch their breath.

The promises made of beautiful times ahead now became times of despair, times of searching for salvation, times of running to escape the evil they were promised they would never have to face...

They were promised the light of great hope. They were promised the light that would disperse the gloom of martyrdom and eliminate the darkest corners of suffering... That light was now extinguished.

With the great promises, invented at party plenums and council meetings, the architects of this conflict instilled faith and confidence in the people that they were powerful and nothing could break them. The architects were saying: “How could that cursed enemy crush those seemingly large and awesome wooden and stone bunkers strung along the mountains and hilltops? How could the enemy succeed in breaking the will of the people?” From the peak of the Party leadership down to the leaflets pasted on rocks, on the walls of village houses and churches, great promises were made which raised

hope in people. Sadly those promises were all false, not worth being written in mud.

The people could see no road to salvation in front of them. All they could see was the trodden down unfamiliar space on which they ran... and all some could think about was that this was someone's plan to plunge them into an abyss and be done with them.

“Run!” an anxious voice cried out loudly.

They ran and behind them they left the light taken from them and a piece of their soul.

“Run!” yelled the voice which until yesterday was promising them the sun and the moon...

They were running on an unfamiliar path, on their way to their extermination. This was supposed to be their way to liberation so no one ever thought that this would be someone's well-intentioned, deliberate and permanent seal of extermination and exile...

Will there be anyone who will name “the bad fate” which led these people down the road of no return?

Where and with whom will these people find support? Under which sky will they find a small place to cry over their bad destiny? Will they ever be able to find peace, rest and take a breath of relief?

To the hatred filled architects who, for years and with unlimited persistence, yearned for the Macedonian people's eradication, their greatest wish came true. The Macedonian people were never allowed to return to their ancestral home. The Macedonian people never found their way back.

For all those who wished them ill, the Macedonian people were turned into permanent refugees and sent on the road of no return. Even since then, to this day, these refugees have nothing but contempt and many curses for them...

Will that river of refugees ever regain its source?

The cruelty of forcing them to become refugees caused them a lot of pain...

A lot of people, crowds of people, passed through the forests, the paths, the crossings between crumbling cliffs to get to safety. Men, women, weeping children as well as very old men and women gathered together in groups and squeezed and pushed their way onward, trampling one another in the mad rush, pushing forward like a flooded river during a rainstorm. Their flocks of cattle and sheep traveled in front of them. As they moved along at a rushed pace their groups broke apart and scattered. There were constant shouts from mothers looking for their children, from wives looking for their husbands, for relatives looking for relatives, friends looking for friends and neighbours looking for neighbours. Every time they encountered a different group, people inquired about the whereabouts of their living, lost or dead relatives or friends. There was a lot of crying and talking. Some were praying out loud and some were cursing. Next to them, between them and in front of them were their beasts of burden; donkeys, mules, horses, wagons pulled by oxen carrying their belongings.

There, on the side, on the grassy patch - they, those blown out of the trenches and bunkers who longed to defend Vicho but had failed, but it wasn't their fault, they lay there powerless and afraid; some with heads and arms bandaged were ordered to prepare defensive positions so they picked up their weapons and swiftly set out on the other roads, on a new task of sacrifice.

The long columns and crowds flowed along the dusty trails and paths to nowhere. They were afraid, sad, whimpering and filled with curses and contempt. They were also overwhelmed by the heavy baggage they'd managed to pack and take with them. In their hasty retreat to save their lives and preserve them they took many things from their homes that they felt they would need. They had no idea how far they would have to carry them on their backs and what treacherous conditions they would be facing on the road of no

return. In fact they had no idea if they would return at all or if these were the things they would need to survive when they returned to their home after the enemy burned down their houses. The great thirst to escape, to save their lives, left no time for them to ponder and think...

They continued to move...

The ravens didn't stop circling in the purple sky before dusk as the red disk began to disappear beyond the mountain. The traveling column continued to quietly cry, swear, curse, wail and painfully utter words of remembrance. A full moon began to shine from behind the hill.

Krstovitsa saw an unoccupied spot on the ground and went for it. She took the rolled up red woollen bed cover off her shoulder, lowered her bag and other items from her back and placed them on the ground beside her. She leaned her head and shoulder on a stone and felt its radiating warmth. A cloud overshadowed the moon and darkness ensued. Saddled and dumbfounded strangers silently walked in the darkness past her as if she didn't exist. People kept passing by her, walking and driving their herds of sheep, goats and cattle. Babies were crying and old people complaining. In a loud voice a woman yelled and cursed only to be drowned out by the crying and sobbing...

Krstovitsa stretched out her arms in front of her, touched her feet and then the ground. Her short rest relaxed her body and allowed her to breathe easier. She took a deep breath, wiped the sweat off her forehead and face and then covered her head with her black head kerchief. She looked up in the sky and watched the stars flicker. Occasionally there was a brief silence during which she could hear the roar of cannons in the distance and feel the faint vibrations in the air. She leaned her head on her red bedcover and imagined she was home in her hearth sitting by the fireplace where the embers she covered with ash before she left were probably still smouldering. She imagined she was in her beautiful guest room where she would spread her worn out, red woollen bedcover and watch her children play on it and grow. And where were they now? She knew her oldest son was dead resting under a rock on Ivan Mountain. She

knew her second son was in Canada working in a mine. She knew her daughter Kotsa was serving a prison sentence on one of the Greek dry islands in the Aegean Sea. She had been sent to prison because her husband, who served as a partisan, left Greece and went to Yugoslavia with the Aegean Brigade. She knew that her two grandsons were left in pieces on Gramos last year. She had learned that her granddaughter had been wounded on the back of her shoulder when she was withdrawing from the battle in Negush and was left there lying and bleeding in the snow. They told her and she still believed that her granddaughter was alive and on her way to Vicho. Krstovitsa's thoughts kept taking her back to the beginning. Over and over again she kept thinking of the past, remembering everything she had gone through. She now suffered from an incurable pain, an incurable pain which tore at her heart. Her heart was torn when she found out that her son Pavle had been killed on Ivan Mountain. The Greek military sent her a letter signed with a royal seal informing her that her son died heroically on the Albanian mountains, heroically defending the Greek homeland against the Italians. Krstovitsa wanted to but didn't have the courage to ask the man who read her the letter bearing the royal seal why her son was now a hero? Why wasn't he a hero in 1936 when he was sentenced to serve six months in prison in the dry Greek islands in the Aegean Sea for saying "good morning" to his neighbour in Macedonian? He spent six months in jail for saying two words in Macedonian! If he was such a hero why then did they also give him castor oil and embarrass him for speaking his native mother tongue? They read the letters to her in Greek about her two grandchildren who last year left their bones on the rocks on Kleftis in Gramos, and in them the Greek government proclaimed them heroes who fought heroically for the glory of Greece. But deep in her heart Krstovitsa felt no pride and no dignity, she felt bitterness and insults. We Macedonians have our own country and our own roots soaked with the blood of so many Macedonian heroes. She was bitter and insulted because in the letters they said her grandchildren died as Greeks for Greece. Krstovitsa too was hated because she didn't speak the Greek language. She didn't understand the Greek priest giving liturgy in Greek and didn't know how to pray to God in Greek. For that they despised her. When her husband Krsto didn't return from the war the Greeks fought against the Turks in Asia Minor, a Greek representative with a letter in hand came knocking. He read the letter

which said, “Stavros, famously fell in Ali Veran for the greatness, glory and honour of our great mother Greece.” Even then (1920s), after his death, they didn’t have the decency to call him Krsto. Before that, when they forced him to wear a Greek uniform, they called him “neznamitis” (someone who constantly said I don’t know) because to every question asked in Greek, not knowing the Greek language, he answered “I don’t know” in Macedonian. The “neznamitis” died in a foreign country but his wife was sent a letter with a royal seal. This is how the Greek government treated the mothers and grandmothers of the dead Macedonians. They were told that their sons and grandsons died for the glory of Greece. But in reality they were only worthy to Greece when they died for Greece shooting and killing others to glorify Greece with their blood. This is how it was. The “neznamitis” were only loved and glorified after they were dead fighting for the Greeks, beckoning their calls to the tune of their military trumpets and marching to their loud drums. This was the only time the Greeks tolerated the “neznamitis” speaking their language. This was also the time when the Macedonian language in Greece was forbidden. Macedonians were forbidden from expressing their pain, grief and anguish in their own language. They weren’t even allowed to write the Macedonian name of their dead on the crosses. By the power of Greek law even God wasn’t allowed to listen to prayers other than those uttered in Greek. According to the Greek patriarch, Almighty God ordered some to rejoice and others to suffer in silence and to be fed not with the goodness and love of God, but with the bitterness of humiliation.

Thus, in those days a Christian God was glorified but not all were allowed to send prayers to Him in their own language and to glorify His name. Every Sunday and holiday wherever church bells rang aloud, Macedonians prayed without words. They spoke by expression and body language and barely noticeable movements of their lips. The only thing they knew to say aloud was “Amen” and quietly, silently say “Christ has risen” and for “many years” (live a long and healthy life). And when they received letters from the battlefields with bad news they ceased to fear the castor oil, the whip and the dry islands in the Aegean and screamed and cried in their own Macedonian language because this was the only way they could express their pain in the deepest, most painful, most shocking way. They lamented in Macedonian to relieve their pain as their grieved

for the loved ones they lost. Krstovitsa endured this kind of pain and lamented loudly many times, during holidays, during weekdays, during gatherings, during funerals and during many waking hours. Before the war with Italy broke out, the Greek language was taught to Macedonian adults in night schools. With much difficulty many managed to learn the first lines of “Our Father” in Greek. Soon after that the bad news began to arrive and as much as they prayed in Greek it didn’t help. It didn’t help Krstovitsa even though the Greek priest and Greek teacher convinced her that God would only hear words and prayers whispered in Greek. There was no forgetfulness in her memory, neither for good nor for bad.

Krstovitsa was sitting on the ground leaning on a cold stone and, through her teary eyes, struggled to look into the distance and see her house through the fog of tears. She felt like she had already lost the Mother of God’s light, eternal warmth, goodness and sad look. She remembered lighting the oil lamp in front of her icon which burned incessantly every day and night. That light had now disappeared. It had been extinguished. The eternal and quiet beauty as seen from the tall balcony had also died. The grape vine woven into its bars had withered and dried. Dried bunches of grapes hung from it. The old apple tree in the yard had been burned down. Flying swallows and wind circled under the smoke saturated eaves and with them carried the aroma of the marigolds and basil which grew in abundance in the yard. The house was desolate... Abandoned... Krstovitsa raised her hands and grasped her cheeks. She wiped the tears flowing through her fingers... She wiped them again... She felt very weak for an instant and feared something was going to break in her. She cried some more from the heart... quietly, without trembling, without loud sobs. After that she felt some relief and a long-awaited calm. She tried to stand up but despite all her effort she remained on her knees. She looked around and listened for sounds in the dark. It seemed like there was no one near her. A step or two away from her a cricket began to sing in the grass, at first quietly, intermittently, shyly. It would stop as if listening for a response. It sang again but briefly. It was interrupted by a passing firefly that flashed several times as it made its way along the roadside. The cricket moved a step further and again began its penetrating loud song that filled the darkness. Krstovitsa turned her head the other way and heard a silent insidious roar in the distance and felt a slight

tremble in the night air. She listened. It seemed like the trees in the vast forest that surrounded her were roaring. The wind blew quietly on a hot August night. It touched her cheeks gently. She felt like something in her was coming alive, something that has been buried with the ruins of life. “God, am I dying or going crazy?” she asked herself in a calm voice without fear. She began to feel her strength returning and pain in her knees from kneeling. “Am I kneeling? Before whom? Why?” she quietly asked herself while slowly getting up.

People and their flocks began to line up in columns under the veil of darkness. When the forest and hills merged into one, a thunderous voice ordered them to march and they all leaped into the unknown in the dark. Step by step the long columns kept moving in the impenetrable dark under the huge sky. It seemed to them like the stars too were moving along with them...

Dawn was breaking. A frowning, pale pink sky was appearing above Bela Voda and light was lazily spreading across Lake Prespa. Krstovitsa readjusted her red woolen bedcover and threw it over her shoulder. She placed everything else in her big bag and threw it on her back. The weight of it made her bend forward looking like she was walking against a strong wind. She walked along the desolate dusty road following in the footsteps of those who walked in front of her. She didn't turn to look back. It seemed to her that death had passed her by. It hadn't stopped for her at the roadside where she spent the night. Death looked at her tears and turned away, taking the path behind the hills by the lake in the reeds and in the vast field of Mala Prespa.

The weak ones, the ones stumbling, took breaks on the side of the road, enough time to catch their breath, to moisten their dry lips with a drop or two of the muddy water that lay in the deep muddy potholes on the road, to extinguish the fire from the long and burdensome walk that was burning their feet and to relieve the burning backache and pain in their shoulders from carrying this lifesaving great weight they undertook to bear.

Mitre stopped to transfer the large, heavy bag he was carrying from one shoulder to the other. He took short and slow steps that matched

those of his wife Mara. Mara too was carrying a lot of heavy stuff and often needed to stop to switch shoulders. At the moment when she felt shaky with a severe burning sensation in her shoulders, in the bag over her left shoulder she was carrying plates, spoons, forks, cups and a small pot. In the bag over her right shoulder she was carrying the gium (large metal container used for holding and boiling water) which at that time was half full of water. After taking several short steps Mara begged Mitre to stop so that she could switch shoulders. The rest of the people in her group continued to walk at a fast pace.

As he watched her struggle and double down, Mitre, in a grunting voice, said: “I told you Mara to leave the gium home but you insisted on taking it. What are you going to do with it? Why would you think you would need it...?”

“We will need it, Mitre... we will need it... that’s all I’m going to say. I’m not going to throw it away...” After she switched the bags over her shoulders Mara picked up the pace and started walking past Mitre. Mitre then said: “Do you remember what your grandfather used to say about that gium, may God bless his soul? The poor man used to say this gium was older than him. Yes. He said that. He also said that when he was a child, when his father’s house was being built, he used this gium to serve the workers water. Did you forget what your grandfather used to say about this gium?”

Mitre caught up to her and said:

“Please Mara stop walking. Let me get some water. I’m thirsty and my throat is dry. Lower the bag so I can get some water...”

Mara leaned forward and tipped the gium to its side until water started to drip out filling Mitre’s hand. Mitre sucked a bit of the water and with the rest he moistened his face, forehead and lips. He then moistened the end of Mara’s head kerchief and, with a gentle movement, wiped the sweat and dust off Mara’s face.

They continued walking...

Men, women, weeping children as well as very old men and women gathered together in groups and squeezed and pushed their way onward. Mothers carried their children under their arms and together with the old, the young, the sick and the crippled moved along hungry and thirsty eager to find a little shade and hide from the hot sun, which dried their bodies and drank their sweat and tears of misery. They leaned on each other, added strength to each other and shared their pieces of bread and drops of water.

“Move, just a little longer,” yelled the leaders, “just a little further to over there,” but they wouldn’t tell them where they were going and where over there was.

There was a large column of people and animals walking ahead of them but not everyone could keep up the pace. Those who were overtired had difficulty breathing and were falling behind. Ristana was also falling behind. Her feet were bare and swollen. She walked on the road of no return barefoot just as she had on every other road during her entire life. She was poor before she was married and poorer afterwards. The man whom she married was ten years older than her. He spent most of his time playing cards and gambling in the village inn. He was the first to arrive and the last to leave the inn. He won some but lost more. The last thing he lost was the only field he owned. He lost it playing cards. But instead of quitting he continued to stubbornly play and became even more indebted. Some forgave his debts while others demanded that Ristana work for them to repay them. Ristana was forced to work as a domestic in houses that had no men, in the homes of the migrant workers who had gone abroad to work. Not once but many times Ristana came home crying. She wasn’t sad about the youthful years she’d lost, she was sad about the situation her husband had landed her in. She begged him to go abroad and get a job just like the men had done for whose families she toiled. “Go abroad like the others, like Pando. His family was poor, but look at them now... I work for them...” She used to say these things but her husband refused to listen to her and this is what made her very sad, sad enough to shed tears all night long in the dark of night, bitter tears that wet her straw-filled pillow from top to bottom.

In the village Ristana was the first person to get up early in the dawn and was the last to go to bed at late dusk. For as long as she remembered Ristana always worked from dawn to dusk for someone else in the village. She worked for a handful or two of beans, lentils, a piece of cheese, a little cottage cheese and for a kilo or two of flour. By doing so she was able to feed her half-naked and tattered clothed children who more often than not went to bed hungry. On one shoulder she carried a small bag with one or two slices of bread, a little cheese, or just bread and salt. On the other shoulder she carried her hoe. With this hoe she was able to feed her two children and her husband. She had no regrets when she sent her children away, who, along with the other children in the village, were taken to the Eastern European countries. She figured wherever they went they would probably be better off and have enough food to eat and perhaps some clothing to wear so they wouldn't have to go hungry, half-naked and barefoot... The same day her children were taken Ristana was left alone. They grabbed her husband and, like hundreds of others, gave him a horse and a job to work for the war effort. His job was to transport cartridges and hand grenades from the depots to the front line. But during one of those trips, in the early dawn, his cargo was attacked by an aircraft. After that he was never heard from and Ristana was left alone.

Walking on the dusty road next to Ristana was Baba Ilina. She was a small woman, the wife of Dedo Tode. Behind her was Baba Dochka. All her life she had been alone. At a young age her beloved husband went abroad to work as a pechalbar (migrant worker) and was never heard of or seen again. He simply disappeared. She waited for him, believing that some day in the course of time he would return, but he never did. She had no job and what little she earned came from cleaning the church where she was constantly and loudly heard arguing with the swallows, which repeatedly stained the floor. She had a big house in which she lived alone but in poverty. She never remarried. She lived her life alone. This time she wasn't alone. She was a small part of a large crowd behind which her shadow was drawn. All those who felt like remaining behind were forced to move forward by a new wave of refugees who mixed with them, gathered them in front of them and took them with them...

So in the great rush to escape the danger, Baba Ilina, who moved slowly, was separated from Dedo Tode. He got lost in the large crowd of strangers.

They continued walking...

The trek was burdensome and exhausting. The deep pain of exhaustion was present on everyone's face as people moved along bitterly, terribly disappointed and boiling with anger, rage and grief.

They walked, and the great hopelessness made every step that much more difficult to take. They were plagued with terrible thoughts and questioned and wondered if they were victims of some great deception and that this was their next step to being deliberately eradicated?

They walked mostly in silence questioning and for a long time, wondering if there would ever be an end to this trek. They kept repeating to themselves: "Who did this to us and why?"

They knew what evil was behind all this as they knew they were victims of this same evil, but no one really wanted to talk about it out loud.

They continued walking...

The crowds were too large for the dusty narrow paths and people and animals were squeezing together to a point of being trampled. Many fell down but got up again and continued to walk along the narrow paths, sometimes coming close to steep slopes and dangerous ravines

"Keep going! Don't stop!" a man's voice was heard echoing in the air. "Follow me!" he yelled and with his hand pointed to the path that was unfolding in front of him.

They followed him but no one knew where this road led. No one told them where they were headed. People silently followed him, listening to the hoarse voices breathing heavily, coughing and for the occasional yell of people tripping and falling. Crowds and

crowds of people mixed with cattle, sheep, goats and all sorts of burden animals, flowed along the dusty road like the tip of a dry river after a rainstorm. They kept walking choked by the dust and baked by the scorching sun, hoping that someone would signal them to stop, even if only for a moment, to sit down, spit the bitter dust out of their mouths and have a few drops of water, even if it came from a muddy puddle. Their throats were sore and their lips were cracked from lack of moisture. Their feet were swollen and their shoulders burned with pain. It was a heavy burden to walk on the road of no return and a heavier burden to have to carry their perceived necessities with them on their shoulders. It was an even heavier burden not knowing where they were going and how long it was going to take to get there... if there was even a "there" to go to. Many lost their families and friends in the great flood of people and were anxious to find them, talk to them so that they could soothe each other's suffering and pain in their souls and have a chance to calm down.

Under the weight of their bags, sacks and other possessions they furiously and mindlessly picked up the pace and rushed uphill, pushing their livestock ahead of them and after they crossed the peak, without restraint, slid down the hill and spread themselves in the level valley below.

The sun was baking hot. It was harvest time and the fields they were passing through were being harvested by Albanian villagers. They collected the long stalks that held the precious grain in large bundles.

Dedo Tode and Boris, who was several years younger than him, sat down and began to rub their legs, knees and feet to ease their pain. As they looked at the fields they began a quiet conversation.

"Look at those people," said Dedo Tode, "they're harvesting their fields and will have all the grain they need to make their bread and more. And at home, in our place, who is going to harvest our fields? Now is the right time to harvest the grain before the spikes crumble and the grain falls out. Who will collect our wheat? Who, huh?"

Boris had no answer for Dedo Tode. There was something else, a different pain that was tormenting him so he said:

“At our place back home, those people, from the leadership, came to our village to tell us that when the battles start approaching our village we should only take things that we would absolutely need and hide the rest. They also told us to leave nothing standing in the fields and gardens before we left. They said burn everything to the ground and turn it to ashes so that there is nothing left for the enemy to take. Let the enemy find only ashes... This is what they told us and we, the obedient ones, I don't want to say fools, set fire to our own fields and burned our grain with our own hands. We set fire to our own crops, over which we had toiled all year, and nothing, neither from the fields nor from the gardens, was left standing... nothing... And that is exactly what the enemy wanted...”

“Do you think anything was left standing and not burned down at our place when we left?” interrupted Dedo Tode. “Our fields of wheat and corn had grown very tall, high above our heads. Our corn had long and straight cobs and was ready to be harvested,” added Dedo Tode with his arm raised up above his head showing Boris how tall the corn plants were. Then, after he let out a big sigh, he continued talking: “We set fire to them ourselves ... we watched them burn and we wept... To tell you the truth, when I now think about this I feel a pain down in my soul from which I will never recover. I will never be able to find relief or forgive myself for the sin I committed. It's not only bad but a great sin to set fire to your own crops with your own hands. I should have harvested them... We wept as we watched our crops, the bread which we were going to make from them, burn. That's what they told us too – burn everything and just leave ashes for the devil... And the wheat, I tell you, it was tall with long spikes as long as a woman's hair braid, I tell you, and the seeds were huge. They would have made lovely bread, I tell you, but we burned them all down with our own hands... We committed a great sin, I tell you...”

Boris asked: “Did you leave home alone?”

“I left with my wife,” replied Dedo Tode, “and now she is lost somewhere in the big crowd. I looked for her but it was useless. She

got lost and probably went some other way. I'm sure we will find each other later. I hope she will be alive and well..."

"Get up! Let's go!!!" a loud and hoarse voice was heard yelling.

Their conversation ended. Dedo Tode's lips stuck together and his words faded away. Their break in the wide plain was short with enough time to take a long breath, brush the dust off their clothes, wipe the dust and sweat off their foreheads, straighten their backs and stretch their legs.

"Get up! Let's go!" cried the same voice.

They got up, picked up their bags and other things that they were carrying, came closer together in a group and set off on their trek towards the setting sun, which for the moment was still shining but with only minutes remaining before it was gone. The high hill above cast a long shadow over them. Dusk was mercilessly descending upon the plains and upon all those traveling over them; the people, their oxen, their sheep and their burden animals. Now only a small semblance of sunlight remained above the hills, the day was slowly dying, and the sky was burning with a purple flame.

"Stop! We will camp here until tomorrow!" cried the person leading the group.

The people began to unload the weight off their shoulders. There was a feeling of relief in the air. They would finally find some peace in the dark to rest their tormented bodies and souls. In the dark of night they should have enough time to take a long breath, to eject the bitter dust out of their noses, mouths and bodies, to make a meal, to soothe their pain, to cry a little, to find each other and reflect on what was happening to them.

Dedo Tode sat down on the edge of a shadow under which others who had arrived before him were already sitting. He lay back in the thinned shadow and with his mouth wide open he thought of the places he had left behind forever. He thought of the alley that led from his home to the church. He thought of the road that led to the fields, vineyards and gardens, to the fountain and to the spring near

the church of Sveti Atanas, from which under the roots of the old oak tree water flowed from time immemorial. His thoughts of back home were vivid like living pictures. He felt pain in his soul which burned like hot coals. He dragged his memories with him with every step he took. The last thing he saw before leaving his home was a black cloud that overshadowed the sun. The place was in ruins and he carried those ruins with him. The great pain for what he had lost wasn't just simple pain but a heavy blow like a stab in the heart with a sharp knife, the kind that hurts the most and makes you die fast. He now carried with him that pain and the sharp blow that came with it. He was one of many who believed in the revolution. Now he spat with bitterness at everything that was promised to him... He dragged his old body on the path of great danger. Behind the crowd, with messy hair and arms stretched praying desperately Grozda cried out inconsolably:

“People, people, my children, my children are gone... I can't find my children!”

When the children were collected last year and sent out of the country, she had kept her children home. She hid them. Now, in the mad rush to escape, she was looking for them, shouting and praying.

A large crowd had swallowed them and dragged them away like a swollen river. She found them there...

The night fell upon them and wrapped them with its black cover of darkness. This was their first night spent in a foreign land which brought neither relief to their bodies or comfort to their souls. Many of them awoke in the suffocating and misty dawn to find their herds of cattle, sheep and goats gone. They had left the camp during the night and scattered themselves along the gardens, meadows and slopes. There was word that the Albanian villagers had now gathered them. No one was allowed to go looking for them.

Those who led the group refused to let the people go and look for their animals. They ordered everyone to start moving again... and they did...

“Let's go people, get moving!”

During one of those short breaks, with a cough and a raspy voice Baba Petra said:

“Lost happiness cannot be reclaimed... They are forcing us into exile for nothing...” That was all that she said before her throat dried up and she could speak no more. She was silent for a long time. She had been one of the most talkative women in her village... She was always cheerful. She was the number one singer and dancer when she was young. She was now confused and rarely spoke. People remembered her for her great amazement and inexpressible disbelief in an event that had long been talked about and eagerly awaited.

This is how it was:

Nearly two years ago, when the autumn rains began to appear and the mountain peaks lay beneath a blanket of snow, an unknown girl dressed in a military uniform came to the village. She told the village board that she was a teacher sent there to open a school. She lifted the heavy backpack from her shoulder, opened it and one by one removed the soaked primers and arranged them by the stove to dry. Pointing with her finger, she said:

“They aren’t Greek. They are Macedonian. The primers are written in the Macedonian language and children will be able to learn Macedonian from them.

The villagers had taken the desks from the school, which the partisans had burned down to prevent government forces from using it as a lodge, and placed them in an abandoned house that belonged to a long-time widowed woman who last year had left for Canada. Children ages six to fifteen, there were no older ones left in the village, gathered together in the evenings and, in the dark of night by the light of a gas lamp, read out the Cyrillic letters, words and sentences loudly from their primers. This was the first time since that part of Macedonia was occupied by Greece that Macedonian words had been taught in a school. The school was closed during the day because deadly flying machines dominated the daylight sky. After chanting their Cyrillic letters through the night the children ran home before daylight and chanted some more:

Forward, Macedonians, forward
For freedom and for life, all forward...

This is how the Macedonian primer made its way into the Macedonian village schools. But that wasn't all. Leaflets printed in the Macedonian language began to appear in Macedonian homes. The Macedonian presses "Nova Makedonka" and "Bilten" were busy printing countless leaflets with slogans inscribed on them and they were pasted everywhere on house walls, in schools, churches and even on rocks. Every message written on the leaflets and spoken at village assemblies and in general conventions was about fighting... about joining the armed struggle... The cry to battle was heard everywhere... in the villages, in the mountains, in the forests, in the partisan bunkers, during raids... the call for freedom was thundering... After many years of darkness in the Macedonian home, the people finally began to talk about light.

Many didn't believe that the Macedonian language would be taught in their village school, even though it had been long rumoured that a teacher would come and open the school.

The least convinced of all was Baba Petra. In her conversations with her lady friends she used to say:

"Oh, my dear ladies, do you really believe that a teacher would speak to our children the same way we talk to each other now? You should know that even if I see it with my own eyes and hear it with my own ears I still won't believe it..."

The villagers knew and remembered how Baba Petra defied the Greek authorities by openly speaking that forbidden language in the middle of the village square, and a few days later being summoned to Kostur to pay a five hundred drachma prostimo (fine). There she told the judge that she wanted to pay one thousand drachmas so the next time she was caught she wouldn't waste her time traveling to Kostur because she planned to continue to speak her language at home and outside of it.

Baba Petra wanted assurances that the teacher wouldn't speak Greek, wouldn't hold a rod in her hand as the former Greek teachers had and beat the children on their palms until they swelled up, wouldn't drag the children by their hair and ears and slap them around so that those hondrokefalo (fat head) children would learn Greek.

Baba Petra quietly and secretly knelt in front of the partly open door of the classroom and with an open hand over her left ear, she couldn't hear from her right ear, she listened. She began to cross herself because she couldn't believe what she was hearing. She immediately ran off, anxious to tell the other women. She kept yelling:

“It's true! It's true...! The teacher is speaking to the children as we speak to each other! It's true... There is a God ladies...”

In the evenings Stefo used to read the Greek newspapers to the villagers, from which they learned what was happening in their country and in the world. But after he learned the Macedonian alphabet he discarded the Greek *αλφαβητα* (alphabet), threw all the Greek newspapers in the garbage and enthusiastically began to read the news from the Macedonian newspapers and leaflets in his daily readings for the few elderly villagers in the inn who couldn't read for themselves.

And as the year 1947 thundered by a new year came into existence and during the best and most beautiful time of this year, when flowers blossomed in the meadow, when the white geese and storks flew over the village on their long way north, when the swallows began to build their nests, a voice came from afar saying “save your children!” This was a call that came from far away, from Belgrade, from the Balkan youth who had gathered at a convention... Unfortunately we were never told whose idea this was and who was behind it.

Children ages two to fourteen were gathered together and along with their mothers walked in long columns from their villages all the way to the Albanian and Yugoslav borders. It was a painful journey full of tears and wailing which ended with even more pain, the pain of

separation between mother and child. The mothers had to go back home while the children were sent on a wild journey, which for them began in foreign lands and ended in distant and unknown foreign lands.

Staring behind them on the dusty road stood their mothers with their empty embrace.

The villages were robbed of their youth and children's joy and laughter and felt deserted and desolate. All that was left for the people now was their own bare life and great hope that they would see their children again, a gift sown into them by the communists. There were no church bells ringing in the villages... no liturgy... no weddings... no baptisms. The churches might as well be closed because the people gave up celebrating religious holidays. What was good for the soul had been abandoned including the soul songs often sung in church. The only songs that were sung out loud now were those that celebrated conflict, war and battles which day by day were being lost.

After that?

Gramos thundered and burned for 72 days and nights. Forests and people alike crashed and burned...

After that?

Everyone and everything that was left alive and loved went to Vicho where new preparations were made for new and bigger battles...

After that?

First, on September 15, they attacked Mali-Madi, attacked the government army and reached the outskirts of Kostur. They didn't take it.

After that?

This was during the worst time of the year. Bloody battles were fought over Negush, Voden and Sobotsko Regions in heavy snow and bitter cold.

After that?

The partisans were ordered to attack Lerin which caused a great cry, much wailing, great sadness and much cursing as a black cloud descended upon the surrounding villages and flooded them with pain and anguish.

Lerin was covered in blood...

After that?

A new slogan was coined and shouted out in a cave located above the village Vineni in Prespa. The slogan proclaimed that: "The enemy will never reach Vicho!"

And everyone, men and women capable of holding a pick, shovel, axe and saw were summoned to dig trenches and build bunkers. They connected every hill at every height with rows of trenches and bunkers built with thick beechwood logs, stones and earth dragged by pairs of oxen, or carried on their shoulders...

In the meantime US General Van Fleet, addressing the army near Kozheni and looking over a military map, circled the area held by DAG and proclaimed "an area the enemy will never reach" with a red pencil. The said area, along with all the mountains, hills, rocks, and brooks, was no bigger than Van Fleet's palm on the military map.

Being reminded of this and of the many events and happenings that she had lived through and experienced in the past seven or eight years and of many other events and happenings from the recent turbulent and ugly times, Baba Petra kept cursing...

The leaders changed. The new ones yelled louder than the previous ones. They yelled:

“Let’s go people, let’s go!

The people got up, shook the dust off their bodies that had accumulated, spat out the accumulated bitterness, collected their bundles, grabbed their bags and followed the voice that no longer yelled “run”, but “let’s go”.

Fiery and suffocating heat was frying them from above like a burning oven.

They kept going...

At one place there was a crowd. At another there was a line. Someone was left behind on the crowded road. Black clouds were gathering far above the high mountains overshadowing the sun. People watched the clouds and prayed for rain.

“It’s going to rain!” said someone staring at the frowning cloud.

Wind began to blow. It began to cool the sweating faces.

The crowds and lines were endless. More and more people were coming and going. Their faces were covered with white dust. Their lips were cracked and burned from the heat and from thirst. They looked exhausted, breathing heavily and walking sluggishly. Cries of babies were heard. They were being carried under the arms of their mothers and wrapped in bundles and carried over their shoulders and backs. The lines and crowds weren’t decreasing. There were many more coming and going but no one was counting.

They walked and walked until dusk, until the sun hid behind the mountains. Darkness engulfed the day and brought night. The exhausted people lay down on the warm bare ground, boiling from the daily heat. They lay down on the beaten grass cooked by the hot sun. They wiped their foreheads and examined their swollen shoulders engraved by the ropes. They rubbed their swollen and bloodied feet.

It thundered once and then again. A lightning bolt struck and tied one hill to the other. The flash in the black sky illuminated the

people who were gathered close together in groups. And in those short and long lightning flashes the people could see one another in the deep darkness. They didn't sleep through the night under the torrential rain. They were drenched by the rain and waited for daylight, soaked. They continued on their way wet.

The leaders walked ahead and were followed by a dusty, grey cloud of people stretching in a long column behind them.

They were going but no one told them where they were going. All they could see was what was ahead of them and when they reached where they thought they were supposed to be they took their bags, bundles and sacks off their shoulders, sat down, wiped the sweat off their faces and necks with their head kerchiefs, squeezed it out of them and swore and cursed – through which they found some relief. Then, with curses on their lips they again got up and walked. Following behind was the dust of fear. They went and stopped, went and stopped looking at new sights, then went again and stopped at a different place looking for relief and a brief rest. And this continued on repeating again and again...

How far would this road take them?

How long is this strange road? Is there an end to it? They couldn't help but think of the things they had lost before they took to this road. The great pain of what they had lost was inescapable, following them like a relentless hunting dog sniffing their trail and barking with a furious bark like that of a rabid jackal, causing them despair...

What day is today?

Which month?

What year?

What moment in time?

What kind of moment in time?

In which country would they be when the sun set?

They kept moving...

Here in crowds, there in long lines, some lonely.

They kept moving...

They walked the dusty road and only stopped for a moment, long enough to move the weight from one shoulder to the other and take a deep breath...

They walked down the strange road where some found each other and others lost each other...

They walked down the road and remembered that until yesterday they were adorned with words of great promises, being told that they were following the road to victory and a bright future, and now they, the same people who made those great promises, were leading them but to where?. Those who made all those great promises were now silent, their lips tired and glued together with the slimy promises they had made. Walking in front of them, those who yesterday had made the great promises were now headed for the narrow gullies, for the great dust, drought and scorching heat, but wouldn't tell the people where they were going and how long it was going to take to get there...

They kept moving...

They stopped, but only for a moment to see if they were still together with their loved ones, to take a long breath, or God forbid to stand up if they had fallen... They shook the dust off themselves, spit out their accumulated bitterness, picked up their bundles and resumed walking, following the voice that was no longer screaming "Run!" but calling on them to "get moving..."

They walked and in their hearts and souls they carried the burden of being deceived, of being lied to and of being betrayed. They were morally wounded and felt defeat as they made their way to the invisible and unknown...

They kept moving...

The long black column of refugees quietly trampled the cobblestones of the road leading down the middle of Pogradets and arrived in front of a wide shrub overgrown with thistles and thorns.

And those who led them said: “Rest here.”

The people immediately offloaded the bundles they were carrying and began to loudly shout lively cheers, howls and screams. They immediately began to search for their loved ones whom they had lost on the road or in the dark of night. They gathered together and questioned one another and used the opportunity to find out more about both their living and dead relatives and friends. Unfortunately the answers they received didn't bring much relief. For many the lakefront plain had turned into a killing field. Many civilians died there screaming, yelling and crying in despair. There was no end to their great pain...

Across the coastal road, on which about twenty trucks were lined up, there was a great deal of water. Lake water, clear water, small waves jumping over one another and gently smashing against the rocky shore. As they took the bundles off their backs, men, women and children ran like mad towards the water. They ran to quench their thirst, to wash away the dust, the sweat, the tiredness and the fear that had accumulated in them on their long journey into the unknown. Relaxed on the shore they felt refreshed. Their bath in the lake water brought new life into them. They now sat on the shore washing their laundry and squeezing the water out of it. They stood there in the warm sun waiting for their clothes to dry.

A few steps away from the people, a low, muffled mournful moaning sound was heard coming from the shoreline reeds. It was the sickly, squeaky, screaming voice of a female. Someone pushed the reeds apart and, after being stunned for a moment, yelled:

“People! People! There's a woman here giving birth...!”

The voice and the call quickly dissipated along the lakeshore and into the plain. Mara was the first to run towards the reeds. Curious onlookers gathered on the shore and circled and knelt in front of the woman. Mara stripped her to the navel and comforted her with a

caressing voice. Then, when part of the baby's head appeared, Mara shouted:

“Mitre!!! Fill the gium with water and bring it here...”

Mara, who was squatting in front of the woman, gently held the baby's head in her hands while begging the mother to inhale and exhale again and again, encouraging her to push one more time and use her strength and life-giving pain to finish the labour.

“Push! Push my dear... Push again... You are doing well...the baby is coming... A few more times and it will be out... Push my dear!”

“Mitre !!! Where are you!” cried Mara while gently pulling on the baby.

Not knowing what was going on Mitre became frustrated and frightened, thinking that something bad had happened to Mara. Then, when he came close to her he was stunned. Mara, without looking at him yelled:

“Mitre, bring the gium, fill it with water and boil it. Hurry! Don't wait... Run!”

Mitre ran back, picked up the container, filled it with lake water, grabbed two stones, made a fire pit, collected some dry grass, placed it between the stones, added a few dry sticks, lit the grass and placed a stump on top of it. He then placed the container on top of the stones and waited for the water to warm. And while the water was warming, Mara's wide open palms were curled up against the crying baby's body, whose cry was now echoing in the lake reeds.

Mara turned to Mitre and, in a warm voice, said:

“Pour some water Mitre so that we can wash the baby.”

“The water is still cool,” replied Mitre with a tone of concern.

“Pour some I tell you. So what if it's still cool. The baby will endure it. Pour some... Now pour some more... Now rip a thick thread out

of my sash and tie the baby's umbilical cord with it. Did you get the thread? Tie it here. Like that. One more time. All right. And now cut the cord here with your knife. It's a girl, don't be afraid. God bless her and may she live a long, healthy and happy life," concluded Mara.

Mara raised the little one up in the air and tapped her on the back in hopes that she would take deeper breaths. Then, after blessing the mother and baby with many blessings for a good, long and healthy life, she gave her to her mother who immediately placed her on her breast to suckle. Mara then cut off the lower part of her shirt and made a blanket for the little girl.

"And now," said Mara to the new mother, "give her your breast every time she needs it, hug her, breathe in her face with your warm breath and keep her warm with your love and embrace..."

Just before sunset, the moment the last ray of sunlight faded above the summit of the high mountain, the mother and newborn baby, wrapped in her blanket, were brought back to the group adding one more cry, that of a baby, to the already grieving and moaning crowd. The full moon and all the stars around it were reflected in the baby's dark eyes...

On the road to the unknown, new little souls came into being in this world and joined the refugee crowd. They were all delivered by Mara's hands...

Mara had helped many mothers deliver their babies not only in her village but also in the surrounding villages. She had learned how to do this from her grandmother. She always helped mothers give birth and taught them how to deal with their pain. She did this often outside in the fields, during harvest time, while collecting the grapes from the vineyards and even in dark mangers in the warm breath of farm animals.

The night slowly descended upon the crowds. They gathered together at dusk yelling and making inquiries and only then they offloaded the bundles and bags they were carrying and went to sleep. The warm soil received the fallen bodies well.

The tired and overwhelmed crowds slept in silence, once in a while interrupted by a crying baby. Their mothers fed them, rocked them lightly and sang sad lullabies to them to put them back to sleep.

Dedo Tode was limping from the pain he had in his right leg. His heel looked like it had been eaten to the bone by his shoe. He was limping here and there asking if anyone had seen Ilina. He described her as a short skinny woman, dressed in black, with a black head kerchief on her head carrying a woven, lace cloth bag on her shoulder.

Ilina was not among the people in this valley. By now Dedo Tode was sure she must have gone with some other group and had landed in some other place. He was sure poor Ilina would be looking for him just as he was looking for her...

The day was coming to an end and the crowds began to disperse. Darkness was slowly setting on the lakeside plain. Truck headlights began to illuminate the road and surrounding space in the late evening hours. Then, a man with a large funnel, made of thick cardboard, yelled loudly for the people to start climbing onto the trucks.

“Okay, no pushing now!” he yelled. “First the old people then the children, after that everyone else with their bundles, bags, sacks and other possessions. I said no pushing! Take your time, there is no hurry. There will be room for everyone in the trucks. No one will be left behind...”

Dedo Tode turned to Boris and, with a suspicious tone of voice, quietly asked:

“Boris do you think they’ll be taking us back home or will they take us further away? What do you think Boris, huh? Speak up so I can hear you... Speak up...”

Boris turned to Dedo Tode and, with an angry tone of voice, said:

“Ask him!” and with his hand pointed at the man with the funnel in front of his mouth. Boris then quietly said: “They will take us Tode somewhere that no one wants to talk about. That’s where they’ll take us. Now keep quiet, play stupid and let’s get moving...”

The crowd lined up in front of the trucks and began climbing, some with difficulty because their legs and feet were sore and others because they had to carry the big bundles, sacks and bags on their backs and shoulders. As they stood in line many were calling for their loved ones to come and join them. They were afraid of being separated and of losing one another as many had done so many times on the road and in the dark. After the last person got on, the man with the funnel ordered the trucks to start moving!

The trucks left and drove nonstop all night.

It was still dark when the trucks arrived and stopped on the road in front of the entrance to Pegin. The man leading the convoy, perched on the passenger entrance of the leading truck, through his paper funnel, yelled:

“Pick up your things and get off the trucks. Then you all go down the road and wait there for us to tell you what we’ll do next.”

PEGIN - This was the name of a town near which lay a slightly downhill slope on which the refugees were given sanctuary. The slope was large and wide but too small to fit them all. Still shaken from their ordeal, the poor refugees were full of fear and doubt. They were wailing, crying and cursing. They were thirsty, hungry and dirty, and here too they were calling and looking to find those whom they had lost during the long trek and before that.

They were afraid, restless and their eyes were full of questions. The most burning questions on their minds were: “What is going to happen next?” “Where are we?” “Will we return to our homes or will we continue to travel on this strange road, and for how long?”

After everyone descended on the slope, the place began to look like a living anthill. To rest their weary bodies some people couldn’t

wait and lay down on the hard, bare ground. This was an opportunity for them to rest, collect their thoughts and be prepared for what was to come next. Some continued to look for their loved one, in hopes that this time they might find them. Others took the opportunity to look after their wounds and ease their pain. Among them voices of despair, pleas, cursing and pain could be heard... Here, in the space under the open sky, they searched, shouted, yelled, hugged and loudly rejoiced for being alive. Some held hands for fear of being separated again; they were touching and leaning against each other to make sure they were still alive and together. Others mourned their loss.

It was a new day. The sun was hot in the open sky. It was burning all day. The people lay down on the hard, sun burned ground and on top of all their other miseries, they now had to contend with the burning sun. Some began to smell and taste something similar to salt in the air. The west wind was carrying warm salty water and mixing it with their sweat. And in the evening they lay beneath the open sky watching the silver clouds roll over them.

The next day big and small tents arrived. They were moldy and smelly military tents with big holes in them. The Albanian military was setting them up. They figured they were good enough for those dirty newcomers to hide in from the rain and the heat. After they put the tents up, the soldiers brought in sweat and blood-stained mattresses and filled them with hay and straw. They were at least softer than the ground underneath them.

“You will now rest and sleep easier...” they said and left.

Those from the leadership were also telling them the same thing as they went from tent to tent to determine how many they could squeeze in each tent. One thing the people wanted to know, and they weren't telling them, was how long they were going to stay in these lice-infested, moth-eaten tents and how many nights they would have to sleep on those sweaty, smelling mattresses... All they could tell them was to be patient and have faith... They weren't told how long they had to suffer and what to have faith in from now on.

Not getting the answers they were looking for, the people reluctantly and quietly did what they were told. They packed themselves in the tents but found the stench of mold suffocating. As they all began to pack into the tents they found that there was no room for everyone.

That day and several days after that, the man with the paper funnel came back and gave persuasive and reassuring speeches. During one of those speeches he said:

“People have faith and patience, rest now, rest and gather your strength for another day or so, or perhaps for a few more hours... Our brave fighters are pounding the enemy at Gramos and soon will bring us victory and after that we will all leave this place and go home... So, wait patiently and have faith and confidence in us and it will all be over. When all this is done and it’s safe for us to return, our voices will thunder again with the good news. When the enemy is broken we will be the first to tell you to pick up your things – we are going back home...”

Some of the people who weren’t paying attention and who only heard the last words, assumed the enemy had been broken and that they were going home. So, they hurriedly ran around shouting:

“We’re going home. Hurry up people we’re going home!”

“Listen people, we’re going back home!”

The great misunderstanding soon turned into self-deception and people were overpowered with a great desire to go back - which enslaved them.

But not one of those who led them said anything similar to that.

They waited and hoped that someone would say something like that. But, as they waited and waited for the good word to be said - it wasn’t said. None of those who led them told them it was time to go home. They only told them that today they would be spending the night here, but no one told them what would happen tomorrow...

In time the voice, which days ago called on them to run to escape the evil, was also gone. Now there was no voice to bring them comfort and soothe their souls, to calm them down and tell them what was going to happen next. There was no one there to tell them where they were going and when they were going to return. There was no one there to ask them if everyone was there and if anyone had gotten lost on the way? Quietly the people waited, they waited to hear that same loud voice which days ago yelled at them to “run”, to loudly tell them that someone was here for them, to care about them, to hear their concerns and to worry about them...

There, on the slope at the fringe of Pegin, the nights didn't bring bright dawns. There thick fog dominated the dawn which, when it dissipated, took with it all the hope that was there.

It was forbidden for people to stray outside the designated slope or go to town. They weren't allowed to go to the gardens next to the slope in which pumpkins, tomatoes, peppers, watermelons and melons were rotting.

Every day a large flock of ravens fluttered overhead, scrambling and circling over the slope, creating a mobile, black shadow that floated over the refugees like a vision of a bad omen. The slope too must have looked black from above because almost every woman, every widow and mother was in mourning and wearing a black head kerchief on her head...

The people were hurting and there was no moment of happiness. Almost everyone was in some sort of pain and people spent their days and nights crying and cursing, some in silence and others loudly. With broken hearts and tainted souls they sat and stared at the rocks in pain...

Black clouds began to appear over the hills at sunset. Lightning flashes cut through the darkness. Someone said: “Lightning struck the top of the hill.” Then thunder was heard. There was a certain odour in the air. Those who recognized it ran and kept yelling: “The thunderstorms are coming here.” By late night torrents of muddy water were heard flowing down the river below as the north wind kept whipping the tents. Heavy drops of rain began to strike the

tents. The sound they made mixed with the heavy sighs and quiet and desperate weeping, breaking the silence in which all ailments and cries were gathered together. Awake, the people endured the long and painful night. And, if it was only that.

“Be patient! Be patient and all this will go away...” some prophesized.

They were patient and waited and endured, crouched under the wet tents while large drops of rain mercilessly fell upon them, filtering through the perforated material and landing on their heads and backs, adding to their existing misery. Crouched next to each other, the women huddled and silently prayed for a quick end to their plight. Their heavy sighs were swallowed by the darkness.

Time had taught them to keep quiet, deep down in their souls to be silent and meek. They had been taught to cry silently, whimper gently and curse the worst curses quietly with their cracked and bloody lips tightly closed, to be firm and strong with their afflictions and misery. Even though they had been uprooted from their native hearth, they weren't torn like the leaves from the branches in late autumn. Gathered together in a circle, they consoled each other and whispered:

“This too will pass...”

Was there anyone to ask these people how much they were hurting? How deep in their hearts and souls they felt their pain and if their wounds would ever heal? Was there anyone who cared about their pain, their sighs and the flood of tears they shed?

No! There was no one!

Day and night they sat there overwhelmed with solitude, sadness and pain and felt abandoned down to their souls.

They were tormented by the uncertainty of what tomorrow would bring...

They had many, many, many questions, among which was the question:

“Will we lose our sanity???”

Mara went out and collected some dry grass and a bunch of dry twigs and placed them between two stones and then placed her gium full of water on top of the stones. She then lit the grass with a match and watched the small flame grow, overpower the dry twigs and lick the gium. She watched the flame grow, shrink and swirl all around as it was blown by the wind. Mara put thicker twigs into the fire and waited for the water to boil. She then took a bag of mountain tea from her sack, broke it into small pieces in her hands and placed them inside the mouth of the gium. A gentle gust of wind blew and carried the smoke and the faint aroma of the boiling tea into the distance.

As the tea boiled, more and more women came and sat around the fire. They watched the flames dance and lick the gium leaving black marks wherever they touched. The gium was getting darker and darker with time but not as dark as the head kerchiefs these women wore on their heads. The mothers and widows stared into the fire mesmerized by its dance, dancing like a living being, burning the twigs, licking the gium and turning it black... The thick black smoke made their eyes burn.

Looking at the gium Mara said quietly: “This gium has been used to put out fires since Ottoman times. It was used to put out the fires started by the Bashibuzuks (armed civilian Muslim raiders and looters), Arnaut henchmen (Albanian bandits), Ilinden revolutionaries, Greek Andartes (Greek armed gangs that operated in Macedonia during Ottoman times attempting by force to convert Macedonians to Greeks), Macedonians enlisted and forced to fight for the Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek armies, French and English soldiers, Indians and black people brought from the Asian and African colonies, and everyone else who came to this small piece of land (Macedonia) wanting to destroy it and leave only ashes, widows and orphans behind.”

Mara stopped talking for a moment, stirred the fire and continued:

“We filled the gium with water from the spring that sprang out of the large boulder and used it not only to put out fires but to quench our thirst, cool ourselves and wash our faces and bodies. People used to say that the water that sprang from the large boulder had healing properties so we also used it to wash wounds, cracked lips and all kinds of other ailments. In winter the water was warm and cool in the summer. Because it was believed to have healing properties people used the water to heal all kinds of ailments including headaches, poor eyesight, sore throats and sore mouths.”

Mara paused for a moment, looked at the women who were paying careful attention to her and said: “That wasn’t all. With the healing water from the spring this gium has quenched the thirst of many, many people which included Albanians, Turks, Ottoman soldiers, foreign soldiers who were here during the Great War, counter-bandits, Greeks, snitches and even policemen who walked up and down the village lanes and listened under people’s windows to hear what language the people in the house spoke. They listened to hear what language was spoken around the dinner table and in what language mothers sang to their children while putting them to bed. Even the communists, who caused much of this wickedness and left behind many widows and orphans, drank from the gium.”

Mara looked around for a moment and then said: “One by one, all those bad guys who set foot in our village and all those who caused evil, left us, but the gium always remained with us... always full of the life-giving water that sprang from the large boulder which not only quenched our thirst but also healed the sick...”

Mara stopped talking now but what she said was repeated and embellished far and wide on the slope where the refugees rested. By the time the story got around people were saying that some sort of great dragon was guarding the water that sprang out of the gash in the large marble boulder. People began to believe that the great evil that passed by the spring couldn’t contaminate the purity of the water because it was guarded by a great dragon.

Someone asked: “Is the dragon that guarded the spring still alive?”

The tea in the gium was now boiling. Mara picked up the gium and went from tent to tent offering people mountain tea. When the gium was empty she filled it with water again and made more mountain tea. Then when she ran out of mountain tea she made herbal teas, mostly from dry nettles, which gave the tea a light golden colour... Mara distributed the tea she made first to the sick and the old, and then to the children.

One of the women approached Mara and quietly said:

“Mara, look at your gium, it has turned black... blackness has covered it...”

Mara looked at her and whispered: “That’s okay. Its only soot from the flame, it will easily come out if I rub it with some fine sand and a little bit of water...” And then she thought but didn’t want to say: “What about the blackness in us? Who is going to wash that out?” She said nothing and kept the bitterness to herself but couldn’t shake the question that haunted her:

“Who is going to wash the black out of our black head kerchiefs?!”

Mara then remembered what an old woman in the village had told her while recounting what had happened during the bloody uprising. As the two women sat under the shade of the eaves the old woman said: “Our hopes, just like our homes were turned into ashes except for that old gium. It didn’t burn. It was blacker than the black walls of our house; it was black almost as black as the head kerchiefs of the rebel mothers and widows, but it didn’t burn...”

Only the black head kerchiefs of mothers and widows were blacker than the gium. This is how it was during all the bad times and this is how it is now.

Mara knew the gium was old, older than her mother-in-law, even older than her mother-in-law’s mother-in-law. Perhaps even older than that.

The women in the village took pride in carrying their stomne (ceramic pitcher) and gium on their head as they returned from the water spring. Mara too took pride in carrying the large and heavy gium on her head. She was a tall and thin woman with a long braid of hair and walked upright, standing tall and swinging her hips as she strolled down the main road in her village with the gium full of water on her head, attracting the eyes of every man that passed her by.

Mara, like many women before her, carried a lot of water in that big gium. She took it to the plowmen, to the grass cutters, to the grain harvesters, to the grape pickers and even to weddings and baptisms; everything that brought joy to the village. The gium served many generations. People were born and died but the gium remained. Sometimes it was clean other times it was dirty with soot. Some people have even claimed that the same gium was used about two hundred years ago to serve water to the builders from the Ianovian villages who built the village church... The gium was black in the fireplace but never as black as the black head kerchiefs of the mothers and widows...

Late at night after Mara returned to her tent she lay down and, through the half-open wing watched the moon lick her watery face with its dim light. Tears streamed down her face and long sighs quietly poured out of her like muffled voices of pain, gloom and humiliation...

Many of the refugees had children with them. There were infants and toddlers between one and two years old and three to fifteen years old. Most of the infants were born on the road, in the camp, under the open sky, in the rain, or on bare ground.

During the spring of last year (1948) not all two to sixteen year old children were collected and sent to the Eastern European countries, although rare, some mothers hid their children and refused to give them up. One such mother was Lina. Lina refused to be separated from her ten-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son. She, like others who didn't want to give up their children, hid them in the cellar. Some hid their children in the forest, on the hills, in their barns under the straw, outside the village in bushes, in caves and so

on. There the children endured the cold, the humidity and the loneliness. From there, like frightened sparrows, they watched the airplanes circle over the mountains, hills, fields and villages and drop bombs. During the night their mothers or grandmothers secretly brought them home and hid them behind the tall walls of their courtyards with doors boarded up by thick planks. The first thing before doing anything, even before they were given food to eat, the children were sternly instructed to keep very quiet because the neighbours and the people from the village board might be listening. The children weren't allowed to laugh or play loud games in the yard or at home. At night they gathered in dark rooms and silently ate the warm slice of bread just taken out of the oven. Sitting high up on the doorstep leading to the balcony, the children stared at the road that their older brothers and sisters had taken when they left. Their greatest desire was to be with their siblings and during every moment while awake they asked their mothers:

Mother, when will father, brother, or sister come home?

They asked questions...

They waited...

They hoped...

Lina held her children, one in her lap and the other on her knee and was constantly surrounded by the mothers who had let their children go. They silently watched her and her children with misty eyes and with a lump in their throat. The mothers mostly came to see Lina's children because they missed their own and had no idea how they were doing and under whose roof they were spending their days and nights. They often wondered if there was anyone out there who would hug them, kiss them and give them love. The mothers who gathered around Lina treated her children like they were their own. They gently caressed their hands, feet, heads and kissed their cheeks. Some mothers sat around Lina looking unfulfilled with their arms crossed and laps empty while others sat with arms stretched out constantly reaching for Lina's children.

Much waiting, many spilled tears and unfulfilled desires unfolded for the mothers with empty laps during those days and the days that followed. All that was left for them now were memories.

Donka, who was sharing a tent and bed with Lina, laboriously exhaled interrupting the peace and in a quiet voice said:

“My daughter was taken last year and my son half a year ago (By a decision made at DAG Headquarters, a violent mobilization of girls was carried out at the end of August 1947. The next wave of mobilization was carried out by a decision made on February 2, 1948 by the Interim Democratic Government of Greece, which was set up on December 22, 1947 in the village of Asamati in Prespa.). Two people came into our house and told my daughter to bring food for the wounded. My daughter was a tall, strong but slender girl with a braid thick like a scarf stretching down to her hips. She was just a kid. Before that, when they came to collect the children and take them to the Eastern European countries, I went to register her so that she could go with the rest of the children in the village. The woman who was writing names in her notebook looked at her from top to bottom, shook her head, raised her eyebrows and said:

‘You are too big to go with the children. Go home...’

She didn’t write her name in the book. Later they gathered all the girls together and told them that now that winter was approaching they would need warm clothing for the partisans; sweaters, socks, hats, gloves and so on. They told them they had a lot of wool and they needed their help to turn it into clothing, but for that they would have to bring their knitting gear and go to a certain village. They could see that my daughter was too young but didn’t tell her to go home or ask me for my permission to send her. They took her... They took all the girls and none of them returned from where they took them. My daughter turned sixteen the same day they took her...”

Donka crossed her arms over her chest as if hugging her daughter. She kept silent in the grip of her crossed arms but her fear and pain was plainly visible on her face... She kept silent...

There was silence in the tent. All the women around her seemed to have gathered all their strength and patience and waited and hoped in silence. Occasionally they untied their black head kerchiefs and used them to wipe the tears off their faces. And who now, today, tonight, or tomorrow would express the great pain of that bloody open wound? The mothers had lost their children during the breakup. They had disappeared into the large crowd. She yelled but there was no answer. Many heads were lost in the dark of night on the roads during the breakup. Voices, cries, cursing and words of bitter contempt were heard...

The tracks of pain cannot be easily erased...

In the great suffering, what should you regret first and what should you painfully endure?

Dedo Tode again went to look for Ilina. He went from tent to tent, from group to group, asking every man, woman and child:

“Has anyone seen my Ilina? People, people, have you seen my Ilina? She is my wife, I say, and her name is Ilina.”

But all he got from them were head shakes and lifting and lowering of shoulders, which meant that no one had seen a woman named Ilina. But Dedo Tode wasn't the only one looking for someone. There were others like him who had been separated from their relatives, friends and fellow villagers.

Dedo Tode's broken and muffled voice was picked up by the west wind and carried from one side of the slope's ridge to the other, scattering between tents but getting no answers of Ilina's whereabouts.

Mara heard Dedo Tode's broken and muffled sad voice and slowly went to him and quietly, gently and humbly whispered:

“Please don't punish yourself; Ilina is probably in another camp. This isn't the only camp... Who knows in how many other desolate camps they have gathered us. Take it easy, calm down, be patient, one day we'll all be together in one place and there you will find your Ilina... So please stop punishing yourself...”

So much for Mara's comfort...

Dedo Tode wouldn't listen and continued to search for his Ilina all through the camp.

“Ilina!” he kept yelling in a begging, broken voice. It would appear that no one else, except Mara, had even realized how inexplicably

painful Dedo Tode's pleas were. Day after day, he kept looking for her and everyone he met and asked said "no they had not seen her". But he refused to give up on her and kept describing her saying: "She is a short woman wearing a black dress. Her name is Ilina, have you seen her?" All he got was silence. And even though Ilina wasn't among the people in this camp, Dedo Tode continued to go from tent to tent looking for her but she was nowhere to be found...

"Ilina! Ilina! Ilina! Don't leave me alone Ilina!" he kept yelling in desperation...

Then when he became extremely tired, Dedo Tode returned to his tent and mourned her, sighing sadly, laying on his back on a sack full of ferns, with his fingers tucked under his head. He tried very hard to remember the paths they had taken together and the places they had sat for a brief rest. He remembered people fleeing in front and behind them like a fierce whirlwind sweeping and dragging everything in their path. That's how he had lost his Ilina... That's how she disappeared in the long and black river of refugees... On the way he looked for her and at every resting place he thought he would find her. He was sure she was looking for him too, asking people if they had seen him... Asking them if they had seen Dedo Tode... begging them to tell her where Dedo Tode was. With a heavy heart, she too must have been filled with sadness that made her tired eyes water, longing for him. Dedo Tode felt sorry for her and wanted to dream of her, but found it hard to sleep in these sleepless nights of misery. Every time he fell asleep he had nightmares. In his dreams he watched his house burn down and heard his ox Gaito roar in the burning barn. Gaito was his favourite ox with which he had plowed his fields for years. There was his lame horse which had also been burned alive along with his ox. He often used the two to plow the fields and carry shuma (oak branches with dry leaves) from the forest to feed his animals. Dedo Tode felt lucky that the partisans hadn't take his horse. The partisan commander who wanted his horse felt embarrassed to ride it because it was lame. He couldn't see himself riding a lame horse going into battle, so he didn't take it. The poor commander was ashamed... how sad. Dedo Tode had witnessed many tragic things including people fleeing in frustration to the mountains and forests, running to save themselves behind the woods and rocks. There they found

salvation which lessened their fear but only a little. Dedo Tode couldn't avoid remembering what he had seen... how the life giving fertile soil was heaped in piles and contaminated, plowed by the terrible burning bombs that fell from the heavens. He couldn't avoid remembering the damage those dreadful burning bombs had done to the houses and the terrible flames they had created, which no one could extinguish, that burned down people's homes.

The terrible nightmares often kept Dedo Tode awake. He would jump off his bed and, even before he was fully awake, hurriedly get out of the tent. Many times he was seen trying to do up his pants and shirt with trembling fingers. In addition to his own nightmares, Dedo Tode was also deprived of sleep by the cries of babies, by the song of the multitude of crickets that had infiltrated the tents. After experiencing a nightmare he preferred to stay outside, under the open sky, and contemplate his misery which had him enslaved. He tried to fall asleep and dream of his Ilina but couldn't.

With short and careful steps, Dedo Tode walked to the road to see if any more trucks had arrived. Following close behind him was his inseparable puppy Sharko, his closest companion and only good friend who never left his sight on the road to the unknown. Sharko, with his sad eyes, always watched Dedo Tode. He appreciated his love and the dry crusts of bread he gave him. Dedo Tode always kept some bread in his pocket especially for Sharko so that the puppy wouldn't go hungry, even though he often went hungry himself.

Dedo Tode lost the strength in his knees every time he found no trucks on the road. He stood there and waited and waited. For him every day and every night the truck came late. For him the trucks were somewhere on the road and coming. This night too the trucks were late.

Disappointed Dedo Tode walked back around the tents and listened to the heavy sighs, sobs, cries of the sick and cries of infants. And all that restlessness in the tormented people who slept or couldn't sleep, weighed on him. He carried their anguish in his heart, feeling their pain and torment for which there was no ointment to appease him. He walked in a circle around the tents several times until he

was tired. He felt it was time to return to his own tent and lay on his bag full of ferns. That night he didn't sleep at all. At dawn he quietly and slowly, not wanting to disturb anyone, got up, left his tent and went to the road. There, he sat under the old plum tree and waited. He waited until the sun was fully visible. He then slowly stood up and let out a painful but quiet murmur:

“The trucks are late again.”

The road was empty again. Dedo Tode decided to go back to his tent and go to bed. And for as long as he couldn't sleep he cursed those who didn't order the trucks to move. For as long as he wasn't asleep, he quarreled with the crickets which sang their song inside the tent and outside in the tall grass... He also quarreled with his neighbour who constantly coughed but refused to get out of the tent for ten days. Then, during the next night, some hours before dawn, the coughing in the neighbouring tent stopped. There must have been some great sickness that silenced the cough that morning. But still, there were those damn crickets which wouldn't stop singing...

Dedo Tode refused to give up his search for the trucks. He didn't want to think that the trucks were no longer there. He only wanted to firmly believe that they were late and would surely arrive very soon.

“If they don't come today, they will surely come tomorrow. I'm sure they will come tomorrow,” Dedo Tode was often heard whispering to himself. He repeated this every day until the day he lost his voice. For hours every day, during the day he sat in the shadow of the plum tree waiting. And when he could no longer speak he constantly thought to himself: “The trucks will come... Someday they will come... They can't leave us here like this? They will come and take us back to our homes...”

The thought that the trucks were already on the road wouldn't leave him. That thought was like a pesky fly circling around his head refusing to leave him alone. It wouldn't leave him, not even for a moment. Every day and every moment of his life he spent thinking about it like it was engraved not only in his mind but also in his soul. He believed and held that belief firmly in his arms, breathing like it was part of his living. He constantly thought and believed that

the trucks had already left their origin and wherever they were, sooner or later, they would arrive here. That thought became his absolute hope, like his faith, like his daily bread and water...

His thoughts became his daily prayers in the morning which he silently whispered with unabashed hope.

After the first rays of sun the camp came alive. Staring into the pale blaze of the morning sun, Dedo Tode watched the sky as the first flocks of ravens swarmed, looking like the airplanes that had burned his house with flaming bombs that couldn't be extinguished with either water or soil.

From his frequent repetition and unyielding desire and hope that the trucks would surely someday arrive, some people began to mock him. When they saw him returning from the road some yelled:

“Did the trucks arrive yet Dedo Tode? Did they pass by here and you didn't see them? Surely they must have passed by; you just didn't see them because you were sleeping! Poor Dedo Tode, may God multiply your years so that you can wait for those elusive trucks to go by...

“They will come, they will surely come...” he promised them all, and with a trembling step returned to the road again and waited.

As the day approached noon, a number of men carrying bags on their shoulders and a truck were seen arriving. It was rumoured that these were people from the leadership.

The newly arrived men unloaded planks from the truck and asked a number of men from the camp to build a stage and next to it a small shack with a table and four chairs. They said this was going to be the office of the administration. Every day after that one of those people climbed onto the stage and gave a speech telling the crowd about the beatings the enemy had received. Every speech ended with a thunderous shout of slogans which no one in the audience repeated. After shouting promises and threats against the enemy, the people from the leadership pulled out the notebooks and pencils from their bags.

No one knew what they were going to write but it is rumoured that they were going to make lists with names and surnames, by village, so that they would know who was here and where they had come from. One of them, perched on the stage, with a funnel stuck to his lips, called everyone to come over. Soon the tents began to empty and a crowd began to grow in front of the stage. The tents began to empty as the crowd gathered to hear what these people had to say. There was one overriding question in the mind of every person standing in the crowd under the burning sun, and that was: "How long do we have to stand here under the baking sun, in the open sky and in the smelly tents before we can go back to our villages and homes?"

Voice after voice, many questions were asked:

"What will happen to us? Where are we being sent? How long will we be there? When will we return home?"

While the people in the crowd became impatient waiting for answers, those on the stage patiently remained silent.

Those on the stage told the people in the crowd to “Take it easy! Everything was going to be all right.” They reassured them that they were waiting for good news. They told the people that they were winning the battle for Gramos and it was only a matter of days before they crushed the enemy after which everyone was going home. “Stick together and don’t worry... Don’t be afraid. The Party knows and cares about you. The Party sent us here to be with you. And please, calm down, no yelling, screaming, swearing and cursing. One by one, we will take your names and determine how many of you are sick and need treatment...”

“Well, now we feel so much better!” someone yelled. “Where have you been until now?”

“We have been at other camps. It’s not just you. There are many other camps where refugees are gathered and they are all alive and well... Hopefully soon...”

But the people talking on the stage didn’t finish what they had started saying and no one was told what was waiting for them soon...

The comrades on the stage now appeared to be very different in both voice and posture than they had been a few months ago. Then confident, now pissed off. Their voices were fading and sounded mournful... They lacked the proud determination, the anger, the storm, the call, the disobedience, the breakthrough. Now their voices were muffled and their promises were flying low and crashing.

The multitude of their great words of promise turned to words of contempt. Now they seemed like they no longer believed in anything or anyone.

The people from the Party went from group to group mingling with them, asking them to calm down and writing their name, surname and village in their notebooks. They repeatedly reassured the people with the words:

“We are making these lists so that we’ll know who you are and where you come from. We need to know this in order to take you back to the right village. So, now just stand still, be patient and wait for the good news to come to you. Today the first and most important news is that our brave undefeated fighters who have retreated from Vicho have occupied half of Gramos and are pounding the enemy to pulp.”

And there, at Gramos, where the people from the Party said our partisans were pounding the enemy to pulp, every hill, every rock, every path, every bunker, every trench and every bush on the entire mountain was a target for the government army (enemy), waiting for an order to open fire...

That same day, at five o’clock in the morning the DAG fighters charged into battle. This was exactly what General Tsakalatos from the Greek government side was waiting for and ordered a counterattack. One hundred thousand government soldiers with 120 cannons, many tanks and 90 fighter planes pummeled the partisans who were attempting to storm them...

Gramos was on fire. The attack was weakening and the number of attackers was decreasing. The stones alone weren’t enough for the partisans to hide behind. They were being beaten from the ground and from the sky.

In a solemn and festive mood from the top of Mount Amuda, accompanied by US General Van Fleet in charge of the government offensive, King Pavlos took out his binoculars and watched the course of the fighting. There was frequent and fast news coming in from the front confirming the unexpected that the DAG forces that were attacking the government units were now retreating to Albania. There was uninterrupted news coming from all parts of the battlefield reporting that the government army was winning.

When news broke out that Mount Charno, a strategic point, had fallen into government hands, General Tsakalos became very cheerful and visibly happy and, with a glass full of wine greeted

General Ketsias, chief of army headquarters, chanted “Long live the Greek nation”, then turned to the king and, with a victorious tone of voice, said:

“Your Majesty the war is over. Gramos has virtually fallen...”

That day and the next two days the area called Gramos was on fire. The peak of Mount Gramos was in flames. The partisans defended it until nine o’clock in the morning August 28 (1949). Two government army soldiers hoisted the Greek flag on the very top of the mountain, on the dead bodies of those who had defended it.

That day and night and the next day and night, the surrounding hills and peaks endured heavy blows from the government army.

Everything was burning... the earth, the rocks, the crushed trees, the hills, the sky and the people... Everything was burning.

With them the last hope was also burning...

On the morning of August 30, Golio Kamenik, the last stronghold held by DAG’s crippled units, fell. The same day Porta Osman, the only escape route to Albania for the remaining living DAG fighters, was cut off.

Huge fires were burning on the Gramos mountain tops and along the entire border line. The government army was celebrating its victory.

Three years later the war finally ended. There was no more gunfire and no airplanes flying. There was only silence all along the border.

Our people endured a lot during those three years in the mountains and police jails... Many Macedonians and some Greeks were killed, tortured, beaten and sent to the hot sands and rocks on the dry Greek islands. For three years the Greeks killed people in the Peloponnesus, Rumeli, Thessaly and Epirus but mostly in Macedonia. It was said, as the outside world was told, “Greeks were killing Greeks” in the big city sidewalks of Solun and Athens and in the narrow alleys of the Ritos Mountain villages. Greeks were killing Greeks on both sides of the warring parties, burning villages,

pillaging houses and raping women. After three bloody years of torment, Greeks would have killed, mutilated, tortured and uprooted many Greeks... too many to count. In future the victorious Greeks wouldn't be counting numbers but measuring how much Greek blood was shed. The victorious Greeks would make lists of Greeks still alive and Greeks who fled, lists to remind the future Greek generations of the great evil these Greeks had perpetrated and to remember that in those three years "Greeks were killing Greeks" everywhere. Not a word about Macedonians... Macedonians don't exist and never existed... "Greeks were killing Greeks"... Greeks on both sides of the war were destroying Greece for three years... Never before in their history had Greeks killed, tortured and mutilated so many Greeks, and inflicted so much evil as they did throughout those three terrible years. The hatred and malice was unprecedented... And no one from the inside or from the outside warned them and told them that: "Greeks shouldn't be killing Greeks...!" Everyone inside and outside went along accepting the story that "Greeks were killing Greeks!"

The last defenders and defeated DAG fighters with mutilated bodies and souls sought salvation in Albania. There, not far from the border, they hid behind the hills where Albanian army officers disarmed them. Rifles, machine guns, pistols, semi-automatic rifles and ammunition were all gathered in a pile. With empty hands and broken spirits they lined up in a column, consoling each other, disappointed and desperate, and climbed onto the trucks that were waiting for them. Every one of them questioned the wisdom of their leaders who had sent them ill-armed, malnourished, exhausted and mentally overwhelmed to march from Vicho, after they were badly defeated, through Albania to cross into Gramos where the government army was waiting for them? What was the point of that?

The evil, gruesome and bloody three-year storm died in the morning of August 30, 1949...

The leaders of the Party who were registering the refugees at the camp near Pegin didn't tell the people that DAG had been defeated. They kept that information to themselves...

And, as always, news of the defeat wasn't shared, the illusion was maintained that victory was within their grasp...

Sofka dragged herself to the border with both legs wounded. She had been shot by a burst of machine gun fire. She occasionally stopped dragging her body on the ground to get some rest and regain some of her strength. Her eyes were filled with fear and pain – they reflected the glare of the flames and the great fires that burned on all the mountain peaks.

The defeated army was disarmed, loaded onto trucks at the Albanian border and driven north, to the far north of Albania.

The trucks traveled all night long nonstop. They were carrying the disarmed partisans who looked sad and restless. They had been through hell; they were first crushed in Vicho, they were then sent marching to Gramos where there too they were battered by the enemy in a crushing defeat. They were silent now and feeling lost, in their own minds they were searching for answers, answers that weren't there. A large crowd of people was gathering on the road ahead. The partisans threw rolled up pieces of paper at them. They weren't letters. Written on them were their friends and relatives and a few words. The senders wanted to let the recipients know that they were alive and well. Some pieces of paper carried bad news... Men, women and children ran after the fast moving trucks hoping to get a glimpse of the people inside and to catch a leaflet or two. Some searched the entire road and the sides of the road hoping to find a leaflet hidden somewhere, perhaps in the snow. Those who found leaflets hurriedly opened them to see whose name was written on them and what news they brought. Some rejoiced, others cried and with their hearts and souls crushed they returned to their tents. Wounded by their pain many gathered together in groups and mourned their loved ones. Some cried in silence. Their crying had no end and there was no one there to console them. That night when the trucks went by and the rest of the next day, the road and the entire surrounding area were flooded with people. They searched all day long looking in cracks, between rocks and in the ditches by the road to find rolled up pieces of paper. And those who rejoiced couldn't avoid the pain of those who received bad news.

And so the crying, wailing, lamenting, mourning, grieving, sighing, cursing and swearing became a regular daily affair. People cried together in a crowd and alone in their tents...

When they heard the roar of the trucks, Donka along with the other women ran to the road and blocked it with hopes of slowing down

the trucks. Those in the trucks screamed and those on the ground screamed right back. They were all shouting names and the multitude of voices mixed together. Those on the trucks threw leaflets into the crowd which caused people to scramble away from the road and scatter, looking for them in the grass, in cracks, behind rocks and in the ditches. Again some leaflets brought joy to the people, while others brought them great pain. The people spoke to each other but very briefly, just a few words, enough to exchange news of what had happened to whom in what village...

Whose heart could endure?

Donka left the crowd and with arms raised above her head walked towards the trucks signaling them to stop. Begging she asked the people if they knew her son Krste and described him as having curly black hair and a high forehead... And even though there were no answers she kept walking beside the trucks stumbling, crouching and praying.

The road was boiling with people whispering in quiet voices. Every day, from dawn to dusk, men, women and children searched the road and went through every blade of dried grass, every thorn bush and every crack and ditch along the road, looking for leaflets. Some found joy and others found dreadful news in the rolled up leaflets. One of the women found a leaflet in the dried grass. She unfolded it and called out loud:

“This is for Donka from the village...!” someone yelled.

“I’m Donka!” yelled Donka and ran towards the woman. “I’m Donka! I’m Donka! Give it to me!” she continued yelling...

Donka’s hands and face trembled. She sat down, spread her apron on her lap, and unrolled the leaflet. There was something written on it but she couldn’t read it. She had never learned how to read. There was a man looking for leaflets through the bushes close to her so she asked him to read it for her. These were the words written on it:

“Mother I am alive and well, your son Risto!”

That was all that was written.

These few words brought happiness to Donka's wrenched and pained heart. They were words of joy, she was most fortunate...

On the large bulletin board, set up next to the large military tent, near which was the main kitchen with four cauldrons under which the fire was never extinguished, Iani, who was in charge of the administration in the camp, with a piece of coal completed writing the words:

“Fifty volunteers are needed”

“They are to immediately report to the administration”

Crowds of men gathered around in front of the board wondering what was written on it and what it might mean. There were only a few who could read and those who couldn't stood there in stunned silence, wondering what the message was all about, shaking their heads and shrugging their shoulders with uncertainty and doubt while returning to their tents.

They knew what the word “volunteer” meant. Not because the word was familiar to them but because that word, like so many other words, had ruined their lives and moved the earth from under them...

The times, even though the people were far away from home, even though the war was over, were still unsafe and turbulent, people were talking, saying that something was being “secretly cooked” and some were ready to again run to the forests, mountains and hills.

“This doesn't sound good to me,” whispered Lazo to his neighbour.

“Volunteers?! It sounds to me like they want to send us back to the mountains, to die. What do you think? What's your take on all this?”

“May God protect us from evil... it is bad...” whispered Boris with a tone of fear in his voice. He then spat to the side, crossed himself and hurriedly left for his tent.

Iani, the person who was in charge of the administration was anxious to get his volunteers. He kept looking around hoping that someone would come to him. As he looked around the camp he saw a number of men laying in the shade of the tall poplar tree having a lively conversation. He saw one of them flapping his arms in the air, which Iani took to mean that he had found some volunteers for him.

The same message appeared on the board the next day. Men passing by looked at the board and hurriedly left to be as far as possible from Iani’s sight.

In the evening when the line was growing in front of the cauldrons, Iani pulled several men to the side and, in a whispering voice, said:

“A large ship from Russia has arrived at the port of Durres and has brought a lot of wheat for us. We have no one to unload it. That’s why we need the volunteers. Do any of you want to do this?”

“Wheat? They brought us wheat!!!” the men were heard saying.
“Wheat, you say? For us? Hey, people, what are we waiting for... Come on, don’t wait, let’s go! How many volunteers do you need?”

“I need about fifty for now...” replied Iani and happily opened his notebook.

The news of a Russian ship, carrying Russian wheat, quickly flooded the entire camp. Men began to line up in front of Iani. It was a long line. Iani only wrote down fifty names and stopped.

Two trucks came to the camp during the dark of night and stopped at the side of the road.

Iani ordered the men to climb aboard and squeeze together. The drivers then covered them up with dirty tarpaulins. And even though they were assured that they were going to unload wheat from a Russian ship, they had doubts about this being true. They were

overcome by feelings that somehow they were being tricked and sent to a new battleground?

Even though they were all silent and said nothing to each other, they were all thinking the same thoughts and had the same suspicions, which were ruthlessly gnawing at them and keeping them awake.

The men could see street lights flashing above the trucks as they drove along a road and stopped in front of a wide iron gate that was blocking the entrance to the port. An armed guard came out of the watchtower, checked the drivers with his flashlight and asked them who was in charge. He then returned to the watchtower and spoke to someone on the telephone. After that he gave the signal to raise the ramp. There, about one hundred metres from the entrance, was a black figure with two tall stacks from which thick patches of black smoke rose high in the air and disappeared into the darkness. The two trucks stopped in front of the ship.

Iani ordered the men to get off the trucks and said: “What you are looking at is the Russian ship that needs to be unloaded, so climb up those stairs, don’t be afraid, and the people inside will explain to you what needs to be done.”

They could only work at night. They loaded full bags of wheat in a large net and signaled the crane operator to lift them off the ship and lower them onto the trucks. In the short time the crane was operated, the men took breaks to clean the chaff and dust off the grain and eat it raw. They took a handful of grain from their pockets, blew on it to remove the chaff and dust, and ate it. Before leaving the ship they all filled every pocket they had and tied their coat and shirt sleeves and their pant legs and filled them with wheat too.

Tired but content the men sat in front of their tents all over the camp and watched their little pots filled with wheat, sitting on stones, boil over a small fire. Women squatting all around them kept blowing on the fire to boost it. Thick black smoke rose like a swarm of black flies, swirled in clumps and grew and shrank stinging their eyes. With their grimy hands they wiped their tears and watched the fire burn hoping that the wheat would boil faster. Some didn’t have the patience and ate the wheat before it was fully boiled. Whatever was

left they took with them to eat later. Some women took handfuls of raw wheat and rolled it in their head kerchiefs for later, to boil it and give it to the people during the religious holidays just like they had at home in the village. At home they used to add sugar, sliced apples, raisins, colourful candies, walnuts, almonds, baked chickpeas, hazelnuts and other sorts of nuts. But here they would have to go from tent to tent to dispense it as it was...

“Take some, eat some, it’s good for the soul...” they would say just like they had at church in the village. “Take some for the souls of those who fell in battle, for the souls of those who we lost in the mountains, on the hills, on the islands and on the road that led to the desolate camps...”

“Take some people... take a bite for the souls...”

With the fingers of his left hand, Dedo Tode took a little of the wheat, closed his eyes, gave a silent prayer and said may God bless the souls of the living and the dead. His words were sad and filled with pain. His voice was bitter and full of despair and grief...

Dedo Tode then crossed himself three times and said “God have mercy on the souls of the dead and comfort the souls of the living.” He then left and headed for his tent, taking with him his unfinished prayer glued to his lips and fixed in his eyes.

During the holidays every tent became a place of prayer and every person prayed in silence, hoping and wishing for less pain and for better times ahead.

In this way many souls in the tents were soothed with that Russian wheat boiled over small fires burning between two stones...

Those who had some of the wheat even had blessings for Russia. Some were heard whispering: “May God bless Russia... May God bless the Russian soil which grew the wheat. May God bless the Russian people who harvested it and in their hearts felt that we should have it. May God bless the Russian farmers who plowed the fields, sowed and reaped the wheat and sent it to us on their ship...”

With prayers on their lips and with many questions on their minds as to what had happened to the wheat that the men from their camp were unloading from the Russian ship for weeks, they lined up in front of the administration shack every day at noon to receive a dry slice of cornbread brought to them by two cargo trucks, each carrying a dozen or so large casserole tins.

About a week later the same trucks arrived at the camp, stopped in front of the administration shack and unloaded bushels of loafs of bread made and baked in the city bakery. They weren't large loaves of bread the kind the people were used to, they were more like large buns the size of a young person's two fists. There was more rye in them than wheat. The buns would have been delicious on their own if they'd had a bit more salt in them. Each bun was cut in half and given to two people. The bread tasted delicious when it was dipped in salt and water and chewed together with raw onions. For some it was enough but not for all. Some didn't eat it all and saved some for a rainy day - for tomorrow or for the day after tomorrow. In pieces, even in crumbs, they wrapped it in their long sleeve shirts and hid it deep down in their bags... They saved it for another day... They feared the future and had no idea what it was going to bring. They felt that part of that, mostly rye, unsalted dry bread should be saved. Let it dry; let it turn hard like stone, but save it for tomorrow or for the day after tomorrow. No one knows what's going to happen tomorrow, the bread might be gone, it might be late arriving, or there might not be another Russian ship bringing wheat.

Mara's hand trembled as she took her half of the bun. She didn't look at it or admire it the way she used to admire the bread she made at home. When she pulled the bread out of her oven, with her flat wooden shovel, she held each loaf with both hands, blew the dust and ashes off them and then pressed them against her chest to feel their warmth. Now, holding the bread in her palm she felt no warmth. The warmth she had felt in the large loaves she made at home wasn't there. While holding the hard rye bread in her hand, she imagined that she was holding a round bun, the kind they used to bake in the fireplace, the kind of dark bun they made of bran to feed their sheep dog.

Sitting in front of their tent, Mitre and Mara ate only one half of their portions of bread. They broke small pieces, dipped them in salt and silently in deep thought chewed them very slowly, held them on their palate for a long time and then swallowed them slowly together with their tears and pain... The other half of their portion, along with all the crumbs that Mara collected from her lap, she carefully wrapped in a white towel and placed them under her straw pillow, next to her bag and gium... Let it stay there for later, for tomorrow...”

Lazo, who was gathering berries at the top of the hill, ran down and yelled:

“I saw ships, big ships...”

People ran, followed him and watched the big ships out at sea bellowing black smoke from their chimneys, which flowed behind them over the sea.

Two large ships docked at the port of Durres at the end of the month. A day later another ship, a bigger white ship, docked in the same port. People could clearly see them from the top of the hill and many stayed there for hours watching them smoking. As they watched the ships they wondered what kind of goodies they had brought this time. Surely they must have brought more grain for making bread. Perhaps milk for the babies, or maybe warm clothes, bedding and covers?

Some old people were heard praying and saying: “God bless Russia...” while staring at the clouds of smoke rising from the chimneys of those big ships...

Baba Petra prayed the most while crossing herself and whispering words of gratitude:

“May God bless the Russian king and give him good health and a long life...”

“Don’t say that, Baba Petra,” interrupted Dedo Tode. “Russia doesn’t have a king...”

“Be quiet! As if you know whether or not there’s a king in Russia. There is, I’m sure of it. And he is a great king. Russia can’t be Russia without a king. You should know that!” replied Baba Petra angrily and, after crossing herself three times, said: “God bless the Russian king... Thank you for the grain you sent us to make our bread and for not forgetting us...” She then turned to Dedo Tode and angrily taunted him saying:

“Look at you! You think there is no king in Russia. I say there is... Russia can’t be Russia without a king. I’m telling you this so you will know it...”

Two days after the big white ship arrived Iani wrote another message on the bulletin board. With his black charcoal he wrote:

“More than one hundred volunteers are needed”

A crowd of men gathered in front of the administration shack. Those who could read, read the message out loud for those who couldn’t. This time the men had no concerns, no doubts and there were no quiet and secret questions as to whether volunteering was a good or bad thing. When Iani asked for volunteers this time, they were sure they would be needed to unload the wheat and who knows what else from those ships. They mumbled to each other that it was a good idea to volunteer. This time no one doubted the message and no one turned their back on Iani or the administration. Those who signed up were anxious to get going...

They were all curious and had high expectations. Some guessed that the ships were bringing them warm clothes, shoes, hats, coats, bread, cheese... As they lay in their beds waiting to be called they thought of the many things they needed which the ships could be bringing them. And as time passed, in their minds, they invented more and more things the big ships might be bringing...

Some of the wives of the volunteers told their husbands, “Go ahead, go line up, don’t wait for them to call you. Go now and unload all the goodies from the Russian ships...”

Two days later the hundreds of volunteers were picked up during the night by trucks and dropped off on the dock in front of the ships.

There were piles of wooden planks in the harbour yard, three to four feet long, and long wooden beams with the bark stripped off them. There were also boxes full of nails, hammers and saws.

The volunteers were divided into groups and given saws, hammers and nails. They climbed onto the ships on broken down stepladders.

There was no wheat in the bowels of the ships. They were empty and terribly dark. The men were asked to carry the wooden beams and planks deep down to the lowest levels and lay them on the floor. They were to lay the planks side by side on top of the beams and nail them down.

Again, the men only worked during the night and were returned to the camp the next day before dawn. They came back to the camp with empty pockets and callused hands. There was no wheat in their pockets. The men were tired and sweaty. They all wondered why those big ships needed wooden floors. Everyone back in the camp was expecting them to bring back wheat, warm clothes, blankets... They kept asking where the wheat was but no one had any answers? Even the ships' crews were silent on the whereabouts of the wheat. Then there was the question of why the ships needed wooden floors but all the men got was a shrugging of shoulders. Even the ones who knew what the floors were for wouldn't tell. They simply said they didn't know. The ships' crews spoke unfamiliar words that sounded like "szybciej", "быстро" (bistro) and "mai repede", words which had no meaning for the men. They continued to work uninterrupted passing beams and planks down into the ships and laying and nailing them. The crew told them the floors must be strong and built well as they monitored their progress, not with a measuring tape but with footsteps. When they completed the lower floors they instructed the men to build more floors on top of them. Everything was measured by steps. They showed them how wide they wanted the distance between floors and the men built them.

The following are words the men heard that were unfamiliar to them:

“Szybciej!” – Polish, meaning faster.

“Быстро!” (bistro) – Russian, meaning faster.

“Mai repede!” – Romanian, meaning faster.

A few days later, when the second floor was built and checked to make sure it was solid enough to hold a lot of weight, a third floor was ordered and then a fourth...

Sometime before dawn when the work stopped the crew again spoke unfamiliar words.

The following are words the men heard:

“Gotowe!” – Polish, meaning ready, done.

“Готовый! (gotovi)” – Russian, meaning ready, done.

“Gata!” – Romanian, meaning ready, done.

“Ετοιμο!” (etimo) – Greek, meaning ready, done.

Even though the men didn't understand the strange words, in time they understood what was meant by them. It was time to stop nailing. Their work for the day was done and it was time to move on. The last floor was nailed and there was no room for more floors. And so on and so on... The last man, the one who said “etimo”, looked at the floors, measured them by taking steps and wrote a bunch of numbers in his notebook. He again said “etimo” and then left. The workers had a hard time forgetting him and that word he used because it was spoken by the same man who they'd listened to at rallies, held in the middle of the day. They had listened to him when he was proclaiming victory in every battle the partisans fought. He never once said that the partisans had lost a battle. They listened to him when he asked them to give everything they had for victory. And they listened to him now while they were nailing down the floors...

Some thought to themselves and wondered: “For what purpose is the construction ‘etimo’ - what purpose will these floors serve on top of one another? Who were those people who spoke to them in unfamiliar languages and checked to see if the boards were nailed properly and if the floors were firm enough to support a lot of weight? And what did those names of the ships written with large capital letters, that none of the men could read, mean?” Some of the letters resembled the Greek alphabet which the men had learned in elementary school back in their villages. Most of the letters weren’t familiar to them. Someone said that Mitre, who had been to America for a long time, might know how to read them.

Mitre was working nailing boards on the lowest floor when he was summoned by some of the men to come out and read the letters written on the ships. Mitre looked at the letters and, instead of reading them, said those letters were probably the names of the ships. The names were “Kościuszko”, “Transylvania” and “Мичурин” (Michurin) but Mitre was unable to read them. He turned to the men and said:

“These letters are mixed, damn it. There is a letter from the Greek Alfavita (alphabet) and others I don’t know, they look like they come from some foreign language... That’s all I can tell you. Look for someone educated...”

Mitre was well traveled but not educated. He had spent four years in America where he worked side by side with Serbs, Czechs, Poles, Greeks, Bulgarians, Russians, Ukrainians, Chinese and others, breaking stones and wheeling them in a wooden wheelbarrow to a site where a rock bed was laid and rails were laid on top of it. There he poured more sweat and used more of his strength than he ever had in the thirty years of working in his own fields, gardens, vineyards, meadows and generally looking after his own property. There he also learned a few foreign words, and when he returned to his village he used them in his everyday village speech like beads on a string. He often repeated them at village meetings, in the village tavern, in front of the church and so on. To those around him he seemed like he’d become more clever, more educated since he’d returned from America. Mitre not only brought money but he also brought well-made suits which he wore when he went to church,

visiting his relatives and friends and to the market in Kostur and Rupishta. He brought back many other foreign words which no one knew what they meant. No one knew if they were used to ridicule, to spite, or for irony. He also used one of those awful and ugly swear words, which the English, French, German and other business owners and city administrators dumped on their workers.

The work done on the ships “Kościuszko” and “Мичурин” (Michurin) lasted eight days. No work was done on the largest and most beautiful great white ship “Transylvania”, which at one time had belonged to the Romanian king. It wasn't loaded...

When the men finished nailing and in the dark of night got off the ships, a man unfamiliar to them waited for them by the trucks. Before they got on the trucks, in a quiet yet harsh tone of voice he said to them:

“Keep your mouths shut! You aren't to tell anyone what you were doing here! You understand?!” They said yes and agreed to keep their mouths shut and tell no one about what they were doing on those ships. At night the trucks brought the men back to the camp.

That night was dark, hazy, grimacing and fatal. It was a night of uncertainty... That night was uneasy and full of stormy thoughts like the waters of a swollen, murky river. That night threw anathema on those who marked time with words of hope. And as it turned out that night was full of deceit... It was:

A night of damnation...

A night of pain...

A night of curses...

A night of hopelessness...

Flashes of lightning were seen falling behind the mountain. One flash followed another and then thunder followed. Not once but many times. The open sky was cut by the constant lightning and thunder and rain poured out of it. The people stood in the open.

They watched the muddy water run down the slope. Some of the dirty water was absorbed by the dry parched soil and some evaporated in puffs of vapour.

No one was talking. Not a word to anyone.

The next morning the same administrators were back, who a while ago were in the camp taking down people's names with promises that they would send them back to their villages. The people greeted them with a lot of coughing, crackling voices, threats, bewilderment, restlessness and anger. There was so much commotion in the crowd that the person speaking on the stage couldn't be heard. Only the waving of his hands was visible but his voice couldn't be heard. His voice was lost in the noise made by the crowd murmuring, cursing, swearing and shouting slurs expressing its anger and deepest pain. The crowd kept growing; men and women were gathering in front of the stage and getting angrier. Their voices became louder like an angry roaring storm. The people were so angry they thundered, stormed and threatened. Their shouts were spreading far and wide, creeping into the tents and echoing on the hills. Like a blazing fire anger engulfed everyone. It ignited the people and broke out and began to boil the silence. The voices of hearts and souls were roaring out loud. And as the crowd grew larger, the storm didn't subside; it grew even larger and with it grew the bold anger of the deceived and humiliated refugees.

Dedo Tode didn't lose hope. He wanted to spread his hope to everyone around him. He told the people not to lose hope. The trucks that had passed weren't for them. "Our trucks haven't come yet. Stay, don't leave the road," he said while sitting under the shade of the plum tree. He sat there all day long until late at night. He only got up and walked around briefly, enough to stretch his legs. He kept telling the people not to lose hope, "Those trucks that were meant for us were sent somewhere else. When they do that job they will surely come back and pick us up..." he used to say while he waited and waited. Then, at dusk, a long row of trucks arrived and stopped on the side of the road. Dedo Tode immediately jumped to his feet and with a steady and strong pace, ran to the camp shouting:

"People, people, the trucks are here! They have arrived! Get up; collect your belongings and come! People, the trucks are here, let's go... let's go home. Home, people, we want to go home, hurry, hurry, the trucks are waiting...!"

Crowds of people rushed to the road where the trucks stood parked with their lights and motors off. More and more people gathered, all overwhelmed by a single thought – their time had come to leave. They were eager and full of joy that, at long last, they would be going home.

"We have had enough! We want to go home!" yelled one of the old people with a tone of impatience in his voice, while he persistently urged the others to collect their belongings and get moving.

"Pick up your rags, we're going home!" yelled Dedo Tode. "We're going home. Move faster the trucks are waiting. Hurry, hurry, people...! The trucks are waiting to take us home. Those cursed bastards who brought us here have finally remembered us. Hurry up and pick up your things..."

They yelled and ran and the road and slope came alive with people.

“Back! Back! Wait! Stop!” yelled a tall man loudly. He was from the leadership.

“Wait for what?” someone in the crowd yelled back.

“The trucks are here for us? Right?!” yelled another voice from the crowd.

“Why should we wait? Didn’t we wait long enough?!” another voice protested.

“People, let’s go, the trucks are here for us...!” yelled another voice from the crowd.

“People, people, take it easy, there is no need for pushing. There will be room for everyone. No one will be left behind. There will be room for everyone, just move slowly, without pushing.

“Watch out you almost knocked my daughter down. Why are you cutting into the line? It has been decided that we are all leaving, no one will be left behind?”

“Thank you God for listening to me and for answering my prayers. Let it be your glory up there in your high place from where you witnessed our torment...” said Baba Petra and crossed herself.

“Please God look after us and protect us from further torment...” she continued while collecting her things...

“People! People! Make way for me to pass. I have a sick wife, make way, make way...” yelled someone from the back.

Another person standing in line got upset and yelled at someone:

“Why are you pushing, can’t you see that we’re all in line waiting to get on?! Ignorant people.”

“Hey, you, you forgot your rug!” someone yelled.

“That’s okay, I don’t need it. I have a better one at home. Let it stay here. Some poor person might need it...” replied the person who had left his rug behind.

“You also forgot your hat...” said the first person.

“It can stay here too... I have four at home... That is if no one broke in and stole them. Let’s go, let’s go without rugs and hats...” replied the second person.

“Hurry up, get moving! Why are you constantly looking behind you?” said another person.

“I’m looking in case I forgot something...” replied the person looking back.

“Didn’t I tell you, the leadership wouldn’t forget us?” said Lazo loudly, praising. “Didn’t I tell you that he, the leader, wouldn’t forget the people and would continue to lead us to a bright future as he always told us...”

“Of course you did! We’ve been here for many days and nights and we not only haven’t seen him but we haven’t even seen his back...” replied another man.

“Towards a bright future, I tell you, towards a bright future... He will lead us to communism. Remember that...!” insisted Lazo.

“You, Lazo, all you have in your mouth is communism and more communism. But you are blind to the fact that you are wearing no pants and your ass is naked. Is your mind not working at all?” asked the first man.

“There is no need for my mind to work. I don’t need to think or worry and you shouldn’t have to either, we have the leaders to do that for me and for you... Do you understand?” replied Lazo.

The person from the leadership opened his briefcase and pulled out a large notebook. He opened it, looked into the crowd and loudly said:

“People! Oh people! Listen to me now. Arrange yourselves in groups by village. You will get on the truck when your village name is called... We don’t have the time to call you by name... I will call the name of your village ... and after that you will receive a number. You will then need to find the truck with that number and get on it. Do you understand? Now be quiet and listen...”

“What did you say?!” asked Dedo Tode with a grin on his face and perked his ear to hear the answer.

“He said that when our village name is called we are to climb onto the trucks...” someone replied.

“Well, didn’t I tell you that?!” said Dedo Tode, who couldn’t stop talking. “You see I told you they would take us straight to our villages... to our homes... not on foot but on trucks...”

When all the people were gathered in groups by village they were given a number with instructions to board the trucks on which the same number was written. So the people, the villages and trucks became numbers.

The person from the leadership took out the notebook from his briefcase and began the evacuation process.

Those from that and that village pick up your things and line up in front of the trucks.

“Are they all here?” he asked, counting, and recounting.

“Now get on the trucks!” he ordered.

The crossroad was empty.

The trucks drove at night and everyone thought that that was exactly what needed to be done. “Why expose ourselves to the locals, there might be someone among them who will inform the enemy of our return?” some thought. They all felt happy and rejoiced. They smiled at one another, wished each other good luck and hugged each other as if parting company. It was like they were returning home from a long vacation. Finally many sighed with relief thinking to themselves that the worst was over and they were going home. Their waiting, troubles, sleeping in the rain, in humidity and wind, in heat, in cold, in dirt, and not having a bath were finally over... This drive gave them hope and joy and wiped the shadow of hopelessness out of their faces.

But, in reality, there were only two people among them all who really knew where they were going, the person from the leadership and the lead driver.

Suddenly there were lights all around the road on which the trucks drove. They had entered a city. There were people walking in every direction going somewhere. The trucks crossed the main street, descended down the small slope and stopped in front of the big, iron

gate. Two men in military uniforms opened the wings of the gate and let the trucks in. Then they slowly drove down the large courtyard one behind the other...

“That’s good!” said Dedo Tode. “Make some space...” He then slammed both fists on the roof of the driver’s cab and yelled out: “Why are you going so slow?! Move it. Drive where the truck can go faster. Hell, if they continue to drive this slow I might as well get off and walk, I will get home faster on foot!”

Kiro, with his back leaning on Dedo Tode’s shoulder, was silent and thinking. His head was full of thoughts about his house. What shape would he find his house in? Would it still be standing or burned down to the ground? If it had been burned down he would have to rebuild it. If the walls were cracked he would have to strengthen them. If the foundations were healthy he would have to rebuild the entire house just like his grandfather did after the Ilinden Uprising when the house was burnt to the ground. He would build a new and more beautiful house on top of old foundations. That’s what he would do, he thought to himself...

He continued to think about his house, his flocks of sheep and cattle, his fields, garden, vineyard... and how he would again listen to the rooster announce the time early in the morning, how he would listen to the bleating of newly born lambs in the yard... surely there would be many things missing which he would have to replace. The only thing that gave him pain was the thought that not many of his relatives were still alive and those who were... how many of them would return? These were painful thoughts that haunted him, caused tears to run down his cheeks and his throat to constrict. They were thoughts he’d rather not think...

“Step on it! Step on the gas I said!” yelled Dedo Tode with all his might, tearing Kiro away from his thoughts. “Didn’t I tell you to go faster? Don’t make me get off and walk home... Do you hear me or are you deaf, huh?!”

Kiro tried again to reconnect with his thoughts of what he would do when he returned home...

But that joy and hope faded away when the truck entered the large yard through the wide open, ugly iron gate.

The great hope that had filled their hearts and souls when they had boarded the trucks that they thought were taking them home, froze when they saw the ships. Their cheers of returning home were gone.

Those who until yesterday vowed that the trucks were going to take them home were the first to realize that the ships weren't going to sail on the waters leading home. There were no waters that they could sail that would take them to their villages, not even good roads, only difficult paths to walk on over treacherous hills and through valleys.

On their left they could see a large body of water. Someone said it was the sea. In it the people could see the reflection of the full moon looking like it was drowning in the great murky water. The waves caused the moon's image to twist and oscillate.

The trucks stopped rolling and a voice was heard yelling: "Everyone off the trucks!" It was the same voice that had yelled at them to get on the trucks in Pegin. "We have arrived! Get off the trucks and line up. Stand side by side and climb one by one up these steps."

People quickly began to line up in front of the stairs.

All able bodied people were asked to climb up the steep iron steps and hold on to the thick ropes which substituted for handrails. Those who were sick and couldn't climb, including mothers with young children who they had to carry, were placed in baskets and hoisted up on the ships. With fear in their eyes and silence on the lips the people followed one another down the steep stairs and into the bowels of the ships, guided only by dim lights. Filled with fear and uncertainty they firmly held on to the thick ropes as they walked uneasily, being swayed from side to side by the waves that rocked the ships. Women wearing white coats were sprinkling them with a kind of white powder. Someone said it was medicine to kill the lice.

Unsteady on their feet and with great fear in their hearts, the people boarded the ships and made their way into the large dark rooms with

the floors covered by wooden planks. In the middle of each room was a long wooden table with wooden benches on both sides. Young women dressed in white coats brought baskets into the rooms from which they took out bread, plates, cups, pitchers full of some brown liquid, boiled potatoes and meat, and set them on the tables.

The people had never seen so much bread... Not since they had left home. They had their eyes glued to it.

They ate as much as they could and then looked for a place to rest and sleep. Dedo Tode and Kiro grabbed the last unoccupied corner at the far entrance of the room. After a long silence, Dedo Tode quietly and shyly said:

“You know, Kiro, when they put me in that basket and lifted me up above the water, I am embarrassed to say, I almost... but I didn’t... I endured... some of us endured and some of us didn’t... I am ashamed to tell you what... And you, you, I ask, how did you do, huh?”

Kiro was silent, lost somewhere deep in his thoughts.

The ship’s lights were turned off. It was dark. Everyone was quiet, only the heavy sighs broke the silence. There was a biting uncertainty on everyone’s mind. “Where are we? Why did they put us on ships? Where will they take us? Will they take us deep into the sea and unload us there?” These were the kinds of thoughts the people were thinking. There was no one to tell them what was happening, which gave them good reason to have negative thoughts and think of tragic scenarios. No one told them where they were going.

They couldn’t fall asleep. They were full with heaps of suspicion and fear. It was scary and the unknown was making it worse. Underneath them, in the gloomy bowels of the dark ship, they felt the ship swaying, like some kind of blunt knocking beneath them, and this caused them unrest. The back and forth swinging swelled their bones with fear and uncertainty. Lying next to one another they held hands afraid of being thrown around in the ship. Overwhelmed by the unrest and uncertainty, they looked at the ship’s iron ceiling, staring at the little dim lights. The women prayed silently.

Somewhere in the middle of the ship a young child was crying. A male voice groaned loudly. It was a deep, loud and painful groan. A female voice crying, broke out in the dark...

A long, powerful and sad siren blew. It was like saying goodbye to the port. The ship began to move slowly, stirring the misty waters around it and breaking free from the mud it had sunk into while sitting at the dock. Inside it was carrying the refugees, invisible from the sky and cut off from the ground, all huddled in their beds in its gloomy bowels, frightened and silent. It was taking them on the road of no return...

In no time at all the ship carrying the people, with lost faith and hope, began to distance itself from the Albanian port of Durres. The noise from the ship's engines overpowered all the crying, weeping and cursing. Only the words of anger and contempt spoken very loudly could be heard.

By now all hope of going home, carried from the slope in Pegin, had vanished.

They realized that they wouldn't be going home, at least not by water. Their villages and homes were up in the hills and mountains. So, if not home then where were these ships taking them? That question preoccupied them immensely. During the day, looking at the water they wondered: "God, where did all this water come from? Will they take us closer to home or unload us in the middle of the sea?" This dreadful thought worried them and made them cling together. Their heads were filled with fear and their throats were very dry.

The sea became stormier the further the ships traveled. Even though the people on these ships had rarely heard the words ship and sea, and had never seen a ship or the sea, many remembered what the pechalbari (migrant workers) who returned home from abroad used to tell them. They would tell them that they went by ship over a large body of water. But that wasn't all these people remembered. They also remembered the mothers, wives, fiancés and children of the pechalbari, crying and weeping as the said goodbye to their husbands, fathers, fiancés and sons. They then returned to their

empty houses and silent rooms and cried. They cried and wondered how their men were doing and cursed the pechalba (migrant work) for taking them away. They even sang sad songs cursing the pechalba and even their men for leaving and for leaving them alone. Now all of them were swearing and cursing those who took them from their homes and brought them here to these dark ships. They realized that those who were still in pechalba hadn't given up hope of returning home. And someday they would. For them, the doors were always open. Their families were waiting and dreaming of their return.

Crouching in the bowels of the ship, many wondered if there would be anyone at home, waiting for them, dreaming of them and cursing the ship that took them into the unknown. Who would wait for them? Would there be anyone to tell those at home that the refugees would soon be returning and would there be anyone at home to wait for them?

As the ship cut the water it carried the people further away from shore on their way to the unknown. From the slits of the narrow windows covered by thick tarpaulins the people could see, just barely, a scratch of pale light emanating from the sun. One by one, they counted each sunset and when they reached twelve the ship traveling over the great waters found itself behind a dense and cold fog. So now those crouching in the ship's bowels measured time by insomnia and restlessness, cursing and swearing and spewing words of anger and malice...

And there, on the slope near Pegin, they left carpets, rugs, broken plates, torn up sheets, forgotten giums, spoons, forks and many, many curses and tears. The once active camp on the slope was now empty and desolate. The cries of babies were no longer heard at the houses in Pegin close to the camp in which Albanian mothers gathered to help with warmth and nourishment. The mothers took their babies.

The winds blew the forgotten rags and other items left behind and scattered them all across the slope. Night and day the once active camp, overwhelmed by the great plight of the refugees, was now silent. There were no shouts, curses, or swearing. There was only

silence. There was no more crying and moaning. The local people in Pegin wondered and wondered: “What happened to the people? Where did they go...?”

There were no answers... Only silence...

Those who knew kept their mouths shut.

They kept quiet!

It wasn't the right time to ask or tell.

It was the right time to keep quiet!

Zip your lips and keep things to yourself.

It was better this way... Their eyes saw nothing... Their ears heard nothing... Their mouths said nothing... The wiser ones in Pegin minded their own business and carried on with their lives and jobs...

The refugees disappeared from the slope during the night. Their long journey into the unknown was accompanied by only a single great desire - to return home -which by now everyone had realized was unrealistic and perhaps unattainable...

Slightly to the side, closer to the grove, in the lowest part of the slope lay the dead, whose bodies had been hurriedly buried during the night. They would remain there forever. Some died of exhaustion and others of old age and illness. The little babies born along the dusty road of no return and those born on the dry slope near Pegin, who didn't make it, also lay mixed with the old people. They were wrapped in old rags or in moldy worn out blankets, left over from the Greco-Italian war, and buried in shallow tombs. The local Muslims living in Pegin wouldn't allow foreigners, especially Christians, to be buried on their land among their faithful. The crosses marking the graves were made up of two sticks tied together by a string. The strong winds blowing from the sea tore them apart and scattered them along the slope.

None of those in charge, or as the refugees called them “important people”, asked or cared to know how many people had died and where they were buried. Those “important people” wrote nothing in their notebooks about the dead left behind, who now lay forever on the desolate slope near the grove. No one wrote down their names in their notebooks. They were left there without a mark except for the small sticks tied together with a string which, over time, the strong winds blew away. But for now all that was left of the dead was a heap of freshly dug soil and a wooden cross over them.

The graves in the little cemetery down there on the desolate slope near the grove may have been shallow but the pain and anguish they left in the hearts and souls of the living were deep and immense...

Even a baby carried all the way there in her mother’s arms was left. Its empty cradle was left next to its grave. It came alive when stronger winds blew and a pleading voice seemed to resonate in the dark saying:

“Sleep little baby, sleep so that you can grow to become a big person... Sleep little one, sleep so you can grow to become a strong person...

In the morning when the sun rose above the grey mist in the distance, the flock of crows again flew over the slope. The black cloud of crows circled for a long time, afraid of nothing and no one, they circled until dusk pecking at the misery of those who had fled...

Yellow leaves fell over the empty tents. The mornings and the nights were cold. Everything was moist and sad.... The wind was constantly blowing from the sea carrying with it the smell of salt. A flock of crows, crowing loudly, flew over the slope.

And there, up on top of the hill, sitting down with its tail tucked in, was Sharko, the forgotten puppy, who howled from dawn to dusk calling and searching for Dedo Tode...

The ship continued on its way but for those inside there was no day, no moon, or stars at night, and those who managed to look out through the narrow window or those who went up on deck for a

moment saw only clouds, thick, heavy, black clouds that darkened the sea during the day.

The ship was sailing...

Where and on whose shore was it going to land and unload its passengers?

PART TWO

The ship slowly anchored at the port late at night. Large lights illuminated the dock and surrounding buildings. They woke the people and again sent them down the same stairs one behind the other with their belongings on their shoulders and under their arms. The old and the women with children were lowered to the ground in nets. From there they were immediately taken to the railway cars waiting for them a few steps away. After everyone was on board, women in white coats came over with baskets in their hands and gave out bread with butter and jam, hot milk and tea.

Whistle. Under them the seats or the ground moved. A bang, a convulsive blow to the wagons, a long whistle of the locomotive and he turned away. First the wheels knocked quietly on the rail joints and then they got stronger and faster. Neither the beating nor the whistling of the locomotive told the excited and surprised passengers where it was taking them.

Leaning on Mitre's shoulder Mara was dozing off but couldn't fall asleep. There was a constant knocking from the moving train under her. She occasionally opened her eyes but all she could see was level ground with forests both to the left and right, sometimes there was open space but it was flat as far as the eye could see. And then there was the constant knocking: once "tak" then "tak-tak" all the time, sometimes faster, sometimes slower. There was the occasional whistle and again through the woods and plains. Sometimes low houses passed quickly in front of the windows. As the train continued on its way, Mara wondered if there was going to be an end to that knocking, to those forests and the endless green plains. No hill, no mound, just plains, forests and greenery... and that constant knocking.

Far away the sky turned pale. The darkness was slowly disappearing. The dim light became brighter. The sun was shining

through the forest gaps and intermittently striking Mara in the eyes. It was daytime.

Tired from twelve days of sailing in open waters, the refugees were suffering from sea sickness, exhaustion and fear of the unknown. On top of that they worried about where this journey might take them. After they were unloaded from the ship they were loaded onto a train and sent on a new journey into the unknown. Then, after an all night train ride, they were housed in a large building, in the town Mijndziguzhe in Lower Silesia in southwestern Poland. The small town, which for years was inhabited by Germans, was a well-known summer and winter tourist resort. The town had not been destroyed during the war. The Red Army hadn't passed by there. The Germans, in the spirit of the Yalta agreement, were evicted to the last one. Houses, boarding houses, hotels, inns, pubs and bars were all empty.

After they were placed in the empty houses, many refugees were amazed at how there was flowing water inside the buildings, not just cold but also hot water. They wondered how that was even possible. They were amazed by the lighting in their rooms; all they had to do was push a button and there on the ceiling, a glass ball would light up. The old people were afraid of the magic light and insisted that the young put it out. The old people were afraid of the button that made the ball on the ceiling glow. They had never seen any of the things that surrounded them. They had never seen such wide beds with linen so white. They had never seen an electric stove and were amazed at how such a stove could give instant heat without having to burn coal or wood. They had never seen strange iron ribs that could radiate warmth. Everything was strange in this place...

They looked at themselves in the big mirrors and wondered if they were truly themselves. For the next seven days that they were there the doctors kept examining them, giving them medicine and applying various potions and creams on them. They were fed well five times a day. They were given bottles of buttermilk to drink which, along with water, were placed in wooden boxes in each corner of the room. That wonder and amazement lasted seven days. Seven days of lying around, eating, drinking and not working. Seven

days filled with thoughts that they would be going home soon but no one told them how and when they were going home.

On the eighth day they separated them from their straw beds and their dirty blankets. The men were sent to shave and get a haircut and the women and children were sent to the baths. The men were sent to the baths after the women were done. Everyone was shy about taking their filthy clothes off. Their bodies were encrusted with difficult to remove dried dirt which had been building for months. Scrub brushes and soap were used to remove it, turning their bodies red from the scrubbing. After everyone was washed and cleaned they were dressed in their old rustic clothes that had been boiled in large buckets for a long time to remove the lice and nits. The next day they were sent for a medical examination.

“Does your head hurt?” asked the doctor.

“No, my head doesn’t hurt...”

“Does your throat hurt?”

“No, my throat doesn’t hurt...”

“Do any of your teeth hurt?”

“No, none of my teeth hurt...”

“Do your ears hurt?”

“No, my ears don’t hurt...”

The doctors asked in Polish and the patients answered in Macedonian. Both sides were amazed how they understood each other and how close the two languages were.

Well fed, washed and cleaned they spent their autumn days waiting. They waited during the rain, fog, hot days and gypsy (Indian) summer filled with thoughts of soon going back home. They waited for someone to come and tell them when they would set out on their journey to return home.

Dedo Nake separated himself from a group of men and called on one of the younger boys to come over.

“Come here my boy, let me ask you something. Tell me are we far from home?”

“Yes we are far Dedo, very far from home... that’s what they say...”

“Aha, in other words we can’t go on foot. Too bad, too bad son ... And how far are we? Do you know?”

“The boy didn’t answer and left, and with the boy left Dedo Nake’s unfulfilled dream...

After the quarantine they were placed in local houses. Each house had a basement, a ground floor and other floors with a lot of empty rooms. Each house also had indoor running water and electricity, a wide courtyard with various fruit trees, lots of greenery, flowers and a barn for housing animals. Scattered through all the yards were various machines that they had never seen before and wondered what they were for... For the first time in a long time the refugees felt clean and free of lice. They were well fed and slept in beds covered with white sheets and clean blankets that didn’t smell of mold and rot. For the first time they used soap that had a scent of roses and acacia... For the first time, after spending so much time on the road and hiding on the slope near Pegin, they didn’t feel the hard dusty ground under them, the humidity and mist, the heavy thunderstorms, the cold during the night and the hard boards on the ship’s floor that substituted for a mattress. The soft white pillows brought back their good dreams, peace of mind and hope. They were no longer awakened by long machine gun bursts, the roar of flying aircraft and the moans and sight of the wounded. They no longer had to listen to the daily promises made to them and demands made of them to give everything to the struggle including their lives, their children, their homes, their possessions... which they did. But even all that wasn’t enough... For the first time during their first days at Mijndziguzhe they walked without fear, for the first time they saw the sky clear, for the first time they weren’t called and forced to dig trenches and carry long logs and stones to build bunkers. They had their first peaceful sleep without fear here in Mijndziguzhe. Here they lived in peace inside a living green environment surrounded by green fields and low hills but their thoughts were elsewhere. They spent their days thinking about going back home. They kept thinking of how they had gotten here over the sea and by train and wondered how far home might be. But in time their desire to go back home began to subside and they became more focused on finding their

loved ones. They were hurting deep in their souls as they searched for a husband, a wife, a daughter, a son, a brother, a sister and all other relatives who were missing from their lives. Now they spent their days and nights in pain wondering if they would ever see their loved ones again. As they learned more and more about their fate, more and more began to wear black – black dresses, black head kerchiefs, black bands around their arms and black collars. They may have looked calm on the outside, and indeed their souls were calmer today than they had been yesterday, but deep inside they felt unbearable sadness, a stinging of their soul, they felt unbearable pain which they couldn't control. They constantly carried a great weight wherever they went and no one was able to offer them relief. Their suffering made them silent, resentful, desperate and inconsolable. And this is what they had to endure...

The refugees ranged in age from a few weeks old to 60 years old, some, a large number, were over 70 years old. There were also a few who were even older. There were some, mostly males, who could boast of having completed four years of elementary education in the Greek schools, and the rest, mostly women, were illiterate and didn't know a single word of Greek. Some of the men who served in the Greek army learned a few Greek words and so did the men who spoke Macedonian at home or were communists and were caught and sent to serve their sentences in Greek prisons or in the Greek dry islands. There they learned some Greek words but not enough to master the Greek language, so to compensate they substituted Macedonian words. So, in time they created a mixed language which they spoke among themselves. This wasn't unique to the Macedonians; the Prosfigi (Turkish Christian settlers and colonists deposited in Greek occupied Macedonia in the 1920's) had also invented their own mix of Greek and Turkish which they spoke on the street. Athenians didn't understand this language. Hence there were many misunderstandings among them that often ended in fights in the city, bars and inns. The Prosfigi, just like the Macedonians who spoke Greek poorly and with a heavy accent, were subjected to prejudice and ridicule. The Greeks often called them "Ponti" (meaning residents from the shores of the Black Sea) or Turkospori (meaning of Turkish seed). Over time the Prosfigi became a majority in some parts of the country and took charge of the police and special services. During the Greek Civil War, many

of the Prosfigi were commanders of larger partisan (DAG) units. In fact the CPG Central Committee and Politburo were made up mostly of Prosfigi. They were fanatical communists to the core. Many joined the Greek Communist movement because they were extremely poor. The majority were dock workers who had contact with Russians who introduced them to socialism and communist ideals. The largest number of the poor and poverty stricken Prosfigi lived in Greek occupied Macedonia and abused the Macedonian people because they saw them as the reason for their poverty and because the Athens government encouraged them to do so. They wanted all of what the Macedonians had including their identity. So, in time, they began to call themselves Macedonians and not much later the Athens government claimed them as the “real” so-called Macedonians and sole heirs of Alexander the Great. Amazingly, not one person in the Prosfigi community ever baptized their child by that name (Alexander). They avoided that name but wouldn’t explain why. They must have had their reasons.

One day about a dozen Prosfigi arrived in Mijndziguzhe. They kept to themselves and didn’t associate with the Macedonians, even though a few personally knew some of the Macedonians from back home and had had contact with them in the villages and markets in Kostur and Rupishta. When the Prosfigi first arrived in Greek occupied Macedonia in the 1920’s, they were quiet, frightened with eyes full of pleas and with stomachs empty. And, even though the Greeks gave them the most fertile lands, they didn’t know what to do with them. All they knew was how to plant and grow tobacco, corn and pumpkins, and nothing else. They didn’t speak Greek at all, so being with the Macedonians they began to learn to speak Macedonian. And, even though they occupied Macedonian lands that belonged to the Macedonian people, the Macedonians felt sorry for them and taught them how to farm; about the seasons, local climate and how to grow a variety of crops. Now they avoided the Macedonians, the very people who had helped them survive. They stood to the side feeling confidence in the Party and in the party leader who was one of them. He was their god, their stick, their hope and their intellect. They quickly moved to the cities saying: “We aren’t fighting so that we can work!” They also freed themselves of their children. They were the first to give up their children, without

regret, claiming that there was a place for them to study, let the Party take care of them!”

In the meantime those responsible for looking after the refugees sent the following report to the Warsaw authorities:

“Everyone in Mijndziguzhe was given a bath, upper and lower underwear and shoes. The medical team, the sanitary workers and the nurses worked from 6am to 6pm bathing the refugees, cutting their hair, dressing them and placing them in homes. The medical team completed its preliminary examination during the first day, and on the second day the doctors began to examine everyone in the homes where they were already accommodated. There were no serious illnesses, only mange, scabs and diarrhea. There were newborns, born only a few days ago, and many very old people among the refugees. Without exception, they all wore torn rags. Many were barefoot, some wore old rubber boots tied with strings and others wore torn up moccasins. The women covered their heads and half of their faces with black head kerchiefs, so we couldn’t tell whether they were young or old. Many of the women had their bodies tightly tied with ropes and we found it difficult to remove them. Generally, the refugees eagerly ripped their rags right off and bathed with pleasure but there were a few, mostly women, who didn’t want to strip naked, claiming that they had never been naked. After being bathed they couldn’t be recognized. Most of them turned out to be quite young and middle aged. They all looked like they had aged prematurely. They held their dignity, didn’t complain and tried to smile when they saw excitement on the faces of the people helping them. They allowed themselves to do with confidence and gratitude whatever the doctor or nurse told them. They expressed great joy at being in a Slavic country (Poland) and underlined that as Macedonians they had come to stay with their Slav brothers until the Democratic Army of Greece achieved its victory and then they would return to their homeland. Almost every adult had a key tightly tied to their body. They said they had to make sure they didn’t lose the key to their house back in their homeland when they were being undressed. The young people who had been in Poland for a year contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of trust and friendship. Besides that every Polish worker made every effort to help the

refugees and contributed above and beyond what was expected of them.

The second day of their stay in Mijndziguzhe the Greek representatives had a meeting with the Polish representatives during which they discussed organizational issues at the centre. It was decided that the Polish Council would gradually entrust its duties to the Greek council.” (A copy of this report can be found in the archives of the author’s collection.)

A decision was made by the CPG Central Committee Politburo, based in Bucharest, to allocate all refugees to various jobs in all the state-run farms where these refugees were settled. This decision was passed on to the lower ranking subordinates located everywhere among the refugees who were former Greek Civil War activists from the lowest Party ranks, who at home hung around headquarters and spent their time lingering around stores, kitchens, ovens and shoe repair shops, and now were put in charge here. The chairmen of the village councils who were appointed on the recommendation and strong support of the village councils now became the people's government. The vast majority of these people were illiterate villagers or semi-literate at best but very obedient to the Party. Most were unusually greedy and great boasters about their contribution at the front lines. They were now everywhere. And here, in the agricultural holdings, they decided who was going to work in what job, in what factory and who was going to move to the city. They became the right hand of the party committee. Even though unqualified, some succeeded in getting jobs in children's homes, some as teachers, others as educators, others as guardians. It was their time. They even began to appoint themselves to various positions without permission from the host country. The local senior management party committee would often receive either written instructions delivered by courier, or verbal instructions sent by radio communication from the top party leadership, conveniently located in Bucharest, and without following the laws of the host country they would take over local, executive and penal authorities. They were usually called "the comrades" of the committee. From the first day that they arrived, they took it upon themselves to take over all administrative duties. From day one they decided who would go to which farm, who would go where and whether people would be allowed to move elsewhere, and later to the towns and cities. They would decide who lived on which street and on which floor. They would decide who worked in what factory, who would be allowed to learn a trade, who

would be allowed to take preparatory courses for further studies at university, and so on. They also kept lists of who earned how much money and used that information at public gatherings to praise and humiliate people. They would disclose who was contributing below norm; a humiliation that was equivalent to a light sentence... For those who were party members, the hardest punishment was being expelled from the Party, which would entail exclusion from the collective. Some of those expelled were further punished by not being allowed to associate with their friends and even their relatives. They were sentenced to a life of loneliness. Exclusion from the party was like church anathema. It was the most severe punishment, not the same, but similar to the church anathema which was a rejection of Christianity; an act meant to severely damage the soul, mind, body and spirit of a person. Punishments such as these were an unbearable burden on people, which led to moral disorders and grave health consequences. For those isolated in this way the world that was once open to them became empty, deserted and closed. Many left their current lives and became isolated from their own countrymen. They left secretly, mostly at night, and moved to nearby towns. Some moved even further, to the big cities, where they found accommodation and, although difficult to manage, lived in a fear-free environment. They earned their bread by taking any job available, mostly as general labourers. They were now free of the committee looking into their pockets. On top of that they took their lives back and began to make their own life decisions. Being a tree in the forest of Poles, many felt truly free and secure.

The purpose of these punishments and this kind of behaviour was to create a closed circle around the refugees. They couldn't be allowed to be individuals and belong to themselves. They couldn't be allowed to have their own opinion which was different from that of the Party. The party line needed to be imposed on them. By the hand of their own activists they needed to be placed under the party yoke. They needed to be placed under the yoke of obedience, by force if necessary, and made increasingly dependent on the Party. So, even though they lived in a free society, the people in their souls felt like the war was still ongoing, it wasn't over, it was constantly in their thoughts. The only escape from their misery was to think of returning home. They were still waiting and hoping to return to their homes. They stopped believing in the promises and other big scams

the activists fed them, like the scam that they hadn't been defeated... This is what the Party was telling them even here, in the agricultural holdings, after all this time. The Party was telling them to always be ready for future struggles and that their stay here was temporary and would only last until the "right conditions" were created for their return. But as time kept on ticking, the "right conditions" were pushed further and further back with no end in sight.

None of the refugees quit their jobs.

The party leaders used to tell them:

"Comrades, today everyone in Poland is harnessed to build socialism. And we too need to get involved in that effort to help the Polish people build socialism with us as quickly as possible and then communism.

At home none of our people ever abandoned their jobs. They all worked on their farms. Working in the fields was in their blood; it was inherited from their ancestors and passed on from generation to generation.

The metallic sound of a hammer hitting a piece of rail signaled that it was time to wake up, have breakfast, go to work, have lunch, go home, have dinner and go the sleep. This is how the days were spent at PGR, the state owned farming company which those from the Party committee in Zgozhelets called "kolhoz", the word the Poles despised. Many times the Poles corrected their Greek Party comrades and explained to them that "kolhozes" don't exist in Poland, but the Greeks persistently insisted that their comrades and political refugees worked in kolhozes.

This was how it was decided and approved. And from then on and in the days, months and years to come, without full control, the Greek activists couldn't force themselves on the Macedonian refugees like they had back home.

This is how it was for many years in their homeland...

Every one of the Macedonian refugees was a villager and knew very well what the jobs were like in the village and the amount of sweat it took to do them. A little later a Party directive came down with orders to deploy the refugees in a large agricultural holding. The directive said the holding had no local workers and needed the refugees to do the work because they were best suited for it. Village work was village work no matter where. But there were differences. At home the terrain was mountainous and hilly. Here the terrain was flat, windy, very humid, misty and plowed with machines, not with oxen or horses. All the agricultural holdings here were state owned. Everyone in the villages had to work to help build socialism and then communism. This is what the Party machine was grinding into people's heads at every evening gathering. The loudest of them all were the former Macedonian cadres who had led the war back home.

They again grouped the people by village and made arrangements to transport them, be it by ship or train, to the "Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne", meaning to the State owned agricultural holdings, which the people from the Party called "Kolhozi". The Polish people didn't like that word and made ugly faces and quietly muttered swear words when they heard it.

During the short break Mara wiped the sweat off her face and said:

"At home at this time of year we picked the grapes from our vineyards. Now there's no one to pick them, the grapes will dry up on the vines and the apples in the orchards will fall on the ground and rot... All we do here is pick up these damn potatoes and carrots from the muddy ground. Why do they need so many potatoes? At home we loved to pick our grapes. We filled baskets full of them and every time we carried a basket to empty it, we ate a bunch. It was like a holiday. We sang songs and told jokes. The days were sunny and warm and the sky was blue and clear... Our hands smelled like grapes. Harvesting was our joy, not our burden. If we were at home, we'd be harvesting our vineyards now and after we were done we'd press the grapes and put them in barrels. A few days later they'd be fermenting and boiling... turning into wine."

Autumn was soon approaching. There would be rainy, wet, foggy and cold days ahead. Dressed in rubber boots, all men and women

were deployed in the fields from six in the morning until six in the evening with only a lunch break. They collected potatoes, carrots, beets... and put them in sacks and baskets and then poured them into the tractor-drawn trailers and horse-drawn carts. Everyone was given a number of sacks or baskets, known as the norm, to fill and were encouraged to compete and be the best. All the work was overseen by the comrade from the committee who went from group to group writing down in his notebook the piles, baskets and sacks collected, the names of those who collected them and if they exceeded or fell short of the norm. And, without exception, all the names of the workers were read before dinner in the great hall, announcing how they had done. No one seemed to care how these people felt, if they were sick, if they were tired, or how much they were hurting. All they cared was if the norms were achieved or not before the working day ended. Both those who were praised and criticized (disgraced) went through the same nightly indignation and no one dared say anything, not a curse, not a swear word against the comrades in the committee who did this to them...

They worked in these large fields and they weren't paid for their work. Their names were on the list with a wage beside them and how they'd done based on the daily norms. Those who could read and write put their signature beside their name. Those who were illiterate, like most, put an "X" in the place where the "comrade" told them. When everyone had signed the list the comrade took it and placed it in his leather briefcase. He then removed a number of packages from a cardboard box and handed each person one. And as he did, with a tone of recognition, said:

"This is a gift from the people's government... and from the Party..."

They were all fed from the same cauldron and always at the same time.

Everyone pretended to be happy, not only because of the free breakfast, lunch and dinner they received, but also because every day they were convinced that someone cared about them, thinking to make their life easier. Let their plates be full of mashed potatoes and give them a small package donated by the people's government and by the caring party...

They were obedient, silent and satisfied...

The short-lived, warm gypsy (Indian) summer, in the meantime, had passed. Black clouds descended from the north and carried cold winds. Wild chestnuts grew where there were none and their leaves were turning gold-coloured and falling on the ground, turning it into a bed of gold.

“People, autumn is coming,” said Dedo Tode, pointing to the hazy and frowning sky.

As autumn took hold it began to rain more often. The north wind blew cold air, fog and moisture. The sky began to get cloudy, with black clouds. The fields were wide and long, very much larger than what the people were used to. The rows were long with potatoes, beets, carrots, cabbages, onions and other vegetables, ready to be harvested.

The work had to be done in the state holdings for the entire year; rain, wind, fog, or shine. Most of the work was done by machines. Here they didn't plow with oxen, horses, or donkeys. Here they didn't sow by hand, taking the grain out of a bag carried on their shoulders and putting it in the ground one seed at a time. Here each kilometre long row was dug by a machine and seeds were equally spaced, deposited and covered by soil automatically by the same machine. And at harvest time, all the villagers from Kostur and Lerin had to do was walk behind the machines and collect the potatoes, sugar beets, carrots and other vegetables the machines had unearthed. And they did just that. Some people collected the vegetables from the ground and piled them in big piles. Others took them off the piles and put them in sacks. Others took the sacks and loaded them on horse-drawn carts and trailers pulled by tractors. The people did this every day all day long with a short break for lunch, brought to them in bins. They worked long hours in the sun, in the rain, in the mist, in humidity and in the cold. This work was normally done by the Poles but now it was done by the refugees; going from field to field, working from sunrise to sunset and returning home. But when the workers came home they didn't have to wait in line to be served from a cauldron, they went straight to the

dining hall where their dinner was waiting. Before eating, the commander in charge of each group, usually a former Party commander, read out the names of the workers and how much work each had done compared to the norm. In other words, he read out the name of each worker and how many more or less piles of potatoes, carrots, beets, etc., they had collected, how many more or less sacks they had filled, how many more or less sacks they took to the trailers and carts, and so on, compared to what was considered average. This is how their hard work, sweat and hardship were measured. And by doing so some people were praised while others were embarrassed. But that wasn't all. All the names and work done that was read out loud before dinner, was posted on a bulletin board on the dining room door for everyone to see the next day. This was reward for some and punishment for others...

Someone looking at the bulleting board said: "Here is Traikovski for example. His counts are always below the norm. I don't know what his problem is. If he's sick he should say so, they'll send him to a doctor..."

Overhearing the comment Traikovski said: "I'm not sick. I just think like this with my simple mind. All day we collect heaps of potatoes, carrots, beets... and put them on the trailer and in magazines. Trucks come and take them... Nothing stays here. I don't know where they're taken. Back in my village I used to take the bundles of wheat stalks to my threshing yard. I used my horses or oxen to shake the grain out and deposited it in my grain bin. I kept my flour at home too. And the milk, and the cheese, and the fat and the curds, I kept them in my pots and barrels. Here I collect, transfer and load vegetables but I don't know where they go. Sorry, but I want to know..."

The man turned to Traikovski and said: "They go to the cities for the working class people to eat, you understand?"

Traikovski then said: "Yes I understand, if it's like that I understand, I must understand. But I don't understand anything else. A week ago I was in the hospital where my appendix was removed. I had three hours to wait before the train departed. I walked down some streets and what did I see? Long lines of men and women with bags and

baskets in their hands waiting... They were standing in front of the shops waiting. I spoke to one of them who said:

‘The potatoes and flour have arrived...’ I heard it but I didn’t believe it. They had to wait in line to buy the potatoes we collected in big stacks every day? We don’t eat all the potatoes we have here, boiled or fried, because there are too many. And there, in the city, they have to wait in line to buy potatoes? I find that strange. I find it strange that in the neighbouring farm where only Poles work, they have to wait in line to buy potatoes, bread, flour, sugar and even a stick of matches...”

Kiro Traikovski was puzzled by the whole situation and couldn’t find anyone to explain to him why people in the cities and the neighbouring economy had to stand in line in front of the shops and wait for hours to buy the very potatoes Kiro was collecting without making the norm. What was also not clear to him was why there was so much leftover food in the canteen; bread, potatoes and other foods, collected in barrels and taken somewhere to feed the pigs...

In a casual way Mitre turned to Kiro and quietly said:

“Listen to what I’m going to tell you Kiro. First, don’t ask too many questions. Second, to say the least, here the state feeds you. Third, those in line in the city waiting to buy food... they feed the state, and here the state feeds you... Now do you understand?”

“No, it still isn’t clear to me, but if you say so, then let it be so like you said...I will gather as many potatoes as I can for the proletariat in the city but I don’t want to damage my back from lifting and carrying... Look over there, look at the women...”

There were a bunch of women at the end of the field leaning on the bushels and bags.

Mara put down the bushel, sat down next to the women and, after wiping the sweat off her forehead, said:

“Yesterday I went to see the local church and what did I see, a cold church. There were only two icons above the altar, that of the Virgin

Mary and Jesus Christ, and in front of the altar only a long table and nothing else. The church walls were naked. It wasn't like our churches where you go in and you aren't alone. In our churches, on one side you see St. Dimitria, beside him you see St. Nikola and on the other side you see St. Iliia. Everywhere you look you see an icon. There are saints and angels on every wall and on the ceiling. Every one of them is looking at you, directly at your eyes. They watch you but won't talk to you. Everyone looks at you with kindness, gentleness and warmth. They look at you as if you are the most important person in the world, and with their eyes they seem to be telling you that you are. They're telling you that we are all with you, come, come on in and don't be afraid..."

Mara paused for a moment, changed the subject and said: "The wind here isn't like it was at home. Here when it blows it blows like it wants to carry you away, like it wants to blow you away. It's not gentle and caressing like it was at home... At home when the wind blew down the chimney, when the sun shone through the window, when thunder roared overhead, when lightning flashed in your eyes, when... eh... what can I say...? It was lovely! Believe me! And the sky?! It was blue, clear and star-studded at night... The aroma and taste of the apples and the smell of hay here isn't like those at home..."

The end of the year was approaching. The weather brought knee-deep snow. The fields were turned white with snow. It was fine and felt like sand in the hand. It was much too cold for these people from the south. They had to endure. The day of the great feast - the birth of Christ - was near.

Two days in advance, all the tables in the dining room were ordered in two rows with benches on both sides. The tables were covered with white sheets and food, brought from the city in two trucks, was laid out on top of them. Behind the front row of tables, in the corner, was a large pine tree adorned with numerous colourful, small and large spherical ornaments which reflected the lights of the low hanging lamps. Sitting among the plates on top of the tables were lit, tall, thick candles as well as lit, short, fragrant candles.

All this was overseen by the watchful and worried eyes of Pan (Mr.) Vishnievski, manager of the Kunuv state agricultural company. In all the days that preceded this day and this dinner Vishnievski had done everything in his power to not only show himself as a good host, but to also wholeheartedly offer the people old fashioned Polish hospitality. And not only that, deep down in his heart, deep in himself, and most of all in his mind, he cherished the desire to arrange a dinner for those, with whom he laboured together in Kunuv and whose great pain he felt.

It was Christmas Eve.

A family holiday...

Pan Vishnievski organized the traditional twelve-dish Christmas Eve dinner for those who had lost their family, loved ones, houses, property, homeland... A solemn dinner for the exiles for whom, at every step and every encounter and meeting, he extended his hand

of friendship with a warm smile and flattering words. A festive feast of great joy - the birth and coming of our Saviour who would bring joy and hope here to the dining room of Kunuv...

There was silence in the great hall. All one could hear were spoons touching plates and loud sighs. Crouched together sitting side by side the guests were deep in thought, looking away into the distance... Sitting in a line with bowed heads bound by black head kerchiefs and arms crossed over their chests, were the widows whose eternal pain was betrayed by their blackness.

Crammed next to each other, for the first time since they had left home, they were celebrating a holiday away from home, in a foreign country.

The long tables reminded them of the lunches they used to have at the monasteries back home. But this, the food, the Christmas tree in the corner, all seemed strange to them. They all sat silently deep in their own thoughts. They looked like they were all lost in their own world. Crammed on the wooden benches they sat in silence dreaming of returning home, and with each bite of the rich festive food they swallowed, they swallowed a memory of sadness. Deep inside them they were hurting...

There was silence...

More silence...

This was the festive dinner that was expected to bring great joy -
The Birth of Christ...

Would the pain ever ease and would there ever be even a little hope?

It was midnight...

The church bells in the city began to ring...

Christ was born...

Joy to all and may all live long, happy and healthy years...

Mara collected a handful of crumbs from the long table, put them into her apron and, as she was leaving the table, said:

“For the souls...”

The Christmas Eve dinner ended late, at midnight. Kole and Pan Vishnievski were sitting at the end of the long table opposite one another, near the fireplace with dwindling flames. With glasses full of vodka in their hands they were having a conversation.

“The people looked very sad and deep in their own thoughts during the entire Christmas Eve dinner, Pan (Mr.) Kole. They hardly ate or drank anything... Did we do something wrong?” asked Pan Vishnievski.

“Lord God, no! You shouldn’t even think that way, Pan Vishnievski. Everything was done in the best way possible. It was wonderful. Unexpected, unprecedented so far... The people got together and saw each other, but...” replied Kole.

“So there was something they didn’t like?” asked Vishnievski.

“It wasn’t something they didn’t like or appreciate about the dinner, they are deeply troubled because of the trauma they’ve experienced and, because of what they lost, they feel great pain in their hearts and souls... Their thoughts are elsewhere...” replied Kole.

“What does that mean?” asked Vishnievski.

“It means that they miss something very much. The holiday seemed like it wasn’t a holiday for them. For them, Pan Vishnievski, this holiday didn’t bring joy. Did you see any joy in their eyes or any brightness on their faces? Tonight time stopped for them. This was the first time in their lives that they had greeted this great holiday under someone else’s roof, despite the fact that you did everything possible to make them feel safe, cared for, calm, satisfied and grateful. Christmas Eve isn’t a holiday like any other holiday. For that matter each day isn’t a day without the homemade meal which brings the entire family together, including the souls of those who

are absent. Tonight, I think, they faced this great holiday with much sadness because their home circle was broken. The family who gathered and sat in a circle around the table, next to each other, close to one another, to have dinner together wasn't there..."

Kole unexpectedly stopped talking. His voice began to crackle. He picked up a log of wood and placed it in the fireplace. All this time he turned his head away from Vishnievski to avoid him seeing the tears that had pooled in his eyes. After calming his twitching lips, Kole quietly said:

"Forgive me Pan Vishnievski, I get a bit emotional when I think about these things... Yes... Like we did tonight, my entire family used to gather together on Christmas Eve. We gathered together around the table crowded with many dishes and a big candle lit in the middle, stuck inside a large round loaf of bread made from the finest white flour. The top of the bread was adorned with nuts, hazelnuts and raisins sitting around the candle like a pyramid. My mother used to put the main dish, the centrepiece of our meal, in the middle of the table but not before she made her offerings to the spirits... According to our centuries-old traditions, hidden from our eyes, she took the plate to the balcony from where she threw a handful of food for the Lord, for her husband, for her children, for the health and happiness of the entire household, for the flocks of sheep and cattle to be fruitful, and for the new days to bring joy to the family... And while she was feeding the souls and the spirits outside, we, with spoons in our hands, anxiously waited for her return and then... then we would start eating our way to the centre of the plate to see who would reach the apple sitting on top, first. Tonight, Pan Vishnievski, our families weren't there, they were missing from the table; for me and for them. A table without our families isn't a complete table. Tonight, Pan Vishnievski, not a single mother got up from the table to take food to the yard and make offerings to the souls and spirits. There was no dinner for them tonight. No offerings were made during this great feast to bring harmony and joy and all the wishes for tomorrow and for all the days to come. The table in the middle of the room is a sacred place, and during the holidays on top of the table the sacred loaf of bread was placed with a large candle lit on top of it. The sacred bread was evenly divided among the people around the table. The lit candle,

symbolizing the light of life, was passed from person to person all around the table... The old people said the table was the place that united the family, the place where a common prayer could be said thanking God for the bread, wine and salt and for His generosity for providing the family with serenity, happiness and protection from evil... Our elders, Pan Vishnievski, learned this from their elders and passed it on from generation to generation. The old people said that the table was created by God to bring the family together, to sit in a circle like it was a single soul. They said the table brought harmony to the family. It protected each member from evil and disorder by bringing them closer to their family unit where each felt loved, equal, warm and secure. With this tragedy that happened to us recently, Pan Vishnievski, our family circle has been broken - our table has been broken. Your guests today are feeling the effects of that broken circle. Without their families around them, they see no point in congratulating anyone. They see no point in doing anything. Back home it was customary, according to our old customs, for the mothers to make offerings to God and to the spirits for many, many reasons. But what's left of our homes and families now? Who should we congratulate and for what? There is nothing left for us to desire now for which to make offerings from the balcony. There is nothing left of our table and the people around it. There is nothing left of our rich lives. And without all that there can be no joy..."

A large tear fell from Kole's eye revealing his immense and never-ending sadness... Both men went silent. While there was silence on their lips there was a storm brewing in their hearts and souls...

"Tonight, Pan Vishnievski, your guests were thinking of their loved ones who weren't with them. Their thoughts were filled with past memories, of how their families used to get together and celebrate this great holiday and how now they were missing that. Their tears and sadness betrayed their sad feeling of not being with their families at home around the table. For us, Christmas Eve, as it is with you, is a family holiday. Our consciousness is deeply rooted in our belief that, on this day, on this evening, everyone should be at home and seated in a circle around the table... The old people always said that wherever you are you should be home on Christmas Eve. They said the whole family must always be home sitting together around the table waiting for the good news, the birth of our Lord

Jesus Christ... And tonight, as the people sat on the long tables loaded with the twelve dishes of rich Polish food, which for them was an unprecedented miracle, they were deep in their own thoughts, Pan Vishnievski. They were thinking of their own families which they no longer have. They saw the table full of food here, which they could no longer have at home... They thought of the home they no longer have; of their fields, their meadows and the mountains they no longer have, whose heights made them feel like eagles. They, my friend Pan Vishnievski, weren't here in mind and spirit during the dinner; they were in their own homes... They were missing what they had and that made them sad... They were missing the flame of the oil lamp that glowed in the corner in front of the icon of their favourite saint. That glowing flame kept their faith alive just like it had for the generations before them which had endured centuries of slavery... We no longer have a state, a country of our own, but we do have our people and our faith. When we began to trust and believe the promises of outsiders, Pan Vishnievski, we had no idea... we couldn't even imagine that they would turn us into even greater slaves than we already were..."

Kole stopped for a moment just to take a deep breath and then continued:

"I miss the church I used to go to and pray for the souls of our dead, for the health of the living and to light a candle so that there would be less darkness and more light for both the dead and the living, and for the whole family which I now no longer have. My family is broken and my people are scattered and without hope. That's what my grandfather used to say. In my country, Pan Vishnievski, every village has its own patron saint. The village church bears the saint's name and the saint is regarded as the guardian of the village. We also have saint name days. The day of the saint after whose name the village church is baptized is celebrated as a holiday by the village. On top of that every house has its own patron saint and the name day of that saint is a family holiday. Those saints are the protectors of our villages and homes. Let me tell you one more thing. We, the people from Kostur Region, call Christmas Eve KRACHUN... The word comes from ancient times and is preserved in the customs of our people... It means the end of a year, when the days are shortest and the nights are longest. When KRACHUN

arrives it signifies the beginning of more light and less dark. The birth of Christ coincides with CRACHUN... Both symbolize the coming of new life and high hopes. CRACHUN marks the end of long nights, darkness and the coming of longer days, in which the sun will shine longer, which means more light. Belief in the natural phenomena and in the Christian faith united people in hopes of a new life. As far as I know the word KRACHUN, instead of BOZHIK (Christmas), is used only in Kostur Region in Macedonia, as well as in Romania and Slovakia...”

Kole stopped talking. The silence lasted a long time. Pan Vishnievski was also silent. They kept silent and talked only with their thoughts.

Their night-long conversation was interrupted by the cold breath of the winter morning.

The day was greeted with the words:

“Christ is born...”

“Merry Christmas...”

“Happiness and good health to all for many years...”

As it happened, Kiro was returning home with Mr. Vishnievski, the farm manager. On the way Pan Vishnievski asked Kiro to go with him to the co-op inn.

“Pan Kiro, would you accompany me to the inn. We can warm up there. It’s a cold and humid day... What do you say?”

“Yes, yes, no problem. I will come with you, Pan Vishnievski, but it isn’t right for you to honour me three, or even four times now, and I never... I’m not comfortable... Of course, it’s nice to have a stiff drink in this cold weather, but... You know what I mean...” Kiro said shyly. “I want us to go but it’s a shame that you should have to pay every time...”

“That’s not a problem. Both you and I got paid today and I don’t mind if both of us spend some of it,” replied Pan Vishnievski and insisted that they go, pulling him by his arm towards the inn.

“That’s a good idea, Pan Vishnievski... of course it’s a good idea, but still I can’t because, you see, it’s inconvenient for me because I have no money...” said Kiro with a sad tone of voice, squeezing the last two words out of his mouth with a heavy sigh.

“How can you not have money? Didn’t you pick up your salary today? What happened to the money?” asked Vishnievski with a surprised look on his face.

“What salary? We don’t get paid. Who told you we were being paid? replied Kiro.

“The man from the committee, your man from the city. I personally gave him the payroll in a bag for him to pay all the workers. I’ve

been doing that for months...” said Vishnievski with a raised tone of voice.

“All we do, Pan Vishnevski, is sign or put our “X” on the payroll sheet and that’s all. We never got any money, only small packages of candy, sweets, string, needles, buttons and some other small stuff...” explained Kiro.

“And money! Money, I ask you, does he give you any money?!” asked Vishnievski with a loud voice.

“As I told you, Pan Vishnevski, all we do is just sign and then get a small package, a gift from the people’s government... We get nothing else...” explained Kiro.

“And money, I ask you, you say he doesn’t give you money?” reiterated Vishnievski.

“The comrade told us that part of our salary goes towards the common cauldron from which we all eat, and the other part goes to help the jailed communists in Greece... That’s what he told us...” explained Kiro.

“And you say he gives you no money. Absolutely none?!” asked Vishnievski.

“None!” replied Kiro.

“What else did the man from the committee tell you?” inquired Vishnievski.

“He told us that we should be satisfied and happy because we now have peace, food, warm bedding... and we have all this thanks to the Party and to the Polish people’s government... This is what he told us...” replied Kiro.

They left the inn late. On their way they ran into Lazo who, without greeting them, asked:

“Where are you two making your way so cheerfully?”

“We’re going home,” replied Kiro.

Lazo went a little closer in front of them, stared into their faces and, while suspiciously waving his finger, said:

“Comrade Vishnievski, I would like to speak frankly and openly with you. Do you have some time?”

“Why not... When do you want to meet?” replied Vishnievski.

“Well now, if you don’t mind, Comrade Vishnevski,” said Lazo.

“All right then. And what is your name?” asked Vishnievski.

“Lazo...” replied Lazo.

“What do you want to speak to me about, Lazo?” asked Vishnievski.

“Comrade Vishnievski, I want to ask you something about a very important thing. And that important thing is, how can I say it without it being an insult; I want to know how much money I should be getting for working in the field. Well, Comrade Vishnievski, I want to tell you that, I mean to ask you if I should have a salary or is it enough that we eat three times a day from the common cauldron without paying. Thank God the food is good and tasty and there is so much that I can’t eat it all. I’m not complaining, thank God I’m full of bread and peace. I’m sleeping peacefully, I’m not having nightmares, but when I’m awake I ask myself how much do the Poles get paid in the neighbouring agricultural economy for the field work they do? Don’t I deserve to get paid for the work I do collecting potatoes, beets and carrots every day in those big fields and loading and unloading them? I don’t know. But I should know because if I’m not told, then it is injustice, exploitation, like my Party says. I want, Comrade Vishnievski, to earn a living for what I do. Let’s say this: You tell me how long you work and I tell you how much money you get? And then what do we do? Then we have to agree. I will work and you will pay me. I and everyone else here are working honestly, but honestly we don’t get any money. I want to have my own money to buy something that my wife will cook at

home for me. I tell you, she's a good cook. Here, in the dining room of the common kitchen, we eat well-cooked potatoes - stew and other appetizing dishes. I'm not complaining, the dishes are delicious, but there is one that doesn't suit me. When I see that black stuff that looks like porridge, I don't remember what it's called, then my stomach jumps. I don't like that dish but please don't be insulted, right? I'll say again that we are full, well fed, sleeping in warm beds but I want my wife to cook some of our meals, at home, to cook and even to buy something for my wife, the poor girl already goes without socks. I want to cook something for ourselves, like at home. It's good that we get these packages the comrade from the committee gives us, why not, but my wife doesn't know what to do with so many needles, laces, buttons and candy. Her bag is full of the stuff. What do you say, Comrade Vishnievski, can I, I mean, all of us who work, get a salary, buy things for ourselves and let our women cook our meals at home? I'm not saying the Polish dishes aren't good, they're great, glory to God, we're all well fed, no one is complaining, God forbid, right? I don't want to bother you anymore, Comrade Vishnievski. Keep what I told you in mind and say a few words about it up there, right? I'm not asking for anything more, Comrade Vishnievski. Goodbye now and don't forget what we talked about, right?" replied Lazo.

Lazo stopped talking but stood in front of Pan Vishnievski staring into his eyes as if looking for the affirmative answer to his plea. He whispered goodbye and left for the field where the sugar beets, which had been lying in piles for ten days, were loaded onto a trailer whose wheels were stuck in the mud. The tractor pulled the loaded trailer and with difficulty dragged it out of the mud and onto a dry spot. It then went to haul the cart that was blocking the way. After the cart was dragged onto the road, Kole got his horses and, with help from the women, positioned them in front of the cart and tied them to the cart harness.

Lazo, who arrived in the field late, approached Kole and asked:

"What is that stuff in the cart, Kole?"

"Beets..." replied Kole sounding like he was out of breath.

“I’ve never seen beets so big? Yesterday we brought beets from the fields but they weren’t as big as these...” said Lazo while weighing a beet with his hand. Then, after he put the beet back on the cart he said: “It’s probably not a beet, Kole, it must be something else. Could it be some kind of pumpkin, huh?”

“It’s a beet, Lazo, a sugar beet,” replied Kole.

“What kind did you say?” asked Lazo.

“A sugar beet, Lazo... From which sugar is made?” replied Kole.

“What?!” asked Lazo looking confused.

“I said sugar is made from beets like this, do you understand? They boil them in large cauldrons in the factories, Lazo, then drain them, dry them and carry them in sacks where they want to take them... Do you understand?!” explained Kole.

“I understand if you’re telling me a joke, I understand, but don’t make fun of me anymore...” replied Lazo, looked away, smiled and quietly said: “Look at him... he tells me sugar is made from beets...”

Kole heard him and interrupted: “Look Lazo, if you don’t believe me then ask that Polish man over there...” and pointed at the man walking by.

Lazo turned around, looked at the man passing by and shouted:

“Hey, hey, you, Comrade Pole! Stop, I want to ask you something...”

The Polish man stopped and Kole explained to him what Lazo wanted to ask him.

The Polish man firmly said that the factories do make sugar from these beets and went on his way.

“What do you say now, Lazo, do you believe me? Sugar is made from these big beets and that’s why they’re called sugar beets,” explained Kole.

Lazo laughed and said: “I can’t believe you’re telling me this. Come on stop fooling. Stop trying to make me believe sugar can be made from these beets that look like pumpkins... Even if I see it I’ll have a hard time believing it...” Lazo then crossed himself and without saying another word went to a trailer where others were loading sugar beets and, with his bare hands, began to throw the big beets on the trailer. All this time he couldn’t get out of his mind what Kole had told him. He kept thinking of sugar being made from sugar beets. If that was true, Lazo thought to himself, if what the Polish man told him was true, and if what that joker Kole told him was true about boiling these beets in large cauldrons and making sugar, then it’s certain that sugar can be made in even smaller cauldrons, and perhaps even in a larger pot.

That thought kept going through Lazo’s mind all day long. When he came home he thought of making sugar himself and imagined how much sugar he could get out of one large sugar beet. He could sell it on the black market and make money. He then wondered how much money he could get from selling the sugar. And the deeper he got into these exciting thoughts, the more he filled his head with all the money he could make... money he would hide under his pillow... His mind was occupied with these thoughts every hour he was awake.

At dusk, when it was dark outside and everyone was gathered in the great hall eating their dinner, being careful not to be seen, Lazo went to one of the trailers full of sugar beets, filled a small sack with big sugar beets and hid a few smaller ones in his bosom and wide trousers and, without been seen, returned home. He dropped the beets on the floor.

His wife, surprised at the sight, asked:

“Why Lazo, why did you bring all these black pumpkins here?”

Lazo looking at her with obvious pleasure and, pointing at a large beet with his leg, instead of answering he said:

“They’re not pumpkins, they’re sugar beets. And do you know, Lazovitsa, what they do with these beets?”

“They give them to the cows,” Lazovitsa affirmed. “They bring a lot of these beets to the dairy farm and feed the cows with them so that they’ll produce more milk...” she added.

“That’s right, here they give some to the cows but wife do you know what they do with them there, in the factories, huh? You don’t know. I’ll tell you. There, my dear wife, in the factories they boil them in large cauldrons and make sugar out of them. So that you know, sugar is made from these beets by boiling them. Now see if we have a small cauldron, and if we don’t bring that big pot... What are you waiting for; I told you what to do... Don’t wait around... Also start the fire...” ordered Lazo.

“And what are you going to do, my poor Lazo, huh?” she asked.

“You’ll see. Just watch and you’ll witness a miracle...” replied Lazo enthusiastically.

Lazo washed the beets in a wooden tub, peeled them with his pocket knife, cut them into large pieces and poured them into a large pot. The iron plate on the stove on which Lazo placed the full pot was already hot. The water with the beets was slowly warming and when it first began to boil Lazo started stirring it with a large wooden spoon he’d taken from the hall kitchen without permission.

The beets boiled all night. The water was evaporating but Lazo kept adding more water and stirring them, turning them left and right and jerking them out of the boiling water, and still they tasted bitter and not sweet like sugar. Sometimes he woke his wife up to help him mix so he could take a little break, sit down, rest his legs and smoke a cigarette. He had no patience to wait so he quickly replaced her and again took over the job of mixing the boiling beets. He did this until dawn.

“Did you make any sugar?” asked his wife half asleep.

Lazo grabbed a piece of beet from the pot, handed it to her and said:

“Here, taste it.”

Lazovitsa blew on the hot piece of beet to cool it down and, with an undisclosed curiosity, licked it, wet her lips, twisted her cheeks and spit. She then said:

“My poor Lazo, if only sugar could be boiled out of beets... Shame on you... You kept me awake all night... You kept telling me stir, Lazovitsa, stir so I can get a break...” she barked at him and, while looking straight into his eyes, scolded him even more: “Shame on you Lazo... but you have no shame...” She again looked him in the eyes and said: “Go, get out of my sight. Go out there and get rid of this concoction. Pour it in the brook and make sure nobody sees you. If people find out what you’re doing, God forbid, we’ll be ridiculed all our lives... Look at you, with your big ideas of becoming a factory owner and a businessman making sugar out of pumpkins... Yes my poor Lazo... get the beets out of your head...” she cursed and swore. “You were going to make sugar in a pot, shame on you...” she said loudly and laughed even louder.

Lazo frowned all that day and for the next two days didn’t show up for work in the field to collect and load sugar beets.

He not only didn’t think of beets but couldn’t stand to look at them. Even the sugar in the canteen tasted bitter to him.

Pan Vishnievski couldn't believe what Mitre and Lazo had told him. He was overwhelmed by the thought that people had been cheated and grossly wronged. He nervously hit the top of the desk, belonging to the head of the state agricultural holding, with his fist and said:

“Mr. Director, this is unheard of and shameful... I don't want to say anything worse. The way these people are being treated, looks to me like the way the black people were treated. Those who worked on American plantations and were given only food and a small gift for the work they did.”

“This isn't how we do things here... This isn't us. In fact this brings great shame to us... Please, Mr. Vishnievski, calm down. Today I will go and check everything out and will erase this shame by all means possible...” replied the director.

“It isn't only outrageous, Mr. Director, but humiliating... In a country where the spirit of freedom is glorified, we're allowing these beaten down people to be treated like slaves...” added Vishnievski.

“Don't talk like that. You are saying harsh words, very harsh words... If those people don't get paid for the work they do, it doesn't mean that your harsh words are justified... I want you to know that the Polish authorities showed a great deal, I would say unlimited tolerance towards the Greek comrades. They asked us not to interfere in matters concerning the refugees. They have insisted that all the problems related to their stay with us would be resolved by their Party committee and maybe there are mistakes. I have learned that the committee has assumed some powers that are outside our Polish law. In a conversation with Secretary Ianis, I underlined that refugees would be sanctioned only if they violated

Polish law. On this Ianis told me that all the refugees are subordinate to the party leadership, which receives directives from the Bucharest headquarters and strongly warned me not to interfere in their work and that the fate of the refugees is their party's responsibility..." explained the director.

"Mr. Director," Vishnievski went on to say, "I'm not asking for us to interfere in their affairs as you mentioned, but I strongly demand that these people be paid the same salary as the Poles who do the same work with them. Don't take this as a threat... But I'm going to ask Warsaw for an answer..." added Vishnievski while pointing his finger at the wall on which a portrait of the President was hanging, and without saying anything, left and headed for the office exit.

"Pan Vishnevski, wait!" called the director. "Have some patience. Somebody has certainly made a mistake here, intentionally or unintentionally, but that doesn't mean that things are so bad that we need to involve Warsaw. Come back in, sit here, calm down and let us think together on how to fix this mess instead of asking someone else to fix it for us... Believe me, I promise you that today I will talk to the Greek committee and ask them to obey our laws. I will tell them, most strongly, that we Poles are also responsible for the fate of the refugees... I will talk to them gently and with calmed nerves. And honestly and respectfully please don't bring Warsaw into this. And as you said, of course, we must urgently change things and as soon as possible. We are masters in our field. I, as the director, now here before you, have already made a decision. I will ask all the farm directors in writing to sign employment contracts, of course, the same as those with Polish workers. Refugees have the same job responsibilities as Poles. That's right, isn't it? You, Vishnievski, can sign an agreement with everyone today. Let them know how much money they will be making. Let them be equal to our workers in the agricultural holdings. We won't treat them differently," concluded the director.

After dinner, after everyone had gone to their rooms and the usual noise was gone, Pan Vishnievski knocked on the door of the basement room where Kole lived. After a second knock, stronger than the first, Kole appeared looking sleepy.

“Oh, Pan Vishnievski, come in... sorry, I...” said Kole before he was interrupted by Vishnievski who asked, in an apologetic tone of voice, if he had been sleeping and walked inside his house.

“I came to see you and invite you over to be my guest,” said Vishnievski.

Dressing hastily, Kole asked:

“What’s the occasion of this invitation, Pan Vishnievski?”

“It’s a great occasion. Let’s go to my place and I’ll tell you... Dress up warmer because it’s cold outside. It’s already cloudy and it’s going to snow more. Put on a hat. If you’re ready, let’s go,” replied Vishnievski.

They slowly made their way through the frozen snow. The cold and strong north wind blew right in their faces and slowed their walk. They walked silently for almost half an hour and stopped in front of the entrance to the large building, where Pan Vishnievski lived alone in one of the many rooms.

“We’re here, Pan Kole, we have arrived...” said Vishnievski pointing to the entrance of his building with his hand. “This palace was built in 1582 with additions made to it over the centuries that followed. Many generations of four powerful families have lived here and in the surrounding area, whose coats of arms have been engraved on the portal (an ornamental architectural enclosure

usually found at the entrance of churches, palaces, city administration buildings and other elegant buildings). The agricultural holding took it over in 1945.

Kole stood in front of the stairs and stared at the tall tower, towering beside the three-storey house that was attached to another two-storey building and next to it was a one-storey building. While Pan Vishnievski unlocked the front door, Kole stared at the portal that had a carved figure resting on a skull and next to it was an inscription that read: “Hodie mihi, cras tibi”, which Kole read silently. Pan Vishnievski noticed him reading the inscription and asked him:

“Can you read what it says? And do you know what it means? As you can see, it’s in the Latin alphabet and it means ‘today me, tomorrow you...’ Yes, this is how it is for everyone, Pan Kole,” said Vishnievski and opened the big door wide. He then bowed forward with his arm stretched out in front of him motioning, and in a quiet tone of voice, in the face of the strong wind said: “Come on in Pan Kole, please enter my kingdom... Go straight then left into the living room...”

Kole’s chilled face and slightly stiff toes began to warm up in the warm heat radiating from the gleaming stove that glowed in the left corner. With amazement Kole looked at the large pictures hanging on the walls in gilded frames and portraits of old bearded men, and old women in long dresses wearing gold rings on their fingers and necklaces on their bare necks. Vishnievski didn’t notice Kole looking at the portraits. With an astonished look on his face at what he was seeing for the first time, Kole turned to Vishnievski and, in a tone of great surprise and curiosity, asked:

“Are all these yours, Pan Vishnievski?”

“What you see, Pan Kole, was left here by the former residents of this place... And it’s not just the portraits. Follow me I’ll show you what else they left. The whole household was here. Leaving in panic and fear the Germans only took what they were allowed to take. Everything that was left six years ago when this house was full of life, which was terribly extinguished at the end of the Great War, is

still here, left the way it was then. Everything is here...” said Pan Vishnievski and added: “Do dziś tu nie dotarli szabrownicy...” (To this day, the plunderers of the abandoned properties haven’t arrived.) He then said: “Before you got here other houses were slightly looted. This house was saved by the commander of the border battalion who occasionally stayed here...”

“Can we go higher?” asked Kole.

“Why not! We’ll go to the tower and from there you’ll see the entire surroundings. You won’t see much now in the dark, but by day you can see the entire wide plain. Let’s go...” replied Vishnievski.

A very narrow set of stairs led to the tower. When they reached the top, Kole walked from window to window and gasped as he looked at the large plain dimly lit by the full moon. From the clearly drawn lines of the fields plowed and sown in the spring, he realized how much effort he and everyone in the economy, who had come from the south, had invested in harvesting all that this flat land had to offer. Kole had guided the horses for two and a half months going from field to store drawing hundreds of carts loaded with beets, potatoes, carrots and cabbages. Hundreds of people worked hard for more than two months, from morning to evening, gathering, loading and unloading vegetables... They poured much sweat on that wide plain now covered with white snow. Kole was amazed looking at the size of the great plain and thinking about how much work had been done to harvest it.

“Let’s go down into the living room and have a shot of vodka and some appetizers. Let’s celebrate, Pan Kole. Be my guest, you go first...” said Vishnievski.

Sitting on top of the table in the living room was a round tray with plates full of finely cut slices of ham, round slices of sausage, marinated mushrooms and pickles. On the side there was a bottle of żubrówka vodka and two crystal shot glasses.

“Here, Pan Kole, czym chata bogata” (you are invited to eat and drink), said Vishnievski and, with a wide swing of his arm, pointed to the table.

They sat down. Pan Vishnievski filled the shot glasses with vodka and said:

“Let’s toast, Pan Kole. Today is a great Polish holiday. To the bottom!”

Kole raised his glass and asked:

“And which holiday are we celebrating?”

“A great Polish national holiday... Today, on November 11, 1918, after 123 years of slavery, Poland regained its state independence,” replied Vishnievski.

“Happy holiday and may you celebrate it for many centuries,” replied Kole.

Kole took a sip of vodka and, somewhat restrained but with a tone of surprise in his voice, said:

“Today when we went to the city, Pan Vishnievski, to take potatoes to a large factory, I saw no flags and slogans marking a public holiday...”

“That’s true. You wouldn’t have because today this holiday isn’t a public holiday. In present day Poland this holiday, more or less, has become a family holiday far from the eyes of the authorities. The kind of celebration you are thinking of, which involved flags, slogans, speeches, rich lunches at factory canteens and many people walking on the boulevards and squares, is celebrated on July 22. (July 22, 1944 was established as a public holiday in the People’s Republic of Poland.) Today we have a new Poland, with new boundaries defined by the Great Powers. In the East we are without Kresi (that’s what the people of Poland call the territories in West Belarus and Ukraine from which they were displaced in 1945), in the West we are with Ziemie Odzyskane (northwestern areas of Poland awarded to Poland in 1945), without a king and president, but with a politburo and a central committee, with a proletariat dictatorship, an obedient government and a modified state coat of

arms. The royal crown which sat on the centuries-old white eagle was taken down...” replied Vishnievski with a trembling voice and he stopped talking.

Pan Vishnievski filled his glass with vodka, took a sip and, in a quiet voice, continued to tell his story.

“In the centuries that passed, Pan Kole, we Poles have been rising and falling. We were a state that meant something in Europe. Yes, it meant something in Europe but inside, at home, we had divisions. Some ideas that came from the West weren’t acceptable to the Polish magnate, the aristocracy and the high priesthood, which obeyed the Roman pope. At that time the people in Poland were reading French books and learning various things including the three principles of the French Revolution - freedom - equality - brotherhood. Those were advanced ideas at the time and were accepted by many members of the Polish assembly who had been debating them for four years in order to transform them into constitutional provisions. So on May 3, 1791, Warsaw proclaimed Poland’s first constitution, which unfortunately divided the Poles. On the night of May 18 and 19, 1791, opponents of the constitution - prominent tycoons and some bishops - gathered in a small town called Targovitsa and sent an appeal to Russian Empress Catherine II to help them. Poland was attacked by the Russian army starting the Polish-Russian war. Poles bravely defended themselves and achieved some victories which prompted Polish King Stanislaw Ugust Poniatovski to order a cease fire and put an end to the hostilities. He sent a letter addressed to the Empress, proposing an eternal alliance, and even abdicated his royal title in favour of her grandson - Constantine. The end of the war sealed Poland’s first division between Russia, Prussia and Austria. Then in January 1793 the second division between Russia and Prussia followed. In response to this was a national uprising called Koshchushkovstvo, named after the leader of the uprising Tadeush Koshchushko. Unfortunately, the uprising failed and on October 24, 1795, for the third time, Russia, Prussia and Austria split Poland. Poland was erased from the European map. In past centuries the Polish kings divided Poland between their sons and Poland was Poland. The powerful neighbours divided Poland and, according to them, Poland was no longer Poland. For one it was a governorate, for the other a

province. But in all those 123 years of slavery, in the consciousness, heart and spirit of the Poles, Poland has always been Poland. The conspiracy in Targovitsa with us Poles is remembered as the greatest national betrayal of all times. The traitors who invoked foreign aid to preserve their privileges were marked by eternal infamy, and during the Koshchushkovstvo Uprising many of them were hanged in the streets. The word 'Targovitsa' today is synonymous with the worst betrayal our nation and state faced.

Vishnievski paused, took a sip of vodka from his shot glass, sighed deeply and continued:

“They divided us, Pan Kole, as a state, they divided the state territory, but us, the Poles, they didn't divide us as a people. We have preserved our name and language and over the years, enriched our national culture. We have always been a great people and had a large and powerful church, which has always been a church of all Poles in Poland as well as outside Poland. On top of teaching us the word of God, our church, Pan Kole, in the past and now has always used the word Poland... An inseparable duality - Poland and God... We were Poles then and we are Poles now, Pan Kole... For centuries our flags have been inscribed with the words “Bóg, Ojczyzna, Honour...” (God, Fatherland, Honour). Now the new authorities have deleted those three words from the flags but they remain in the hearts of the Polish people...”

Vishnievski stopped talking for a moment. Kole, excited to hear more, kept looking at his pale face.

“Let us sit by the fireplace. It's warmer there,” said Vishnievski, interrupting the brief silence. Then, after making himself comfortable in the soft armchair, Vishnievski continued telling his story:

“And then? Then, Pan Kole, we had uprisings and heavy defeats. Our neighbours kept dividing us but we kept rising up. We had weapons, but most of all we had consciousness. Thousands of Poles joined Napoleon and fought in his wars because he promised he would resurrect Poland. He kept promising and the Polish people kept dying in his wars. We lost many young people in San Domingo

and Saragossa and in the war with Austria, Prussia and Russia. Yes, it's true, Napoleon wrote a constitution for us and created the Warsaw principality, and in return we appointed Maria Valevska... But as the old saying goes, 'he who writes can erase... he who gives can take... he who builds can destroy'. It all depended on those with whom Napoleon associated and why they needed a written constitution and a principality. When we launched the second uprising in 1830 - we were alone against the Russians. We suffered a catastrophic defeat. Europe opened its doors and took the survivors and their leaders, including all those who were maimed and crippled by the war. There were divisions among the Polish aristocratic elite who had gathered in the Parisian lounges and hotels. They argued for years over who was guilty, who was patriotic and who was a traitor. And everyone was convinced that only they were right. It's amazing that the idea of freedom can divide people. Thirty years later, we rose up again and again we were defeated and had to flee into exile (He was talking about the 1864 January Uprising called - Powstanie Styczniowe). Many escaped to the west. The Parisian lounges and hotels were overcrowded but still divided. After the Great War, one hundred and twenty-three years later, we got our state back. We crushed the Bolsheviks - in the Polish - Bolshevik war at Visla. We succeeded because we had a leader, a leader who united the Poles, who during his entire lifetime didn't unbuckle his belt on which his war sabre hung. (He was talking about Joseph Pilsudski (5.12.1867-1936)) Everyone is silent about him today... Twenty years later the Germans crushed us and again we were on the run. Some ran to the East, others ran to the West. We became soldiers of all the armies that fought against Germany. We were fighting in all the big and small battles. We were also dying in the forests where we were shot in the head... But today it's forbidden to speak about that... (He was talking about the shooting of Polish officers in the Katiska Forest.) In all this we shouted our old Polish slogan - "za naszą i waszą wolność" (for our and your freedom), which was engraved on all the sabres and embroidered on the flags of the Poles who participated in the struggles all throughout Europe and America. The Polish fighters were always sent to the battles which the Great Power armies failed to win. Thousands died in the battle for Monte Casino in Italy. The following hymn is sung for them today:

Czerwone maki pod Monte Casino (Red poppies under Monte Casino)

Zamiast rosy piły polską krew... (In place of dew they drank Polish blood...)

We also had the Warsaw Uprising... It was our heroic Polish suicide... The defeats we suffered, however, didn't discourage us. And let me tell you, Pan Kole, we were also involved in foreign uprisings and victories, and, as I told you before, we carried our slogan for freedom written on our sabres... Yes... We gave the Americans Tadesh Koshchushko, the Hungarians and the Turks Iusef Bem, they were ours and they're national heroes, and we gave the Russians Felix Dzherzhinski ((11.09.1877 - 10.07.1926), - creator and head of the first Soviet security authorities.) I think that Poles also participated in your unfortunate uprising. Despite all the poverty that the war left us in, we were helping the civil war in Greece. Coincidentally, the other day I met with an old friend of mine, who was engaged in the so-called "S" action, a cryptonym under which we helped the Greek and Macedonian partisans commanded by General Markos under strictly confidential conditions. My friend in the so-called "nocne Polaków rozmowy" (Polish nightly talks - confidential meetings and close-knit Poles talking about the political situation at the time of Poland's slavery, as well as in later times, especially during communist rule) told me that Poland gave the partisans 10,000 pairs of shoes, 10,000 shirts, 15,000 metres of canvas for making military uniforms, 4,000 "Mauzer" rifles, 50 heavy and 15 light machine guns, 18 mortar launchers for 0.81mm mortars, 679 pistols, 4 million bullets, 8 complete US radio stations, 26 tons of sanitary material and medical equipment, 600 anti-tank mines, 1800 anti-personnel mines and many other explosive materials. The partisans received aid from Poland and other Soviet bloc countries through Yugoslavia until Tito and Stalin began to quarrel. After that any aid collected in Poland was delivered by Polish airplanes and ships through the Albanian port of Durres. According to my friend, Poland sent the first shipment of aid by plane, which flew from Warsaw on October 8, 1948 carrying a ton and six hundred kilos of medical equipment, medicine and explosives. The next shipment was sent by ship. The ship "Stalova Vola" carrying five hundred tons of military material left Port Gnidia on November 7, 1948. All this, according to my

friend, was done under the cryptonym “S”, meaning special action. It was carried out by II command of the Polish Army’s General Staff. But that’s not all, Pan Kole, many Polish surgeons worked in makeshift mountain hospitals housed in caves. There was also a military hospital camp in Sukt, near Durres where the wounded were rehabilitated, the chief physician in that hospital was a Jewish woman from Poland. In July 1949, at the behest of the top Polish state leadership headed by Beirut, the secret military hospital ‘250’ was opened on the island Uznam, capable of treating two thousand wounded. This hospital was equipped with state-of-the-art medical equipment and employed top Polish surgeons and doctors of various specialties. When the Polish authorities did an audit to determine how much aid was given to the partisans, they came up with 177 line items with types of equipment that started with 105mm cannons, 120mm mortars, and ended with hand-held shavers and razor blades. My friend also revealed to me that, according to a report written by General Komar, Poland accommodated 13,868 people, including 1500 wounded and 3,000 children. A separate bank account was opened for them to cover the costs of transportation, food, health care, accommodation, education for the children and other necessary services. Pan Kole, Poland, like the other countries in the Soviet bloc, got into this dirty war about which Stalin said: ‘Do you think Britain and the United States, the most powerful states in the world, will allow us to cut off their lines of communication in the Mediterranean?! And we don’t even have a fleet.’ For this reason Stalin ordered the uprising in Greece to end as soon as possible. But the Greek Communist leadership didn’t obey. And that was the first terrible landmine. In July 1948, at the height of the heaviest battles in Gramos, which lasted 70 days and nights, American journalist Polk, who arrived in Gramos via Yugoslavia, met with Zahariadis and told him that the Athens government was ready to negotiate a ceasefire and put an end to all hostilities. This time too, the Communist leadership didn’t want to listen and stepped on the second landmine which led to their defeat. The journalist who spoke with Zahariadis was found dead in Solun. We don’t know which side killed him... Sorry, Pan Kole, for getting into your drama. I wanted to tell you more about our Polish drama...”

Vishnievski stopped talking, took a burning piece of wood from the fireplace and lit the cigarette he had been rolling between his fingers

for a long time. He inhaled a long puff which made his chest expand. He then exhaled the smoke through his nose. His entire face disappeared into a grey fog. After smoking about half the cigarette, he turned to Kole and, unexpectedly changing the subject, asked:

“Back home, Pan Kole, did you give away brides?”

“No, we didn’t. Our masters took them by themselves... by written order verified by signature and seal...” replied Kole.

“Was that it?! How did they do that?” asked Vishnievski looking surprised.

“The Ministries of Interior and Defense instructed all military personnel, police, gendarmeries, civil servants, judges, teachers, priests and so on to marry girls from the local population, meaning Macedonians... (Instructions on the Greek state’s attitude towards the Macedonian population were sent to the Aegean part of Macedonia almost every year. One such instruction is kept in the archives of the author’s collection. It reads: “Ελληνικη Δημοκρατια, Υπουργειον Δημοσιας Τακσεως, Υπουργια Εθνικης Σασφαλιας, Διευση Β. Τμημα ΙΙ. Αριθ.Πρωτ. 6502/7-50428. Θεμα Επιβουλη τατα της Μακεδονιας, ΑΠΟΡΡΗΤΟΣ, Αθηνα 16 Φεβρουαριου 1982. (Greek Republic, Ministry of Public Affairs, Ministry of National Security, Directorate B, Protocol No. 6502 / 7-50428. Subject: Conspiracy against Macedonia. Secret, Athens February 16, 1982”.) A well thought out plan concocted to break family ties. Of course, they also demanded a big dowry from the brides, often in money, which impoverished their entire family... By those traditions they valued the dowry as much as they valued the bride... And when their years of service ended they left and went back to their own hometowns only to come back during the fall after the harvest. Be they from the cities or most often from the islands, from where they belonged, almost every fall, when the bins were loaded with grains, the barrels with wine and the storehouses with beans, nuts, fruits and vegetables, they came back. They would bring their children with them, the grandchildren of those who remained behind in the village. They would bring the grandchildren with them, who now spoke Greek exclusively, to visit their grandparents who didn’t speak a single word of Greek. They could only communicate

through their mother who often hesitated to speak Macedonian because the Macedonian language was described as dirty and vile by the Greeks, who made this very clear even to their own children, often in front of their Macedonian mother. They didn't stay long. They couldn't stand the smelly and dirty village courtyards and lanes and the stuff the chickens, sheep, goats, cattle and pigs left behind. They cared only for their city and nothing for their village. They only came to the village for a few days, four at most. After their short stay they took what they wanted and left. They took with them bags full of nuts, chestnuts, beans, potatoes... The grandchildren were given money for which they would say "spolaiti" (thank you) taught to them by their mother so that they could be polite to their grandparents. They didn't even know how to say goodbye to their grandparents... In the village they felt very lonely. They had no one to play with because the villagers didn't speak their language. The children, however, even though they were taught to dislike the Macedonian language and were forbidden to speak it because, according to their father, it was vile, knew that it was the language of their grandparents and in the short time they were in the village they picked up a few words from the locals. Then when they went back to the city they used those words, the words from the language of their grandparents, to annoy their city cousins."

Kole stopped talking and took a deep breath.

Vishnievski threw a log into the fireplace, sighed deeply and said:

"Yes... that's right. That is how family ties were broken and re-broken... that's how nations were broken, if there was no one to guide them and show them the way... And they, Pan Kole, those foreign grooms, I think they not only had marital obligations but also other commitments... And I think they are one of the great tools in the mill of internationalization..."

"My dear Pan Vishnievski, today all of Macedonia is full of such grooms and milling machines... We even have such grooms and milling machines here in Poland..." replied Kole.

There was silence. The log had caught fire and the fireplace was burning bright. Both men were lost in their own stormy thoughts.

Vishnievski broke the silence first and said:

“We, Pan Kole, stubbornly endured believing that with our endurance we were strengthening our faith in Poland and with our honour and self-sacrifice we defended the Polish name. We the Poles from the three parts of enslaved Poland, as well as Poles who were scattered around the world, have been defiant, not lying on our backs, our spirits were high and in our minds we never gave up hope that Poland one day would be resurrected. We defied every evil, and passing through evil we always remained Poles... Poland and Poles, those names, Pan Kole, have been ours since ancient times and will remain ours, it is our destiny. I would dare say we have been resurrected by those names because we have kept them in our past, which is our dignity and pride even though with them we had more defeats than victories. They also gave birth to our anthem, which originally was a regular military song sung by the Polish legions in Italy. Have you heard it? No? Here it is:

Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła (Poland will not be lost)

Póki my żyjemy (While we are still alive)

Co nam obca przemoc wzięła (The alien force that took from us)

Szablą odbierzemy (We will get back with a sabre)

That’s right. As long as we Poles are alive, Poland will never die...” boasted Vishnievski in a triumphant tone of voice, and after waiting a while to see how his words resonated with Kole he asked: “Are you tired of hearing my stories, Pan Kole? And have I told you where I’m from?”

“No, you haven’t told me...” replied Kole.

“My roots are from the East. We call these dear places that are now east of the current Polish border Kresy. But, unfortunately, we can’t talk about them now... In the Polish being my roots have marked 400 years of existence,” said Vishnievski.

“You mean you Poles went there and stayed for 400 years?” asked Kole.

“Something like that...” replied Vishnievski.

“We, Pan Vishnievski, haven’t taken root anywhere else outside of our country. Others have taken root in our country and that’s why they’re trying to eradicate us... In my country, Pan Vishnievski, wherever you dig, shallow or deep, you will find traces of us that go as far back as Philip II and his son Alexander. You will find shields and swords from the Roman legions... In the New Testament you will find St. Paul’s letters addressing the Macedonians. Everywhere you dig you will find foundations and crosses from the first Christian monasteries. You will find papyrus from the Bogomils and maybe some goose feather pens used by Saints Kiril and Metodi with which they wrote our alphabet... You will find the bones of warriors from the great Byzantium Empire, swords and daggers from the Crusaders. You will find Turkish yataghans and Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek skulls... Foreigners have invaded our country for centuries and turned us into slaves but we endured... In all those times, and even now, we are like the fool who stumbled on the same rock twice. We allowed these outsiders to lead us and make decisions for us. That’s how it was then and that’s how it is now. You see, Pan Vishnievski, everyone loves my country, even strangers. They love it even more; the little countries all around it and the big countries far away. But only the indigenous people carry it in their hearts and souls; the villagers, the urban and provincial craftsmen, the illiterate, the semi-literate, a handful of writers, the migrant workers, the exiled and the outcasts... My country is very much loved, Pan Vishnievski...” replied Kole.

Kole stopped talking. Something was burning inside him like the wood in the fireplace. He pushed a piece of wood with his foot further into the fire and said:

“We, Pan Vishnievski, are now like a dead and abandoned forest, with no new shoots growing. The old trees have been cut down and their juices are drained into the ground. We are like the old who go into the ground and their memories go with them with no one to remember them. Their memory is their heritage, their long legacy,

the memory of who they were, of what they did, of who did good or bad, who built, who destroyed, who contributed, who left, who was clever and who was wise. What will we build upon now that we are broken up, what will those who come after us and those who come after them add? Who knows, that's what scares me, maybe the environment will slowly nibble on us if we don't preserve what's ours, if we foolishly accept values that are different from ours, which don't drink from the juice of our roots. The old are dying and their knowledge, wisdom and memories are lost because there is no one there left to inherit them, to preserve them. You know, Pan Vishnievski, our past isn't written on parchments or in thick books, it's kept in the memory of our people and is passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. When our children back home were collected and sent to the various Eastern European countries, the old people were left with their mouths closed. There was no next generation to pass their knowledge on to. There was no next generation to tell what happened to them and to those before them. Our existence has always been recorded orally, it wasn't written down. What will we become of us when all that knowledge, all that wisdom, all those memories, all those traditions are lost? Please understand, it has been our tradition to pass our existence and memories down by word of mouth from generation to generation and not by writing them down. To whom will the grandfathers and grandmothers, now housed in various agricultural holdings and nursing homes, pass their knowledge of the land they left behind, and about the strangers who took them to end their existence? The land that the old people left behind now belongs to their grandchildren but they are no longer there, they don't have it. What will happen to the grandchildren? Someone had a good idea on how to destroy us. They said get rid of the grandchildren first and then get rid of their grandparents so that the land which nourished them won't be inherited by them. Back home, Pan Vishnievski, we had two schools, two ways of teaching our children. The first way, which was forced upon us, was to send our children to Greek school with books, notebooks and pencils in hand, sitting at a desk and being taught by a teacher who, during class, always held a rod in his or her hand with which they hit the children on their palms if they were ignorant of words in the Greek language, and most of all if they accidentally uttered a word of the forbidden language they spoke at home in secret. The second way of teaching our children,

Pan Vishnievski, was at home, in a half-dark room lit by borina (pine wood sticks), by a kerosene lamp, or by the flickering flame in the fireplace. While mothers and grandmothers worked hard weaving, spinning yarn, knitting, sewing and patching clothing, grandfathers sat by the fireplace and told stories. The grandchildren sat in a circle around them and listened. The grandfathers always started with something like: "Once upon a time..." No one wrote these stories on paper. What was said and heard was grounded in the minds of the children and remained there like a heavy stone in a deeply dug foundation. It was recorded in their memories like the word of God was inscribed in a thick book by an eagle feather pen, and protected by wooden book covers and wrapped in a white lamb's skin. By the way, such a book did exist and was kept in one of our monasteries built a long time ago on a hard-to-reach mountain cliff... When we were kids we went there just to see it and pray..." Kole stopped for a moment and then continued:

"Now, Pan Vishnievski, those old men and women, here in the Kunuv agricultural economy, sit around in silence in their beautifully decorated rooms lit by electric lights and warmed by electric heaters. They are depressed and feel lost but haven't given up hope that someday soon they will be back with their grandchildren and the silence will be broken. They are anxious to pass on everything they know from the past and what they have learned since then which, like a spool of silk thread, has been stuck in their heads. They are silent now because they don't have their grandchildren to tell their stories to. The mothers and grandmothers here don't weave, spin yarn, knit, sew, or patch clothing... They no longer sit in a semi-dark room rubbing their tired eyes, irritated by the smoke given off by the kerosene lamp. Whenever they want light they turn on a switch and light appears, hanging from the ceiling. They still shake their heads in amazement wondering where the lights come from and how it's gathered and collected. They too are silent. All sorts of thoughts swarm under those black head kerchiefs. Their busy hands are now empty, and those empty hands can only caress their empty laps on which their loved ones used to sit... but now have been taken away. In their silence their minds are flooded with thoughts, mostly painful memories. And in these well-decorated, warm and wonderful rooms, Pan Vishnievski, every day

they wait for someone to come and tell them it's time to go back home..." concluded Kole in a broken voice.

There was silence... The river of thoughts flowed... It flowed and along the way was supplemented by small streams. And those little streams were Kole's thoughts and memories. Kole broke the silence and continued:

"Then Dedo (grandfather) would begin his story something like this:

'Once upon a time there was a king who had a great kingdom, which had no name because it stretched from one end of the world to the other... They, the older ones, much older than me, and much older than the old ones,' my Dedo would say with a sad voice, 'proved to be unworthy and whether they put poison in his wine or did something worse to him, they killed the king and destroyed that great kingdom...' My Dedo used to tell long stories about the great king and his great kingdom, and we, with our dreamy eyes, patiently listened to the story and felt sorry for both the king and his kingdom. During the long winter nights, after a couple of glasses of warm red wine, Dedo would also tell us other stories. Most of these stories were about fairies, about the multi-headed dragon and the brave young man who cut off its heads with a single swing of the sword. Dedo knew many stories and told us a lot of them. He told us stories about the Turks and the Begs who kidnapped the most beautiful girls, about the thieves who hid in secluded places along the road waiting for people to return from market so that they could rob them. He told us stories about the muggers who wore white dresses and white pants tied under their knees and moccasins with pompoms on their feet. They each brandished a rifle over their shoulder and raided, looted and robbed our villages, paid off their spies, killed people and yelled out loud that the land they walked on was and must be theirs again... In a quiet voice Dedo would finish each story with something like this: 'They lived well, and we live even better...' The last story he started to tell us began something like this:

- Once upon a time there was a king who had a great kingdom, which didn't have a name because from end to end it extended all over the world ... They, older than me and much older than them, he said in a sad voice proved to be unworthy and if they put some

poison in his wine or did something worse to him, they killed the emperor and shattered that great kingdom. The story of that great emperor and that great empire was long, but we, with the dream in our eyes, listened patiently to the story and felt sorry for both the emperor and his empire. In the next long winter nights, after a couple of glasses of mulled red wine, Dedo would tell us other stories. And the stories were about fairies, dragons with many heads and brave boys whose heads were cut off with a single blow of the sword. Dedo knew many stories and told us a lot about some Turks and beys who kidnapped the most beautiful girls, about some climbers who were waiting for the shopkeepers in hidden places when they came home from the market, about some muggers with white dresses and white panties tied under the knees and with opinci with puffs who went to our villages, robbed, bought spies, slaughtered and said that the country they were going to was and should be theirs ... Dedo, in a quiet voice, told and ended each story like this: - They lived well, and we even better ... The last story he started telling us started like this:

‘There was once a country in which there were some people...’

He never did finish his last story. He’s gone now... He’s no longer here. He’s not in Kunuv to tell us the story about the country in which there were people, on these long winter evenings, where the old people rested in warm rooms... I, Pan Vishnievski, always sat in the corner and didn’t miss a word Dedo said about the country in which there were people... That story survived and was brought here. Not once and not only one night did the old people gather in their warm chambers and tell that story, the story of the country that was and the people who were in it... One would begin telling one version of the story and another would pick it up and weave it like an old string and tell an older version of it.

One version went something like this: ‘It was one country and in that country there were people. Now those people are no longer there, they’re gone. Some other people came to that country and told the native people ‘this isn’t your country and you aren’t who you think you are. You will be who we want you to be. And who you think you are, you aren’t because someone else created you, our great enemy, and we, for your own good, will make you who we

want you to be and we will give you a new name...' So, Pan Vishnievski... here in Kunuv, in those warm rooms the old people keep telling that story, the story of a country that was and of some people who were... What happened to that country and those people? Some say that some of the other people who came there chased out the original people who had lived there for centuries and exiled them. They destroyed their houses down to the foundations. They also destroyed the graves of their ancestors so that no trace of them was left... These other people then brought new people, newcomers to the country to replace the native people who were exiled. But not all of the newcomers were content with what the other people wanted them to be. So the newcomers became divided. Some wanted to accept and be what the others wanted them to be. The others wanted to be who they were and refused to become what the others wanted them to be. And so, Pan Vishnievski, the story continues. And that's how it was... a disgusting time during which there were many divisions, quarrels, hatred and slander and because of all that some people put their fate in foreign hands... and the others defended themselves with their bare hands.

At one time it was a single country and the people who lived in that country rejoiced and plowed, sowed and reaped the fruit it bore.

They were one people once...

It was one country once...

What is left of them now are only stories..." said Kole in a broken voice and stopped talking. Tears began to run down his cheeks.

There was silence.

Silent thoughts were boiling in silence.

They were both silent as they searched their distant and stormy memories. This was where their thoughts were taking them... Vishnievski's deep and sad sigh broke the thread of the long silence. He said:

“Let me tell you, Pan Kole, even though we came to what is called and written as “Ziemie Odzyskane” (Returned Lands), I don’t feel like I belong here. At least for now. My genealogy says that all of my ancestors, including myself, were born there, in Kresy. I came from there and now I’m here. When? Five years ago. The war was still raging when we were added to the eviction lists. When the German army was pushed far into the west, that’s when they opened their notebooks and began to take a census of the people who were to be moved. Then, when the Great Powers placed the cross of death on defeated Germany, they told us we were going to our ancestral Ziemie Odzyskane. That’s what the newspapers used to say... And we left ... We traveled for days in freight wagons together with the goods they were carrying. People and goods, traveling together. Even today we can’t talk about that in public. Exchange between countries; take a little, give a little, that’s how this was explained. It was decided by the Great Powers, it was their law. Before they moved us we were a big family: a noble family, owner of thousands of acres of land that included fertile fields, forests, fisheries, hunting grounds, breweries, palaces and even villages. We had our own guards and contributed to the army. My family mattered and even had its own voice in the choice of kings. When things weren’t going well in the kingdom, my dedo was called to parliament to call for a “Liberum veto” (Latin: - literally – I will freely not allow... - nothing can be done without me. In Poland during the XVII - XVIII centuries there was the principle of unanimous adoption of laws in the Sejm (parliament) that allowed the vote of one MP to dissolve the Sejm and remove already adopted laws). Nothing more was needed. But it wasn’t without brawls. Yes, there were great quarrels, strife and divisions in the Polish kingdom that led to its weakening, which was used by our neighbours to divide us. In one of those divisions our family came under Russian rule and some of our people served faithfully and were left alone, those who didn’t were sent to Siberia to be punished. And now I have relatives in Siberia. Now, Pan Kole, nobody talks about them or how and why they ended up in Siberia. When the Bolsheviki came we lost everything including most of our family. Only a few people from my large noble family were left alive. Everyone was educated and had a university degree from Lavov, a city where Polish science and culture flourished for centuries... It’s now forbidden to even talk about that too. I was a university professor there. Now at Ziemie

Odzyskane (returned Lands) I'm the manager of this Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne (State Farming) and assigned by the authorities to be your good host... Yes... this is where we have come to; this is what others have decided for us, Pan Kole... I'll also tell you this; when our Polish royal lineage was extinguished, we no longer had our own Polish king; we brought foreign kings from foreign tribes and nations. We had kings from the Hungarian, Swedish and French royal lineages. One time we picked one by choice. His name was Poniatovsky. He was rumoured to be a lover of the Russian Empress Catherine the Great. The poor man drowned in a river near the German city Leipzig while fleeing the onslaught of the Russian armies pursuing Napoleon. Unfortunately he proved to be incapable of being a king or a swimmer... but from what we hear, he was a good lover..."

Pan Vishnievski stopped talking and looked at Kole's face as if seeking confirmation and support for his words in expressing his past. After lighting a cigarette, he continued:

"Let me tell you, Pan Kole, not that we Poles are united today... Here we have a government and a President of the People's Republic of Poland, and in London we have a government and a President in exile. Through their press and radio they both sputter and swear mercilessly at each other trying to prove that they alone are the true saviours, and I am deeply convinced that neither serves the Polish people, they both serve someone else. This is sad but true. But, there is always that hope that someone right for this country will be born, like the one who resurrected Poland some thirty years ago, and put Poland on the right path again. Let's not lose hope and let our hope be our strong support... And let's not forget the great truth that he who forgets his birthplace will always be a stranger..."

A deep sigh poured out of Vishnevski's mouth and silence prevailed only to be broken by the loud howl of the north wind.

Kole listened to every word Vishnievski said but when he noticed a note of distress in the tone of his voice, to appease him he put a log on the fire and, with a curious tone of voice, asked:

“The books and the big library you mentioned you had, what happened to them? What happened to the books?”

“Let me say that we didn’t leave them to the Bolsheviks. The entire Osolinski library and many other private libraries were packed up and transported to Breslau, now Vrotslav. All the books and old manuscripts that had been collected by generations of the great Osolinski family for centuries are now housed in a large building in Vrotslav. We also transferred the entire library fund to the Lavov Polytechnic and the Lavov University. They are still a source of knowledge and a great testament to Polish culture. Like before, they are now used by teachers to teach and students to learn. And when I go to Vrotslav, if I have some free time, I go there and in the silence of the large reading room I renew my knowledge and sometimes borrow books...” replied Vishnievski.

“I, Pan Vishnievski, haven’t had a book in my hands for a long time. I used to read a lot... I love books...” said Kole.

“If you’re interested, Pan Kole, I can get you some books from the Vrotslav libraries, either from the Osolinski library or from the university, and bring them to you. Just tell me what subjects interest you... Do you want me to bring you books, Pan Kole? Also let me ask you another question which I find a bit difficult to ask...” said Vishnievski before he was interrupted by Kole who said:

“Please don’t hesitate, ask away...”

“Why did you, an educated and intelligent man, decide to come here to this agricultural economy and work as...” asked Vishnievski and didn’t finish his question so as not to offend his guest.

Kole noticed the hesitation in Vishnievski’s voice, quietly sighed and said:

“Pan Vishnievski, I didn’t decide to come here. It wasn’t my wish to come here... I was sent here... sent for...” said Kole and paused while searching for an answer as to why he had been sent there.

The fire was burning low in the fireplace, the logs were almost burnt out and the ash was slowly covering the glowing embers. The north wind was howling outside and the snowstorm was piling snow on the windowsill.

Sitting there in silence, lost in their own thoughts, the two men kept digging into their past while sipping vodka from their crystal shot glasses, trying to drown their incurable pain...

After a long silence, Kole spoke first. He said:

“A few months after our admission to Poland, somehow we, a few comrades from the gymnasiums from Bitola and Veles and a couple from the battlefields of the Greek Civil War, managed to find each other and get back together. But not all of us made it. Four remained on the battlefield forever. We also learned of another being alive but without legs. Our group shrank to only five. We decided to study, and we went to the city education council to inquire if the Polish authorities would allow us to enroll in any of the gymnasiums here. They didn’t ask what kind of education we had, they told us that those who didn’t have a high school diploma would need to attend a two-year preparatory seminar, and I, since I’d graduated from the Faculty of Philology in Solun, was advised to contact the rector of the Vrotslav University. I was treated very kindly there and about a week after I was interviewed by an old gentleman, who introduced himself as a professor of ancient Greek at the University of Lavov, I received word that my qualifications had checked out. On the recommendation of the old gentleman I was offered a job to teach Ancient Greek. I accepted the position and at the same time asked if I could take courses and get a bachelor’s degree in Slavic Studies. The professors agreed and we all shook hands on it. So for me the grand gate of the University of Vrotslav was now open. My friends also received letters from the educational authorities informing them that they had been provided with boarding accommodation and scholarships. How much better could life get? I thought. After that we all waited patiently for the school year to begin and we passed the time working at the train car manufacturing factory,” said Kole before he was interrupted by Vishnievski who asked:

“What did you do there?”

“We moved iron from one place to another. Not that we had any profession! We worked in the day and late at night we learned Polish. We each paid the teacher a couple of hundred...” said Kole before he again was interrupted by Vishnievski who asked:

“Ah, and where did you live?”

“On Hubska Street... Yes, there on Hubska Street... it had no number...” said Kole before he was interrupted by Vishnievski again who asked:

“Where was it?”

“Beyond the central train station behind a large grey building. All the buildings around it were wrecked from the heavy Soviet bombardments. Some said that this part of the city had been bombed by Katiusha rockets. That was the only building in the area that was left alive. I say alive because the first floor, the ground floor and the basement were still livable even though there was no water or electricity. Most importantly the residents there were protected from the wind and rain. The busiest areas were the basement and the ground floor. There were all sorts of people living there and all sorts of things going on. There were robbers, pimps and street prostitutes. They were the most numerous residents of the basement. There were also waiters, service people, informants, city couriers serving the Vratslav underground and some homeless people. They all stayed up late at night until the last drop of vodka was drunk. They slept on the floor and relieved themselves behind the building. They also had bosses but they weren't with them in the basement. Their bosses had apartments in hotels and some in luxury villas that were untouched by the Soviet-led offensive. That's what we were told and we had no reason not to believe what we were told because we too were witnesses of the risen and witnesses of the fallen...” said Kole, took a deep breath and continued:

“All the buildings around the central railway station, where trains rumbled day and night, were demolished, only piles of rubble remained. I also want to tell you that when I was there something else happened to me. I always walked on the paths. I say paths

because the streets were covered with ruins. On my way towards our residence in Hubska a masked man suddenly jumped in front of me holding a brick in his hand pointing it at me. Stop he yelled and then said 'kup, pan, cegłę!' (buy a brick sir). I recognized his voice and said to him in Polish: 'Te, Jacek, te skurwi synie, te świnio, to ty mnie, kurwa, mnie cegłę, kurwa, co!' (You, Jasek, a whore's son, you pig, whore, me, brick, whore!). I also quoted a few more of the many similar words I'd learned in the streets and from the underground vocabulary. I hit him one and before he fell I gave him a kick between his legs... That night I was agitated all night long, I couldn't calm down. Then a stranger came over and, in a mild tone of voice, asked me if I could give him a cigarette. Being distracted I was suddenly attacked in the corridor from above. Someone, or perhaps more of them, threw a sack full of something hard over my head. I was hurt but still alive. Bricks in Vratslav were sold at night behind the train station. Who was brave enough not to buy one when a knife was flashed in front of their eyes? Yes. Bricks were sold but only at night. The residents of Hubska left for work early in the morning and came back late at night. They carried piles of stolen items from abandoned German apartments. Trucks would then arrive before dawn and pick up the stolen or should I say looted goods. The same trucks, with lights off patrolled the roads leading to the Warsaw markets and robbed unsuspecting travelers. This was the same road on which many inhabitants lost their lives during the war, especially during the Warsaw Uprising when everything was lost. Nothing was left. Everything was done underhanded and sold and resold. This is what they told us in order to persuade us to join them because, they said, there was a lot of money to be made in this type of work...

It was here on Hubska Street that we received news that Macedonian teachers and educators were being expelled from the Macedonian schools in the state education centre in Zgozhelets. The Party made a decision to replace the Macedonian Cyrillic alphabet with the Bulgarian one, or, like they said, to replace it with the 'new Aegean' alphabet. We immediately rejected their decision and, after a few brief consultations among us, we decided to send a protest letter to the Greek party committee, whose seat was in Zgozhelets. Several days later, a couple of people in civilian clothes arrived to see us. They asked us if we were the ones who had written the letter. We

said yes. Then they told us to go with them and took us to Zgozhelets by train. There they locked us up in the basement. They ordered us to sit down and flashed bright lights in our faces. From the way the basement was arranged, I realized that we weren't the first visitors there. They opened their notebooks, sharpened their pencils and began to interrogate us. They accused us of being, reactionaries, chauvinists, nationalists, anti-party elements and Tito's agents..." said Kole before he was interrupted by Vishnievski who asked:

'Here, in a report submitted to us by the Party committee in Zgozhelets, it says that you considered the expulsion of Macedonian teachers and educators by the Greek party organization from the schools in the state educational centre (State Education Centre - in Polish: Państwowy Ośrodek Wychowawczy. In Zgozhelets Macedonian and Greek children were housed in a centre which in the past had been a German barracks. It consisted of two parts – "Białe koszary" - White Barracks - which included preschool and school children, and "Zgorzelec Ujazd" in which children over the age of fifteen studied crafts. The Greek committee, without Polish consent, called the first part "Παιδουπολη Ζαχαριαδης" (Pedioupolis Zahariadis) meaning Children's Town Zahariadis, and the second part "Παιδουπολη Τερποφσκι" (Pedioupoli Trpovski) meaning Children's Town Trpovski) in Zgozhelets and the change from the Macedonian Cyrillic alphabet to Russian or Bulgarian a hostile anti-Macedonian act. Do you agree with that?'

I said: 'Yes.'

'I also agree... I don't think one can change the alphabet by a party directive... Further down in the report it said that you said: 'The Party has decided that the language and alphabet are artificially created...' I don't want to read any more... Did you say that or not?' he asked.

I said: 'Yes we said that...'

And he said: 'Yes... I agree with you...'

The colonel put the papers aside and, after taking a few puffs from his cigarette and blowing the smoke out of his nose, looked at me and quietly said:

‘I was taught, young man, that the language of birth, with the first milk of a mother’s breast, is learned and passed on from generation to generation and not created by party decision... To claim that a language and an alphabet were created by someone for political reasons and needs is...’ He didn’t finish his sentence. He took the report out of my file, handed me the red pencil and, in a commanding voice, said:

‘I was taught, young man, that the language of birth, with the first milk of a mother’s breast, is learned and passed on from generation to generation, and not created by party decision... To claim that a language and an alphabet were created by someone for political reasons and needs is...’ He didn’t finish his sentence. He took the report out of my file, handed me the red pencil, and in a commanding voice, said:

‘Sign your full name here and sit there in the corner.’ He then growled ‘Next!’ with his hoarse voice.

The next person was Traiche, the irreconcilable Traiche, the best student in the Bitola gymnasium, a clear thinker, well-read and clever, a favourite of his comrades, of the girls in the gymnasium and the girls in Bitola in general. He was the first to join the partisans as a fighter and commander in the 18th brigade, who swore by Pando Vaina. He’d told us that his dedo had been slaughtered by the Greek Andartes, the criminal Cretans who the Athenians called ‘Makedonomahi’ Macedonian fighters. He’d told us that his father had served many years in the most notorious prison in Greece, the Akronavplion from which he never recovered. He’d told us that his younger, 17 year-old brother was a partisan in the 103 DAG brigade who was killed in the battle for Lerin. He’d told us that his mother was killed by a mortar shell along with the wounded person she was carrying on her shoulders. Traiche was now the only one of his entire family left alive. He didn’t like the Party or its leader and hated all Macedonians who swore by him... Traiche was also wounded, struck by a bullet in his right shoulder and a piece of

shrapnel. He was taken to the hospital secretly known as ‘Hospital 250’ where he was treated by Polish doctors. It was in this hospital that he quickly learned the Polish language, often begging nurse Pani (Ms) Tereska, whom he admired and about whom he had long dreams, to bring him books from the hospital library.

The Colonel pulled out a sheet of paper folded in four from an envelope, opened it, read it carefully and highlighted some of its content with his red pencil. He then glanced over at Traiche and said:

‘It says here that you said that Macedonia doesn’t need parties. It only needs a strong leader... that a divided people needs a strong unifier... and not parties... You said parties are a tool of division. In a word - just a leader. Do you admit saying that?’

“Yes...” replied Traiche.

‘Good. Let me see what else you said and what the reason for bringing you here was,’ said the colonel, flipped over a few pages, hit the paper with his red pencil and said: ‘Here it says that you said that before the Inform biro resolution, the political commissars and party people forced you to praise Tito and after they made you swear at him. Do you admit that you said that? Is it true that you said that?’

‘Yes... we first praised him and then we cursed him...’ replied Traiche. ‘That’s what the political commissars told us to do and that’s exactly what we did... We had to be obedient...’

‘Let me see what else you said... Here it says: ‘Our people live in four countries. They live under four regimes each working to depersonalize and denationalize them. Hence the Macedonians have many enemies and their biggest enemies are Macedonians. And that is why they will always be just victims. And in order for them not to be exploited by foreigners and traitors who are forcing them to change their name, they need to be more Macedonian so that the name left to them by their dedos is kept intact. That name unites all the people who are of the same origin and faith. That name is the

link that binds all people, even those of other origins and faiths and entices them to live together...’

‘Do you admit saying that?’ asked the Colonel.

‘Yes...’ replied Traiche.

‘Well said... Do you have anything else to admit to?’ asked the Colonel.

‘Yes... I want to say something but not to admit to things...’ replied Traiche.

“Okay then, go ahead...” said the Colonel.

‘We aren’t against the party. We want the party to be with us, as we have been with it throughout the entire Greek Civil War. But, instead of being with us, every day the party spreads lies about us; that we are Tito’s agents, that we are the people’s enemies and so on. On top of that they have abolished our organization NOF and AFZH because the party claims they served Tito and contributed directly to DAG’s defeat. No one else is being blamed for DAG’s defeat except for NOF and AFZH, whose leaders were the biggest worshipers of the party. The leaders of NOF and AFZH were the ones calling the (Macedonian) people to arms for three years and to give everything they had so that the party could come out victorious. And the (Macedonian) people gave everything they had... and lost everything. Our people have been stripped bare and torn away from their homes... Our families are broken and we don’t know where they are. As if this wasn’t enough, the party further denigrated us by claiming that our Macedonian language was artificially created by Tito... that the Macedonian alphabet is artificial... and that Tito created the Macedonian identity artificially. So now they’re doing in Poland what they used to do to us in Greece. Now, here in Poland, the party has abolished the Macedonian language in favour of creating some sort of new ‘Aegean’ language. The party has abolished our Macedonian Cyrillic alphabet and introduced the Bulgarian Cyrillic and, in order to be able to implement it, found a solution; expel the teachers who taught the children the Macedonian language. They say this was a party decision... We also don’t accept

the party decision that expelled the mothers from the children's boarding homes... These women accompanied the children from home to here and have dedicated their lives to look after them...'

Traiche stopped talking for a moment and then asked:

"Is what I'm telling you already written down on those pages in your yellow envelope?"

"No... It's not written down. I'll write it down now..." said the colonel and pressed a black button. An officer with two stars walked into the office. The Colonel ordered him to take us to the dining hall. There they gave us bread and cans of sardines. A short while later the two-star officer brought us back to the Colonel. He immediately began the interrogation.

'In the apartment, in Hubska, what did you talk about?' the Colonel asked.

I spoke first and said: "We have nothing to hide about what we talked during our nightly sessions there... Now that we were no longer in the war and lived free in Poland, we talked mostly about learning and how we could use our time to learn more. We don't have much education and we wanted to build it up... we wanted to learn more. Work and learn..."

The colonel listened and took notes. He stopped for a moment, glanced at me and asked:

"About those in Zgozhelets, in that party committee, as you said it, did they have any brains in their heads or were their heads filled with moldy hay? They sent you to me because you were talking about wanting to study and work, that you loved your homeland, Macedonia, right? So, I fought in two world wars, two civil wars, in Spain and China and I was always talking about Poland and no one because of that, no one reprimanded me or interrogated me... Did they send you here because you love Macedonia? They sent you here to waste my time when there's a war I need to fight against domestic and foreign reactionaries?" he said and then yelled 'Duty officer!' The same two-star officer walked in. The Colonel ordered

him to personally take us to the train station, buy us first class tickets and send us back to Zgozhelets. He ordered us to report back to the Greek party committee. The next day we did what we were told and went to see the party committee. There they welcomed us with the most hideous words and recommended that we be kicked out, find our own jobs and accommodations and report to the party committee once a week. But instead of doing what they asked, we went back to Hubska Street in Vrotslav...

The comrades from the party committee in Zgozhelets weren't happy with what we'd done and so they wrote a letter to the city's state security service demanding that all of us be detained on the grounds that we were public enemies and that an investigation be initiated in order for us to be tried by a competent Polish court. The city's chief of staff forwarded the request to the state security and the wheel started turning again, which took us back to the same colonel. After reading the report against us, he turned to the comrade from the party committee, who was in our company at all times, and said:

'We have no legal basis to bring a lawsuit against these people. They didn't violate any Polish laws. There is no Polish law to charge them with for having opinions. Just because you think they violated the spirit of your party, doesn't give you the right to refer them to the Polish courts... I don't see that there is any more need for me to be involved in this... You are free...'

The comrade from the party committee was visibly irritated, interrupted the colonel and told him:

'With your behavior, Comrade, you confirm that you stand on their side and don't forget that there is also a priest above the priest... That's what our people say...'

Feeling threatened more by Comrade Parousis's (the man from the party committee) tone than by his words, the Colonel, gathering his papers together, said:

'Is this what your people say or is it what your party says?'

They brought us back to Zgozhelets. They kept us in the basement for two days and fed us stale bread and water. They decided to ‘re-educate us’, not by sending us to school but by sending us to work. They told us that if we worked hard we wouldn’t have time to think about the nonsense we were up to. They also told us that today we were free and warned us that we needed to work in order to continue to earn our freedom. And so, Pan Vishnievski, as crazy as it may sound this is why I’m here in this place today. I was sent here by a party decision, to be re-educated...”

Kole stopped talking. His gaze was strangely lost in the horizon where the sky met the wide plain.

“What about those young people over there?” asked Vishnievski, looked over, made a motion with his hand and continued:

“What about those three young people who are pulling the cart from the mud with their horses? Were they are sent here for re-education?”

“Yes...” replied Kole.

“But why?” asked Vishnievski.

“When they found out about the party’s decision to abolish the Macedonian Cyrillic alphabet they went out during the night and wrote anti-party graffiti on the barrack walls in Zgozhelets. In bold letters they also wrote slogans such as ‘Long live Macedonia!’ Unfortunately they were caught. The party police, in which Macedonians were included, and without whom the party couldn’t do all its dirty work, discovered them. They went through the same screening process as we from Hubska did and here they are... They are forbidden from associating with me and with everyone else. And that’s how it is, Pan Vishnievski, the party has its own people everywhere... even sitting in the school desks... And now, Pan Vishnievski, you know how we got here, in Kunuv, in this agricultural economy...” replied Kole.

Kole and Vishnievski spent the long winter evenings together. Their conversations were always tied to their past and to difficult times. During one of those nights, Kole opened up his soul even further and said:

“We, Pan Vishnievski, have placed our destiny in the hands of others and as a result we first conquered the mountains and then the road leading to no return... Perhaps some day we will realize that what we have done wasn’t beneficial for our people, but only to reward the individuals who present themselves as the leaders of the people...”

“I see, Pan Kole, that in the lists your party committee gave me, your names are all Greek. But when you talk to each other, I hear you calling yourselves by names that sound more Polish than Greek, ending in ‘vski’ for example like my name ‘Vishnievski’. Your names are quite similar or very similar to Polish,” commented Vishnievski.

“That’s right, Pan Vishnevski. In the lists we are Greeks and have been since the day Greece put us under its control. The Greeks not only changed our first and last names but also the names of our villages, cities, rivers, lakes, mountains... They changed everything that wore our mark and that differentiated us from them... We are all Greeks in their lists with their names, not with our names... This is how they like us to be; without our own names and with the names they gave us. That was and still is their great illness... This is how it is, Pan Vishnievski... We are Greeks in their lists but Macedonians in our hearts and souls when we are at home with our families, when we work in the fields, in the vineyards, when no snitches and no one from the authorities listens and when we speak our own Macedonian language. And here in these Polish fields, behind the carts and tractors, in our homes and canteens, we are Macedonians. These

people you care about, Pan Vishnievski, back home didn't understand what the priest was saying in our churches because the priests delivered the liturgy in Greek and not in the language they understood. These people didn't even understand the judges when they delivered their sentences in Greek because they only understood Macedonian. And here, they gave you lists in which we are all Greeks. And when we speak to you in our Macedonian language, you say many words are similar to Polish and you are surprised how similar our languages are. When you, Poles, speak Polish we understand you. Not only myself, because I have some education, but also the uneducated women and old people who don't speak a word of Greek. They too understand you... Even the Polish workers who accompanied us on the road and brought us here noticed some of the similarities in our languages. This is what one of the nurses told me on our way here. She said: 'Pan Kole, before the war I was studying ancient and modern Greek in the Warsaw Gymnasium, and when they told me that they would be sending me on a special and secret Greek-related mission I was delighted. I took my ancient and modern Greek books from my home library and threw them in my backpack, along with my other essentials. All through the journey I took the books out and tried to impress the people by reading to them. From the moment we made contact I addressed them in Greek, and they, especially the older women, looked at me in disbelief. I saw fear in their eyes and some wouldn't take my hand when I offered my assistance. I spoke to them in Greek but they kept quiet and looked at me with mockery on their faces. 'Καταλαβεις?' (Do you understand?) I asked one woman. She nodded her head somewhat coldly. I got frustrated and said out loud: 'Moj, Boze, nic nie rozumiem!' (My, God, I don't understand anything.) A middle-aged man came over and in a very calm voice said to me in Greek: 'Excuse me, sister, I understand you...' I looked at him and started chewing his words. He then said: 'Forgive me but those words you spoke sound like Russian words, forgive me but those words sister are quite similar to ours. Even the word 'sistro' (sister) is quite similar to our word 'sestra'... I stood there puzzled... And then, the man who told me he had understood slowly and admirably told me again: 'Sorry sister, they don't understand you because you speak Greek to them.' 'Are you not Greeks?' I asked. He then said: 'Why not ask them?' I turned to a woman and, while pointing my finger at my eye, nose, mouth, teeth, hair, foot, said the

words in Greek out loud like it was done with students. Nothing! I then pointed to myself and said: ‘Ia siostra’ (I am a nurse) in Polish and one of the women said: ‘Ti mila nasha sestra...’ (Our dear sister...)” Stunned, I immediately translated the whole sentence to Polish: ‘ty miła nasza siostra...’ Mój Boże! (My god) I yelled in amazement and they said ‘Moi Bozhe’. And after that we spoke to each other, I in Polish and the women in their own language, which made me wonder what kind of Greeks these people were who could understand Polish? So I asked the man: ‘Are they Russians?’

‘No, Ms nurse, they aren’t Russians,’ replied the man.

‘How can they be Greeks if they don’t understand me when I speak Greek to them? What are they?’ I asked the man.

‘That’s right; they’re not Greeks either...’ replied the man and left without telling me anything more.

‘So what are they, Pan Kole?’ she asked me when we were talking.

‘Macedonians... pani siostro, Macedończycy...’ I said to her,” Kole concluded.

“After that, Pan Vishnievski, our dear nurse hid her Greek books in her backpack and pulled out a large notebook and, throughout the entire journey, wrote the Macedonian word beside each Polish word. She questioned the women by pointing at something and saying what it was in Polish, the women then told her how to say it in Macedonian... Later, her tiny Polish-Macedonian dictionary was of great help in the hospital, where she took care of our wounded...” said Kole, smiled and continued:

“Now, Pan Vishnievski, I will tell you something that will make you laugh. All the while we were aboard the ship traveling to Głanisk, Polish doctors and nurses took care of our people. During the medical examinations, the doctors often would ask: ‘boli głowa, noga, oko, nos, rana, zęby, gardło?’ (Does your head, leg, eye, nose, wound, teeth, throat hurt?) And our answer would be: ‘ne boli głowa, noga, oko, nos, rana, zabi, grło...’ (My head, leg, eye, nose, wound, teeth, throat... doesn’t hurt). And then there were the nurses who

delivered our food, they would say: ‘chleb, mleko, mięso...’ (bread, milk, meat) and our people understood what they were saying and would often say to me: ‘Dear Kole, why do they taunt us by twisting our words, why don’t they speak to us with our pure words? Surely they’re pretending to be Poles? No, they certainly aren’t Poles, they are our people. They just pretend to be... they are our people... I swear to God, they are our people...’ that’s what some of the women said to me,” said Kole and stopped talking.

The silence lasted a long time. Both men stared at the surrounding hills and trees whose leaves had been gilded by the fall and, without turning his head, Kole spoke first. He said:

“These people, Pan Vishnievski, about whom you care on a daily basis, have their own deep-rooted sense of uniqueness. They are villagers who for generations have been tied to their land, their flocks, their sickle, their hoe... They are now torn from their plough, their sheep, their goats, their cattle... They are torn but their minds are still with them, with their land and with their flocks that nourished them. They lived poor lives, some together with their goods and animals, in the same house under the same roof. They lived on the top floor and their animals under them and in the yard. The light with which they lit their homes was either borina (pine wood sticks) or kerosene lamps... No wonder they are so amazed by the glass bulbs that glow from the ceilings over their heads here. As soon as a child starts walking in the village they are ready for work. Even before they are teenagers, children, often barefoot or wearing pig skin moccasins, earn their bread by working hard. Our people, Pan Vishnievski, are village people, poor, illiterate and ignorant. They had as much food as they could extract from the fields, the garden and their flocks. For as long as their plow was plowing, for as long as they could sow and harvest, and for as long as their yard was full of sheep, goats and cattle there was no hunger for them. Their world was as wide as the distance from their home to the village limits. Here in Poland, Pan Vishnievski, they walk along the clean streets with no mud on their shoes and eat three meals a day in the canteen. At home they ate once or twice a day, usually homemade bread and cheese. They ate meat only on special occasions or during the holidays. Out of the hundred and ten men who lived in my village, half of them were pechalbari (migrant

workers) working overseas or on lands outside the village. As far as education was concerned, the old people had none and most of the children went as far as grade four. But when it came to religion and agriculture the village children knew more than their teachers. The children quickly learned arithmetic with its four actions - adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing up to one hundred... and mythology... The teachers insisted that they learn the so-called Greek mythology and know all the so-called Greek mythological gods, and if they didn't they came home with swollen palms, hit by the teacher's rod countless times. Ironically the teachers weren't paid by the state but by our poor people who were taught to be uneducated. Yes, they were taught nothing... Go and speak to any of our woman in Greek; I bet you they won't understand a single word you say. Our men and women who were born during Ottoman times (before 1912) and didn't know any Greek but the Greeks, after they occupied our lands, insisted that we speak only Greek. When our people were caught speaking Macedonian, their mother tongue, the only language they knew, they were dragged through the courts and punished. Some were fined so much it pushed them into poverty. Then came the communists who filled their heads with ideas... They were told that under communist rule no one would punish them for speaking their mother tongue, that for them there would be no poverty, there would be plenty of food, they wouldn't need to plow their fields with oxen, Russia was going to give them machines to do that work, there would be no need for the men to do migrant work overseas and no one would prohibit them from speaking their language. And the most important thing about this was that no one was going to prison for speaking their language. The villagers believed those promises and believed the communists would be protected from evil. The people who made these promises were communists themselves and the ignorant people believed and began to embrace their new faith (communism). They were ignorant and now they were even more ignorant. And ignorant people are what it needs the most when you want to achieve something. The people themselves weren't communists but they accepted the Communist Party because it was the only party that promised them protection. For these people, Pan Vishnievski, the authorities had no love or compassion; they disliked their way of life, their homes and their primordial lands. In the state's eyes these people didn't count for anything, they were just in the way and needed to disappear. What

else can you call it when the state changes your name and forbids you from speaking your own language? The end of the Great War (WW II) didn't bring our people what they expected; what they were promised for their sacrifices. And those who promised them protection were dragged into a new war. Deceived by some of their own people, they again took the communist side even though they weren't communists... And as far as I know, Pan Vishnievski, the Poles were also promised much but you, being literate and learned people, fought for your own interests. We, Pan Vishnievski, put our fate in the hands of the Greek communists who promised us that we would be free. And we believed their idolatry. We trusted them a lot and put our faith in them and they brought us here. I believed them too and now I'm here in your farm..."

"What kind of work did you do, Pan Kole, during the war?" asked Vishnievski.

"I gave speeches, made decisions, shouted slogans written by the Greek communists with promises, calling on the Macedonian people to fight against Anglo-American imperialism and later against Tito. I translated many of their speeches and slogans into Macedonian and the faithful but ignorant Macedonian communists printed them in our newspapers... They themselves read them, but most of what they read they didn't understand and even misrepresented to the illiterate Macedonian villagers... There I was needed... Here I am accused..." replied Kole.

"What did they accuse you of?" asked Vishnievski.

"What didn't they accuse me of...? They accused me of being a Titoist, of being a Macedonian nationalist... You know, Pan Vishnievski, when a small group of us Macedonians were in quarantine, we decided to go to Vroslav... to work in a factory and study. Some of us already had high school diplomas, others had just enrolled in the gymnasiums in Bitola and Veles and some at the University of Skopje. I was at the end of my studies in the People's Republic of Macedonia, the federal part of Yugoslavia, even though I already had a degree in philology from the University of Solun. At that time, in the part of Macedonia that was under Greek rule, I was one of the few educated Macedonians... Then the Greek communists

went ahead and boycotted the elections in Greece. As a result the English assisted political right assumed power and began to persecute the political left, especially the Macedonian people. The Macedonian people in Greece faced unprecedented terror. Once the political right established itself in the Greek part of Macedonia, it began to create lists of who to target, persecute, jail and exile. A huge part of our population from the villages was sent to prison in the dry Greek island camps... And most of them didn't know why. It was madness... To save themselves from the onslaught, many party activists, party organizational leaders, secretaries, ELAS (Ellinikos Laikos Apelefterotikos Stratos - Greek National Liberation Army) commissars, commanders... fled for Yugoslavia at the behest of the party by secret channels. Bulkesh was their destination. And at that time the Greek Civil War was raging in Greece. God willing, Pan Vishnievski, I will tell about Bulkesh another time... All the boys who studied in the Bitola and Veles high schools as well as myself and three others who were studying at the Skopje University, who were from the Kostur and Lerin villages, were collected and kept in a cellar in Bitola for a few days, near the military officer's boarding house. Morally and politically they were preparing us to be fighters. We didn't need much convincing. We, too, were victims of what was happening in our country and frankly confirmed that we wanted to join the struggle against the new authorities in Greece, and most of all, as some of our Bitola high school professors told us, to fight for Macedonia. Let us fight so that our divided Macedonia can be reunited again. By the way, our professors, as we learned later, paid with jail sentences for promoting the idea of liberating Macedonia. They were tried when we were bleeding on top of the Macedonian mountains... They were punished with long prison sentences to be served in concentration camps... And when they brought us to Poland, we of the few who were left alive didn't forget that we were Macedonians who loved Macedonia. We thought so but the party didn't," concluded Kole.

Kole paused for a moment, looked at Vishnievski and continued:

"The party declared us nationalists and Tito's agents. They took my pencil and notebook and gave me the reins of a horse. And now I guide a horse-drawn carriage and transport what's loaded on it so that they from the party committee can re-educate me. In their list I

am known as Nikos Simigis but what do you hear my people call me?” asked Kole and continued.

“They call me Kole Simidziewski and the others they call Ianevski, Petrovski, Ristovski... But in the Greek lists they are called Giannopoulos, Petropoulos, Hristopoulos...”

The Greek authorities took away our real names and gave us these Greek names, Pan Vishnievski, and then they gave you these lists and told you that we are Greeks,” Kole added.

Looking like he had suddenly remembered something new, Vishnievski turned to Kole and said: “Yes, that’s what they told me. I remember that now very clearly. When I first met your people and listened to them talking among themselves, I noticed they used Polish sounding words. So at one point I asked one of the men: ‘What kind of Greeks are you using words in your conversations that are similar to Polish?’ He said: ‘Well, we aren’t Greeks, we’re Slavo-Macedonians.’ The man from the party committee also told me, several times: ‘We are Greeks and they are Slavo- Macedonians. To differentiate them from us Greeks we called them Slavo-Macedonians because they are Slavs by race. Like you who are Slavs.’ Well if that’s so, I said to him, then you should be calling the Poles Slavo-Poles. Maybe, he said, if the Poles lived in Greece. I then said to him: ‘You people are racist!’ ‘No, you’re not right!’ he replied with a raised voice. ‘We are only Communists.’ Then he, Pan Kole, threatened me and said that my opinion would be judged by the party committee in Zgozhelets...”

Kole laughed loudly and, tapping Vishnievski on the shoulder, said:

“Rest assured they won’t give you an excellent grade...”

Vishnievski smiled and said: “The other day walking on the road I met an older man and, after a short conversation, I asked him what his name was. He said:

‘My old name is Petrovski...’

I took out the list from my briefcase but I couldn't find his name on it. I said to him:

'Your name isn't on my list.'

He then said: 'Look for Petropoulos, is there a Petropoulos on your list?'

I looked and there it was. I said: 'Yes, there is a Petropoulos on my list.'

To my surprise he said: 'Erase the name Petropoulos and write Petrovski in its place. That's my real name which I inherited from my family. Erase Petropoulos and write down Petrovski. Do it!' he insisted. 'Wipe out Petropoulos because here I'm free to call myself by my real name. Petropoulos reminds me of the taste of castor oil and renka (salted dry fish)...' This is what he said to me, Pan Kole, what does it mean?"

Kole looked at him and said: "When taken orally castor oil causes strong diarrhea and 'renka' is a dry and very salty fish. They were force-fed to the Macedonian people by the Greek authorities to punish, castigate and humiliate them for speaking their Macedonian language. So, how are we to interpret their actions...? When they ban your language and change your name by force?"

"Pan Kole, our elders at home, at school, at church, at children's camps and youth camps always told us to love your language and your homeland... And those kids among you, Pan Kole, why were they sent here?" asked Vishnievski.

"To punish them, Pan Vishnievski, to punish them for loving their language and their homeland. The day the party committee announced that it was replacing what it called the artificial Macedonian Cyrillic language that Tito created for the Macedonians, with Russian or Bulgarian, and removed the teachers, educators and women accompanying the children from the State Education Centre, some of those children rebelled. They went out during the night writing graffiti and slogans on the city walls in support of Macedonia. And those who were caught were sent here

by the party committee for re-education, just like the rest of us. They were caught with help from their schoolmates, party activists and party police...” replied Kole.

On one of the following winter evenings, after drinking his second shot of vodka, Pan Vishnievski said:

“I see, Pan Kole, you haven’t learned how to drink vodka. I’m surprised by how you continue to sip it so slowly. Watch and learn. You take your full shot glass of vodka, you tip your head back a little, you open your mouth and, with a single swing, you dump it down your throat. You don’t have to swallow, it just runs down to your stomach on its own... Observe, here is how it’s done...” and Vishnievski demonstrated.

“And wine, do you drink wine, Pan Kole?” asked Vishnievski.

“We drink wine during the holidays, weddings, baptisms and during cheerful and sad days. We don’t serve wine from bottles, we serve it from pitchers. The host fills a pitcher full of fresh wine from the wine barrel and puts it in the centre of the table. The hostess then fills the wine glasses from the pitcher. We don’t drink wine like water, we sip it slowly with pleasure pouring it inside our mouths. Sip after sip after sip... merging the wine with the throat, stomach and soul,” replied Kole.

“In other words you don’t drink much, right?” asked Vishnievski.

“Yes we do but in moderation, Pan Vishnievski... And, of course, there are those who drink without moderation...” replied Kole.

“In other words, you don’t have many drunkards, do you?” asked Vishnievski.

“Not many but there are drunkards. We also have songs about drinking. In our country, Pan Vishnievski, wine and rakia songs are common and have been sung by our people because these drinks are

part of our sweat and daily lives. The days when we harvest our grapes, when we ferment our wine and when we distill our rakia are holidays for us..." replied Kole.

"When do you drink wine the most?" asked Vishnievski.

"We drink wine mostly during the fall and winter and rakia all year round..." replied Kole then stopped talking. He then stared ahead far into the distance and quietly began to murmur:

"Vino piam, em rakia, (I drink wine, I drink rakia,
Kon iavam, adzhamia. (A horse I ride, like an amateur.)
Kon me sheta gore dolu, (The horse takes me here and there,)
Gore dolu niz toa pole... (Here and there in the valley...)
Me odnese na ladna meana, (It took me to a cool inn,)
Bo meana do tri momi. (To three girls in the inn.)
Prvata tochi, drugata nosi, (The first poured, the second served,)
A tretata mene me gleda. (And the third kept looking at me.)
Pa ia kachiv na Koncheto, (I took her and put her on my pony,)
Ia odnesov pravo doma... (I took her straight to my home...)"

The quiet murmur brought Kole home.

"Are you singing, Pan Kole?" asked Vishnievski.

"Sorry about drifting away... Our conversation reminded me of a drinking song we used to sing back home called drinking wine and rakia... it's a folk song... Our people, Pan Vishnievski, sang songs like that for ages. For wine and rakia, for pain and sorrow, for day and night, for sun and moon, for vineyards and fields, for love and desire, for life and death, for good and evil... for robbers, henchmen, traitors and strangers... For everything, Pan Vishnevski, that was part of their lives... The songs were created by ordinary people, mostly by villagers. Cheerful and sad, those songs are for all seasons, for all things and for happiness and misfortune... Maybe someday our people will sing a song or two about us... here... or someone will write something in their notebook and record how we got here and how we live here. Our story, every story needs to be written down so as not to be forgotten... especially the madness that brought us here... Our people, Pan Vishnievski, have interwoven

their joy, sadness and pain into our folk songs with ordinary, simple, everyday words. Every good and evil they experience, their suffering and joy, sadness and hope, but also their soul they have captured in a song. We don't have Rei and Kohanovski, Mitskievich and Slovachki... We have folk songs. Our souls, hearts, desires, suffering, pain and hopes are captured in them. Our people also put their wisdom into folk songs. In the long string of folk songs there's one that is an unreachable metaphor. Listen, Pan Vishnievski, it goes something like this:

Terzii, brakia, terzii, (Tailors, brothers, tailors,)
Ai, soshite mi bel fustan, (Stitch me a white dress,)
Bez nozhitsi da go skroite, (Trim it without scissors,)
Bez konets da go naberete... (Hem it without string...)

Devoiche, versshko, devoiche, (Girl, trusted, girl,)
Ai, da ni mesish kravaiche, (Knead us some bread,)
Bez sito da go otseesh, (Sift the flour without a sieve,)
Bez voda da go zamesesh, (knead it without water,)
Bez ogan da go ispechesh. (Bake it without a fire.)

Terzii, brakia, terzii, (Tailors, brothers, tailors,)
Ias ke vi mesam kravaiche, (I will knead you some bread,)
Niz kleпки ke go otseam, (Through my eyelashes I will sift it,)
So solzi ke go zamesam, (With my tears I will knead it,)
Na gradi ke go opecham, (On my chest I will bake it,)
Na gradi ke go opecham... (On my chest I will bake it...)

This, Pan Vishnievski, is how our people sang about the possible and impossible. The common people sang like this... It's genius... And let me tell you, Pan Vishnievski, we have endured long centuries of slavery but thanks to our Orthodox faith we captured our traditions and customs in our songs. They were and still are our biggest teachers... This is how we managed to preserve ourselves, our customs, our language and our spirit..." said Kole, paused for a moment to organize his thoughts, and said:

"A written language, do you hear me Pan Vishnievski, we gave other people our written language, we have enlightened them and at the same time have left ourselves illiterate... ignorant, Pan

Vishnievski, ignorant... And as you know anyone can knead the ignorant like dough and make them do whatever they want them to do... It's true, Pan Vishnievski, we gave our alphabet to others but we remained not only illiterate but ignorant and blind... Yesterday, Pan Vishnievski, you characteristically asked me what was most painful for us as a people... Disagreement, disunity, jealousy, political blindness, believing in the promises of others... Unfortunately all of those things are painful to us. We allow ourselves to be easily deceived, which seems to be a Macedonian weakness... a misfortune... We can't seem to see our way out of our problems and as a result fall prey to those who know our weaknesses and use them against us. We exist in three different states and each state has manipulated us through their propaganda to hate one another and at the same time we also received their vicious hatred. We seem to do to one another what they do to us. We hate each other in the way they hate us. And this is nothing new. We hated each other in the past and we hate each other today. In the face of our neighbours and their distant caretakers, we have always been victims... then and now..."

Kole's voice quivered a little which didn't go unnoticed by Pan Vishnievski.

"Our people who work in these big fields are barely able to withstand the fear even when they hear a tractor rattle. To them the rattles sound like machine gun fire. Did you see them duck for cover yesterday when an airplane flew over? Fear has nested deep in them. We suffered a terrible beating during the war. Our defeat devastated us. I hope we'll learn a good lesson from it, which may wake us up. Then maybe our maturing will begin. Perhaps we'll realize that it's time for us to grow up and look for other ways... Ways that will lead us back to our homes where we'll be masters of our own destiny. Our eternal foolishness, our strife, divisions and lack of clear thinking have led us to this terrible defeat... Pan Vishnievski, it isn't shameful to admit that wanderers from around the world have shaped our destiny... Now, unfortunately, we are among them... It's very painful to find out that these 'caretakers' who we trusted have betrayed and humiliated us... Yes... the fate of our people rested with them and our people have paid with their lives for their betrayals and humiliation... Our people still have to bear the unhealed wounds

which were left open from our senseless divisions encouraged by these outsiders...” concluded Kole and stopped talking. Then, after a few moments of silence, Vishnievski asked:

“Pan Kole, earlier you mentioned Rei, Mikolai Rei. Did you know that he lived during the sixteenth century, a time when the sermons in the Polish churches, even in wealthy communities, were given in the Latin language? The neighbouring peoples were laughing at the Poles so Rei, who knew the language of the Polish multitude, said:

A niechaj narodowie wżdy postronni znają iż POLACY nie geśi, iż swój język mają (Let the neighbouring nations always know that the Polish people are not geese but have their own language)

This is what he said and his words were remembered by the Polish people for centuries and this is how we kept our dignity intact. Our language and our great literature in the long past and even today have protected us from external divisions instigated by our neighbours, and even internal divisions we instigated ourselves, and have helped us preserve our identity as Poles... In the past, and even now, we’ve been told that in order for Poland to survive it must bind itself to the Great Powers. Before Poland was partitioned, some people said that Poland should turn to Russia because Russia was becoming a Great Power. Others were saying Poland should bind itself to Prussia or to Austria-Hungary. And this is exactly what led to Poland’s territorial division. The Poles were divided into patriots and traitors... the patriots raised uprisings, bled and lost while the traitors fought for personal gain and privileges. Then, long after the last divide, a man came along and promoted the idea that Poland should only rely on the Polish people. He girded his sabre around his waist, left his misery behind and led the Poles east and west. But the divisions didn’t end, new worshipers surfaced, both in the west and the east and they brought new divisions. Muttering among themselves they felt secure that they were now well protected by the easterners. And what did they, in the west think? As you can see, Pan Kole, a division between east and west began to appear. Some of our neighbours who wanted to go west, wanted to pass through Poland. Those who wanted to go east again wanted to pass through Poland. Poland was in everyone’s way. And if things didn’t go well, things never go well here, then solutions came in the form of

deception or war. From what you tell me, I believe you are in the same situation, as us. If someone wants to go east by land, they must go through Macedonia or from the east to the west, they must go through Macedonia. But, unlike us, they don't have to declare war on you. They know how to do it by deception. They find weak-minded and greedy people and assist them to achieve high positions, power and money. They look for weaknesses and greed in people, not for days, but for months and years. Well, they are their biggest helpers in switching sides. They are what we call traitors. They are protected for as long as they are needed and no more, for one time only. Once they have achieved their goal they are set aside and others are sought for new goals. The architects of this game know how to play it well, and their small-minded and greedy victims are blind and deaf to it... That's how things were done in the past and that's how things are done in the present..." concluded Vishnievski.

Labro, who occasionally came to the farm in Kunuv, following the party line, often came to see and talk to Kole. The last time he came, he stopped on the road where Kole was guiding the horses pulling an overloaded cart. Labro signaled Kole to stop and said:

“Come over here. Let the horses take a break. Come and sit beside me and let’s light one.”

“Thank you, Uncle Labro, but I don’t smoke,” replied Kole.

“I know that you don’t smoke and that you don’t drink, I knew this from before, but people have been telling me that you read a lot, sometimes late at night, sometimes all night long to the early morning and sometimes during the day. You steal time from your working hours to read. Ah, Kole, Kole, are you an educated person, huh? You speak clearly and very good Macedonian, and you speak Greek like an educated Greek. We had a couple of students in the prison at Akronavplia who were educated much like you... What kind of education do you have?” asked Labro.

“I studied at the University in Solun...” replied Kole quietly and got up to continue to drive the horses.

“Sit down! The horses aren’t rabbits, they re not going to run away. Sit down, I said, sit down and tell me if the party sent you here to work?” asked Labro.

Calmly and quietly Kole said: “Exactly... They sent me here to work...”

“And why, I ask you, are you working here as a horseman and not in the leadership or in the boarding schools teaching the children?”

Today, out here (in Poland), we need educated people, not people to lead horses, right?" asked Labro.

"That's what the party decided, Uncle Labro..." replied Kole.

"What did you do before this job?" asked Labro.

"Like I told you before, I was a student..." replied Kole.

"Did you take part in the war?" asked Labro.

"Yes..." replied Kole.

"What were you in the war? What was your rank? Was your rank high..." asked Labro.

"No, it wasn't high... I was low..." replied Kole.

"Why? You're educated... you're smart, why low...?" asked Labro.

"That's the way it was then, as it is now, the high places weren't for the educated..." replied Kole.

Labro crushed the cigarette butt into the ground, stared at Kole's face from side to side and, while chewing his words, asked:

"I hear, Kole, that you speak Polish very well too? And I don't believe you were sent here by chance. You must have offended someone and this job is your punishment?"

"The party knows why I'm here..." replied Kole.

"That's right... the party knows everything and doesn't make mistakes... The party, Kole, is everything. The party is judge, jury and executioner. It punishes, it doesn't forgive. It doesn't correct wrongs; it cuts them out or allows them to grow just the way the party wants them to grow. The party is God and therefore doesn't recognize another god. Do you understand?" replied Labro.

Kole nodded his head. He felt he had no power to prove to the old man that it wasn't like that. The old man was already deeply convinced that this young man had been tempered by the fire of communism, had been bent and straightened, and bent and molded on the anvil of those who attacked his consciousness with heavy hammers. People like Labro were already anchored by someone who only wanted to cut the world with their own knife. And the knife was sharp. People like Labro were simple but persistent, eager to get even the smallest place by the table, and were satisfied with the crumbs they managed to collect. They satisfied their hunger with the meat of other people's thought and promises that, at some point in the future, they, the simple people, would eat and drink like the rich. Their self-deception drove their madness for rule to increase daily. And they believed it. Kole didn't want to argue with that self-confident old man whose conviction came from the outside, not from his own brain. Someone else was pulling his strings and hammering ideology into his brain. Labro believed what he told Kole that only one person in the party must think and no one else, because if everybody was thinking then there would be no party. Only one needs to think and the rest will follow in his (or her) footsteps. And that there is no other god...

Kole didn't want to wait for Labro to finish thinking about his new god, so he got up, shook the dust off his old worn out military pants and said:

“Uncle Labro, I have to go and finish my work. And you have to finish yours...”

Labro stepped on the cigarette with his shoe, spat to the side and said:

“Tonight we're having a gathering in the dining room. I want you to come and give a talk, but before that I'll tell you something... Okay?”

Kole didn't promise he was going to attend the gathering. Before taking the horses, he turned to Labro and asked:

“Is it true, Uncle Labro that you were in the Akronavplia prison? That’s what some people said...”

“I was, son, I was... and for many years... Come back, sit here and I’ll tell you about it. Sit here, closer. It was a bad prison, one of the worst in which the most prominent and most faithful communists were imprisoned, especially the most trusted by the party who were placed in high positions... Even though it was a prison, it was a great school for us, replied Labro.

“How did you end up there?” asked Kole.

“Me? It’s a long story but I’ll briefly tell you, not how I got there, but how I got out of there. When General Metaxas established the fascist dictatorship, he gathered the most prominent communists who he considered most dangerous and sent them to that prison. I was among those people. As you probably know, Greece was occupied by the Italians, Germans and Bulgarians and formed a government in Athens that worked with them. That government surrendered all the prisoners, including me, to the Germans. And there was no one to organize resistance and fight against the occupiers in Greece. Then Ianis Ioanidis, a member of the CPG Politburo, secretly gathered us Macedonian communists and told us that there were no forces in Greece that could organize resistance against the occupiers. All former active communists were in prison. At the same time the Greek political right cooperated with the occupiers. Ianis said that only the communists were capable of organizing a resistance against the occupiers. In addition, he noted that it was possible that a large number of brave and faithful communists were to be released from prison and, after being released, they could begin organizing an anti-fascist resistance, which would also help the Soviet Union which at the time was fighting heavy battles against the Germans. We asked him how we could help. Ianis explained that our Comrade Delio Popnedelkov had a wife who was German who was going to urge German command to release her husband. She would tell the German commander that her husband was imprisoned because he was Macedonian and not a Greek Communist and that there were dozens like him in prison. The German woman spoke with the German commander who then called the Bulgarian embassy and told them

that there were Macedonians in the prison. Given the chance the Bulgarians thought of ways to turn the situation to their advantage, so they figured that if they freed them then these Macedonians would work for the Bulgarian cause in Greece. And so, with help from the Bulgarian Embassy in Athens, they released 27 prisoners, all top activists including the Vlach, Andreas Chimas, a lawyer from Rupista, who later served as an ELAS representative in Tito's Supreme Headquarters, and two who were Madzhiri (Turkish Christian colonists). They too were released because they said they were Macedonians and because they spoke the Macedonian language. All together 24 'Macedonians' were released, some of them had been senior officials before the war, such as Andrea Shipov, who was a member of the CPG Central Committee as well as other regional and district secretaries, as well as city party committee secretaries. The condition for our liberation, said Ianis, was to say that we were Bulgarians. Some, including myself, said that we couldn't do that, we are Macedonians, but he said that this was a party directive and party directives are the law. And so we, 27 communists, came out of Akronaplia as Bulgarians. We were given party tasks in the cities and the party appointed us to organize a resistance movement against the occupiers..." concluded Labro and stopped short of telling the whole story.

The stick with which Labro was digging the soil in front of his feet broke. He grabbed one part of it and said:

"When I speak about this something inside me breaks, just like this stick..."

"What happened after that Uncle Labro?" asked Kole.

"What happened after that? After that the people from the party said that the important work we were assigned to do couldn't be entrusted to Bulgarians. There was a storm of outcries not only in Akronavplia Prison but also in other prisons as well as in the terrain, calling for an end to 'Bulgarians leading the Greek resistance'. It was simply unacceptable because if those 'Bulgarians' won they would be making all kinds of demands on Greece. That was one reason why the 'Bulgarians' must not be allowed to lead the Greek resistance. 'Do you think that after their victory those autonomists

wouldn't make demands?' And whether we like it or not, at the behest of the party, we declared ourselves Bulgarian. The party said we were Bulgarians period, like in the children's game where the donkey can fly. And those who said the donkey can fly wailed like donkeys. Or something like this joke: 'It was rumoured that a painter in front of a shop in Kostur was painting Jesus Christ. A passing Vlach stopped, stared at the picture, and when he saw that the Jesus in the picture was barefoot, he told the painter: 'You must not have Jesus barefoot. Paint him a pair of red, pigskin moccasins immediately.' The painter didn't want to and said: 'But sir, Jesus is barefoot everywhere.' The Vlach insisted so the painter gave in and painted a pair of red moccasins on Jesus' feet. When he was done he moved to the side, sighed deeply and said: 'My poor Jesus, - the painter not wanting and the Vlach insisting - you are now wearing red moccasins.' Something like that happened to us... From our not wanting and from the party insisting we became Bulgarians. Party discipline, you know, then and now, was and is the law... After that, out on the terrain, they began to hunt us down. We were again arrested. They shot Lazo Trpovski, Tashko Karadza and others. Some fled to Bulgaria, others to Yugoslavia. We stayed in the mountains for a while. I remained alive and loyal to the party. And after the liberation, when the beloved Zahariadis again took over the party, I was re-activated in the party and faithfully performed the tasks entrusted to me. And you said that they called you Kole and that you aren't in the party?" asked Labro.

"No... I'm not in the party," replied Kole.

"You don't need the party... It's a big commitment. Sometimes you have to do things that are against your will that your conscience won't allow... Come to the gathering this evening. I'm going to give a talk and there should be someone more educated than me, like yourself..." said Labro.

Called by their first and last names, the people gathered in the large hall of the local inn, or as they called it the "common cafeteria". The men were drenched in sweat wearing their unwashed overalls and dirty rubber boots. There were portraits hanging on the front wall of Stalin, Beirut and Zahariadis and the table underneath them was covered with a red tablecloth and beside it were four chairs.

When everyone was settled Labro began to speak:

“Now comrades, now that we have recovered from the bad times, thanks to the party and to the people’s government, we are opening a new front in our struggle. There is a big battle ahead of us that we must win. And that’s the battle with Titoism, you know, right? To the Titoists we will declare an open and merciless war, that is, to exterminate Tito’s agents and spies. We will annihilate those who are among us and those who are in the homes and schools with our children. Our party demands this from us. We have already started this fight. The other day the party removed the teachers from the homes and schools. They didn’t teach the children the way the party wanted them to. They decided on their own to put ideas into the children’s minds about a so-called Macedonian rather than a Slavo-Macedonian alphabet and some Macedonian, not Slavo-Macedonian, language. Those teachers have now been replaced with loyal party people, comrades above all who came out of the hospitals... healthy fighters. And let me tell you the good news that the grammar of the new Slavo-Macedonian language is being written in Bucharest with full support from Comrade Zahariadis. It is being written by a very good and educated friend of mine with whom I spent time in Akronavplia prison. He is a good and honest communist. The party will take care of educating the new teachers. The party will send a group of older children to Bulgaria to learn the craft. The teachers who now teach in the boarding houses aren’t teachers by trade but, with help from Greek and Polish teachers, they will be able to learn something. Tito’s clique has its agents everywhere. That’s what the party says... Tito has his agents and his own people everywhere. Party vigilance doesn’t sleep. Slowly, one by one the party will find them and, in its own way, will punish them. So, for example, in addition to the great damage Tito did to us by closing the border, he did more great damage. He did a great deal of damage to our children in the homes where they live in the people’s democratic states, which rescued them from the war. Tito put teachers in these schools to teach the children Tito’s alphabet and language. This is what the party has decided and this is what the party will do,” concluded Labro Moskov.

Someone in the back yelled: “Wait, Comrade Labro! So those teachers we, the parents, sent along with our children, you say are Tito’s agents? They are our people, our relatives from our villages, how can they be Tito’s agents?”

“It’s true; the party estimates that they were put in these positions by Tito’s agents. So he was there, that bastard Kolishevski and his comrades, they put Tito’s teachers in positions to teach our children. But the party’s watchful eye doesn’t sleep. Resolutely and vigilantly, day and night, it’s breaking that clique. It took the party one night, in a militant way, I would say like Bolsheviks, to make the purge. The party expelled those agents along with their alphabet and language, outside the schools and homes. And in place of Tito’s masters the party put conscientious party faithful masters. And my friend from Akronavlia prison, wait, what was his name... Well, I don’t remember at the moment but when I do I’ll tell you... He is an educated man and a very good communist, he is from Bapchor. He is now in Bucharest completing his party assignment, writing a new grammar that reflects the real Slavo-Macedonian language. (In 1952, the Publishing House “Nea Ellada”, a Macedonian division, based in Bucharest and under the total control of the CPG, published a “Grammar in the Macedonian Language”. The grammar was authored by T. Peikov who wrote an editorial in it in which he said: “The composition of this grammar for the glorious Macedonians of Aegean Macedonia is the legal result and blueprint for the tumultuous progress of our people. It attempts to formulate the grammatical rules of the Macedonian language as it was formed today in Aegean Macedonia, especially following the introduction of the Macedonian language radio broadcast on the radio station “Free Greece”. The Macedonian department of the publishing house “Nea Ellada” is convinced that this first Macedonian grammar for the Slavo-Macedonians from Aegean Macedonia will greatly help our youth and Macedonian language teachers in the proper teaching of the literary language and Macedonian language in general. It is to serve as the main bibliographical guide to grammar composition: Bulgarian grammar by Dr. Lybomir Andrejchin, Nick Kostov, Enno Nikolov - Sofia 1947 And Grammar Russian Language, A.S. Matiychenko, 1952.”) Personally, by party line, I found one Russian, one Ukrainian and two Bulgarian grammar books for him and took them to him in Bucharest. When I gave them to him I told

him to write the new grammar day and night. I said make it Slavo-Macedonian like the party wants it... And so friends, thanks to our leader, we'll soon have a new Slavo-Macedonian alphabet and a new Slavo-Macedonian language now being written and created in Bucharest... and he, what was his name? Ah, I remember now, Atanas Peikov is his name. There, in Bucharest, he'll make the Slavo-Macedonian language exactly how the party wants it. And while he works day and night, we here, comrades, need to write a letter to thank the Poles for what they do for us refugees. In order not to waste our time, the letter has already been written and approved by the party. It says:

‘To the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party

Dear Friends,

On behalf of the refugees who are taken care of at Meindziguzhe, we extend our warmest thanks to the Polish United Workers Party and to the entire Polish people for the help and fraternal tenderness they have offered us.

We are deeply moved by the solidarity, brotherly feelings and the extraordinary care shown and continued by our Polish comrades both during our journey and during our stay here in Meindziguzhe.

All of advanced humanity knows that we, the Vicho refugees in Macedonia, are direct victims of Tito's fascist gang and Rankovich, Kardeli, and Gilas's open betrayal, who shamelessly served the American and English imperialists to instigate a new war against the Soviet Union and against the people's democracies. Tito's clique along with the belligerent Greek Monarcho-Fascists have stabbed and continue to stab democratic Greece in the back.

Without the open betrayal and blows inflicted by Tito's treacherous clique, the Monarcho-fascists could have occupied our free regions. They were unable to conquer them for three years, despite the enormous and repeated assistance they received from the American and English imperialists.

And as such, the Polish People's Democracy, led and inspired by its avant-garde party, the Polish United Workers' Party, in a gigantic and peaceful step of renewal for a better life, we have seen with our own eyes that its supreme law is its international birthright.

We saw our children, who were shown paternal and maternal hospitality, thrive. We almost didn't recognize them because of the great improvements they experienced in their stay here.

Thank you for all you have done for our children, for us and for the people of Greece. You will always live in our hearts. Thank you for the unshakable determination of your people who gave their all for freedom and independence. Thank you for your help, for all you have done, for your righteous work in assisting the struggling democratic Greece which will finally be triumphant, no matter how much it will have to sacrifice.

Long live PORP

Long live the heroic Polish people

Long live the People's Republic of Poland

Long live struggling democratic Greece

Long live the world democratic front and peace with the invincible Soviet Union leading the way under the bright leadership of the great Stalin.

For the Committee

Sterios Datsos

Nikolaos Serbedzis

Marika Elkova

Fotios Urumov

Petre Asparuhov

Mahi Pilaeva

German Petrov

Ianis Naumis,' concluded Labro.

(The original of the cited letter is in the Polish State Archives under signature 237 / CII - 425. The letter is in Greek, handwritten, translated into French and typed on a machine. German Petrov has signed the Greek text with Cyrillic letters, while the French text is signed with Latin letters. The other signatures are in the Greek alphabet. A copy of this letter can be found in the archives of the author's collection.)

Labro stopped reading and, after he coughed and spit under the table, slammed his hand on his papers, as if wanting to shake off the dust, and said:

“That’s all comrades, with this letter we the refugees here in Poland have expressed our gratitude and great faith in future triumphant struggles. Does anyone want to add anything? What do you think? It’s good, right?”

There was silence as if everyone’s mouth was taped.

There was a loud cracking of a chair in the back. They all looked...

Mitre slowly got up, raised his hand and began speaking. He said:

“I, comrades, want to say that it is well written. Everything has been said, I mean written. It has been written in a way that the party wanted it to be written, with big and audible words, which I, my apologies, don’t understand, especially the words at the end of the letter. Does it miss anything? As a matter of fact, I say it is good, it doesn’t miss much. But it seems to me that we have been used to accepting all kinds of written material without understanding what is said and we have made this our habit. I don’t know what others think, but I think that it misses something. It misses that it isn’t written in our language. It should have been written in our language. Some of us who know and understand the Greek language have understood what the matter is and what to say to those who don’t know a single word of Greek. I think that we, who are Macedonians here in the agricultural economy of Kunuv, need to thank the Poles in our Macedonian language which is similar to theirs. We have our own language; why not thank them in our language, huh? We already work with the Poles here, working in this agricultural

economy, and some of us also speak Polish. If these Poles we work with here in the economy understand our language, and we understand theirs, then those above who are educated I'm sure will understand what we're saying if we write the letter in our language, right? But why is it that those above, at the top of the party, don't want to hear... not a single word of our language? This is what I think. And since you asked the question if we want to add something then I say it would be nobler to thank the Poles in our language than in the Greek language in a letter which others wrote for us. And to the other person reading the letter sitting next to you, comrade Labro... I say no one understood anything... like it was written in French... And now, Comrade Labro, I remember, and until recently it was, I think, at the time, there, in our village gatherings, lots of letters, newspapers, appeals and other things, written in large and clever words, were read to us, which we simple villagers didn't understand and approved by clapping our hands. Was it like that or not? And finally, to say that there's nothing to be added to what is written... and if there is anything to be said it is in which language it should be written, and the language will tell who wrote it..." concluded Mitre.

Labro, it seems, wasn't happy with what he'd just heard, so he stood up and with both hands leaning against the table and body leaning forward, yelled:

"You, you, there in the back stop clouding the issue!" Labro then raised his hand and angrily and threateningly shook his finger and yelled: "We know about people like you!"

His last words sounded like a threat and a warning, and they all realized that the shaking finger had not only threatened Mitre, but everyone who was there.

The gathering was finally over. Glancing at the cloud of doubt, speechless, in silence and without saying goodbye, the people emptied the hall and walked away in steps of disharmony, in which the sound of Labro's threat began to fade away in the distance of time...

Labro hastily collected his papers that had been scattered on the table and, as he was about to leave, stopped, stared at the back of the crowd leaving and with his hoarse, but powerful voice, yelled:

“Wait! You, the comrade who spoke after me, you stay!”

Mitre, realizing that he was the comrade being summoned, turned around and slowly walked towards Labro. Standing one step away from the front of the table, as calmly as he could, but not comfortably, Mitre asked:

“Are you looking for me?”

Without looking at him Labro cried out: “What’s your name?!”

“Mitre... People call me Mitre...” he replied and then asked: “What’s the matter Comrade Labro?”

“What’s the matter?!” growled Labro. “The matter is your negative comments, do you understand? What was all that you said about, huh? What were you thinking? Who do you think you are speaking like that? Do you know that everything you said isn’t in the spirit of the party? Look at yourself...” screamed Labro and slammed his fist on the table as if wanting to permanently nail every word he said, creating small patterns on the table top with each blow, disturbing the smoothness of the red cloth that covered it.

Mitre took a step forward and with the same tone of voice asked:

“Is that what’s troubling you, Comrade Labro?”

“What else would you think is troubling me, Comrade Mitre? I follow the party line, I struggle, I try, I sacrifice and you contradict me...” replied Labro.

“And here I thought that you wanted me to take you among the people. Come, Comrade Labro, stay with me for a day or two and listen to their complaints... Listen to the cries of the women, hear the mothers and widows cry, hear the heavy and painful sighs of the fathers... Come, Comrade Labro, come with me and I will take you

to the fathers, mothers, women whose husbands and children died to defend what was forbidden, come, tell them that by party decision your friend in Bucharest is creating a new language for them... A language which is different from the one they learned from their mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, which they in turn learned from their older generations, the only language they understand. Come with me and find out what else they don't know. Come and listen in which language they mourn their loved ones that they lost in support of the party. Come with me and together we will look for them... for the living because we still don't know how long we have to stay here and where and to what ruins the evil will take us..." said Mitre, stopped talking for a moment and, after swallowing his bitter saliva, continued:

"Come, Comrade Labro, let me take you to our people, and together with them you can roll up your sleeves and work all day in these endless fields. So you too can feel the great pain which we continually have to endure every day. Let us endure it together..." said Mitre, paused for a second, and very quietly said: "As if you haven't poisoned us enough already..." And then, without hesitating, Mitre turned around and, with a confident step, headed toward the exit. Before crossing the threshold, he stopped, as if to remind himself of something, turned around and slowly went towards Labro. He then leaned on the table with his left hand, waved his finger at Labro and slowly, as if a sigh had interrupted his voice, asked:

"Tell me, Labro, about the language you spoke to us..."

"Which language?" Labro asked, surprised.

"You know the one that somebody out there in Bucharest is creating..." replied Mitre.

"And does that bother you? You prefer the artificial language Tito invented over the real one that is being created?" asked Labro.

"This language, the language which you and I are speaking now; who invented this language? Tell me so that I will know. When you were a child what language did you speak with your mother and

father? And your mother and father, what language did they speak with their mother and father? And what language did their mothers and fathers and grandparents speak? Will you tell me?" asked Mitre.

Labro standing there stunned, while staring into Mitre's eyes, said:

"In our language, Comrade Mitre... They knew no other language, other than our language..."

"So why do you want to change our language and use someone else's?" asked Mitre.

"Because that's what the party wants. The party claims that Tito invented our language and the party has to be trusted because the party is never wrong..." replied Labro.

"That's what those in Athens (the Monarcho-Fascists) also say, that Tito is guilty. Right? What's the difference between them, Tito and the party? Labro, Labro, it's not up to Tito, or anyone else for that matter, to decide what our language should be. We have our own language with roots that extend back to our grandparents and to their ancestors. If that wasn't the case, today we'd be at home plowing our fields... And let me tell you one more thing Comrade Lazo, they are all working to eradicate us..." said Mitre, spat the bitterness out of his mouth to the side, and without saying another word headed for the exit.

Labro stayed behind along with the bitterness of the words spoken.

About ten days after he had his conversation with Labro, two strangers came from the city. They said they were looking for someone called Mitre. They had something urgent to tell him.

They didn't have to wait long; someone found Mitre and brought him to them. Then, after they had a short conversation, the three of them made their way to the city.

They immediately took Mitre to the party committee headquarters in the city. They placed him in a semi-dark room that hadn't been aired for who knows how long, in front of a desk behind which sat the

party secretary in a deep leather armchair. Without any greeting, the questioning began much like a hearing.

“We know that you, comrade, what was your name...?” said the secretary.

“Mitre...” replied Mitre.

“So, Comrade Mitre, we have come to the conclusion that you, there in the kolhoz, in Kunuv, are spreading hostile propaganda among the kolhozians, which has made its way to the other kolhozes where Slavo-Macedonians work. Here we have a written statement about what you said and how you said it. What you said is punishable and we here in the party committee are considering not reporting you to the Polish authorities, provided that you repent and give us your word that you won’t behave and speak as you spoke at the gathering about a week or so ago. You will also say publicly, at a gathering, that you were very wrong...”

Without getting up, the secretary handed Mitre a piece of paper and a pen and said:

“Sign here to admit that you are sorry and that...”

Mitre took a step forward, leaned over towards the secretary and slowly and eloquently said:

“They asked me to say sorry and have remorse in the Greek prisons and concentration camps. I didn’t repent then and I won’t repent now. And as you know this isn’t Bulkesh here, and if I did something that broke Polish law then let the Poles themselves come and get me. You aren’t in power here and don’t forget that. You are no different than me here. You can wipe your nose with this sheet of paper...” said Mitre in an angry voice and felt like spitting all his bitterness on the secretary’s face, but restrained himself, turned around and without saying another word left.

Late that night Mara (Mitre’s wife) was freed from the threshold of fear.

In the meantime the party committee in the city summoned Labro, to briefly explain to him that they had received a radio telegram from the party headquarters in Bucharest saying that the party had decided to send Labro to do party work in Bulgaria, where he was needed to clarify the new situation to the Macedonians.

Even though he felt uneasy, Comrade Labro didn't reject the offer and quietly said: "I will do what the party decides. Consider it done! Goodbye comrades!"

Labro took a train to Sofia where, after less than two months, the committee received news that they didn't fully understand. They didn't know for sure why Comrade Labro had died; was it because of health reasons, because of the hard party work he had to do, or due to drinking. The party report also didn't explain whether or not Labro had managed to convince the Macedonian people in Pirin Macedonia that the alphabet and language they were learning, in the newly opened Macedonian schools in the Pirin villages, wasn't Macedonian but a language invented by Tito...

In the meantime people gathered in the big, party committee hall in the city and honoured Comrade Labro by singing Lenin's march. At the same time the party committee summoned Mitre to their city headquarters for the second time. From there they took him to the State Security Administration, where the interrogation lasted only about half an hour. After hearing Mitre's statement, the chief opened a grey envelope from which he took out the statement the party committee had made about Mitre's hostile activities and slowly began to tear it up. He threw the pieces into his waste basket and said:

"You are free to go. Go home. We have more important things to do here... When you do something against Poland, I mean when you break Polish law then I'll bring you back here myself... Goodbye!"

At the time the Communist Party of Greece, in Poland, and in every other country it had set its foot, began a manhunt, hunting down every one of the refugees who didn't follow the party line and didn't obey party directives. People were attacked in public and humiliated. Fingers were pointed at them followed by all kinds of

threats. Even yesterdays most trusted allies today were humiliated only because now they didn't think like those in the party. People felt they had no choice but to isolate themselves. They felt there was no one they could talk to who could be trusted. So they talked to no one, everyone was suspicious of everyone. And that's exactly how the party wanted the people to feel. To be silent; to even be afraid of their own shadow. Great fear was sown, opening a wide gap between the people, allowing the stormy and murky river to flow not only full of fear, but also full of mutual hatred and suspicion. The spectre of fear circled over them incessantly. Exactly that – only fear could bring order over those who wanted to think differently than the party. Fear of a sharp axe hanging over their heads held by a flimsy thread. The party wanted the people to remain silent and without objection and to accept what the party said as truth. It wanted them silent and to accept its promises and deceit in silence. That was what the defeated party needed. Just like back home, where the Greek state did the same...

Back home they were at the forefront of the state and here in Poland and elsewhere in the Eastern European countries, they were at the forefront of the party. Back home professors, academics, ministers, bishops, judges, officers, gendarmes, priests, teachers, journalists... all strived to prove to themselves, to be convinced that they didn't exist in the state by their own name, and if anyone claimed otherwise the road to the concentration camps and dry islands was wide open. Here in Poland and in the other Eastern European countries, they are spreading the doctrine that the Macedonians are not who they think they are. Everywhere they are inventing fictitious names like Slavo-Macedonians, and artificially created Macedonians, to convince the world and themselves that Macedonians don't exist. And for those who refuse, the party has its laws, courts, judges and judgments.

The people back home and the people here carry the same yoke around their necks, the difference being is that those under the right wedge were carrying the entire Greek state and those under the left wedge were carrying the Communist Party of Greece. They hated each other to death but they didn't give up on the yoke under which they were wedged...

So tied by the same yoke they together pulled the plow, disparaging and destroying those who were different from them and didn't think like them...

The 1949-1950 school year was already under way. It was decided that preschool and school children who were with their mothers or with both parents would gather at the Zgozhelets state reception centre.

There was a large poster posted on the door of the dining room inviting all those who had children to come to the evening gathering.

“I was sent here by the party committee to tell you that we’re going to collect all the children that are here with you and take them to the central boarding house in Zgozhelets... They will live and study there together with the children who left last year,” said the man from the committee.

Someone in the back yelled:

“You took our children two years ago and you made soldiers out of the bigger ones... We haven’t forgotten the cries and screams of the mothers in Prespa who saw their children dressed in military uniforms and with rifles over their shoulders. We still don’t know if those children are alive or if they were killed in battlefields. Now you want to take our little ones too...?”

The persuasion was hard and long.

The hall was buzzing like a beehive.

“I’m not giving up my child. Two years ago you took three of my children and I still don’t know where they are and if they’re alive... Go back where you came from. Enough with the collecting...” yelled a woman.

“No! We aren’t giving them up! First, bring back the ones you took and we’ll see! Where are our other children and where are you planning to take these ones?” yelled another woman.

“People, people calm down. Take it easy, don’t yell. We aren’t taking them far. They’ll be close, in the city. The ones who aren’t here are probably in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia... They’re alive and well. These children who are with you, some will find their brothers and sisters there... Some children from neighbouring kolzozes have already been taken there and have met their relatives, and some their brothers and sisters. In the homes they’ll have everything; food, clothing, education... everyone will have their own warm bed... And all school age children will go to school,” replied the man from the committee.

“Yes, but that is a school for Polish children... Not for our children...” yelled another.

It wasn’t easy to convince the parents... Not only because they had been lied to in the past but also because they had no confidence in the party committee to give them passes to go and see them, at least once a week. They were still carrying great pain and sorrow from their children being taken in 1948 and sent to the Eastern European countries.

Eventually the children were taken and transferred to the two central children’s homes. Those older than 15 were housed in the Uiazd barracks in Zgozhelets, later renamed Trpovski, where they learned various crafts. The others were housed in the Biale Koshari central barracks later renamed Zahariadis. The little ones were sent to the kindergartens.

For the many mothers who were scattered around in the agricultural holdings, this was the second time their children had been taken from their bosoms. Their days and nights again became silent and empty of their children’s laughter.

Lina, the mother of two children who she’d hid in the barn, in the wet cave and in the rocks back home, was now left in an empty room, all alone. She wanted to pray but she had left her icon of the

Virgin Mary in her house back home. “How far away was it?” she wondered.

“Where’s my icon of the Virgin Mary?” Lina whispered. “Where is my icon to which I always prayed to keep my children safe and to never be separated from them? Why did the Virgin Mary allow me to be left empty-handed and with an empty lap and an empty bed? What did I do that was so wrong...?”

This was yet another wound. A big wound that constantly ached, for many it was opened for the second time before it had a chance to heal from the first. But in those lonely days and nights, in the gloom of a long winter’s night, something was whispering in their ears telling them to be patient and not give up hope... All the women and mothers heard the same quiet whisper and with their prayers they inspired hope, which made their aches less painful.

Mind, heart, soul, body, thought, hope, faith, patience, waiting... It was as if everything had been thrown at the crossroads on an open road. And with all that there were many unanswered questions: “Who did this to us and why?”

“Who crushed the hearts and souls of these mothers in black...?”

It was already December. The days were short, cold and dry and snow drizzled like light sand. The nights were long, dry and cold. Saliva on people’s lips froze and glued their lips together. Even the warm breath coming out of people’s mouths froze before it got too far. The cold was penetrating and was felt down to the bones.

Everything here was alien. The sky, the day, the night, the snow, the cold, even the fog, which in its frozen morning mist dressed the terrain pure white.

At the state training centre, in addition to the Polish director, the Greek party committee decided to bring a Greek director from Romania. His name was Rigas. Once he took office, he did everything that was contrary to the already established Polish order. Rigas’s biggest supporter on all issues in doing his job was the old schoolmaster Bakolas. Bakolas didn’t tolerate the Poles and the

Poles didn't tolerate him. When they spoke among themselves the Poles never referred to him as Bakolas. They had a nickname for him; they called him the "ugly Greek". His head was bald on top and elongated like a melon. He combed his long hair that grew at ear level up to hide his baldness. He combed his sparse hair from his left ear to his right and vice versa. He had only three teeth in his lower jaw and they were black. His voice resembled that of a crowing crow. His breath stunk like a village toilet... Whatever their reason, the Poles not only didn't like him, but they didn't tolerate him. Comrade Bakolas was not a "towarzysz" (comrade) for them, he was the ugly Greek. His closest friend was Comrade Zogas, another Greek teacher whom the Poles also didn't tolerate. Was it because one time he slipped up and told them that his teachers had taught him not to tolerate the Slavs, or because he was always scratching himself below his navel, in the front and in the back. So they avoided him, saying he was full of lice.

Rigas had a number of demands regarding the upbringing and educating of children. One of those demands was to have nationally mixed groups in homes, schools and classrooms. He also demanded that this request not be waived. During meetings he spent a long time trying to convince people that mixed classes would help the Slavo-Macedonian children speak their language less fluently, and they would learn Greek faster by communicating with their Greek friends.

This is what Rigas asked and this is what Rigas got. Unfortunately the results were contrary to expectations.

As a result an open meeting was called at the pedagogical collective in order to debate the issue. And here is what was said:

RIGAS: "You don't work at all according to the pedagogical rules of the great Soviet pedagogue Makarenko," he told the Polish educators and teachers.

BEATA: We know who he is... You know what kind of children they were. And are the children you have entrusted to us to have a Makarenkian upbringing? Did you get that from your parents? We, Comrade Rigas, have no need to re-educate. We teach but not like

Makarenko. We will, in turn, say educate, not re-educate...” Beata replied.

Rigas didn’t pay attention to what Beata was saying. He lent his ear to Bakolas and in a whisper he asked:

“That guy, the bald one, who is he?” asked Rigas.

“The tall one?” asked Bakolas.

“Yes, the bald one,” replied Rigas.

“He is the main director, his name is Kopciński. He is the one who didn’t allow older children, teachers and educators to be mobilized...” replied Bakolas.

Ah... let’s see what he will tell us...

Kopciński stood up, looked around and began his presentation. He said:

“At the request of your top leadership we contacted our state film institution and asked for a film to be made about the lives of your children in our homes. Top experts in the field of documentary films were hired. The shooting lasted almost a year. An entire day of school, sports and other activities were covered as well as the children’s living, upbringing, educational and other conditions. The film was taken to Warsaw where it was subjected to a commission evaluation by prominent Polish pedagogues, psychologists, professors, including Poland’s Education Minister Sksheshevski. When the movie ended the lights were turned on so we were able to see the faces of those watching it. I didn’t see any excitement, or pleasure, but deep thoughts which to me looked like disappointment. The minister began to write something down and his pencil broke. He pushed the sheet and the broken pencil aside, wiped his sweaty forehead and, after he looked at us all, stood up and said:

‘We saw a lot of children but we didn’t see a single smile on their faces... We saw a lot of sadness and pain in their eyes... They didn’t look like happy children in the movie... No! No, no sir, this movie

can't be shown by any means,' said the minister." concluded Kopciński.

"Where is this movie now?" asked Rigas.

"I don't know..." replied Kopciński.

"Find out and give it to us immediately!" demanded Rigas in a certain tone of voice which sounded like an order to everyone in attendance.

Kopciński pretended he didn't hear what Rigas said and continued:

We set up a new commission to evaluate where we went wrong and whether we made mistakes in the process of adopting and educating the children. We assessed that we hadn't made mistakes... Do you know what shape the children were in when they arrived? The children who came from Romania looked like a group of prisoners... We received a number of chaotic children who were suspicious of the Polish doctors, nurses and educators. They were completely closed to the outside world. They all thought alike and had nervous, clumsy reactions, and acted like robots. They had deep psychological problems which were triggered by the sounds of running tractors, flying airplanes and other loud noises. The Greek Civil War certainly left its mark on them. Every time there was a buzz of an airplane, the children's reaction was predictable. They grabbed their packs and ran for cover screaming, crying, squealing and wailing and hid under their beds and desks. When they saw a tractor they were startled and ran away crying. At night, when they slept, the children were haunted by nightmares. In their nightmares they saw fascists carrying machine guns and knives, climbing up the stairs, breaking in through the windows in their bedrooms, trampling their packs and them. There were children in all the groups who were always ready to run away. They often left their bedrooms during the night and went outside to wait for orders to leave. All this put a lot of stress and anguish on our staff including the educators and the older Macedonian helpers. Phobias, collective hallucinations, general mistrust, suspicions and the like... tells us that this group of children suffered a lot, was cut off from death, rescued, but afraid of the new, unsure tomorrow, a dreadful past

leading to an even more frightening future. The children didn't believe anything we told them, they doubted everything, but gradually their distrust and suspicion turned to open sincerity and they expressed their gratitude in various ways. Their hearts finally began to open. We made sure the Polish staff was with them all the time, day and night. They played games with them, sang songs, danced, walked in the city, in the forests and meadows, beside the rivers and streams, in the parks. By doing that we managed to get their smiles back, calm them down, allow them to sleep peacefully and even dream of airplanes... They were free, cheerful, playful and sang songs. The shell of the postwar debris in them gradually began to crack. But unfortunately, I must point out the fact that after you came to the state training centre you brought in your own teachers and tutors, most of whom were military people, whom we cannot recognize as educators. They have no smile on their faces and they don't know how to talk to the children properly or how to make them comfortable. And then when they arrive at the school, walk in the canteen or any other place, they walk with a military step and often sing military and war songs. The only thing these teachers allow the children to draw in art class are aircraft, rifles, cannons, knives, burning houses, smoke... I have never seen a child draw trees, flowers, streams, meadows, chickens, chicks, children dancing, balloons, balls... I haven't seen anyone draw the sun... On top of that these Greek educators gather the children in the hall, after dinner and keep them there late, even past midnight, where they lecture them about the party and the leader and make them sing battle songs, chant slogans and call for a new war. This, unfortunately, reminds them of their past and tragic childhood... Because they go to bed so late some children often sleep in class... Your teaching methods are reminiscent of those used to bring up children ideologically. Comrades we want to ask you and your top leadership what kind of education we should be giving these children. Should we educate them to be the future builders of their destroyed homeland or prepare them to be the new partisans? What attitude should we be taking towards the continuing tendencies of your militant risk-taking educators? We often wonder if your educators and teachers forgot how to work with children... All of this, according to the commission's conclusion, led to their parents feeling apathy, disappointment, powerlessness and endless sadness... I would also like to say a few words about something very

unpleasant. The Macedonian children were left without their teachers. We don't have Macedonian teachers. Those who were removed from the educational centre were removed for reasons that are unfamiliar to me. Why were they removed?" concluded Kopciński. (A Copy of this document can be found in the archives of the author's collection.)

Rigas stood up and said: "I will answer your question immediately. The initial period of our educational work was very difficult due to lack of supervision over the Greek-Macedonian staff by the Communist Party of Free Greece. In the early period many positions were occupied by Tito's people who, on the orders of the fascists, were sent specifically to carry out subversive actions. We dismissed them because they were spreading foreign ideologies... The main reason for the serious changes to the Macedonian staff was because correct personal information became available to the party. Any Macedonians employed anywhere in the future will be selected and controlled by trusted people to avoid the mistakes made in the past..."

"What?! What kind of foreign ideologies are you talking about?!" asked Dzhuban.

"Tito's ideology! These people were influenced by Tito-ism. The children were being taught in the so-called Macedonian language which was artificially invented by Tito... Of course, we will soon bring in new teachers and educators and new textbooks that will be created and printed in our publishing house in Bucharest... By using these textbooks the Slavo-Macedonian children will learn the real Slavo-Macedonian language for which our party invested a lot of effort and knowledge to create..." replied Rigas.

"Excuse me, Comrade, what is your name?" asked Dzhuban.

"Rigas," replied Rigas.

"Comrade Rigas, here we accepted Macedonian children. Macedonians! And you talk to me about some Slavo-Macedonian children? What does that even mean? Were we wrong?" asked Dzhuban.

“That’s right. You were wrong. You were seduced by the Tito-ists, Comrade...” replied Rigas.

“Is that so? And what was wrong with the women the children called mothers? You also removed them from the centre... You say they are illiterate... You say they wear black... You say they spread feelings of sadness in the children... And that’s why you removed them. It’s true that some aren’t literate and some only had a few classes of primary education. That is correct. But it’s also correct that they were the single strongest link in the chain: parents - language - birthplace, daily communication with the children, perhaps even more than with the teachers... They were the living carriers of their original mother tongue and reminders of their past and things that shouldn’t be forgotten... Like remembering the names of their loved ones, the names of their villages, the names of the meadows, the hills, the mountains, the fields, the vineyards, the springs and all the places where they played... These women were satisfied with the small wage, and if they demanded something it was their desire to be as close as possible to the children who had unlimited confidence in them. They wanted to have the children as close as possible to them, to caress and cheer the anguished, to calm the agitated and to wipe their tears and kiss their weeping eyes... They urged the children not to extinguish the spark of hope, to overcome their losses - fathers, brothers, sisters... who were left behind in the battlefields... You removed the mothers and now there is no one to look after the children; to cradle the very young, to warm them with their warmth, to hold them in their arms and rock them in their laps... Who will whisper stories to them about their parents and grandparents, what their names are, what their villages are called and where they are? Do you realize that by removing these women from the children you robbed them of their customs, culture and even their homeland? And one more thing! You took the children’s golden earrings, rings, chains with the cross and images of the Mother of God, which were given to them by the mothers... Why did you do that?” asked Dzhuban.

Rigas piped up and said: “That’s right! We did all this, as well as many other things, in support of the action to collect aid for the jailed communists in Greece...”

“For the children these were sacred symbols of their memories. In the souls of the children you have killed God...” said Dzhuban but was abruptly interrupted by Beata who said:

“I want to assure you that we won’t allow the children to be molded. Greek children will stay Greek, Macedonian children will stay Macedonian...”

“Sorry, Madam Comrade, not Macedonian but Slavo-Macedonian!” replied Rigas sarcastically.

The meeting ended late. Before leaving the hall Kopciński said to Ptashevskaja:

“We will bring up and educate the children but no one is going to educate those whom we met today...”

“My dear,” said Dzhuban quietly, “they are already educated. They need nothing more...”

“I’m surprised and amazed at their convictions and the way they think,” said Kopciński.

“Don’t let them ruin your day...” replied Ptashevskaja.

“What insolence, claiming that Tito created the Macedonian language and the alphabet for the Macedonians... And my university professors taught me that...” said Kopciński who was abruptly interrupted by Ptashevskaja who said:

“My dear, Vatslav, our friend Rigas is the fruit of a poorly planted seed and I’m sorry to say this, but he was raised at a bad time... I just can’t see a place for him in the educational centre... And not only here, but I don’t see a need for a Communist Party of Greece organization anywhere in Poland. As you know, they have created special service cells that operate like the police everywhere where refugees from Greece live and work. And all the time they submit defamatory statements against people who aren’t like-minded. They also commit acts contrary to our laws. For these reasons I’m

considering writing a report to ask the Polish state and party leadership to ban these organizations in Poland. Anyone who wants to be a member of the party can do so by joining our party. Refugees don't have to have their own party organizations. The best way for them to organize is through various associations, clubs, choirs, drama sections, etc. This way they can successfully preserve and nurture their spiritual, national culture - songs, dances, literature and domestic customs and traditions.”

In the report that Kopciński prepared and sent to the Ministry with an indication that it would be forwarded to the PORP Central Committee (Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party), among other things, he concluded that:

“Rigas is an open enemy of the children. Immediately remove him from the state education centre and abolish the Greek administration.”

Rigas was absent during the next state training centre's council meeting and during the next directorate meeting.

It was rumoured that he had been sent to Bucharest to do some new party task. (For more information on the fate of Macedonian children in Poland, as well as on Macedonian refugees in Poland, I would like to refer the reader to the book “MACEDONIAN CHILDREN IN POLAND (1948-1968)”, Mlad Borets, Skopje, 1987, and “Macedonian Refugees in Poland 1948-1975”, Documents, Skopje 2008.)

It was April.

It was spring.

Wild and tame flowers began to flourish in the meadows.

It was April, it was spring and it was the first spring here for the newly arrived refugees.

The spring was clear and warm and lush and fragrant flowers were blossoming everywhere. Time was moving, the streams were pouring and the dawn was filling with bird's songs. The mornings were still chilly but with each passing day the breath of spring was felt more and more. The wide plains and surrounding areas in Kunuv were teeming with young and fragile greenery and the acacia trees began to flower early.

This was the first spring the refugees had experienced outside of their homeland. The feel of the warm spring sun in a foreign land spurred them to again think of going home, a belief firmly embedded in their minds since they had arrived. Their great and immeasurable hope of going home came alive again and they didn't conceal it. They waited patiently for spring to arrive and with it the day that would take them home. They hoped for, and in that hope flowed the time during which they kept their faith and love for what they had left behind alive. They were healthy in spirit even though their hearts were broken. And in that time, the time they spent waiting and hoping, they were given the opportunity to break free from the collective spirit. To break free from believing the great promises made to them in the name of the party and the leader. Promises made to them by the same people who back home and here never stopped tightening the hoop around them. Finally they were able to increasingly distance themselves from those who didn't stop

sowing slogans for some victory over those who had defeated them. Unfortunately they couldn't overcome the evil that caused them pain. Their pain was still lingering, not easing, smouldering and reminding them of their ordeal...

Will this first spring, greeted here in a foreign land, be the spring of their return home, or just a dream, another broken promise, a flight of hope?

They hoped and, with a deep sigh, waited staring at the storks returning to their nests. Some storks flew across the sky, some descended on their old nests which, like baskets, sat on top of chimneys and telephone trunks and, standing on one leg, the storks kept an eye on their surroundings... The women kept looking at them and remembering the old saying that storks can cleanse all evil and bring new life. Swallows flocked in the yards in low flight and sang their songs as they built new nests under the eaves. The nightingales sang early. The bees buzzed around the blossoming flowers in the meadows... Black crows circled the freshly plowed fields swooping down looking for a meal and crowing out loud. Women crossed themselves and, while spitting to the side, said out loud:

“Stay far away from us...”

Two people from the party committee showed up in Kunuv in the afternoon when the refugees were arriving from the fields and queuing up in the common dining room. After everyone sat down at the long tables, the people from the party committee got their attention and one of them said:

“We have just arrived from Bucharest and brought your mail. We have some letters for you. We know it's late but we'll need some of your time and some of your people to go through the lists and identify the names and surnames of the political refugees and their place of residence.”

The two men removed all the envelopes from their old leather briefcases and began to hand them out.

The white envelopes were passed from hand to hand. When they handed them to the recipient they said to them “be proud” of what is written in the letter. They also said a word or two to comfort them and a few words of sympathy.

There were few letters that brought joy and many that brought pain.

Mothers cried.

Almost everyone was mourning. There was crying, lamenting and howling. The people were sad. Mothers were heard weeping...

They were told to be proud of what was written in the letter, but which mother was going to be proud when she found out that her son was dead... that her daughter had been killed?

There were many questions about that:

Which wife was going to be proud of her husband’s death?

Which sister was going to be proud of her brother’s death?

Which brother was going to be proud of his sister’s death?

Which child was going to be proud of the death of his mother or father, brother or sister?

Who can forget the evil and the bad that had happened to them?

“Be proud!” they were told.

The sadness, the crying, the lamenting, the weeping, the mournful sounds of people badly hurting spilled into the streets. Poles passing by listening to the sad cries wondered what was happening. Many approached the mourners and in a quiet and kind tone of voice anxiously asked:

“Co tam się dzieje?” (What’s going on?) And as they heard the person’s explanation and sad cries, some crossed themselves and

with tears in their eyes and trembling lips, took their hats off and, with a silent and gentle step, left.

The women gathered and mourned together, they cried, moaned, lamented and grieved together. Together they shared their pain, for which there was no word to give them comfort. Together they shared the joy with those who had received good news. Some comforted those whose letters brought them pain; others were happy for those whose letters brought them joy...

And in the next days, weeks and months, more letters arrived through which husbands found their wives, through which wives rejoiced that their husbands were alive and well but somewhere far away in places they had never heard of before. Mothers found their children who were alive and well and living in countries and cities they had never heard of before. It was almost as though the letters decided who was going to be a widow, who was going to be a widower and which children, who two years ago had lost the warmth of their mother's lap and hugs, were going to be without a mother or father, or left orphans...

They cried and cried. They cried in homes... they cried over shoulders... they wept, and wept and wept...

Cry, mother, cry, weep, but your crying won't ease the pain of a wound that hasn't healed... Cry ... Brace yourself... Keep your heart tight... Endure...

Cry mother, cry for all the pain and sorrow... for the time lost waiting... Cry, though crying won't lighten your fate... Cry under your black head kerchief, a mark of your unhealed wound and unhealthy pain, cry... Get it all out. Maybe crying will lift the weight that is thrown not only on your back, on your tormented shoulders, on your head, heart and soul, but also on your subjugated and enslaved hands... Cry, scream, get it all out, mother, let your cry and wail lighten the soil over those for whom you are still waiting with all your heart and soul to return... And even though you know that there is no return for them, you grieve for them, for those who are no more and will never sit on your lap again and in the grasp of your arms... cry, cry to your heart's content and endure. Squeeze the pain

in your empty lap, hug the pain with your arms and live with it while you are still alive...

Wail, mother, wail... and let your heart and soul cry until the last sigh leaves you...

The mothers kept crying and weeping and none of them had the strength to relieve their pain that had been unleashed from their tormented souls...

The first night and the next two Kunuv didn't sleep. It was crying, moaning, wailing and unleashing its pain...

For three days mothers, widows and relatives were awake, crying and crying. They spilled a lot of tears and suffered unbearable pain...

Who had done this to cause them such great pain?

That spring letters were also sent to the boarding homes where the children were housed. They too felt the sadness and pain, and they too cried, whined and wailed. Some found out that they were orphans. Some found out that they had lost a parent, a brother, a sister, a close relative, a friend... Their pain was great and they carried it with them every day. They kept their letters hidden in their notebooks. They often secretly opened them under their desks just to mention the names of their loved ones, whom they had lost, and to remember how life was back home when they had all been together.

They continued to hurt.

The memories of those who they lost gave them pain.

They were unable to rise above the yellow bitterness that drowned their souls and gave them such great pain. Who was capable of overthrowing and crushing the scourge that had enslaved them?

Would the pain of having lost a loved one ever subside or would it burn inside them forever?

Would there ever be forgetfulness?

It was spring outside.

The air at dawn was filled with the aroma of blossoming lilacs and the song of nightingales.

It was a fragrant, blossoming spring full of bird's songs. It was their first spring away from home. Their first spring in a foreign land, under someone else's roof, in foreign bedding and bread baked in someone else's oven. It was a lush spring, mostly clear but sometimes rainy. It was a warm spring, the flowers were blossoming fast and the swallows were nesting under the eaves. The swollen buds began to open and roses appeared. The meadows were adorned with blossoming flowers. The storks were repairing their nests on top of the tall chimneys. The air was flooded with the aroma of tender thyme...

That spring, the first spring spent on foreign soil, saw many tears and felt great pain...

That first spring saw no tears of joy...

And they, those who had given them the letters said unto them:

“Your loss is not just great pain but also great pride...”

Which mother is proud of her baby's death?

What woman is proud of her husband's death?

Which sister is proud of her brother's death?

Which brother is proud of his sister's death?

What child is proud of the death of their mother or father, brother or sister?

Who can forget the evil and the bad that had happened to them?

The nights from dusk to dawn became nights of torment and tears; an hour of silent weeping, an hour of heartbreaking loud wailing. They became nights of mourning for sisters, mothers and wives... They grieved and wept, wailed, moaned and cried day and night. This is how it was done in Macedonia. For centuries women spent three days weeping over the tomb and serving food and drink for the soul of the departed. Nine days after that and for the rest of their lives they kept their deceased in their memory, which never gave them comfort but kept the spirit of the deceased alive. They were alive and their presence in this world was accounted for, for as long as they were remembered. The women wore black head kerchiefs to remind everyone and themselves of their lifelong grief. And now the women were crying and weeping day and night away from home in their rooms on foreign soil. They were crying and weeping for those who were missing, and for themselves and for their uncertain destiny...

Back home their crying and weeping was accompanied by the sad ringing of the church bell which signaled to everyone that there was a home wrapped in black. But here, in Kunuv, there were no church bells. The mournful letters arriving in the bloodied briefcases of the commissars kept coming and putting more and more mothers under the black.

It was April.

It was spring.

It was the first spring in an alien world. It was the spring of a great cry, a great cry of great pain...

It was a spring of despair, bitterness, sadness and hopelessness. A spring that was sending many mothers under the black head kerchiefs...

Spring; the pain of our mothers, widows and orphans...

Mara joined both the women weeping and the women rejoicing. She cried with the women weeping and was happy with those rejoicing.

The pain of the one group hurt her and the joy of the other made her happy.

Donka always followed Mara. They were inseparable. Donka was Mara's shadow. Donka was a tiny, sickly woman. She was one of the many women who shared her own pain and suffering, waiting anxiously and hoping to receive her joy or...

"May God defend and protect us..." Donka would often say to herself and struggle to get rid of the bad thoughts from her mind.

She waited patiently and with a lot of hope. Her time was spent waiting. Waiting and hoping... Her nights often ended with tormenting dreams, and the days with waiting. And here in Kunuv, just like at home, the days and nights were spent waiting. Wherever she went, whatever she did, she always had a great desire to see her loved ones. Nonstop, Donka played and replayed her memories like a repeating and never ending dream. She clung to those memories of her loved ones fearing that if the thread broke and she lost them her loved ones would also be lost.

After marrying her husband and bringing her son and daughter into the world, Donka assumed responsibility for the plowing, the harvesting, the gardening, the vineyard, the sheep, the goats, the cattle... She kept the house safe from winds, rain and snow. Her husband wasn't home. He was working abroad as a pechalbar (migrant worker). Donka was left home alone with the children. During the long winter nights, after her little boy and girl fell asleep on her lap, Donka felt alone. She suffered from immense loneliness and, without regret, cursed the pechalba that took her husband away, of whom she constantly thought and whose company she enjoyed which now wasn't there, not at home, not in her garden, not in the vineyard, not in bed, but always in her mind. After the children went to sleep, she followed her usual routine of adding more firewood to the fireplace, lighting the lamp in front of the cold icon and praying a long prayer to the Mother of God. She prayed for her husband, wherever he was, to be alive and well, to make his money and return home as soon as possible. He had been gone for a long time, immensely long for Donka who he'd left alone with her daughter and son; the daughter in the cradle and the son on her lap. The little

ones were growing fast under Donka's watchful eyes. The little girl she rocked on her knees and the little boy in her arms. The little sprouts grew and grew. And she was growing old without him... and he was there in America, growing old without her... Donka never left a field unplowed, never left a grain field not harvested, the grapes in the vineyard not picked... Her barns, storage houses and barrels were always full. And so were the yard and the stables. The roof didn't leak a drop. The livelihood of the village flowed well with hard work and sweat... Donka was one of the hardest working people in the village... Even without her husband she did well... That is until the days the Great War (WW II) ended and the bad days began. There was a lot of talk that people in the cities were arguing and fighting, that authorities were opening prisons, that the Madziri (Turkish Christian settlers) were robbing the Macedonian villages, new songs were being sung in the forests, shooting and fighting was taking place in the mountains and that the battles were getting bigger and bloodier. And so one night during those turbulent times, some armed men came and gathered her son Krste and many others like Krste, and took them to the partisans. That's what they used to say then. After the harvest more armed men came and took the healthy and tall girls. Donka's daughter Sofka was healthy and tall but very young in age. They told her to go home; she was too young to be taken. Year after year they came back and took more children. One year they came back and took all the children. They told the parents that they were sending them across the border to other countries but promised that the children would be returned soon. Sofka wasn't taken with the other children. Donka was told that she would be sent to study and become a nurse. They sent her but they didn't dress in a white uniform... The village was left empty without children and so were the laps of their mothers...

And after that?

Then came the black news and cries of mothers and widows...

With a trembling body and fear in her heart Donka waited day and night.

And those who said that they were fighting for justice came to the village and, without justice, took away Donka's wheat, corn, sheep,

goats and ox. Then they took her horse named “Sivcho” (grey), on which they loaded the wheat and corn. They told her they would return the horse but they never did. They did the same to all the other villagers. The armed men then gave Donka and the others each a piece of paper and promised them that when the people’s government came to power it would pay them back for everything, for every grain they took. They came back again and again demanding that the people donate everything they had for the struggle; bed covers, pillows, plates, spoons, shoes, socks, shirts, sweaters, gloves, shovels, picks and the strength of their arms, legs, shoulders and backs to carry the wounded, weapons, ammunition, to dig trenches and to carry thick and long logs to build bunkers high up in the mountains so that the enemy would never take Vicho.

Lucky for Donka they didn’t find her cellar. At least her wine and rakia remained intact. Her wine was fermenting in oak barrels and waiting... for weddings, baptisms, holidays... waiting...

Sitting on the doorstep Donka waited. She waited for Krste and Sofka and for him, the Pechalbar (the migrant worker), she also waited for him. In her mind she searched the roads and wondered; which road would they come from, the upper or the lower? When it was dark she lit the lamp in front of the icon of the Mother of God and, kneeling down, prayed. She prayed, and when she couldn’t sleep at night she prayed more. She prayed in the white dawn when she woke up. She prayed when the sun shone a bright beam of light into her dark room. In the prayers she always begged and hoped for her husband to come home. She desperately wanted to rest her head on his shoulder, to look into his eyes and melt in his arms... And she begged for her son and daughter to come back as soon as possible... In her waiting, like a small glow in the darkness, like a spark in the stove and like a tiny flame in the lamp, there was modest hope circling... They will come, she would whisper, they will come, she would say out loud. And when she set the dinner table she always put three extra plates; one for him, one for her daughter and one for her son... Without him and without them the table was empty, the house was empty, her heart and soul were empty... her arms and lap were empty...

Empty arms, empty embraces, empty laps... There was no one for the mother to hug, to caress, to whisper stories, to sing songs...

Desolation...

Frostiness...

Silence...

She counted the days, months and years in solitude.

She waited and remembered...

She waited day and night. She got up early in the morning before dawn. She washed her face with cold water to expel her nightmares and drank a few gulps of water, enough to rinse her throat and wash her bitterness. During the cold and rainy days she waited with her face glued to the glass of the fogged up window... Her gleaming hope never left her alone. She fed her hope with the thought that at some point in time, day or night, her husband would arrive and then she would cry on his shoulder and pour out all the pain from her heart, all the bitterness of her lonely life and all the anxiety of having to wait for him. She would then look into his eyes and cry with joy until he cried... She would weep until she expelled her entire affliction accumulated in the depths of her soul.

Her waiting became her life. And every spring, when the fruit trees and flowers blossomed, her youth withered away...

And here in Kunov she is still waiting. Every day, every night, every waking hour, she is waiting. She is waiting here like she waited on the slope in Pegin where she searched the entire side of the road, looking under every stone, under every blade of grass, in every crack for a piece of rolled up paper. She is waiting here like she waited at home where the door in the yard was always wide open, where the door to her home was never locked. She stood for an hour and then she sat for another hour at the outer gate. She did the same at the doorstep of her house. She waited. She waited with her face clenched in her palms, kneeling and rocking. With her glances and teary eyes she measured the length of the road and the length of

time. The village road ended up there and there at the end she cast her view and waited as she gazed. Time flowed across the hills and across the mountains... When an army without government markings passed by, she and many other mothers rushed to the road, impatiently waiting for the soldiers to pass by so that with hope and desire and with trembling and prayerful voices, they could ask:

“Do you know...? Have you seen him...? Have you seen her...?”

There was only silence... And that could only mean “NO!”

They were silent. Their wide open eyes anchored on the faces of the mothers, watched as they passed by and left... Some soldiers slowed down, but only for a short moment, and stared hoping to see their own mother.

“No! That wasn’t my mother...” they would say to one another.

The boys and girls in uniform passed through the village and left. They passed in front of the many mothers with high hopes who stood at their gates. The mothers stood there and waited, and in that long, promising wait they drifted into silent prayers which, like the beads on a silk thread, moved along one by one expressing their greatest desires. They stood there and waited. They prayed. They hoped. They used the end of their black head kerchiefs to wipe away the tears of pain, bitterness and sadness.

Donka waited on the doorstep in front of her open gate.

All the other mothers in the village waited.

They were waiting, our mothers were waiting...

The mothers waited, and in that long and agonizing wait on their faces lay an inexpressible spasm of pain, their silence was relentlessly fatal and boiling over in their eyes was immense suffering and sadness. With a shriek from their souls and with long sighs from their hearts, the hoping mothers waited in front of their houses as the boys and girls in uniform passed by and left. And on their way to the battlefields, their desire to see their own mothers

were unfulfilled, mothers who would soon be left with empty arms and empty laps.

The soldiers followed some other roads to the mountains and hills and from there some other roads which led them to the battlefields...

In the meantime their mothers waited patiently for a long time for them to return.

The mothers, standing in the doorway, waited for their children to return...

They waited and in that waiting, their empty arms and laps were filled with the rumblings of immeasurable hope and wishes that couldn't be properly expressed with words...

They waited in silence, enduring their pain, crossing themselves, praying to all the saints and to the heavens for their children to be alive and well and to return to them soon...

Day and night they continued to hope, they continued with their prayers without interruption. They prayed and prayed and those who had lost someone who was very dear to them; they painfully cherished memories of them and carried a wound that wouldn't heal and would never allow them to remove their black head kerchiefs from their heads...

Here in Kunuv, like back home, and like on the slope in Pegin, Donka waited without interruption. All the mothers and wives waited the same way...

Every time Donka met someone, every time she briefly passed someone, people close to her or people she barely knew, they would say to her:

“Don't worry, your daughter is alive and well...”

Even the women with whom she boarded consoled her with those same words.

A lot of hope and faith burned in her. There would be no life for her without hope. Her life became waiting and hoping.

Donka waited but no letters arrived for her.

She knew that her son Krste was alive. Someone gave her a leaflet that they found on the road back on the slope at Pegin. She kept that leaflet in her bosom and there was no day that passed that she didn't take it out, unfold it and look at the three or four words that told her that her son was alive. With shaking fingers she unfolded the piece of paper to make sure those three or four words were all there... That leaflet was the remedy that kept her alive and warmed her hope. She kissed the piece of paper with all the warmth of her soul, caressed it tenderly, warmed it on her cheeks and exhaled. Then after pampering it she put it back in her bosom, where her heart was beating the strongest.

About the daughter... there was only silence...

It was April here, her first spring of exile.

It was April.

It was spring.

The days were filled with a lot of crying and with great pain...

Those passing by listened and wondered. They stopped for a moment or two... they listened, took a long breath, and wondered:

“Dlaczego płaczą Macedońki?” (Why are the Macedonians crying?)

It was April.

It was spring.

One afternoon, far away from his village, Kiro died. He died in Kunuv. They lay him down on an iron military bed in a small semi-dark room and covered him with a white sheet, after sunset. A plate of flour was placed on top of a small table covered with a white

tablecloth and in it stood a lit candle whose flickering flames spread light on Kiro's soul. Three women whimpered quietly and made sure the candle was always lit. They burned one candle after another until the darkness was pushed away by the arrival of dawn.

What kind of pain squeezed the life out of him and laid him down on the hard iron bed? There were questions asked and assumptions made. Some said it was his incurable restlessness that wounded his soul and melted his heart. Others said his loneliness exhausted him. And others, repeatedly repeating the eternal, said it was his fate; this is what had been written for him.

Kiro's body was buried at noon outside the German cemetery on the other side of the high stone fence.

"May God have mercy on his soul and may the foreign soil be light on him..." This was the only desire the living had for Kiro after his death.

There were a bunch of letters on the little table beside the bed, in the room where he stayed alone. These were his only companions and his greatest joy. One of the letters, stamped with a postage stamp from Bucharest, said that his wife was in Krnov, Czechoslovakia. She had been sent there by train. She, along with many others, was taken off the boat and loaded onto train cars. Next to that letter was an envelope on which were written, in capital letters, the words Tashkent, USSR. Kiro knew where USSR was but hardly anyone could tell him where Tashkent was. Some jokingly said: "It's probably somewhere on earth and somewhere under the sky..." So, somewhere on earth and under the sky, was Tashkent, where his son, along with the defeated army, had been taken to Odessa by ship and then by train through the deserts to the end of the world - on very warm ground and under a very hot sun - in the city called Tashkent since time immemorial. The pile of letters also contained envelopes with postage stamps from the post office in Debretsén. People told Kiro this city was in Hungary. The name sounded strange to him at first, but after they told him it was the name of a Hungarian city he knew from the letters that there were boarding houses there in which his two sons lived. Kiro often opened the envelopes read the letters and put them back, ironing each envelope

with his warm palm. He read and re-read the letters many times and each time he read them the words momentarily alleviated his great affliction. He knew by heart what each letter said. Sometimes he received a picture or two with the letters. The people in them looked the same as they had a year or two ago, when they were at home. Those he had pinned on the wall with little pins and often looked at each and spoke to them, laughed with them, taught them, reprimanded them, caressed them and gently and warmly kissed them...

And so Kiro's fractured family was united in the letters and pictures in his little room in which, besides his great joy, he often was overwhelmed by painful feelings of loneliness...

It was April.

It was spring.

It was Easter.

Christ has risen!

Happy Easter and may we celebrate it for many years!

In the next two months four more graves were dug beside Kiro's grave. Without a priest and without a church bell, more bodies were buried behind the tall stone fence outside the deserted German cemetery, overgrown with tall grass and brush. One by one our old people cast their souls under these strange skies and rested their bodies under foreign soil. A new resting place was found for them outside the fence of the German cemetery. This corner would be their eternal resting place; a growing new settlement outside the wall and iron fence. That little corner came to be known as the Macedonian cemetery.

Women dressed in black went to the cemetery and performed the usual rituals and ceremonies that they had performed at home to commemorate the diseased and to pray for their souls so that they might find peace.

Life continues in their long prayers for the living and for the dead and will remain as such for as long as they are remembered.

And this is how it was in April and the following days and weeks, during that first spring of exile.

Many of those who were of age didn't see another spring. In their eyes, time blurred the life-giving light and shortened their walking path.

The silence coupled with the great desire and undiminished hope, deeply rooted in their souls, to return home soon, shortened their lives and many, in the years that inevitably flowed, didn't wait for a new spring.

With the heavy pain in their hearts they disappeared into the darkness in this strange land that wasn't theirs...

May God forgive their sins...

“We knew all the trails and crossings from the previous year. We knew where we left rock bunkers last year, and there were no trenches because we didn’t dig any. We piled stone on top of stone and those were our bunkers. Those built from logs, stone and earth were blown up by bazookas, by the new weapons the Americans brought, and by the bombs dropped from aircraft. We traveled at night, doctor, at night when the shadow wasn’t visible. We charged our enemy at dawn. We were greeted by a storm of bullets. They were expecting us. They were waiting with their fingers on the trigger. We walked right into their line of fire, right in front of their machine guns. They were waiting for us behind every rock, behind every stone, behind every tree trunk lying down or upright. There was no place to take cover. We were all targets. We were falling like flies. Gramos has no soil, only rocks, stones, blood and bones. There was a hailstorm of bullets coming at us. You can say they could hit us right between the eyes. That’s how they were positioned. They were thousands, we were hundreds. They lay down, we ran at them standing. We had to jump over our fallen comrades and attack upright. We ran forward upright and no one turned their head to see who was left behind. We were children, doctor... children! Children were killed and mutilated. I lost many of my friends and my own life was destroyed because of what happened there. The machine gun fire, the hand grenades, the bombs... They weren’t only crushing stones but evaporating lives. Their bombs ruined many lives. We were children, young girls and boys; they were men, seasoned and experienced fighters. Children fighting against men! Inexperienced boys and girls fighting against experienced fighters. They nailed us to the ground. Orders came to withdraw. And as we pulled out, we became targets again. A boy fell down in front of me. I fell next to him. He was breathing. He was wounded but alive. I made my way under him and slowly tossed him on my shoulder. I crawled on the ground on my hands but couldn’t see where I was going. I ran into a rock. I laid the boy down. I tried to stand up but

my legs wouldn't support me. I was hit by a burst of gunfire and felt the bullets stinging my legs. I noticed some of my comrades going by me. Some were running and others were crawling and begging for help. I was unable to move. I lay on my back and watched the clouds of fog and smoke rise. I couldn't see the sun. I couldn't see the mountains, the hills... Everything was covered in smoke. I felt very tired and wanted to sleep... That's all I can remember..." said the young fighter.

"What happened after that?" asked the doctor.

"I don't know. All I remember after that is being shaken... Up and down motion... I suspected I was being carried on a stretcher. I woke up but I didn't have the strength to figure out who was taking me and where. I don't know how long that shaking lasted. When I woke up again I saw myself lying down beside others in a truck. I could hear voices, howling, screaming and swearing but my world went black and I passed out again. The shaking of the truck and the loud cries kept waking me up. I could feel great pain burning and biting at my legs. The good thing about the pain is that it was telling me that I was still alive..." concluded the young fighter.

"What happened after that?" asked the doctor.

"After that they lay me on a flat board, tied me up, tied boards on both sides of my legs, and stood me upright. I couldn't move at all. I wasn't alone. Next to me were many beds, all occupied by wounded young men and women," said the fighter.

"What happened after that?" asked the doctor.

"After that I rolled left and right. I lay tied tight on those boards but I didn't know where I was. I no longer heard cries, gun shots, or smelled gunpowder... I figured I wasn't on the battlefield. When I realized that I was laying on a soft bed I knew I was in a hospital. After that I paid careful attention to the voices and heard another language being spoken, which I didn't know but could understand a few words. Some words, like those of body parts, were similar to those of my native language. I could hear the doctors and nurses speaking but could only understand the words for hurt, wound, eyes,

nose, voice, foot, just like they were said in my language. I realized that I was in good hands. The word for ‘good’ is the same in both languages. Doctor, I look forward to seeing you in this hospital room... always smiling... I often wondered: Lord, God, why does this man have such a gentle smile, so much warmth in his voice, such a gentle look in his eyes? When I think of his tenderness and his gentle touch, I cry. When I look into his eyes I see a reflection of my pain. Doctor, what kind of man are you?” asked Sofka, the young female fighter.

Sofka spent her days with her eyes fixed on the ceiling. There hung all her questions, doubts and hopes. There she looked for answers as to how her life was going to be. Her left leg was cut above her knee, her right leg... Dr. Barchikovski and the other doctors were consulting each other and thinking about it. Their last decision was to remove the part of the leg that was turning bluish, but a few days later black spots began to appear...

She looked at the ceiling and quietly said:

“Now I want cry... Now I want to cry quietly and for a long time. I want to cry for myself and for all those who I knew that never made it, whose bodies were left among the rocks in Gramos. I want to cry for those who were left alive but were mutilated. I don’t know if I will have enough tears to cry for all the calamities, for all those who stayed behind in those wild mountains they call Gramos, where in every footprint there is dried blood. Wherever you step, you step on blood, you stumble on bones... Now I want to cry, I want to cry a lot. Maybe the crying will ease my pain, maybe it will ease my pain that comes from my heart and soul, and not from my legs being cut off... maybe it will ease my pain. Gramos was a big grave... but I don’t know who dug it. I don’t know how many were never buried and are still burning under the hot sun? Who is to blame for all that? Who committed these sins? Mothers everywhere are crying, in the cities, in the villages, in gathering places and on the roads that lead to nowhere. There are no homes... only desolation... There are bad people who have spread malice, hatred, desolation and who have spawned bad fate. They have unleashed terrible sins against those who are left alive. There were also those who watched the slaughter with their binoculars from the distance, scanning the hills, looking

for movement, looking to mow down another life. And when they did spot someone, behind a rock, behind a stone, behind a tree, on this hill, or on that hill... they pointed at them with their finger and waited for them to fall. And as they fell, their life was snuffed out of them, those watching jumped with joy. They never asked whose child they had just killed... They didn't want to know whose children they had ordered to be slaughtered, to be exterminated. Now I want cry, now I want cry very, very much... But I have no more tears, so I will cry without tears... I will cry a heavy and painful cry. Painful! I will cry for myself and for all the mothers whose children were left behind on both sides of the rocks.

Sofka covered her head with the sheet which long trembled over her mutilated body. The nurse came in to calm her down and take her on a pushcart for her regular outing to the high dunes from where she could view the sea, and from there to the gym for therapy. This was her daily routine - a breath a fresh sea air and then exercise in the gym.

After exercise Nurse Teresa returned her to her hospital room and, with the doctor's help, laid her down on her bed. Sofka was tired. The exercises for her legless body were hard and painful. Her waist hurt, her shoulders hurt and even the smallest parts of her body hurt. Her soul also hurt. And she suffered. Looking at the ceiling a swarm of questions swirled inside her head for which no one had answers. The only thing she had to do was look at the ceiling, endure and think. This was her life. Sometimes she thought of collecting all her pills, counting them one by one and then swallowing them all. To end herself... She wanted to do it. To be gone... But all around her were the people in white who comforted her, promising her things, reassuring her that, even as she is, life was worth living. She would learn the language which would open the way to the open world of life. She doubted it but slowly those assurances were working on her, encouraging her...

Dr. Barchikovski (this is his real name) entered the room smiling and sat on the edge of the bed in which Sofka lay and, in a low and quiet voice, said:

“I’m very, very glad that your left leg is healing well. You are recovering. The right one worries me... but only a little...”

“What’s the problem...?” asked Sofka.

“You are a brave girl... Don’t worry. Everything will be all right,” replied Dr. Barchikovski.

“By all right you mean you’re not going to cut it off?” asked Sofka.

With a cotton swab Dr. Barchikovski wiped the drop of sweat that appeared on Sofka’s forehead and quietly, in an almost begging tone of voice, said:

“We will treat your leg but if the treatment doesn’t work...” Dr. Barchikovski didn’t finish his sentence. He got up, caressed Sofka’s cheek and said: “We will save what can be saved from your body, but we will surely leave you with something... the most important thing... your life... Let it sustain you...”

“Life... what kind of life will that be?! I’m a cripple...! You say I’m brave... Will that make me happy? My face is deformed, my forehead is one big scar and now you tell me to be brave?” replied Sofka.

“We will remove the scar from your face and you will be beautiful again...” said Dr. Barchikovski.

“Oh, Doctor Barchikovski, you bring us all comfort... But tell me what would be the point of being beautiful if I have no legs?” asked Sofka.

“They will love you even without legs... To convince you I will ask all the young men in the hospital. I will say to them: “Boys, tell me is Sofka beautiful or not. And let someone dare say that you aren’t. Everyone will say that Sofka is the most beautiful girl in this hospital...” replied Dr. Barchikovski.

“You are a great person Pan Doctor. As they say in my tradition: ‘You aren’t just a man, you are pure gold...’ You know how to console a hurting soul...” said Sofka.

Dr. Barchikovski leaned over her head and quietly and gently whispered:

“I’ll tell you something but let it stay between us. I know a rascal who loves you very much. Today, during my visit he whispered in my ear. He said: ‘Doctor, go and see Sofka and tell her that I love her very much...’ And then he said: ‘That girl is very dear to me. She’s not only always in my mind but in my heart as well, and it doesn’t bother me that she has only one leg. Even without legs I would still love her... even more...’ This is what he said... Now rest, think of life and rejoice that you are alive and that not one but many love you very much. And if you want to know, darling, I too love you...”

“Uh, you too Doctor...? You big joker you...” replied Sofka.

For the last few days Sofka had been experiencing severe leg pains and by now had realized that she was soon going to lose her other leg. Doctor Barchikovski had also come to the same conclusion...

Two days later Sofka lay in her bed without her right leg.

Staring at the ceiling she spent all day with questions running through her mind. She didn’t ask for any answers. She just wondered.

She didn’t laugh out loud. She laughed with her eyes. In those eyes there was laughter and joy, pain and sadness, long solitude and disappointment... And slowly, but painfully, she got used to the idea of being a cripple...

In the meantime the meeting in the chief physician’s office continued for a second hour. It was a long and tedious debate.

“Gentlemen, this is a military hospital and I am a military doctor here and I’m treating soldiers, not party secretaries. That’s my

job...” said chief physician Dr. Bogdan, addressing the Greek party secretary and all those present at the meeting.

“Our job, Comrade Doctor is to strengthen the fighting spirit of our fighters every day. They aren’t here to relax in the very good conditions that your people’s government has created...” replied the Greek party secretary.

Dr. Bogdan looked at him and, in a calm tone of voice, said:
“Comrades, Greek partisans, again I must emphasize that this is a military hospital governed by military rules. You comrades, Greek partisans, can’t make a party school out of my hospital. My co-workers tell me that you had late-night party meetings with our patients. This is unacceptable and against the rules for all our patients. Yes, we have patients here, not partisans... and your party members are also patients here. And you, while you are here, you too are patients...”

Dissatisfied with the explanation the party secretary said: “Caution must be observed. We have information that there are those, among the Slavo-Macedonians, who are distrustful of our party...” But before the Greek party secretary could finish his sentence, Dr. Bogdan abruptly interrupted him and said:

“Excuse me, what did you say? Slavo-Macedonians? Can you please explain to me what that means?”

“Of course, Doctor... They are Slavs living in the Greek part of Macedonia and, unlike the Greeks living there, we call them Slavo-Macedonians...” replied the Greek party secretary.

Dr. Bogdan smiled and quietly, in a tone of astonishment, said:

“According to your logic, the Poles in Poland should be called Slavo-Poles, right?”

“No!” replied the Greek party secretary.

“No?! Why not?” asked Dr. Bogdan.

The Greek party secretary looked at Dr. Bogdan with a distasteful look and, pretending he didn't hear his question, said:

“Let's get back to the subject at hand. Namely, the Slavo-Macedonians have been gathering separately from their Greek comrades. They have been singing war songs that are very similar to the war songs sung during the war in the Serbian part of Macedonia. These are Tito's songs and we already know what Tito's role was in the international Communist movement and our struggle. And one more thing... We have information that they are preparing to do a theatrical play they call 'Bloody Macedonian Wedding'. This play was written by one of Tito's writers and has been frequently performed in Tito's theaters in Skopje... And I would like to point out to you that we have also seen some irregularities with your co-workers. For example, we have noticed that your nurses wear necklaces around their necks with the image of Jesus Christ. It's wrong not to say something about that. We find it unacceptable for our fighters to see such symbols. We are educating them to be fighters, not religious worshippers...”

Dr. Bogdan looked at him and said:

“Please understand comrades, Greek partisans, that this is a secret military hospital which has strict military rules. Religious feelings here are a personal matter for every member of our medical staff. That shouldn't be your problem. And please don't get involved in the healing process. I don't understand why you harbour such suspicion towards your fellow Macedonians. They are disciplined, meek people and have a very good attitude towards the whole collective. They feel free here in our country. They speak their language freely and follow their own customs and traditions which, I understand, have been banned in Greece... You, I have the impression, don't trust anyone. You are in doubt of everything. And I will say this again; please don't get mixed up where it's not your job. I'm asking you, soldier to soldier, to be disciplined patients... This meeting is over. Go back to your rooms and abide by the prescribed rules... And leave the Macedonians alone. I don't want my military hospital used for party rallies... And stop taking disciplinary action against our patients...”

“Doctor, you can’t do this to us... We will protest...” objected the Greek party secretary.

“Dr. Bogdan didn’t say anything. He gently rubbed his forehead, and after he calmed down he asked:

“What’s your name?”

“Captain of...” replied the Greek party secretary.

“I didn’t ask for your rank, I asked for your name!” interrupted Dr. Bogdan.

“Karamouzis...” replied the Greek party secretary.

“And yours?” asked Dr. Bogdan pointing at the person standing next to the Greek party secretary.

“Parisis...” he replied.

This man had lost an eye but one eye was all he needed to see bad things in people... He was evil, a type of bad person, suspicious and full of malice... He had a weird and sickly smile...

Dr. Bogdan turned to his assistant and asked him to get the head nurse.

Nurse Ianina showed up immediately.

“Nurse, please bring the patient charts for, what were your names again?” asked Dr. Bogdan.

“Karamouzis and Parisis,” replied the party committee secretary.

The nurse pulled out the two charts and handed them to Dr. Bogdan who carefully went through them and then gave them back to Nurse Ianina. He then turned to Karamouzis and Parisis and quietly said:

“Comrades, you have recovered well and we don’t want to keep healthy people in this hospital. We will release you like we have

released hundreds of patients who have recovered here and you can go to your refugee centre in Zgozhelets. Nurse, please prepare the patient release forms for Karamouzis and Parisis and bring them to me to sign. Tell the attendant to prepare some clothes for them. One suit, two shirts, one necktie, a coat, a hat, shoes, two pairs of socks and several undershirts and pairs of underwear each... Provide them with food for two days and everything else they will need in accordance with the rules... You, gentlemen, forgive me, you comrades, Greek partisans, remember that this is a secret military hospital where we treat wounded fighters, not party propagandists...” concluded Dr. Bogdan, hit the table with his hand and said: “Meeting is over...”

“I made new braces for you but they won’t be the kind that go well with the looks of a beautiful girl such as yourself,” joked the prosthetics craftsman. “But, even though they couldn’t match your beautiful legs,” he tried to convince her, “your new braces will be good enough for you to dance the waltz at the next dance. They will let everyone see what a good dancer you are. They will squeak a little but everyone will think the newly laid parquet floor is doing the squeaking...”

Pavel put the braces on her legs, tied the belts and helped her get up. He then held her under her arms until she was able to stand up and pushed her slightly forward.

The first step was difficult, the second even more difficult. Each step became more and more difficult, painful and exhausting. She pushed forward hard while leaning with her hands against Pavel.

“I can’t!” she kept saying with a weeping voice. “The braces are too heavy and the belts are too tight. I’m in pain...” while clasping both of her hands tightly around his neck.

“The first step will be difficult and the second even more difficult. You will get used to them; it takes a lot of patience and practice.” She reached the wall with difficulty, leaning on her hands, standing with her back turned to Pavel.

“I can’t!” she kept saying with a weeping voice. “The braces are too heavy and the belts are too tight. I’m in pain...”

“You will get used to them; it takes a lot of patience and practice. We’ll start your practice tomorrow. Step by step we will walk up and down the hall from one end to the other, and when we have that

mastered we will go for a walk in the park and then we will walk along the seaside,” explained Pavel.

Every day she spent hours practicing taking steps from one end of the hall to the other and back. At first she used a crutch but a week later she went without one. And as she learned how to walk better her confidence level grew and she felt, in no time at all, that she could walk on her own without any support. She practiced every morning and afternoon with tears in her eyes, with a hardened heart and soul. Her muscles became used to it, but they still hurt and she still yelled and cursed but mostly cried in pain begging Pavel to stop. Her days were spent with several hours of exercise. Pavel insisted that she exercise, even when she cried and begged him to stop.

“No my dear, you must endure, walk, one small step for now, another and bigger step later. I can see that each step you take today is better than the step you took yesterday. Push yourself...” Pavel used to say.

“And how much longer will you torment me like this, my dear Pavel?” Sofka used to say.

“One more month my dear... Like I told you before until the first waltz you dance with me like I promised you. Please continue to exercise. Only with practice will you achieve success. Go on and think of the waltz...” Pavel said jokingly and pushed her to get moving.

Half a year later, after many difficult exercises, which usually ending with Sofka crying, Sofka was asked to see the hospital director. It was a short, military style conversation. She was told that she was completely healed and able to take care of herself.

In the evening before the lights went out, according to hospital rules, Nurse Teresa quietly entered Sofka’s hospital room. There was a strange satisfied look in her eyes and a big smile on her swollen puffy lips. She sat down next to Sofka, held her hands in hers and, caressing them, whispered to her:

“I have good news and better news for you.”

“Please give them to me...” Sofka said impatiently.

“The good news is that a decision has been made and you will be leaving the hospital next week. That’s what the boss decided...”

“Finally, like all the others, I will be joining the world. And the other news, Nurse Teresa?” asked Sofka.

“For the other news you’ll have to close your eyes and take a deep breath,” said Nurse Teresa with a trembling voice and sweaty palms.

Sofka opened her eyes wide and loudly said:

“Please Nurse Teresa, speak up! What’s the other good news?”

“Your mother...” replied Teresa.

“My mother, my mother...” said Sofka as if centuries had passed since she had uttered that word. And again she said, “My mother, my mother...” but she didn’t cry.

“Your mother, Sofka, is alive and here in Poland...” said Teresa.

“My mother? My mother? My mother?” said Sofka and tears began to run down her cheeks.

“Calm down, my dear. Your mother is alive and well. She works in one of our agricultural holdings. We found her through the Greek party committee in Zgozhelets...” said Teresa.

Sofka covered her eyes with her hands and began to yell like she had when she was little:

“Mamo!!!”

“Tears began to flow between her fingers.”

“Mamo, mamo, mamo!!!” she kept yelling just like when she was little.

Sofka got up, fell into Nurse Teresa’s arms and cried out loud.

“Calm down my dear...” begged Nurse Teresa, stroking her hair. “Calm down. I have something else to tell you. Stop crying and listen to me carefully. It has been arranged for you to meet your mother next week at the train station in Vrotslav. She will be there waiting for you... And now get some sleep. Good night...”

Sofka didn’t sleep that night. All she could think about was her mother who she’d last seen six years ago, in the evening, when she and the other girls were collected and taken away. She left behind hard times but she never stopped thinking of her mother. Sofka kept looking at the ceiling trying to remember what her mother looked like, trying to remember her face. She remembered her mother had dark hair, sad blue eyes and a gentle smile. She remembered getting big warm hugs during her childhood...

A week later the large hospital gate and the world opened wide for Sofka. Left and right stood the doctors and nurses. Nurse Teresa gave Sofka a big hug, secretly placed an envelope in her pocket and quietly said:

“I’m giving you my mother’s address and a little something for you. Please write me through my mother and let me know how you are doing. That way we can stay in contact.”

The doctors and nurses with whom Sofka had spent a long time were all there. Some were smiling and others crying. Just as the jeep started to pull away they all began to wave goodbye. Dr. Barchikovski broke away from the others and ran towards the jeep. He grabbed Sofka and hugged her. He held her in his arms for a long time. He then said:

“Good luck, my child.” (As chief surgeon at that time, Dr. Vladislav Barchikovski was one of the main founders of the most modern equipped military hospital, which occupied 27 blocks (barracks) in which about 2000 wounded DAG fighters were treated. His

impressions and experience were published in 1988 in a book entitled “Szpital grecki na wyspie Wolin” (Greek hospital on Volin Island). Under utmost secrecy the hospital was founded by the Polish government in July 1949 and disbanded in 1952. As a reminder, Volin Island was home to one of Germany’s largest air bases, where V1 and V2 missiles were designed, manufactured and fired over Great Britain.)

Sofka had been in this hospital for two years and was leaving much of herself behind. Both her pain and gratitude were engraved on her face and in her tearful eyes. A new world had opened for her in her long stay here. How could she leave it, how could she say goodbye to it? The jeep would take her to another world where she would be among other strangers in a land she didn’t know. She looked ahead, carrying the cross of pain on her shoulders. When she said goodbye to the doctors and nurses it wasn’t with words. She kissed their eyes, cheeks and foreheads and expressed her gratitude in silence.

She left the hospital but with her she carried the faces of all the doctors and nurses. She carried the face of Pavel, the prosthetics craftsman who sent a report to the hospital management in which he wrote that he had great success with Sofka, but estimated that in order to achieve even greater success; he proposed that they send her to the prosthetic institute run by the renowned German prosthesis specialist, Dr. Willy. She carried the faces of all the staff who were kind to her. She was wholeheartedly grateful for their words of consolation, their looks in which there was more hope and every day less pain and much, much affection. Everyone loved her and she loved them. Now, as she was leaving the hospital and the jeep was far from the big gate, Sofka realized that she was leaving for another world. An unknown world... Would she be able to cope, as she had coped and overcome the pain during those two years, the pain of the very feeling of being mutilated? She then remembered the words Barchikovski said to her when he said goodbye:

“You won’t be lost in the world. It won’t be the world it will be you who will put it under your feet. Leave deep footprints behind, like those on the sand by the sea...”

Donka arrived at the Vrotslav train station at noon. She was told not to forget the platform number where she was supposed to wait for a train to arrive. Donka was impatient and her entire body trembled as she took each step pacing back and forth measuring the long and empty platform from one end to the other. From time to time a hoarse voice was heard making announcements about trains arriving and leaving which made her even more anxious.

One announcement said: “Opóźniony pociąg pospieszny ze Szczecina do Przemyśla przez Poznań-Wrocław-Opole-Katowice-Kraków jest opóźniony pół godziny.” (The high-speed train from Shchechin to Pshemipli via Poznani-Vrotslav-Opole-Katovitse-Krakoni has been delayed.)

About thirty minutes later the same voice said:

“Opóźniony pociąg pospieszny ze Szczecina wjeżdża na peron pierwszy...” (The delayed high-speed train from Shchechin is now entering platform one.)

People waiting to board and those waiting for their friends to arrive ran for the train. The station warden wearing a red cap on his head and carrying a yellow paddle in his hand gave the signal. The locomotive whistle blew, a cloud of steam puffed out and the train slowly began to move and, a short time later, disappeared.

There was another woman at the end of the platform. She was limping her way towards the other end of the platform, carrying a backpack over her shoulder and a suitcase in her right hand. She was leaning on a crutch with her left arm. She could hardly move her legs on the concrete slab. She walked slowly, looking ahead. She paused for a moment and looked left and right and, after taking a deep breath, continued to walk ahead. She stopped, turned, looked

and started walking again. She did this several times, giving the impression that she was looking for someone. She stopped and sat down on the nearest bench. She took off her backpack and leaned it on the bench. She looked all over the platform. Sitting on the bench she waited and watched the trains come and go and the people getting on and off. She watched people shout, talk, meet, hug, laugh and rejoice. She wasn't jealous of them. She was happy for them. She kept saying to herself I too will meet her, welcome her, hug her, kiss her, look into her eyes...

Trains continued to arrive and leave. Where do so many people come from? Where do they go? She sat there and watched. She often got up to see if the one getting off the train was the woman she was looking for. She would wave her arms, shake her hands, shout... It wasn't her. She would return to the bench. In time she began to feel anxious. She was breathing heavily. She crossed her arms and watched the many people get off and on the trains, shouting and wishing each other a good trip... And saying, 'see you later'.

The whistle blew, the locomotive rumbled and the train left. Moments later another train arrived.

Pacing back and forth along the platform Donka kept looking around. Finally she sat down on one of the benches. "People, people, so many people..." Donka said to herself as she watched and wondered why her daughter hadn't got off one of those many trains that passed by here. "She probably missed her train. Or perhaps the train is late. She is definitely late. There's another train arriving. Please let it be this train... Please let her be on this train..." Donka said to herself.

Donka got up from the bench and walked towards the limping woman coming from the other end of the platform, whose steps were banging loudly and evenly on the tile floor. She went past her a few steps then stopped and turned around. She looked at the woman and watched her approach and pass by. Donka kept watching the woman from behind as she distanced herself. She listened to the loud banging made by her crutch hitting the pavement. The woman went to the end of the platform and turned around. Donka waited for her and as she got closer she began to look at her more carefully.

When the woman came close to Donka, she stopped. They both looked at each others faces and eyes.

The platform was empty. There were no trains. There were no people. The benches were all empty.

She turned around and, without stopping, looked at her again. “No, it’s not her... It can’t be her...” she said to herself again. She couldn’t imagine her daughter looking any different than what she had looked like the last time she saw her; tall, slender, stout... This woman was bent over, disfigured and lame, as if she had no strength in her legs and looked sickly.

When the woman went further down the platform and the pounding of her crutch was less loud, Donka stopped, turned around and watched her as she braced herself on the crutch and swung from hip to hip. Donka whispered: “Poor woman... Young and lame... What kind of mother would push her to travel on a train like this? Maybe she’s waiting for someone?”

Another train arrived and the platform became crowded. People rushed, pushed, shouted, hugged and said goodbye. The whistle blew, the locomotive roared and the train left. Those left behind quickly left the platform and went to the city. Only the two women remained on the platform. They walked back and forth in opposite directions passing one another and secretly looking at each other.

Donka suddenly stopped. Her blonde hair, her long blonde lashes, her round, white face, all sank into Donka’s eyes. She stared at the woman with the backpack and crutches for a long time.

“Is it her...? No, it’s not her... this woman is lame...” Donka whispered to herself and again looked at the woman’s hair. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from her blonde hair, blonde eyelashes and white face.

“It might be her...” she whispered trembling with excitement. Only she, her Sofka, had such blonde hair and such long eyelashes. Whenever Donka thought of her daughter she always remembered her blonde hair, blue eyes and her beautiful long blonde eyelashes.

They reminded her of the clear blue sky. There was no other girl like her in the whole village. Only her Sofka looked like that...

Donka quickly turned around, caught up to her and asked:

“Are you waiting for someone?”

“Yes. For my mother...” she replied quietly.

Their eyes met. There was fire in their pupils and excitement on their faces. They stood there staring at each other. They stood face to face looking at each other, stiff, cheeks trembling, incapable of speaking...

“My mother... I’m waiting for my mother...” said Sofka.

Donka immediately recognized her voice and began to shake and weep.

After she regained her composure Donka said: “Are you... Are you...” but she couldn’t get her words out because her voice kept breaking. Donka then stretched her arms out and threw them tightly around the woman. Her embrace was so forceful it made the women look like they were one body. Donka’s strong and warm embrace bound them together. They hugged for a long time in silence. They were hugging in the middle of the platform and whispering to themselves:

“Are you really my child...?”

“Are you really my mother...?”

People passing by looked at them curiously as they rushed to catch their train.

The whistle blew, the locomotive roared and the train left. Another train came after that and more people poured out and left the platform. Only Donka and Sofka remained behind, standing in the middle of the platform tightly embracing each other, face to face, tears running down their cheeks, inhaling and exhaling, joined

together as if they had one heart and one soul. They stood in their tight embrace and quietly, barely audibly whispered:

“My child...”

“Mother...”

The two women, alone on the platform, hugged and kissed as tears washed their faces from the ills of their separation, inflicted on them by the wild times...

More trains came and went. More people descended and ascended. The platform was filled and emptied time and time again but the two women remained in an embrace for a long time. They hugged in an inseparable embrace and with a gentle, quiet, warm and caressing whisper, mother and daughter slowly began to calm their nerves and heal the great pain...

“My child...”

“Mother...”

Would the great joy take away the gloom that reigned over them during those painful years of separation?

Trains were coming and going. The platforms were filled and emptied and the two women were still hugging...

It was fall.

The soil was still breathing the aroma of a golden, Polish autumn and the Indian summer warmed the decorated, golden leaves above the trees.

It was fall and the end of a second year in exile for the refugees...

After meeting her mother, Sofka suffered another setback. Donka was hit by a heavy truck just two steps away from her. It was an accident that took place on the corner of a street. Sofka could have

prevented it had she had the strength to grab her mother and move her out of the way. She felt like she had let her down...

The prosthesis institute was on the outskirts of the city, which hadn't suffered from the so-called "carpet" bombing by American planes. The beautiful palaces, museums and everything else that stood there, built over centuries, were destroyed. Some said that the city, one of the most beautiful in Europe, had been destroyed for no reason. The car stopped in front of a large iron door, where an armed soldier was standing. He asked for a pass and, after looking at it, let the car enter the yard. Everywhere it was green, lots of flowers and clean paths. Sofka stood up slowly and, while two nurses held her by her armpits, walked down a long hallway. There were wooden handlebars mounted along all the walls and stairs, and wheelchairs, crutches and canes left leaning against the wall along the hall. The nurses took Sofka to the gym, sat her down and told her to wait. She didn't wait long. A middle aged man dressed in a white coat came into the gym with a confident step and a mild smile on his face. He greeted Sofka in German but she didn't understand what he said. She just nodded her head to return what she assumed was a greeting. A few minutes later a woman translator arrived and asked her in Greek:

"Do you speak Greek?"

"Yes, I understand but I'm not fluent," replied Sofka.

"That's fine, I'm sure we'll understand each other," said the translator and began to explain things to Sofka. She said: "They brought you here to the famous professor and master craftsmen of prosthetics. Tomorrow you will start with the professor, as he put it, to collect data on your current treatment, and then, when all the necessary examinations are completed, the exercises will begin. So today, come with me so I can introduce you to other patients, show you to your bedroom, the dining room and then, after you rest, we

will go for a walk in the park where the professor will explain the many things about the exercises you will need to do.”

Professor Willy had a thorough conversation with Sofka.

“Where do you live in Poland?” he asked, looking straight into her eyes.

“In Vrotslav... in a boarding house for the disabled...” she replied.

“Do you like the city?” he asked.

“It’s a big city, with wide and long streets for the trams to travel. Vrotslav is a city with many parks that have blue and white lilacs. They are the most beautiful and fragrant in the spring and so is the aroma of jasmine. I like the small streets that are lit with lanterns. I often walk on those when I go to the park in which there is a pond. It’s a pleasure to watch the two swans swimming together. And in the autumn, Vrotslav is golden...” she said but before she could finish the professor interrupted and, in a quiet and sad voice, said:

“I was born in Vrotslav. I grew up there, graduated from college and became what I am today. I lived in the western part of the city. To go home I walked from the city centre west along a long two-way street. Wild chestnut and linden trees grew on both sides of the street. When they bloomed they spread their heady scent everywhere. People couldn’t get enough of their aroma. There was a beautiful park across the street. It was all green. My street was close to the end of the long street. If you went left then right you would have ended up on my street. First I walked down that old cobblestone road, that’s the street you mentioned, the street lit with lanterns... I remember watching an old gentleman riding a bicycle every day after sunset with a stick, which he used to light the lanterns. The surroundings were filled with uninterrupted intimate light, scent from the linden trees and songbirds. There were many birds with a variety of chants. My house was also there. It had a ground floor, two floors above that and an attic. It was located in a large yard with pear, apple and plum trees planted on both sides of the path. Lots of roses too...”

The professor pulled out a large handkerchief from his inner pocket, wiped the sweat from his forehead and neck and, after a long silence, continued:

“The Soviets bombed the western part of Vrotslav, which German command had declared an inextricable fortress. This was the northern suburb of that big and beautiful city we used to call Breslau, which the Poles now call Vrotslav. My family and I left the city under coercion and fear mainly from the strong propaganda waged by the German authorities claiming that the Soviets were killing people. I left my favorite city and my villa with only a few prosthetic tools and instruments and a few medical books in my hands. We left everything else there. I even forgot to take the keys to the villa... We traveled on foot. Our column was attacked by Soviet aircraft. The road led us to this city. And so my dear lady, by decision of the victors myself and millions of other Germans have become refugees. We were expelled from our own place of birth. The choice of where one lives during peacetime isn't the same as being forced to leave during a war where there is death and destruction. The new Communist authorities, in the Deutsche Democrat Republic, welcomed specialists like myself and gave us houses, work and excellent working conditions for, of course, our silence. We are silent here about who we work for. But we know for whom we make our braces and we take good care to keep our patients satisfied. We treat them as if they have perfectly healthy legs. That's the kind of legs we make for them,” concluded the professor.

Throughout her stay in Germany Sofka had frequent walks and talks with the people in the workshop, the gym and most notably in the park where during the long walks, which were designed for outdoor exercise, Sofka was very happy with the new prosthesis, taking steps, turning around and kneeling... She did well in both the gym and long walks in the park. Her contact with people also helped her learn a few German words. She felt better and had less pain with each passing day. Professor Willy was pleased with her progress and had confidence that Sofka would steadily become better.

One day, at sunset, with some slight uncertainty in his voice, Professor Willy said:

“When you go back to Breslau, now Vrotslav, I want you to do something for me.”

“Be assured, doctor, I will do it for you. Just tell me what you want me to do,” replied Sofka.

“Go to this street’, the doctor told her the German name of the street and then said, “the Poles must have changed it by now but the house should still be there because that part of Breslau wasn’t bombed. I told you where it was... near the street with the lanterns. If you go there before sunset, maybe someone will light them. Turn left and you’ll see my villa. It’s certain that someone lives there now. Ask the new owners to let you in. You already speak Polish well and you’ll be able to communicate with them. Ask them to let you in so you can have a look, to see what’s there... outside. Promise me you’ll go... You’ll do me this favour. I love that house with all my heart. I dream of it often. My father was an architect and he built it with great love. My mother was a professor at the Academy of Applied Arts and she helped him. Promise me you’ll go and see it.”

“I will, Doctor. God willing I promise I’ll do it and next year, if I’m healthy and alive, I’ll ask to change my braces and I’ll tell you everything I find out. I’ll do my best to look at the entire house, every room and every corner. Trust me and thank you for your trust. I’ll travel back by train tomorrow. You don’t need to take me to the train station; I’ll go on my own. I’ll write you a letter from Vrotslav in my language, in Macedonian, and let you know how things went. There are a few disabled people here who are Macedonian and can read it for you... I’ll send you the letter through a trusted friend and not through the regular mail...” said Sofka.

Sofka returned to Vrotslav. A few days later she went looking for the villa. It was evening. The street was already illuminated by the lanterns but she saw the man slowly riding his bicycle, finishing the job. Disturbed by the night breeze the blue flame flickered inside the lanterns lighting and dimming the cobblestone street. Sofka stood on the side of the road and watched the lanterns for a long time.

The next day, at noon, she entered the yard. The yard gate was open. She knocked on the front door of the house. A short, fat lady opened it and said:

“Come on in, who are you and what do you want?”

“Excuse me, Madam... Walking along the street I noticed this beautiful, beautiful villa and said to myself, go and see what’s inside. I hope that’s okay. Excuse me, dear lady, I didn’t mean to disturb you...” replied Sofka.

“Bronek, there’s a lady here who wants to see the villa...” yelled the woman.

A tall, skinny man came to the door. He looked sickly and was holding a white handkerchief over his mouth. After a long and painful cough he said:

“Welcome, Madam, let’s go inside,” and then invited her in with a wide swing of his arm. Sofka went from room to room, first on the ground floor and then on the first and second floor examining each room carefully.

“Here, Madam, in this villa,” Bronek began to explain, “lived a prominent German architect and orthopedic doctor, best known for making excellent prosthetics. As you can see nothing was changed here. The same furniture, the same beds, the same paintings on the walls... Everything was done with great care to preserve it. And as an architect myself, I decided not to change anything here. I saw no need. Nothing has been changed... It has remained as it was arranged by the previous owners...”

After Sofka looked at all the rooms, Bronek asked:

“And what did you decide? Will you join us in living in this villa? You have the freedom to choose your own room. I, with my Ella, am already old and sometimes need modest help... We would be very pleased if you would join us and help us out... for example go to the pharmacy to get our medicines? What do you say to that?”

“With great pleasure I will be at your disposal, dear Sir. Although I am a severely disabled person, I don’t mind going to the pharmacy or the store. Even the doctors advised me to walk. Most often I go on foot, and rarely by tram...” replied Sofka.

“Are you working right now?” asked Bronek.

“Yes, in a disability association...” replied Sofka.

“What do you do there?” asked Bronek.

“Toothbrushes, clothes, shoes, slippers...” But before she finished speaking Bronek interrupted and asked:

“What kind of education do you have?”

“No education at all. I grew up in two wars. The first as a child in the village and the second as a fighter at age seventeen... I was heavily wounded and the Polish doctors healed me in a beautiful hospital where I stayed for two years and learned to speak Polish... My nurse cared very much for me and we had long conversations about everything around us...” replied Sofka.

“You have mastered our language well...” said Bronek.

“Thank you...” replied Sofka.

“Now let’s go to the yard. There too everything is as it was before. Only the apple, pear and plum trees are older. The cherry tree unfortunately dried up and died but we planted a new one. We also planted new roses,” said Bronek.

“Bronek?” yelled the fat lady, the architect’s wife, from inside the kitchen. “Enough walking, the coffee is ready...”

While drinking his coffee Bronek told Sofka that from her accent he had the impression that she wasn’t Polish.

“Yes, Sir, I’m not Polish. I’m Macedonian but I wouldn’t want to waste your precious time telling you the story of how I got here,” replied Sofka.

“Okay then. You can tell me more... You can tell me everything the next time I see you Madam. I have the impression that you are a sincere and good-natured girl... I can see it in your eyes and can hear it in your sad voice. But before you go just tell me one more thing, where are you from?” asked Bronek.

“I am from Macedonia, from the part that Greece took,” replied Sofka

“So, you’re an immigrant?” said the fat lady, paused for a moment, introduced herself as Elizhbieta and continued: “I know there was a war there... I’ve heard that there are quite a few immigrants from Greece in Vrotslav. We, too, are immigrants here. Our children are also immigrants. Our older son lives in the UK, he is a civil engineer and during the war he was a pilot, a Major in the Royal Navy. Our younger son is a doctor. He also fought against the Germans. Our daughter married a Bolshevik colonel and lives with him and our two grandchildren in Odessa. You see, we are a broken family. We come from Lvov which today is in the Ukraine. Lvov, my dear Miss, was the heart of Polish science and culture. My Bronek taught architecture at the Lvov Polytechnic. I taught the Polish language and literature. My specialty was Polish romanticism - Mickiewicz, Slovakia... I will repeat, Lvov was the centre of Polish science, culture and elite intellect. There were top names in all the sciences. People say that Lvov, besides Krakow, was the mind of Poland. Warsaw? There was nothing there. A collection of petty traders, sprawling aristocrats housed in large palaces built by average Italian architects. And lots? Lots had some significance. It was Russia’s clothing sector. The Jews there developed a powerful textile industry and clothed Russia with textiles. There was a Polish person among the Jewish industrialists who had no noble title and no coat of arms but he had a lot of money. Instead of pointing at a coat of arms, he pointed at the letter ‘P’ which meant that he was from Poznani and that he was a Pole,” said Elizhbieta, paused for a moment and, after wiping her tears, continued:

“Broniek and I go to Lvov once a year, on November 2, the day of the dead. Our parents and ancestors rest in the most beautiful cemeteries there. We were a large and reputable family of doctors, architects, engineers, university professors... We go there to clean the graves, put beautiful autumn flowers on them and light candles so that there is light for their souls and for our painful memory of our dear Lvov. We aren't alone on that day. Thousands of Poles go there and that day Lvov is Polish again, it has a Polish soul and Polish pain and sadness. Everyone speaks Polish and Polish can be heard everywhere. People quietly sing old Polish songs which takes away some of the pain and sadness from our souls... We also curse the day the Soviets drove us into freight wagons with the cattle and moved us here to Vrotslav. We, my dear Madam, feel like refugees here and not like people from Lvov...” concluded Elizhbietta.

“Ela (Elizhbietta),” said Broniek. “Please don't tire out the lady...”

“Do you think I'm tiring her out? No, I'm just telling her why we aren't in our own home today, in our house in Lvov. I'm telling her that we have been uprooted and cast out... Well, didn't they drive us out, my dear Broniek?” replied Elizhbietta.

“Yes dear, you are right,” replied Broniek and then quietly said: “But now it's bad to talk about these things. Many have suffered under the new regime because of such talk. Now is the time for inspiring slogans, not for fruitless ornaments and unfulfilled hopes...”

“No, it's not like that my dear Broniek. Unfulfilled hopes? Have we Poles ever lost hope? Never, my dear! We live as we live but we haven't lost hope. What did our old people teach us? What did we teach our children? And now what do these new rulers teach in school? Under what conditions can you enroll in college? You need to be a member of the Polish Youth Union, to come from the proletarian class, not the intellectual classes... And in our time what was the requirement for enrollment? Knowledge, my dear... But, well, enough about this. Come back to us, Miss. I will bake a cake that will make you lick your fingers. Now that's all that's left for me to do. To bake cakes and cookies instead of what I used to do, be a university professor. I also wanted to be a professor here in Vrotslav but I was told that I was from another time and people like me are

rubbish. We have endured a lot and we will also endure this... As we have done in the past 120 years. Our greatest weapon, my dear, has always been our never-ending hope..." concluded Elizhbieta, got up and said:

"Madam, it was my pleasure, please come again. You will have a room with us, instead of living in that worker's dormitory. We will work out the rent. Bronek and I have been fifty years together, and now only rarely does anyone visit us. See you and come again. I will bake a cake especially for you and for my Bronek, who loves to eat cake, drinking strong Indian tea which we get under the table... God be with you, dear lady..."

PART THREE

Late night, a quiet knock was heard on Argir's apartment door. Wearing his pajamas Argir slowly opened the door halfway.

"Get dressed and come down. The leader is waiting for you downstairs..." whispered a stranger.

Surprised by the news, Argir quietly told his wife who was waiting for him, got dressed in a hurry, ran downstairs and stopped in front of the building entrance where a dirty, black VOLGA car was parked. The stranger opened the right front door. Argir got in and sat next to the driver.

"Greetings, Comrade Argiris..." a familiar voice was heard saying. Argir felt chills over his entire body. He slowly turned and, with a stuttering voice, quietly said hello then instinctively raised his right hand and gave him a military salute. Sitting in the back seat right behind Argir was the leader who leaned forward and, after he was done with the formalities, said:

"Comrade Argiris, the time has come for us to become seriously involved in the lives of our political refugees. We at the Politburo have decided to bring all the refugees together in one place. Regarding this, we have asked the Polish authorities to give us one or two empty villages in the extreme southeast of Poland, villages that have been abandoned. Comrade Beirut, the President of Poland, has agreed. There, Comrade Argiris, we will establish a kolhoz. The Polish authorities have given us two villages where we will first settle your Slavo-Macedonians. Your task will be to visit them in the farms where they work and explain everything to them. They trust you. We'll agree on what you're going to tell them. You can count on the party and me personally to support you in this. Now, go back to your apartment, get what you will need, tell your wife that you

have been summoned to do an important party task and that you will be back home in a few days.

Argir understood and accepted the task Zahariadis gave him; it was a serious party task; as serious as a combat order. He rushed back to his apartment, gathered his things in a small old suitcase and, at the same time, quietly told his wife with whom he had been speaking, the task he had been given and that he would be gone for some time.

Four days later they arrived at the villages that Beirut, the Polish president, had given to his friend Zahariadis. They spent one day in Krakov where, after they had their baths and rest in a hotel, they did some sightseeing. They left Krakov early the next morning. After traveling over bad and muddy roads, they arrived in Ustshiki Doline in the evening. There, they were greeted by a member of the Greek Communist Organization in Poland, by the Polish United Workers' Party district committee secretary and a dozen armed civilians. They had dinner with the border military detachment commander and leader of the district unit in a strictly secure dining hall for special guests. After dinner, which consisted of roast duck and Hungarian wines, they spent the night in the guest apartment of a villa built exclusively of pine logs. The next day they didn't have breakfast. They had coffee and after about a half hour drive on a very bad local road, they arrived in the village Kroshchenko and went to the school building. There they had breakfast and went to tour the villages Kroshchenko and Liskovate, located beyond a small hill. There were low houses built with wood everywhere. Some were covered with sheet metal but most were covered with straw. Only the neglected school buildings and train station were built with walls and covered with ceramic roof tiles. There were pine forests and huge fields all over the place lying along the small hill, overgrown with tall grass. The arable land seemed to be fertile. There were stunted apple trees, pear trees, cherry trees, plum trees... in the yards of the houses. The sight gave the impression that life was once thriving here.

Zahariadis took Argir by the arm and, after walking about ten metres away from the escort, said:

“We will turn this space into an open living space for your Slavo-Macedonians and for a large number of Greeks. This will be their

new life. Here we will establish a kolhoz and give it the hopeful name ‘NEW LIFE’.”

Argir stared sternly into the leader’s eyes and without hesitation asked:

“Comrade Zahariadis, is this some kind of new Bulkesh? Will we be building a new life here, in this wasteland where even the devil doesn’t want to visit?”

(Bulkesh was a village in Serbia inhabited by Germans until the end of World War II, at which time they were expelled by the Yugoslav authorities. After the Varkiza Agreement was signed, by which the Communists handed over their weapons to the authorities supported by the British, several thousand prominent ELAS commanders and EAM and CPG political activists fled to Yugoslavia. At first they stayed in Strumitsa, Bitola, Prilep, Veles and Kumanovo and from there they were sent to Tetovo and housed in the old barracks. At the same time refugees who had fled Greek occupied Macedonia and lived in Bulgaria returned to the People’s Republic of Macedonia. The barracks were emptied of Greek refugees and replaced by these so-called “Aegean” Macedonian refugees. The Greeks were moved to Vojvodina. By the end of 1945 there were five thousand Greek military and political refugees occupying Bulkesh. There the Greek refugees formed a Greek municipality with their own administration, their own police, radio station, printing house, primary and secondary education, a school for officers, sub-officers and political commissars and their own currency. They built a state within a state. The first partisans to go to Gramos came from Bulkesh. Bulkesh was the nursery for the Democratic Army of Greece’s future command. At the end of August 1949 all remaining 1200 Greeks in Bulkesh were transferred to Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Bulkesh is remembered by many political refugees as the place where many crimes were committed against dissidents.)

“Yes. Here, Comrade Argiris. Here we will wage a great battle to bring life back. The work has already begun. Brigades of carpenters and electricians are being assembled to install doors and windows as well as electricity, and only then will we bring our people here. Your party task now is, Comrade Argiris, to go back to the kolhozes

around Zgozhelets and convince the villagers from Kostur and Lerin to accept their new place of residence. The houses they live in now, as I was told in Warsaw, have already been given to the expatriate Poles from Western Ukraine and Belarus, territories they call Kresi. Now let's go back to town and talk to the local authorities about urgent matters that need to be taken care of. After dinner and a good night's sleep, we'll return to Zgozhelets where we will explain the new tasks to the CPG land party committees for Poland, and then you will go back to the kolhozes, which the Poles call State farms, in which our people now live, and do your part. Is that clear?

For an old communist, a battalion commander in the Greek Civil War, and now an ordinary textile worker working in a textile factory in Legnitsa, the leader's word, oral or written, for Argir had always been clear and unmistakable.

Argir was also very ambitious. He had studied Polish for a long time, at night and during his free time. He wanted to enroll in a two-year high school course that would give him the opportunity to continue his education in a special course, and from there he wanted to go to college. He wanted to study mechanics; to become an engineer. This was his greatest wish to which he dedicated his entire free time. But his desire wasn't going to be fulfilled... A week later, he was sent to the farms to visit with the refugees so that he could explain to them that they would soon change their residence. A few days later, he visited the Kunuv agricultural farm, where people from Kostur and Lerin Regions worked. This wasn't his first meeting with them. In fact Argir himself was from a village in Kostur Region. When he was young he worked as a cow herder and a shepherd. Later, as a young adult, he fought in two wars (WW II and the Greek Civil War). He often visited the Lerin and Kostur villages during the wars where he was welcomed and looked after with food, drink and lodging. Many of the villagers' sons and daughters served in Argir's battalion, some of whom had left their bones on the battlefields. He tried to comfort them... to minimize their pain. And for that every meeting with them was difficult but he found relief in his heartfelt conversations with them. At the gatherings with the villages in Poland, which lasted from early morning until late afternoon, and sometimes until midnight, he explained to the people that there was a plan to move them to the

new villages which the Polish authorities had awarded them. In his talks Argir convinced them that a kolhoz had already been created where each family would have its own house, with a yard, a piece of land where they could plant tomatoes, potatoes, onions and even watermelon. Where they could raise a few chickens and, in due time, one or two cows. He assured them that those who worked at the kolhoz would receive a regular state salary.

He would often say:

“And so, my dear friends, every family will have its own house... And any surplus harvested from your gardens, or extra eggs collected from your chickens, you will be able to sell in the town market which will allow you earn more money...”

“And you, Argir, where will you live?” a voice was heard coming from the back rows.

Argir smiled and said:

“There, at the kolhoz, together with you...”

“For sure?” someone asked.

“For sure!” replied Argir.

“And there, at that kolhoz, will there be a canteen like we have here and food from the same cauldron?” someone asked.

“No!” replied Argir positively. “There we will have a restaurant, a tavern, a club, a cinema, a theater and two schools. If any of the parents want to take their children from the boarding houses they can. The children can live with them and study at the kolhoz schools. As for the cauldron, it will be gone... Everyone can cook at home whatever they want...”

Argir ended every meeting with the people with this kind of promise and assurance.

During the entire foggy, rainy and cold week in late autumn 1951, trains kept arriving at the old, now restored train station in Krushchenko, built at the time when the Austro-Hungarian Empire ruled. Refugees kept pouring out of the old wagons, Macedonians and Greeks who lived and worked in the state agricultural holdings in the area around Zgozhelets. With them also came the Macedonians from the State Agricultural Company in Kunuv. The newcomers were greeted by a white canvas sign hanging in front of the train station which, in large red Greek letters, said:

WELCOME TO THE KOLHOZ NEW LIFE

For the refugees this was a new place to live and work - abandoned villages in the far southeast of Poland, near the Ukrainian border.

The Greek authorities merged the two villages into one and named it “KOLHOZ NEA ZOI” (KOLHOZ NEW LIFE). The competent Polish district authorities, however, didn’t accept the new name. The old names remained as they were registered in the old land deeds and the area was renamed “Spółdzielnia Produkcyjna w Krościeńku” (Production Cooperative of Krushchenko).

The old railway wagons kept emptying. The future residents of the kolhozes were arriving and lining up on the platform, hanging on to their bags with their meager, leftover possessions which served less as a necessity and more as a reminder of home. They lined up along the platform and waited to be called. They were called by village and number.

In a similar way, those coming from Kunuv, who a year ago or so traveled on the Albanian roads single file or in groups, carrying their possessions on their backs, shoulders or under their arms, walking in mud, were now escorted over a cobblestone road to the village

Liskovate. Both on the right and left of the road they traveled were small bare hills. At the foot of the hills, at the end, a little farther from the road there was a line of low wooden houses covered with straw. The person leading the group stopped in front of the houses and, looking at his notebook, loudly yelled:

“Mitre and Mara, are they here?”

“I am Mitre,” yelled Mitre.

The person leading the group wrote their names down on a piece of paper, handed it to Mitre, pointed and said:

“Your number is thirty?”

“What?” asked Mitre

“That house, there, do you see it? It’s marked with the number thirty. We are giving you that house. Take your things and good luck.

The person leading the group then instructed the two people delivering furniture and other things as follows:

“Unload two beds, two mattresses, two pillows, four blankets, one table, two chairs, one kettle, two plates, two tablespoons and forks. Okay?” He then said to Mitre: “Sign here, be happy and live a long and healthy life...”

That was everything. That, along with their old possessions, a bag full of old items and the gum they had brought from home, constituted their entire possessions.

The house had a single floor at ground level. It was built with long pine logs and had small windows and a gable (triangle shaped) roof. Inside the house were two rooms and a kitchen with a large oven. The floor was laid with rough unfinished planks. There was a well dug in the yard that supplied the water. There were bats in the corners and long, thick cobwebs hung from the ceiling. The new

residents used wet towels to wash the floor and wipe the cobwebs. Then they removed all the junk from the yard...

They cleaned the house for a whole week and started their new life.

It was evident from the other empty houses, some without doors or windows, some with plum, apple and cherry trees growing in their yards, that people had lived here in this wide fertile plain.

About thirty metres from the house there was a Christian Orthodox church also built with thick pine logs. Standing in front of the church courtyard entrance was a large gate through which a number of men walked in. They said they had been sent there by the "Kolhoz" management to destroy the icons. And, without warning, they pulled out their knives and started cutting up the icons on the walls. Those which fell they stamped on and kicked. They then tore down the royal doors and the entire altar. The large and two smaller church bells were taken down and thrown behind the church. When they were done the Kolhoz party secretary inspected the site and praised the work. He then entered the church and collected some of the wooden icon canvases and took them with him. On his way out he ran into Mara who blocked his way and said:

"God will punish you for what you've done..."

The secretary stood in front of her for a moment and mockingly said:

"There is no god or devil in this wasteland... Mind your own business..."

After he left, a flock of sheep was brought inside and the church was used as a stable.

When he got home the party secretary nailed the canvases together and made a box in which he stored his officer's uniform, his military shirt, hat, trousers and boots. Occasionally he checked to make sure that the moths hadn't eaten them. In that box he kept the things that reminded him of the civil war which were slowly being eaten away by mold. Occasionally he opened the box just to make sure

everything was there. He needed to look at his uniform, boots, hat... to remind him of his past glory. He was confident and looked forward to the day when the party would again order him to wear them. He looked at his uniform and filled his head with coveted war victories. He touched his uniform gently and inhaled the rotting odor of mold. The crippled saints watched in amazement from inside the box with eyes wide open. They had broken heads, torn faces, cut shoulders... It seemed they had lasted for centuries hanging on those walls and now, in the new life in the Kolhoz, they were facing a new breed of Romans who had renewed their torment.

The memories of being a partisan, the hope of fighting and the great and immense faith in the party... gave him pain in his soul as he put his faded uniform back in the box... Until it was time to air it again...

There were two Christian Orthodox churches in Kroshchenko, the larger of the two villages. They too were built with pine logs. Only the hinges and locks were made of iron, everything else was built with wood. They were built by a master's hand with passion and faith in God, with only an axe and a chisel in hand. One of the churches, the larger one, was surrounded by thick oak trunks. There was no inscription to show when this church was built. But the many rings in the uncracked logs showed that these trees were very old. The Russian Orthodox Cross and the church bell were taken down and thrown into the brook. The royal doors were removed and the altar was destroyed along with the large and small icons. They were replaced with thick supporting logs and thick and wide planks nailed on them. The altar was replaced with a stage. The front wall of the stage was covered with a red canvas and in the middle of it hung a large, colour portrait of Stalin, to the right, a smaller portrait of Beirut, and to the left a portrait of Zahariadis. The new saints were silent and sternly watching over their worshipers, except for Zahariadis who watched with a mysterious smile on his face. Many thought he seemed to be mocking them. And so the larger church was transformed by the party authorities into a Kolhoz theatre, club and cinema, which they called "Partizan". Its name was written in Greek and Polish capital letters and high above it hung a red flag. It was a proletariat name. This is what the party committee had decided. This is what the president of the administration decided even though he had never been a partisan. He had seen a rifle but

never carried one. During the entire war he had just wandered around headquarters. And now his decision was gladly and enthusiastically accepted by those who were real partisans. And so the church was no longer a church. It became a theatre where parodies and stupid sketches were played on the stage. It was a concert hall where partisan and other fighting songs were sung. Once a week it became a cinema where Soviet films were watched, where the former partisans could admire Russian courage, forgetting their own, proven in partisan battles in the mountains of Greece and Macedonia. At the end of the film, the party secretary climbed onto the stage and, after a long and loud applause, made a long speech that was often interrupted by slogans praising the Great Stalin, the Greek party and its leader, the Greek people's government... in that order. The applause was mixed with slogans in honour of the lesser leaders, followed by a brief speech by the party secretary, ending with the words that 'everyone in the kolhoz should work in a self-sacrificing manner, like the Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian red armies did when they fought. But nothing was said about "their own" partisans - nothing - not a word. Maybe because now they were coachmen, dressed in grey overalls, wearing dirty rubber boots instead of military boots and away from their mountains...

The other church, the one west of the village, was converted into a shop and the third, the more spacious one, was converted into a club. Some of the icons were destroyed and some stolen. Many made boxes out of them to store their clothes and built shelves upon which they put their special plates, purchased in the neighbouring village cooperative. They gathered in their new club during the evenings and played chess, checkers and other board games, smoked cheap cigarettes and made idle conversation to pass their time and forget their troubles. The men who lived alone here, like they had back home in their villages, were used to drinking wine and rakia. Here they drank mostly vodka but also cheap beer and sour wine made from apples or potatoes...

Many left the club late, leaving behind their sweat, stink of unwashed socks and underwear. They went home feeling doped up and went straight to bed without taking off their dirty clothes or rubber boots. Often they would gather in one house and tell stories until dawn. They would boast about their superb fighting abilities

and quietly swear at their incompetent commanders, throwing poison at their political commissars and all those who didn't tolerate them. Even those who had never touched a rifle boasted about their heroic deeds. In vodka they drowned not only their grief and pain, but also their hatred and malice.

Those who didn't have wives washed themselves and their clothes in the river or in the brook that flowed past their houses. Some just dumped water on themselves from the wells that the previous owners had dug in their yards.

Many nights they spent giving speeches and lectures which often turned into mutual accusations and quarrels. They often spit and swore at each other with the most repulsive words. Sometimes, when they were having severe arguments, Zahariadis had to step in to calm them down, often with threats, but only when he was there. As soon as he left the yelling, cursing, spitting and swearing would begin again. But then news traveled fast. Zahariadis had his snitches everywhere. He would come back and knew exactly how to calm them down. He would divide them into Tito's friends and enemies. Zahariadis was a very convincing liar. The best liar among them and they were accustomed to his lies and promises. He knew exactly what to say given the circumstances: "What does a blind person need?" "To be able to see!" "What does the sick person need?" "To be well!" "What does a hungry person need?" "Food to eat!" "What does a naked person need?" "Clothes to wear!" This is exactly what Zahariadis promised them with the same tone and words that they themselves spoke. He sat down among them; he hugged them and held them by their hands. And they, mystified, said:

"He is one of us... He is born of our people. He responds to us with great concern. May he live long." They would say these things in front of him and then spend the entire night swearing at him and blaming the vodka for their drunkenness. They learned to drink vodka because they seemed to find relief in it from their bitterness...

They had left their youth in the mountains and here, in this foreign land, in a different time brought by some new winds, the thoughts of the revolution about which so much was said in the damp trenches

were slowly subsiding from their well-washed brains and faded every day. Now they weren't of the same thoughts and convictions.

They had changed in their new environment. They had become more mature and hence were slowly being purified of their ideological plague and their partisan dreams...

They were becoming ordinary people with different thoughts...

Mara waited for Mitre at the door and when he arrived she said:

“A man from the lower village passed by here and said that you should go and see, what did he call it, the board or the committee. He didn’t say why they were looking for you.”

Mitre took off his dirty rubber boots, threw away his wet socks and said:

“Those from the leadership said that whoever wants can buy one or two and even three cows, goats, sheep, chickens and pay for them through their wages. What do you think? Should we buy something?”

“Let’s buy something, Mitre, but not a cow. Cows eat a lot, who is going to take it to graze? Let’s buy a goat, one that gives milk. It doesn’t require too much food. We’ll tie it in the yard and it can graze on the grass as much as it wants. Buy one or two or three chickens. We will have some eggs. And don’t forget we will also need a rooster... Buy a rooster. The chickens will need it and so will we, its crowing will make us happy. Make sure it’s big and young. His tail should be bushy and his shoulders large, walking proudly, and crowing so that when he crows his voice can be heard beyond the hills. It will be like back home, a proud rooster, like the one we had that was taken from us by what’s her name? Wasn’t it Vera? I am sure it was her. She was the culprit who didn’t leave a house without lies and a bed without lice... She came to our house with her comrades and they ate our rooster, the best and most proud rooster in the whole village. When it flapped its wings up and down, all the dust disappeared from the yard, when it crowed the entire village knew whose rooster was it was. That’s the way it was... I don’t want another kind of rooster. But where did those people from the

leadership find the cows, sheep, goats and chickens and why do they want to sell them to us?” asked Mara.

“E-e-e-e!” yelled Mitre with a bitter tone of voice.

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Mara.

“Mara, Mara... The kind of rooster you want exists only back home...”

“That’s right... But where did they get all these animals?” asked Mara.

“They told the Poles that we are villagers and we need to do village work. The Polish authorities gave them what they asked for. They loaned them five million of their money and they, from the leadership, will use that money to buy the animals from the livestock markets. They would have to repay the loan. It won’t be a gift... And somebody, as a joke, said that what the communists took from us for the war effort, they will return to us here but we’ll have to pay for it...” said Mitre.

“Oh, yes...” exclaimed Mara. “Whatever was put in the cauldron will never come out of the cauldron... It’s gone! What was once yours will never again be yours...”

“What do you say about having a cat? The yard is full of mice and they enter the house... A cat doesn’t need much to eat... it will feed itself on the mice...” said Mitre.

A young man knocked on the door in the morning. He was carrying a bag full of tools on his shoulder and holding a small box in his hand. After he greeted Mara, he said:

“I’m here to mount this box on the wall. On which wall do you want it mounted?”

“What are those boxes for that you put in the houses?” asked Mara, then pointed at a bigger box in the corner of the room and asked the young man: “What is that box for? Tell me.”

“We put these in all the houses. Every house has one,” replied the young man.

“And what is that big box in the corner of the room? Is it an oven?” asked Mara.

“No, it’s not an oven, it’s a stove. The previous owners used it during the winter. The winters get very cold here. They are so cold that the beech tree stumps crack, saliva on the lips freezes, long icicles grow and hang from the eaves, as long as a metre, even longer. God forbid if one breaks off and hits you it will kill you on the spot. The winters here are long, cold and icy. When you go out to get water from the well you will find everything is iced up. Even the roads are closed because of the ice. The ice covers the trees, freezes the brooks and penetrates through the windows and doors. Even the water in the well freezes. And when it rains in spring or summer or fall, it can thunder and rain all day long. And the fog, it is so thick here that you can’t see your own nose. And when the sky is clear, the sun is so hot it bakes the earth. This is how it is here... As for this other box you asked about, this is a talking box that will wake you up with a song every day, first thing in the morning, then it will talk to you all day long, sing to you, speak to you, tell you things that others want you to know... And if you don’t like something, then just turn this wheel here to the left and the sounds will go away. So, the box will be with you all day and, as I told you, it will talk to you and sing to you. That’s right, this box will talk and sing and maybe you will dance when it plays a dance for you...” explained the young man.

“Young man, tell those who sent you here and made you hang these boxes, to go to hell,” said Mara and with a mocking tone of voice, said: “This box will talk and sing to me...?”

Mara didn't like the feather-filled pillows. When spring came she took the pillows to the yard, tore them up and scattered the feathers. The wind blew and covered the entire area in white feathers.

After Mara shook the feathers off herself, she said:

“Mitre go cut the grass and spread it well so that it dries. Then go up there near the bare hill and collect some thyme. I will look for some mint and horehound. I searched yesterday but I couldn't find any. Who knows if they even grow up here...”

“What are you going to do with the grass?” asked Mitre.

“I will stuff the pillows with it. I don't like the feathers... Did you forget that you spent your entire life sleeping on a hay-filled pillow? Our grandmothers and mothers always put mint, horehound, marigolds, basil and thyme in our pillows along with the hay or straw. The whole house smelled nice and no animal came near. No spider, mosquito, flea, or lice. Our dreams were sweet with that sweet aroma. Have you forgotten?” replied Mara.

After stuffing the pillow with dry grass, to which she added mint, horehound, marigold, thyme and basil, she picked it up, stared at it and leaned her head on it. The feel and aroma brought fond memories from her past life back home. The smell and rustle warmed Mara's soul. She remembered the scent and the rustling in her ear since she was very young.

She grew up sleeping on pillows like this. When she became a bride and a mother she slept on pillows like this... When she spent her days and nights on the road, sleeping on the wet ground waiting for the enemy to be defeated, she put her head on her pillow and inhaled the aroma, listening to the cannon fire in the distance dreaming

dreams flooded with blood and the pain of people being maimed... How many dreams did she have on her pillow, how many tears did she drop on it, how many sleepless nights did she lay on it... And now, here, in this old Ukrainian wooden house, she was leaning on a pillow filled with rustling hay and an aroma that reminded her of her pillow at home...

She dreamed and in her dream she only heard voices dear to her. Some called her name, others greeted her with words of happiness... This was a dream she wanted to dream every night. Only in her dreams did she have her closest friends. Her wish was for the night to be long and the dream to have no end. Her dreams seemed to be like they were part of her, part of her everyday life. All those who she carried in her dream calmed her soul, made her livelier, made her heart beat easier, but from morning till night she was tormented by the pain of separation from her family, and sleep, besides joy, also brought calm and a glimmer of hope... and pain... The days had no words of relief for her. Her dried lips could hardly speak any words. She wanted only words of good hope, words of warm prayers... Mara wanted to dream only dreams that would hold her in the circle of her loved ones. When she woke up her pillow would be soaked in tears. There were tears of joy, tears of pain...

But she wasn't the only one. The days and nights during those times were sad for everyone around her. New letters kept arriving every day and brought bad news. They brought despair and hopelessness to many... Day and night they gathered and mourned their dearest ones who they'd lost on the battlefields... Some said this was their fate... This was the fate of those who were lost in the battlefield... This was the fate of those old men who died and were wrapped in a blanket and buried in foreign lands. This was the fate of those who died at sea and were tossed overboard into the deep, dark and cold waters. These poor people died all alone without the cries of their loved ones, without the priest and without the sad church bell ringing. Their names weren't written on the wooden crosses marking their graves. And it didn't take long for those crosses, the only symbols marking their graves, to be blown away by the fierce wind or to be buried under piles of overgrown grass. Those who left their bones on the Macedonian mountains, those whose bodies were thrown into the great sea and those who were buried in foreign soil

would for years be part of the great pain, sorrow and burning for those living... Those living who were exiled from their homes... They would never be able to find peace.

They would only secrete pain...

The abandoned apple and cherry trees on the hills, slopes and in the yards began to flower. The young fawns bleated inside the thick pine grove early. The snow had melted on the hilltops and the rivers and brooks were overflowing with water. This time last year it was very cold. Snow was falling in April and parts of May. It snowed during the holidays. This year it was mixed weather. The mornings were clear and the afternoons were gloomy, filled with black clouds coming from the northeast. Lightning cut through the sky and thunderstorms filled the entire valley. The sky was opening and the rain fell during the night. The nights were wet and the mornings cold. The cranes flew north late. The bird nests were still empty. Tractors didn't plow. Ice had pressed the ground hard.

Early March announced warm weather.

From the box hanging in the corner, a sad voice said:

“Attention, attention, our great leader, Comrade Stalin is sick...”

That's all the box said, and from that moment on no more songs, only sad, long drawn out music without words. They talked about Stalin all day long. Who he was, what he was, what he did, how he did it... only about him and him alone, and how without him there would be no... At this point Mara turned the button all the way to the left and the house became silent.

On the fifth day of the month, early in the day, it was still dark outside, Pavlevitsa knocked on Mara's door and said:

“Mara, Mara! Have you heard?”

“Heard what?” asked Mara.

“Stalin died!” replied Pavlevitsa.

“Oh, the poor man! What illness did he have? May God bless his soul...” said Mara and crossed herself.

“Mara, today the whole world is crying and mourning...” said Pavlevitsa.

“Well, today the world is crying... Tomorrow it will be rejoicing...” replied Mara.

That day and the following days, until the funeral and after the funeral, some wept, others rejoiced.

Everyone had their own reasons for joy and regret...

Even the kolhoz committee was in mourning. They tied a wide black ribbon on the big red flag and place it in front of the small statue of Stalin that had been erected during Soviet times in front of the House of Culture, which during imperial times was a village inn. The monument disappeared the next morning. The party secretary called the city police station immediately. Two policemen and a German shepherd searched the area. They found the statue beheaded and arms broken. It was thrown into the brook. Written on the chest was the word “ZBRODNIARZ” (Criminal).

In a statement, the Kolhoz Nea Zoi party secretary said he had doubts that it was a refugee who had done that. He suspected it was one of the Polish drivers who transported pine logs to the sawmill.

In the evening neighbours Pavle and Pavlevitsa went to Mara and Mitre's house for a visit. This was a regular thing they did during the evenings after sunset. Mara served the men vodka and she and Pavlevitsa had sweets made with plum jam. Here, too, they kept up their Macedonian custom of serving the men an alcoholic beverage and the women sweets. Mara also took away the vodka bottle after the drinks were served. She maintained that custom too.

The flame of the great candle inside the house often went out as there were many electrical brownouts and blackouts. The middle houses in Liskovate, it seems, experienced regular brownouts with the electricity increasing hour by hour and then decreasing hour by hour, causing dark shadows or no shadows on the wooden walls inside the house. The conversations were soft and often silent. Most often they communicated by silence. In their silence their thoughts collected like a swarm of bees. In their silence they felt their pain for those they had lost. The few words they exchanged felt heavy and were full of long sighs. The evil had destroyed everything in them that yesterday was theirs, was most beautiful and dearest. There was sadness in their eyes filled with the pain of their souls. They spent most of their evenings in the semi-dark room in silence. Their long moments of silence were often interrupted by heavy sighs. Their thoughts often took them back home and gave their souls a slight relief. Their hearts warmed when they thought of that distant time, the time of their youth which would never return, which they kept fresh in their memories. Their memories of back home comforted them, kept them alive under the straw roof of this wooden Ukrainian hata (a village house built of logs. Most often such houses are found in southeastern Poland, Belarus and Ukraine). Back home, there, back home, they used to say, back home, there in our home. Words which they repeated endlessly, words that became engraved in their minds, words that, every time they were mentioned, woke up their

long and heavy sighs full of pain, unbearable sadness, sorrow and hope.

Every time they said anything they repeated:

“When we were back home...” which released a river of memories unraveling the key to their life.

This home, the wooden Ukrainian hata, was never called home. It was breathing with a different soul, other hearts grieved for it, other minds thought of it. It wasn't theirs even though they looked after it every day. There was no place in their minds, hearts, or souls for this house. They didn't know its previous owners. They knew no name, no surname and no fate. From the churches, they figured they were Christians. But because they were gone, because their hata became empty, the new residents figured that the previous residents had probably had some bad luck, that some evil had knocked on their door and made them leave. This home, where the refugees now lived, was home to some others; maybe uprooted, maybe evicted, maybe displaced like them, but in this home they felt alien and every day and night they wanted to return to their own home, to their hills and mountains, where they could drink water from their springs, not from the wells in the yards... This was their overwhelming love and desire, in their moments of despair. This was what they wanted, this was their light in the dark and this is what warmed their cold souls... Their thoughts during those evening visits always brought them back home... far away, far away, only there, there to their own homes... Whatever the conversation was about, it always ended with the words - back home... back in our house...

The flame of the great candle went out and so did the conversation. With wishes and prayers for a good night, the visitors said goodbye and walked out over the threshold...

Lightning flashed above the winding hillside bring momentary light to the dark and then, only a moment later, thunder.

“It will soon rain, let's get going...” said Pavle and stepped forward.

“Come again... in good health...” said Mara and waited until her guests disappeared in the dark.

When Mara turned around to go inside, she thought she saw something. She thought she saw someone run by and disappear behind the house.

“Mitre I saw something... maybe a person... over there,” said Mara with concern.

“I don’t see anything there. You must have imagined it. Get inside, don’t stand here,” replied Mitre.

“I thought I saw a person...” Mara insisted.

Just as they started to eat dinner, Mara’s ears caught a soft, barely audible knocking sound on the window. She turned her head abruptly and noticed a raised hand on the window. She felt a sharp pain in her gut and paralysis in her legs. Barely able to take a breath, in a frightened voice, she whispered:

“Mi... Mi... Mitre... somebody is there,” and pointed her hand at the foggy window.

Mitre lit the gas lamp, raised it above his head and went around the house to check. He saw nothing and heard nothing. He came back a little angry but calmly said to his wife:

“You are imagining things. Be quiet and stop being so scared...”

“I saw a hand; it looked like a man’s hand. Don’t look at me like that... Lock the door... You don’t know what might be hiding in the dark...” replied Mara.

Mitre locked the door and checked the handle to make sure it was locked properly. At that very moment he heard a silent knock on the window. He took a step and slowly turned around but saw nothing. He returned, slammed the door open and, holding the lamp high above his head, went out and, with a resolute and confident voice, yelled:

“Who’s there!?”

“Nie bój się pan...” (Don’t be afraid, sir...) replied a pleading voice in Polish. The person raised his hands up and repeated: “Nie bój się pan...”

Mitre thought he was a beggar.

“Who are you? What are you looking for? What do you want?” asked Mitre ready for a confrontation. But as he approached the stranger and shone the lamp in his face, he saw benevolence, pity and pleading in his eyes. The stranger was begging with his face, and mostly with his eyes.

“Who are you?” Mitre asked him again.

The stranger begged Mitre in both Polish and Ukrainian to let him go inside. That much Mitre understood from the few words the stranger said.

Mara stood behind Mitre and looked at the stranger with a sympathetic look. The stranger came to the front of the door and with both arms stretched out, calmly said:

“Nie bójcie się, państwo, ja tutejszy... to mój dom... (Madam don’t be afraid, I’m from here... this is my home...). And then he knelt down and caressed the threshold with his trembling hands and kissed it... A painful tremor shook his body. The man trembled and cried with a suffocating cry directly from the heart and from his hurting soul... He then shook with great excitement and barely audibly, with a suffocating voice, said:

“To mój dom ... mój dom ... Boże dzięki Ci, stoi moja chata ... mój dom...” (This is my home... my home... Thank you God, my home is still standing... my home...).

Frightened and startled by the sight, Mitre and Mara made their way inside and invited the stranger into the house.

While crossing himself, the stranger again repeated:

“Boże dzięki Ci, stoi moja chata ... mój dom...” (Thank you God, my home is still standing... my home...) He felt immense calm and happiness filled his heart as he crossed the threshold of his hata.

This wasn't the first time the stranger had come here but this was his first time coming so close, to touch the doorstep after so many years, and the first time to walk inside his native hata. The other times he had come here, he had come in the dark afraid of being seen. He looked at his hata from the distance clasping his face with his hands, watching it through his tearful and misty eyes, firmly convinced that it was still standing. Seeing his hata relieved some of his sadness and lessened the intrusive pain in his soul. From there he went to the cemetery, pulled the dried grass off the tombs, lit candles over the graves and prayed for the souls of his ancestors. While holding a lit candle in his hand, he kissed the crosses and tombstones and quietly waited tranquilly for the darkness to disappear. The small candle flames danced in the dark in the desolate cemetery. With his pain pressing deep into his heart and soul, somewhat relieved, the stranger in thick darkness followed paths known only to him, which took him a long way north. He secretly moved from train to train, often going on foot, hiding from people. He was returning to that sandy, flat country, to the unwanted and hateful house where the authorities had settled him. He didn't like the walls made of red brick, neither the grey sheet roof, nor the double paned glazed windows. For him, that house was always foreign and cold. He was grieving for his wooden hata in Liskovate, where he dearly loved everything, and there in the north, everything was unwanted, meaningless, undesired and alien...

Volodimir was returning north, bringing with him mild joy and tranquility in his soul and the feeling of gratitude to God and to those strange newcomers who brought peace, warmth and light into his hata.

After Stalin died and the warmer winds began to slowly blow away the hatred and evil, and there were less restrictions on train travel, Volodimir traveled all day and night so that he could knock on the little window at dawn.

From his quiet and whispering words, Mitre and Mara could extract the words “I, from here, my home”. They understood the words and most of all they understood, the quiet, trembling, painful and uncomfortable weeping, the touching and caressing of the doorstep, the kissing of the door and the walls, and the Orthodox crossing... They understood that only those who had lost something very dear through misfortune would do something like this... Only they would travel such a long way to spend such a short time in their former home...

After dinner, consisting of bread, cheese, onions and salt, Mitre and Mara listened to the Polish and Ukrainian words, looking for words that were similar to Macedonian, and with souls squeezed by pain, wiped their tearing eyes and sighed deeply, listening to the stories the Ukrainian stranger told them who said his name was Volodimir. (We are talking about the Operation “Wisła” - a pacification military action carried out in the years 1947-1950 against the Ukrainian Uprising Army and the organization of Ukrainian Nationalists operating in the state territory of the Republic of Poland. The action involved mass forced eviction of civilian Ukrainians from southeastern Poland and resettling them in the so-called Ziemie Odzyskane (Reclaimed Lands), which until 1945 were inhabited by Germans, who according to the Treaty of Zelandia were recruited to Yalta. A total of 150,000 Ukrainians were forcibly evicted and the state permanently seized their property.)

Volodimir, with a trembling voice, began to tell his story:

“The date was April 28, 1947. It was early in the morning when the entire village was besieged by the army. The soldiers broke into the houses shouting and yelling, ordering us to pack our things. They said: ‘You only have two hours to gather everything you need and after that get out and take to the road.’ Military trucks were lined up all along the road. More soldiers came and yelled: ‘You only have twenty minutes...’ What to pick up first? We couldn’t even gather our wits in such a short time. We had belongings in the house, animals in the stables - two horses, a colt, three cows and a calf. In the yard we had a four-wheeled wagon. We could have loaded a lot of stuff onto the wagon but the military would only allow us to take

25kg of belongings from inside the house and the horses and cattle and then walk to the train station that was thirty miles away. Waiting there were freight cars loaded with belongings, people, horses, cattle, chickens, sheep, goats... We had a long journey ahead of us. We didn't know where they were taking us. The army that guarded us provided us with some food and water when we stopped at various stations. They only gave us enough to keep us alive. We traveled for days in those freezing freight cars. Finally they unloaded us onto a plain on sandy ground in a pine forest. They put us in empty houses which they told us had belonged to Germans. Some of the houses were given to demobilized Polish soldiers. We found out that the Germans too had been expelled. We were given houses but no work. We had to work with the Poles for months just for a piece of bread. They called us enemies at every step, humiliated us and prohibited us from calling ourselves Ukrainians and from gathering for prayer. The educated among us were separated from us, the priests were removed. They even prohibited us from visiting one another. Thank God we stayed alive..." said Volodimir, sighed a heavy sigh, crossed himself three times and said: "There is a lot to be said but that is all I can say for now. Maybe some other time..."

Volodimir wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand, leaned on the table and quietly said:

"I was born in this house... my roots are from here... I grew up here, I brought my bride here and my children were born here. My parents, grandparents and their parents are buried in the cemetery up there. I'm going up there to light a candle for their souls... But before I go can I just look at the house one more time? There were shelves in this room with books stacked on them. They were my dedo's. He constantly encouraged us to read. In Ukrainian we read the books by Ivan Franco, Taras Shevchenko, Lesia Ukrainka. In Russian we read books by Mitskievich and other Russian writers. My dedo read mostly church books. They were thick, with wooden covers and handwritten... I see that there are no books here now... My dedo said they were written in the Cyrillic alphabet, which was invented by some saints called Kiril and Metodi, and that the Cyrillic alphabet came to the Ukraine from the far south..." said Volodimir and was abruptly interrupted by Mara who said:

“We found the house empty. Completely empty, desolate, moldy and cobwebs hung everywhere... We were cleaning it for days but found no books. Not one...”

Volodimir continued:

“From those books we learned many things about the Ukraine. The books said that the Ukraine was occupied by Tatars, Turks, Russians, Poles and Germans... They all hated us very much and we hated them even more... The Tatars and Turks took many of our girls for their harems. One of these Ukrainian women, I don't remember her name, married the Turkish Sultan and gave birth to many male children. They fought each other, poisoned each other, stabbed each other with sharp daggers and even drowned each other just to become first in line for the sultan crown... So, Ukrainian soil is soaked with Russian, Tatar, Turkish, Polish, German and what not blood... Even the wide flowing Dnieper River is moaning for the Ukrainian blood it carried to the Black Sea...” said Volodimir, walked towards the window, pointed with his hand in the distance and said:

“There, up there, is my property, my fields. From the brook on the left to the other brook on the right all the way to the top of the hill. When the Bolsheviks came to power, they collected all our crops and created a great famine. Many died of starvation. Golodomor covered the Ukraine. (Golodomor in Ukrainian literally means starving. The story telling of Volodomor is about the artificial starvation by Soviet authorities at the height of forced collectivization in the Soviet Union. According to various sources, around 7 million died in the territory of Ukraine in 1932-1933, and about 3 million people in other parts of the USSR. Golodomor is considered one of the most tragic catastrophes in Ukrainian history and is sometimes referred to as the Ukrainian genocide or the Ukrainian Holocaust. By decree No. 1310/98 issued by President Leonid Kuchma, Golodomor has been declared a national holiday - Day of the Dead - a Day to Remember the Victims of Golodomor.) They took my land. Then they took all the villagers and moved them into the Kolhozes. We endured hard times and great difficulties but we remained alive. The only place where we could find something

to eat was in the empty fields where we secretly collected spilled grain from the ground. We went out at night when the moon was full and the sky was clear and collected grain even though we knew it was a punishable offense (On Stalin's order, Molotov and Kaganovich drafted a decree on the protection of social property, often referred to as the five-class law, by which he, who would break so many classes, was sentenced to death or 10 years in prison. More than 125,000 people were fined on the basis of that decree.). When the Great War (WW II) ended, the Soviets and Poles agreed to exchange land. This is how we found ourselves in Poland. We had no peace. The Ukrainian nationalists, this is what they called those who wished to create a greater Ukraine, fought with the Soviets and Poles on one side and Czechoslovakians on the other. They lost the war. The winners crushed them and uprooted us..."

Volodimir's voice began to wither. He covered his face with his hands. It seemed like every breath he took, every word he uttered was dripping with pain and sorrow.

There was silence in the room.

Heavy sighs in place of words.

Mitre and Mara looked sad and stared far, far, far away... There were lumps in their throats and tears in their eyes. They were reminded of their own sad fate, injured souls and open wounds that refused to heal. They sat in silence, listening to the Ukrainian speak with a desperate voice full of turmoil...

Their thoughts of what they had lost wouldn't allow them to have peace. The deceitful slogans, to which they regularly listened, felt like a rope wrapped around their necks. And now, here, in this valley that was often submerged in fog, they were told of some new victories. Mara and Mitre and hundreds of others like them, hadn't forgotten the many other times they were told of such victories and right after were asked, sometimes threatened, to give generously for those victories everything they had; grains, beans, lentils, flour, wine, rakia, bed covers, pillows, shirts, sweaters, gloves, wool, yarn, forks, spoons, plates, cups, three sheep for every ten owned, one or two oxen and horses. It was compulsory to donate the horse. And so

for that promised victory they left empty barns, barrels, jugs, fields and empty houses. The people were given a piece of paper upon which was written that when victory came, the people's government would return everything to them to the last grain... And before that? Before that they gave them sickening pain... They gathered their children, both young and old. To the young they gave a one way ticket away from home. To the older they gave a rifle and made them targets at the front. Their houses were emptied and their courtyards silent. The village streets were silent; the musical instruments were silent; the church bells were silent... And every moment was filled with fear, waiting, crying and great burning uncertainty...

The victory didn't come, but... the great and bloody defeat did which, following the long roads of a crusade, brought them here to this Ukrainian hata.

They sat motionless and nodded, the thoughts in which the claws of longing had them in their grasp.

All the while, Volodimir, the Ukrainian who came secretly from far away only to see if his hata was still standing, was talking, with their thoughts they had taken all the roads back and were already at home... This is where their inconsolable, inexpressible and indescribable, with words, sadness had taken them...

"May God bless you, dear people..." said Volodimir interrupting the silence. "Thank you for the bread, cheese, onions and salt. I haven't eaten anything sweeter... May God give you long life and much health... My dear people, I will pray for you all my life until God takes me..." Then he crossed himself three times and bowed three times...

On his way out, Volodimir stopped at the door where Mitre and Mara stood next to each other, bowed low, almost to the ground, crossed himself in the Orthodox way three times and said:

"Good people, may God reward you, I am grateful for your hospitality and beg you, along with..." said Volodimir and without finishing what he was going to say, went back to the big room. He

went to the corner and took out a piece of the board. He crossed himself three times and took something out of the dark hole. It was wrapped in a thick dark cloth. He slowly and carefully unwrapped it like it was a diaper on a newborn baby, turned around, and when he returned Mitre and Mara saw that in his trembling hands he was holding a small icon of the Mother of God. Volodimir slowly and gently blew the dust off it, crossed himself, kissed the frozen and smoked-filled icon and, with a silent plea in his tearful eyes, said:

“Please look after my home and Mother of God be with you...”

He left during the night.

In his hata he left his soul and pain, and with him he took the spark of hope and confidence that he would someday return...

Mara sighed and in a sad voice said:

“The poor man... poor us... poor us who are strangers in this place and in this foreign house. We are like chaff blown away by the cold wind...”

Mara hung the icon in the same corner.

Mitre finally found a use for the small, open flame oil lamp he had found in the trash scattered in front of the church. He cleaned and polished it well until it looked like it was new, filled it with oil, put a wick in it and placed it in front of the icon. He then tried to light a match with his trembling hands but the matchstick broke.

Whispering, Mara said to him:

“Strike the match slowly and gently...” prompting Mitre to say loudly:

“I know how to light a match!” his voice echoing in the large room.

He had success on his second attempt. The match slowly flared up and Mitre, trying not to breathe on it, put its flame against the wick. He rolled the wick handle left and right to give the wick more oil and once the wick was lit, he adjusted the flame just right. The pale

flame fluttered and trembled, powerless against the breeze, shedding its light in the corner in front of the Mother of God.

The warm light was pouring into the room. The shadows of Mitre and Mara grew large behind them against the wall. Watching the flame of the little lamp glow consoled their hearts.

The little light warmly enveloped and nourished Mitre and Mara's souls. Its shine brought them a small ray of happiness. The two stood in front of the flame silently staring into the sad eyes of the Mother of God. They prayed in silence, and in their prayers they wished that all those who pray before the Mother of God be filled with goodness.

Mara too had her own prayers. Barely audibly, with her mind, heart and soul, she whispered: "Golden Mother of God open and illuminate our way back... Please send us home..."

The lamp was burning into the night until the wick burned out. The shadows were diminishing and melting into darkness full of prayers.

The next morning after breakfast, after Mara got up from the table, she quietly whispered to Mitre:

"Mitre, I just remembered something... That Ukrainian man, you know, yesterday, whispered to me on his way out. He said: 'Ask Pan, (Pan in Polish means gentleman, Sir), ask him if he can cut the grass in the cemetery'. The poor man, very kindly said: 'Their souls will breathe easier when the sun shines on their graves...' Please Mitre, go and buy a scythe and cut the grass... to soothe their souls, Mitre, to let them breathe the warmth of God's light, to let the sun warm them... Go, go Mitre..."

There was level ground high above their wooden hata. Knee high brush and grass had grown. And there, in the tall grass was a distorted and broken Orthodox cross. A broken tombstone...

Mitre looked around and while looking he said:

"This is a forgotten and abandoned cemetery..."

Whose pain lay here? Whose burning pain?

And does the fact that you go there every day and light a candle give you any comfort?

“No... It only exacerbates your pain and sadness... because it is painful and sad to see abandoned and forgotten cemeteries... it is as if you have forgotten those you left behind...” said Mitre.

There were no tombstones and crosses in the Ukrainian cemetery in Liskovate except for the plaque put there by Volodimir.

The nearest place one could find broken tombstones and Orthodox crosses was the brook where they had been dumped by vandals. There was only one tombstone left on the dry grass in the cemetery. There were no markings to show where the graves were. Evil, anger and revenge over time had poured over the graveyard and everything was destroyed. There were winners and losers here. Both left desolation behind. The naked hill was overgrown with bushes and thorns. The wind was swinging the distorted Orthodox cross above the bell tower. It was now used as a perch for the crows. It was a wilderness filled with painful sorrow.

There was dark loneliness all around and above this holy place.

“Mitre, Mitre, wake up. Someone is knocking on the door,” said Mara.

Mitre went, opened the door, but quickly came back and said:

“Get up, Mara, get up. Pavle is begging you to go and see Pavlevitsa...”

“Oh, the sweet woman, her hour has come,” said Mara and quickly got out of bed.

Mara got dressed quickly and, without saying a word, ran to their house. She came back late in the afternoon and happily said:

“It’s a boy... Pavlevitsa is well and Pavle is very happy...”

“God bless their child, may it be well...” said Mitre and crossed himself three times.

In the evening, Mara went to see Pavlevitsa, who had brought a third child into the world. Now she only had pictures of the other two. They were living in a boarding house in Hungary. The two women looked into each others eyes and smiled a joyful smile. Mara, leaning over the newborn, touched his forehead and prayed for him wishing him to grow up healthy and when he did grow up to plant a seed of good hope...

A child was born in Liskovate, a new seed in a foreign land. Will it take root here? Will it mature here? Will it grow and flourish here or will it one day find itself uprooted and sent somewhere else?

On the fortieth day after the baby was born, Pavle and Pavlitsa's hata was filled with guests who brought them gifts and shared their joy.

Like they did back home, the newcomers often got together in someone's house. They followed their old traditions, even though they were settled in those wooden houses far away from home. By now they didn't mind so much because they knew, like themselves, their former German speaking owners had been banished. They sympathized with them and gave them their love because, like themselves, they too had been exiled not only without the right to return but also to never speak of their homes again.

Were there similarities between them?

Was there something connecting them together?

If there was, what was it?!

Not everyone was able to endure life in Krushchenko and Liskovate. Many moved to the cities, learned new skills and got jobs in the factories. They became city folk, factory workers, proletarians, but deep down in their souls they were still villagers and persevered with their old village habits. Their hands never moved away from the hoe and the plow, and they accepted as much of the alien life as they needed to so as not to be rude and unkind to their Polish neighbours. Others, however, were slowly swallowed by the middle and began to celebrate Easter twice. And those who stayed in Krushchenko and in Liskovate renewed their old home habits and took to the meadows, fields and hills just like they had done before. They quietly sang their own Macedonian songs, shared Macedonian memories, gathered together in reunions that looked like the reunions that they had had back home... but nothing was the same... because they weren't at home... They would never be allowed to return home to their birthplace. Their thoughts and memories of home were the only things that brought them home, which somewhat eased their sadness and heartaches.

Finally, after years of abandonment, the deserted and looted Ukrainian hata saw shining light, heard resounding human voices and admired the smoke rising above their straw roofs.

The yards, meadows, fields... all came alive. The green valley that had been languishing for years, the deserted hills and fields without owners, all came alive with the labour and sweat of the refugees who didn't like this alien, hilly and remote land. They didn't like the green pine forests and the grasses on which the deer grazed. But they did rejoice at the sight of their golden plants swollen with grain swaying in waves under the gentle wind. Unfortunately this too was a sad sight... This too felt alien... it wasn't theirs.

The refugees couldn't adapt to this country. They didn't feel it was theirs. They knew that others loved it very much, and these others sorrowfully mourned for it, dreamed of it, longed for it and hoped some day they could return to it and again love it with the same love. They could again work it with their sweat, plow it with joy and happiness, harvest its fruit and die here. This country rightfully belonged to others who loved it with their hearts and souls, who felt its warmth when they walked upon it, knelt upon it, lay upon it, were born on it and died on it... This is where they had started their life and this is where they ended it... When they knelt, when they slept, when they walked, they saw themselves in it, they kept their past in it, they waited for the new day in it... but those stronger than them gave them no choice...

Did they have a choice?!

The summer was coming to an end. The children brought here from Romania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and some from Yugoslavia, to be with their parents, began to enroll in the school. Unfortunately they didn't have a Macedonian teacher in Krushchenko to teach them in the Macedonian language. The party secretary ran into Tome Fartsalovski, nicknamed Fartsalata, on the road, stopped him and said:

“You, Comrade Tome, you have done some teaching before. Is that right?”

“What does one need to know to be a teacher?” asked Tome jokingly. His step, as always, was playful and his eyes, as always, looked foggy. He claimed the vodka he drank was doing this to him.

“All one needs to know is how to read and write a little... sing a little, folk songs, but mostly war songs...” replied the party secretary.

“If that's all it takes then you won't find anyone better than me!” declared Tome.

And this is how Tome Fartsalata, the village's hired hand from Mali Noze and DAG's assistant to the cook, became a teacher.

Tome sang beautifully and, in addition to singing folk songs, he also sang many revolutionary songs. He taught the children to read and write and sing the more popular partisan songs like “Izrei zora na slobodata”, “Vo borba, vo borba narode Makedonski”, “A bre Makedonche”... - every song that was sung in Vardar Macedonia during the war with the Bulgarians and in Gramos and Vicho by the Macedonian partisans. These songs were sung for as long as no one said that these were Tito's songs and, by party order, stopped the

children from singing them. These songs were taken from Kosta Ratsin's songbook which Tome had stolen from the Katlanovo hospital library when he was undergoing treatment after the partisans lost the battle for Voden. Whether out of jealousy or from any other illness, and at that time the greatest illness was to be called a Tito supporter, someone reported Tome to the party committee. The party committee then closed the school down. Tome was dismissed and sent to work in the farms leading horses.

He didn't complain. He was pleased because his salary was now higher...

Before going to bed, Mitre rubbing his feet, quietly and calmly said to Mara:

“Mara I have a hard time sleeping. My legs are frozen at night. I’m cold. Please, knit a pair of socks for me...”

Mara sat next to him, put her hand on his knee and said:

“Mitre, I don’t have knitting needles or yarn. I would knit you a pair today if I had those things...”

Mitre hugged her gently, kissed her forehead and said:

“Tomorrow is market day in town. I’ll go to the market and buy you what you need.”

“If you can’t find yarn, then buy some wool and I’ll make my own yarn. You’ll have to make me a distaff (a rod that holds the wool). I will have to wash the wool and it should dry in a couple of days. I will then separate it by hand, stretch it, put it on the distaff and then turn it into yarn with a spindle,” boasted Mara with a slight smile.

Mitre returned from shopping late in the afternoon and threw a sack full of white wool at Mara’s feet. Mara dumped the wool onto the floor, took a few lumps and rubbed them in her palms.

“It’s rough and sweaty but good, I’ll dip it in boiling water and then rinse it well in the brook. It’s good but not soft and silky like ours... Our wool, Mitre...” said Mara but her voice broke before she could finish her sentence. She took a deep breath, wiped her tears with her sleeve and said: “Needles, Mitre, did you bring me needles?”

“No! I looked everywhere in the market but I couldn’t find needles. Pavle, our neighbour, who was with me told me that knitting needles can also be made from plain wire, like the one that hangs on the fence. How many needles do you need?” asked Mitre.

“Five short ones for socks. For other things like a scarf or a sweater, just two, but long ones...” said Mara.

The next day Mara lit a fire in the yard and placed her gium (a large vessel used for storing and boiling water) full of water on top of a metal stand over it. She spread the wool out on a blanket in the sun to air. She put more wood in the fire until the flames began to lick the bottom of the gium. The water began to slowly boil. And as the water boiled harder, Mara could feel her heart beating faster. Something was boiling in her head and heart... bubbling and boiling...

Mitre brought the wooden trough he’d found tossed in the rotten grass and leaves, cleaned it, washed it and placed the wool in it. He then slowly and moderately poured boiling water over the wool and Mara mixed it with the wooden paddle, twisting it, lifting it, lowering it and hitting it hard... She did this several times then took handfuls of it and placed it over the fence to drain. Mara stepped aside, while wiping her hands with her apron, and with satisfaction said:

“Now let it drain... it will dry by tomorrow. I will separate it with my fingers and after that we’ll collect it on spools and then spin it...”

The next day Mitre went to the bushes looking for hazel and dogwood shrubs and brought home a dogwood rod on top of which had three branches. He peeled the bark off with his pocket knife, cut off a bit of the outer branches and left the centre branch longer and pierced a slit in it.

“Look, this is your distaff...” said Mitre sounding very pleased, handed it over to Mara and added: “Mara, here’s your distaff, take it.”

“It’s good but it’s long for me, cut off a little. The distaff should be flat in front of my eyes. Cut some off. Cut it here. Enough, no more. Let me start now,” replied Mara.

Mara placed the distaff under her left arm, squeezed it with her elbow and said:

“In good health and with God’s help!” and crossed herself. Then, with her left hand using her thumb and index finger, she pulled a thin lock of wool from the distaff, attached it to the spindle and with the three fingers of her right hand gently twisted the spindle. It didn’t work; the spindle fell on her lap. She spun it again and the spindle again fell on her lap. Her fingers didn’t want to work. She was out of practice. She hadn’t placed a distaff under her arm for a long time. All through the war the distaff and spindle were collecting dust in the dark cellar. In those days there was no spinning or weaving. What was left of the wool was hastily knitted into socks and sweaters and donated to the war effort, which promised the people freedom and for which the villagers spent more of their time in the hills and mountains digging trenches and building bunkers than they did in their fields, gardens and sheepfolds. Her fingers, it seems, had forgotten how to spin. During the bad times distaffs, spindles and looms were tossed in attics and cellars. But despite her inability to get the spindle spinning Mara didn’t despair. She moved to the other side of the room, away from the window through which the hill had already cast its shadow, pressed on the distaff hard with her underarm, moistened her fingers with her lips, pulled on the wool held by the distaff, fastened it to the spindle and with her right hand’s fingers spun the spindle again and again. It worked. She gently pulled on the wool, drawing lock after lock, spinning the spindle and wrapping the yarn around it.

Mara was breathing hard and fast like something strange had happened to her. There was joy in her eyes and the more the thread grew the more cheerful she became. The spinning reminded her of home, in her mind she had returned home, returned to those quiet, late autumn and long winter evenings when she and the neighbouring women got together and, under the light of a kerosene lamp or under the light of a pine stick, spun, knitted and stitched...

and modestly, from heart and soul, they sang those unforgettable songs that were joy and sadness, sorrow and hope. They sang:

“Mori chupi Kosturchanki”, “Tvoite ochi, Leno, mori”, “Ne rusaj, prusaj, pred mene, mori lepa”, “Edna nevesta kalesha”, “Aj da begame, mori, Vase”, “Ogreala mesechina”, Biljbilo mi pee po rosata”, “Kinisala Milka za voda da odi”, “Izniknalo cveke vo momini dvorovi”, “Tri godini sevde”, “Mori Jano, bela Jano”, “Zora se zori”, “Bog da bie, Tino, mori”, “Razbolela se, Kalina”, “Goro le, goro zelena”, “Katinka bolna legnala”, “Cherasha od koren se korneshe”, “Ne se beli, Mare mori, ne se crvi”, “Pijan gredam od grada”, “Izvor voda izvirashe”, “Stani mome da zaigrash”, “Uchi me majko, karaj me”, “Otvori mi, belo Lenche”..., the girls sang the most “Koj ti gi dade, more, tie crni ochi”.

Every time the women got together in the evenings they sang those songs as well as many other songs. They started working with a song in the evening and ended with a song at night...

At home they cooked dinner with a song and sang until it was bedtime.

While they worked with their hands shaping the yarn the women also talked about their families, their crops, their lives, their problems as well as mourned their departed and for each occasion they seemed to have a song; happy and sad songs. They were dear and unforgettable songs sung from the heart and soul. To Mara it seemed like the entire Ukrainian hata was filled with songs, which flowed out into the yard and garden through the half-opened window. And as the spindle spun, it seemed to merge Mara's past with her present. She spun and murmured; she spun and silently murmured...

Mara spun and the white thread wrapped itself around the spindle, being collected by the reel on the vertebra, and with it persistently and intrusively, like some grey mist in the distance, the thread of memory unfolded.

With moistened fingers she softly smoothed the thread and gently pulled on the wool. She then firmly but gently twisted the spindle

repeatedly over and over again, and while she was doing that she sang one of those dear and unforgettable songs she used to sing at home...

“Otvori mi, belo Lenche” And while she sang this song she could hear the voices of the other women singing in her soul.

And while she sang this song, “Koj ti gi dade, more, tie crni ochi”, her favourite song, it made her spirit come alive...

Mara spun harder and in her firm spin she found herself dancing in the middle of the village, dancing the dances Nevestinskoto, Bairacheto, Zhenskoto, Pushchenoto... and listening to the thunder of drums, the shrill of the zurla and clarinets echoing and spreading their music far on the opposite hills...

Surrendered to the spin, Mara remembered the dear old and unforgettable days when children fell asleep, some in their mother's laps and others in their cradle, as the women spun and sang. They fell asleep under the rustle of the spindle and under the songs sung quietly. The dear ones grew up into mature men and women but never made it to the altar of marriage... They were gathered at night and taken somewhere in the dense forests, in the high and rocky mountains and in the bloody battlefields... The pain for them remained with their mothers at home... The fear, the uncertainty and long wait was left behind for their mothers to bear. And on their lips rested the inevitable and pressing question: “Where are they now? Where did the evil take them?”

The spindle spun under Mara's three fingers collected not only the white thread, but also all that remained as a reminder, time winding and unwinding, changing, cursed, black, eerie and malicious...

The spindle was spinning and gathering thread... unwinding memories from a time past...

There was white thread winding on Mara's spindle and sorrow unwinding from her soul... and at that moment when her bitterness was burning the hottest, Mara stopped spinning her spindle and

quietly sighed from the depths of her heart and soul, calmed she sat down and said:

“This is how it was...”

After she finished spinning the wool, Mara tied her distaff and spindle together with thread and placed them in the corner. She collected the yarn in two large balls and the next day began to knit. She didn't rush. Time was in her hands. The material she knitted grew longer every day and spread over her lap. And as she knitted and knitted her thoughts took her to times past...

Mara knitted calmly, and with every loop she made there was a plea, a pain, a sigh, a curse, a desire, a sorrow...

Mara knitted loops and whispered prayers for the souls of those who died in the ships and whose bodies were tossed overboard into the great waters.

Mara knitted, and with every loop she made there was a prayer. Mara knitted, and with every loop she turned there was a tear of pain. Mara knitted loop after loop and for every loop she knitted she turned something in her memory, something quiet and deep, something virtuous and heartfelt, something sad and depressing... Mara sighed deeply for some things that were happening now and for the many things that had happened a long time ago... for things that would never come back... Deep in pain, Mara sighed for many things... for all the things that were there... at home... and for all the things that were here in Liskovate, in Volodimir's hata, in the poor Ukrainian man's house who'd been uprooted from his homeland...

Mara knitted loops, and in every loop there was prayer for salvation from calamity and evil and to be unleashed from the clutches of this endless pain. And with the next loop there was a silent, deep, pious and sad sigh and a deafening cry... Loop to loop, prayer to prayer, pain to pain, desire to desire, sigh to sigh...

Mara knitted, and as the needles made the loop, her thoughts knitted the names of people, good and bad people, good and bad times, songs sung at weddings, at harvest, in the vineyards...

She knitted the days and years she had left behind. Mara looped and every loop was a man, a name, a house, a song, a dance, a hill, a meadow, a vineyard, a prayer for good, for health and for the souls to rest. Mara knitted and on the needles hung the loops and on each loop hung the names of places around the village.

“Down below, at the bottom of the village, there was a fountain, a gushing spring that watered the gardens. And below that were places that the old people many generations ago had named Botkovets, Vetrichav Kosten, Golemata Stena, Goshovo, Damko, Delie, Zhachka, Zherishte, Krlevitsa, Kopadina, Matsanka, Petkovets, Srneniva, Chezmuje, Shekaritsa, Shemelika, Studenik, Pochivaloto and many other places. The people from the Greek government then came and wanted to change them. They came from Kostur with notepads and pencils in their hands, heard the old names and wondered what kind of new name they should give them. They heard of the mighty marble rock from which life-giving water sprang and wondered what to call it.

They called it many names but the old people refused to accept them. They refused to erase the old name of the mighty marble rock from which life-giving water sprang, which their ancestors called ‘Mramorcheto’. The Greeks did their best to erase that name but they couldn’t erase it from these people’s hearts, minds and souls. So, eventually the Greeks wrote ‘αὐωνυμο’ (anonymos in Greek means without a name) in their notebooks. That was the name the Greeks gave the Mramorcheto. As for renaming the other places, the Greeks said they would come back for them another day. They came back. And again, they pondered what names to give the meadows, forests, fields, hills, springs, fountains, brooks, puddles, swamps, roads, paths, winds, dogs which barked all day long... Some they renamed, but for many they had no names so in their notebooks they wrote ‘αὐωνυμο’. And before these Greeks left the village they commissioned the mayor, teacher and priest to invent new Greek names for the songs, dances, stories, proverbs, riddles, angels, saints, wind, rain... and obliged them to baptize and register all newborns with Greek names and teach them in the Greek language... They wanted all newborns to be divine and wise just like the Greeks...

In those days they invented many names...” Mara whispered to herself.

With every loop she made, Mara whispered a place name and all the place names she knew became loops and hung from her needles. Place names that were passed on from generation to generation... Place names that were remembered by her father, grandfather, great grandfather, great-great grandfather, place names that she now wished to pass on to her grandchildren which she didn't have...

“Loop to loop - name to name, then and now, always the same and always unchanging branded in the mind, heart and soul... always the same...” whispered Mara.

“I hear you whispering, Mara, what are you whispering about?” asked Mitre.

“About our place names, Mitre... I am naming each loop I knit after a place name from back home... I whisper a name and after that I knit a loop. I am naming the loops after our place names from back home...” replied Mara.

Mara continued to knit... She knit loop after loop after loop and with each loop she arranged on the needles, she arranged a wish, a prayer, a feeling, pleasure, sorrow, pain, regret... Mara was knitting all the voices from the past and all the sorrows from the present in those loops.

Mara knit and in her knitting she knit her own and other people's sorrows, which had a beginning but no end, no shore to rest on, no bottom to sink to, immense and untamed, inexpressible and inconsolable, overwhelming and devastating; there was no cure or remedy for her and that's why she was constantly hurting...

Mara pushed the last loop through, trimmed the thread, strung the sock on her knees, caressed them, warmed them with her palm and, sighing out of pain or joy, said:

“Mitre, here are your socks. Wear them in good health. And if you bring me more wool I will knit you a sweater... But please buy me long needles. And the yarn, Mitre, isn't the same as ours, soft and warm... it isn't... ours Mitre ...” but her voice broke and she didn't finish what she was saying.

Tears welled up in her eyes and obstructed her vision...

Is there any cure that heals the soul, heart?

Mara was sixty but she looked like she was older. There were visible wrinkles around her eyes and on her forehead. She carried a great burden worrying about her pechalbar (migrant worker) husband in America and that wilted her face. On her back also lay all the worries of her children, her son and daughter, the farm, the fields, the livestock, the house. She was unable to do all the work herself so she hired people to help with the harvest and look after the livestock. She hired local village labourers to do some of the work and paid them with crops collected during the harvest. The cheques which Mitre sent her from America she tied in a cloth and stashed in the small secret closet behind the icon of the Mother of God. The cheques gathered there in a pile, as did the years spent without Mitre, without his warmth and embrace. The cheques didn't speak to her, they didn't keep her warm and they didn't caress and hug her. They just lay there dumb and deaf to her pain, to her sorrow and her moments of loneliness. They were oblivious to the lonely nights she spent alone pressed by the weight of her misery. The cheques just lay there alone inside the dark, secret little closet just like Mara did in her room in the dark of many nights.

Mitre came home to Mara a year after General Metaxas came to power. The bank swapped Mara's cheques for a pile of Greek money. It was a lot of money but Mara managed to squeeze it in the same little secret closet behind the icon. The money was tightly packed and the closet was now full but didn't fill the gaps created by Mitre's long, long absence from her life. His return was welcomed with joy and the promise of a new life. But that didn't last long. Policemen came from the city, arrested him and took him away. In a military court he was convicted on suspicion of attending rallies in America, seeking autonomy for Macedonia. And so Mitre was convicted as an autonomist, dangerous to the state and spent two years in prison doing hard labour, breaking and transporting stones on one of the dry island prison camps in the Aegean Sea. And the

money, smelling of sweat, which he'd earned building a long railroad in America, gathered dust and wasted away in that secret place in the little closet, just as Mitre wasted away on that rocky island from which no one could escape. Mitre returned home on the eve of the war with Italy. The village was swarming with Greek soldiers. The day after his return the Greek government ordered him to volunteer his free labour in building a concrete bunker. He didn't object. He was told that hundreds of villagers from Kostur and Lerin Regions were deployed to build many bunkers along the Greek-Albanian border. They were told their help would save the country. But it didn't. The great joy of the Greek army defeating the Italians ended in Albania, outside Korcha. It was rumoured that Greece had been attacked from the north by Germans and Bulgarians. A few days later the Italians arrived in the village. The bunkers were blown up and the villagers were told to surrender all the rifles they had collected from the fleeing Greek soldiers and to stay out of trouble. When the Greek army fled, the Greek soldiers abandoned their arms on the spot where they were stationed. So, there were rifles and ammunition everywhere; in the houses, in the fields, on the roads... And so the Italian soldiers sent the villagers to collect them and bring them back. The rifles the villagers brought back were piled in a small pile in the middle of the village. It was a very small pile considering how many had been left behind but it was enough of a pile to convince the Italians that they had done their job. Everything else the villagers found, including the light and heavy machine guns, the many rifles, the many boxes of ammunition, etc., they hid deep underground in their houses, barns, in the woods, under rocks and so on... They figured that some day they might need them. And indeed they did, especially when the communists started the Greek Civil War. Mitre too hid some guns and ammunition. When the partisans began to secretly collect arms for the new struggle, Mitre dug up his foundation and unearthed the ten rifles, three light machine guns and the two boxes of bullets. He dug and degreased them during the night, loaded them on his horse and went to deliver them where they secretly collected weapons for the new battles and victories. He came home without his horse. They gave him a piece of paper upon which was written the promise that the people's government would return it to him after it had achieved its victory. And since then Mitre gave them many things and received many pieces of paper with similar affirmations which Mara wrapped in a cloth and stashed

in the dark, secret little closet behind the icon of the Mother of God. They wasted away together with their money... The money that Mara never spent, after the capitulation of the Greek state, became worthless.

One evening the men gathered together at Mitre's house and had a discussion about what went on in the Kolhoz.

"I heard that Lazo was going to build a house here?" said Mitre.

"That's what I also heard..." said Mihail and then added: "Even if I had the money I wouldn't build a house here. I built a house back home but they demolished it, they destroyed it down to its foundations. Now only thorn trees grow in its rubble. I wouldn't build a house on foreign soil; there's no room in my soul for a new house. There will be no place for a new house for me because it will always remind me of my pain... I don't need that kind of pain..."

There was silence. Pavle broke the silence in an attempt to tie the torn thread from yesterday's meeting. He said:

"We have been left without our leaders... In other word we have been beheaded... The people of Kostur Region have been beheaded before. They were beheaded during the Ilinden Uprising and remained beheaded after that. It's true. When the uprising broke out Kostur Region was on fire... Its leaders were gone. How? Well, Pando Kliashev spoke about that many years later, as was written by Miletich and published in Sofia in 1925. Miletich wrote that Pando Kliashev said when the Kostur Region villages were burning, he sent about 800 women to Bitola to complain to the European consuls. The women weren't received by any of the consuls except for the English consul, who photographed them twice but did nothing to help them. This was all the help we received from strangers, said Kliashev. At the same time, on October 17, as Kliashev recalls, himself, Chakalarov, his sister and another 20 people crossed the Greek border near the village Velemish during which time Chakalarov, as Kliashev recalls, was wearing Vlach clothes and traveled in a carriage to Trikala. The Greeks arrested the

young men in the group but released them two weeks later. From there they traveled to Sofia via Varna. In the meantime, Chakalarov and Kliashev passed through Arta - Lesvos - Corfu - Trieste - Fiuma and arrived in Belgrade. Kliashev arrived in Sofia on November 8 followed by Chakalarov on November 10, 1903. And now should anyone ask me why I'm telling this, I'll say that I'm telling you this so that you will know that while our leaders found a safe haven in Sofia, the people in Kostur Region were left leaderless under the open sky with a Turkish sword hanging over their necks. In other words, our leaders were saved but the people they led were left to the mercy of the enemy. And now our leaders who were arrested in Bureli were sent to Moscow where they found refuge in the Soviet camps. But, from their pictures, they don't look like Soviet prisoners... but that's another story. And so Kostur Region, yet again, was left without leaders. And now, in this wasteland, in which we breathed a little life, Zahariadis and his followers want to invent new leaders for us. And we, here, are upset about this and don't understand why we aren't allowed to select our own leaders... We need leaders, not idiots appointed by our so-called friends. There are many idiots among us who want to be appointed leaders. After all, it was our appointed leaders who led us to this situation. While they left in 1945 over the mountains and settled in Skopje and Bitola, they left the people of Kostur, Lerin and Voden Regions at the mercy of the new Greek authorities. Living free and safe over the border they quarreled, divided and slandered themselves, and then returned back home over the same mountains to fight again. And when the situation turned extreme, in the midst of the most difficult battles, they split up again. Those in Prespa accepted Zahariadis renaming them Slavo-Macedonians. He promised them a lot but delivered nothing. Then when they went to Skopje and sat in front of Kulishevski they became Macedonians. And those who settled in Skopje and didn't go back, while drinking bitter coffee in the hotel MACEDONIA, kept sending Zahariadis messages accusing him of lying and telling him how to lead the war... Was it like that or not?"

"You can say that but now, while we are refugees, now that we are on foreign soil, all the time Comrade Zahariadis is thinking about how we can be organized for..." said Pavle but was interrupted by Mara, who stormed into the room through the half-open door cursing angrily:

“May God erase his name... may he go to hell... He, the dishonorable one, he’s the one who ruined us and brought us into this wasteland...!” And then she spit.

“Don’t talk like that, Mara... For us he was the best defender... As you know he came here from Bucharest, and maybe from even farther away, to create a revolutionary organization for us, to save us from Tito and Kolisevski and you attack him like he’s your enemy... Don’t talk like that. The man cares about us; he always asks how we are...” said Pavle.

“You mean if we are still alive or not?” interrupted Mara and then said: “You know what he did to us and to our people and it would be best for all of you if you change your conversation and talk about something more important. Stop talking about Stalin did this and Stalin did that... Nikos did this and Nikos did that... Tito did this and Tito did that... These people pulled the wool over your eyes and left you blind! Was it like that or not?”

“You’re wrong, Mara...” insisted Pavle.

“And so you say I’m wrong and you are right...” said Mara and added: “What about what you said to me about hosting someone here in my house from those who came here for the, what did you call it?”

“Congress...” replied Pavle.

“Yes, that congress... I won’t play host to anyone anymore. I did enough in the last three or four years to entertain, feed, wash, etc., the likes of them and what did it get me? Nothing but pain and grief! And now you want me to do it again so that you can create a new... what did you call it?” asked Mara.

“Organization, Mara, a revolutionary organization, A new revolutionary organization, Mara. Do you understand?” replied Pavle.

“And what will that new one do? Will it start from scratch? With whom and against whom? Do you think too many of us are still alive and more needs to done? So that we can all turn to dust? So that no trace of us will be left?” ranted Mara.

“No, not from the beginning but from where it ended. The fight will continue from where it ended. We will fight against Kolishevki’s gang and those who made a club for the Aegeans there in Skopje and spent day and night slandering our party and our friends...” replied Pavle.

“Enough!” exclaimed Mara. “If I understood you correctly you are going to fight against our own people? Meaning you’d want me to fight against my own relatives living there? Right? You’re trying to convince me to help you create a revolutionary organization so that our people can turn against each other? Brother fighting brother, brother slandering brother, brother killing brother? For whom will you be making this organization? And what did you say it would be called?”

“Ilinden in capital letters, Mara...” said Pavle.

“But isn’t Ilinden theirs too? You will divide Ilinden? Are you also going to divide Delchev from Gruev and from Sandanski, and all the others who fought during the Ilinden Uprising? My poor father will roll in his grave. And not only him but everyone who...” said Mara and her voice broke. She covered her face with her black head kerchief and began to weep...

There was silence in the room. All eyes turned to Mara and watched her wrinkled lips twitch. She broke the silence and said:

“For themselves, but for who else...” said Mara through her head kerchief. “They (Zahariadis) will create a revolutionary organization in order to create an even bigger scam. They will call it Ilinden and we who are still left alive will become its instrument... No, that can’t be allowed to happen. I, Mara, the illiterate and the entire half-literate women, will tell you that they (Zahariadis) are doing this, not for us, but for themselves so that they can cheat us again. They won’t be satisfied until we are all gone. It wasn’t enough what they

did to us so far, now they want to do this too?” said Mara, pulled back her head kerchief and with a curious look asked:

“Are they here already?”

“Yes!” replied Pavle and said: They’ve come from Czechoslovakia 36, Hungary 36, Bulgaria 3, Romania 30 and Poland 80, all former activists and party members. We put many of them in the school where we put iron beds in the classrooms, like these, yours, and, let me say, the more important ones we said we’ll place in the houses. So I figured you can accommodate a couple here. Don’t forget about your honour. It’s warm here, clean and everything is beautiful. They will be pleased,” concluded Pavle.

Mara wasn’t happy and said: “I will say it again, I will not host anyone the likes of them in this house. I have done enough already! I explained to you what I did for them in the past three or four years and what it got me. No more! And you have the nerve to talk about my honour?”

Pavle turned to Mitre and said: “And you, Mitre, what do you say? Will you take two?”

“Well, Pavle, you’ve already been told. We aren’t taking anyone,” replied Mitre.

“Be careful not to make a mistake. The party knows what to do with...” said Pavle but was interrupted by Mitre who said:

“With people like us, right? The party will declare us enemies of the people and send us somewhere, right?” Mitre then opened the door wide and said: “Pavle you will do well if you go now... there’s the door...”

At the exit, Pavle turned around and said threateningly:

“The situation hasn’t changed that much Mitre, even though we’re far away from home. Things are the same here as they were back home... Most honestly, Mitre, for your own good, I hope you won’t

disappoint us. You have always supported the struggle... You understand me, right?"

"It would be better if he didn't understand you..." interrupted Mara.

Standing outside the door Pavle turned to Mara and said:

"Mara, Mara, you are the best hostess of them all. Think about this and talk some sense into your husband. I'll forget about your insolence... I'll take it as a joke. Prepare to accept two guests and come down to Kroschenko tomorrow. Comrade Zahariadis will be giving a speech. He'll tell us his ideas about the new revolution..."

Mitre accompanied Pavle to the corner of the road and, before turning back, without a handshake quietly said:

"Think about this very carefully, Pavle, and don't get caught up in a new set of lies. There will be no revolution... Mara explained it to you very well. We will be deceived again..."

Mara and Mitre didn't open their house to the two congress delegates and didn't attend the rally to hear Zahariadis's speech. They also turned off the talking box right after they heard the first exclamations, slogans and applause... They didn't hear what the leader said and promised the people at the large gathering in front of the church, over which they had forgotten to remove the Orthodox cross which had tilted sideways and looked wrong...

Two days after the rally took place Mitre's neighbours got together during the evening. Those who hadn't listened to the talking box were eager to find out from their neighbours, those who had listened to the talking boxes, what had happened at the rally. They wanted to know what had been said and decided.

Kiro started the conversation. He said: "Look, they held a congress for us. I was at their congress. I sat a little to the side and watched and listened. Our dear, dear, wise leader spoke for a long time about the struggle so far and about a future struggle that awaits us but never mentioned a people. Not only him but also those who endorsed him, who praised him. Nobody. No one mentioned a

nation, not at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of their long speeches. And we were a nation, right? We were a people who during the war gave him, and all those around him, everything we had even the bread from our mouths... I shouldn't have to remind you of the things they said to us in the past, the promises they made to us and wrote down in their notebooks with their pencils but then quickly erased them. When they needed us the most, they unanimously accepted, wrote down and proclaimed that 'In Northern Greece the Macedonian (Slavo-Macedonian, Zahariadis never called the Macedonian people Macedonians in public) people gave their all for the struggle and fought with universal heroism and self-sacrifice, which is cause for admiration. There should be no doubt that, by sacrificing their blood today, as a result of the victory achieved by the Democratic Army of Greece and the People's Revolution, the Macedonian people will completely gain their national renewal in the way that they want to gain it...' (Part of the resolution adopted in January 1949 in the village Nivitsi, Prespa Region.) Yes, then we were a people because we gave our all for the struggle and to be a people we had to continue to exist, sacrificing our blood. But, Zahariadis's great lie didn't work out well for him. His own people, those with whom he shared the big cave in Prespa, those from Belgrade and Skopje and especially those in Athens, who held many Greek communists in their prisons and concentration camps, asked those Greek prisoners if they agreed with Zahariadis's resolution. Those who said they did were proclaimed traitors and, without trial, got a bullet in the head. Then his closest friends turned their backs on him and that is why, only a few months later, he changed the resolution to something else and ended up lying to us... Unfortunately the people who he involved in the war as a result of his lie still admired him, but a few months later he began to slander them too. Even though they were obedient to him, he sowed hatred and malice among them... And I will say again - no one in the congress mentioned people, only comrades in Greek. Zahariadis said everything he wanted to say in the way he wanted to say it, emphasizing that he and a few others around him truly care for us Slavo-Macedonians, who live in the peoples' republics happy and without a care. He also emphasized that we should never think that we have been abandoned or forgotten. He said he would create an organization for us, a glorious Macedonian revolutionary organization... And this is how our most beloved and wisest son

Zahariadis will again take what remains of us under his wing and together we will create a revolutionary organization in this wasteland. It will be a new revolutionary organization for the Slavo-Macedonians who hate Tito and, together with him, we will hate everyone who doesn't hate Tito and so we will divide ourselves, slander ourselves and hate ourselves. So, my dear people, right now there are no Macedonian people, there is no Macedonian nation, there are only comrades, and tomorrow some fool will call them all citizens, meaning a nameless group of people... And so they will keep dancing with the devil and propagating the evil they started a long time ago. They will continue to claim that our nation, our language, our alphabet and our 'sinister' name were created for us by somebody else, and that is why a new language had to be created by party directive, and now, with this congress, they want to create new Slavo-Macedonians from those who were maimed by the war but are still alive. We are everywhere, scattered around towns, in barracks, in villages... Some have even taken permanent residence underground in foreign cemeteries. Every passing day more and more of our loved ones find their way to graves in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and beyond the great deserts, in distant Tashkent, taking with them their great hope of returning home... So, I ask you, who is a bigger criminal, Zahariadis or those who follow and worship him? And for me it wouldn't be strange if some fool tomorrow says, hey you there, wherever you are, we will give you a language, a name, a nation and a state if you agree to not be who you are... To not be who you want to be... but to be who we want you to be... In the past they defined us by agreements and they will continue to define us by agreements but not of who we are but of what they want us to be. They will say you are so and so, do you understand, and when we shake our heads saying no, they will say read the agreement which your people signed in the spirit of cooperation and friendly relations with your neighbours and the world. The same kind of hated agreement concluded against the wishes of the people, the same kind of agreement that created division, malice, hatred, slander, bribery and treachery. Those who care about nothing but their own interests will say this is how it is... This is how it always was... People... People bled and people died until that disgraceful defeat, but to justify that shameful defeat Zahariadis and his bunch are blaming us the people who, through our sacrifices, somehow became guilty... Then, on top of that, they

say that we aren't a people but something invented by somebody else... and on top of all that, they found serfs among us who were willing to launder their filth. They brought serfs, similar to those of Ottoman times, like the Fanariot priests and teachers, on whose trust we placed our fate and in return they brought us nothing but treachery and bloodshed. Now we are placing our trust in a new set of hands called the Communist Party of Greece. They boast that they are unbeatable and strong and that we are weak and crushed like a broken good for nothing earthen pot. Now they're trying to glue back that broken pot with a new organization called Ilinden with capital letters; a revolutionary organization for the Slavo-Macedonians. In great capital letters because the game they are playing, it seems, is a great game. And that game is called the great divide. Our division. A Macedonian division to eradicate our name. If you have no name, you don't exist... our name is the target. What exists without a name? What is celebrated without a name? What is planted without a name? What crosses into immortality and is immortalized without a name? The Polish people who are responsible for the Macedonian and Greek children were also at the congress. When the speakers spoke about them and about their country they always use the names Poles and Poland... I wrote down his name and parts of his speech. Ah, here it is. His name is Kopciński... no, that's not it. Here it is, I found it. Kopciński, they said was next to speak, and tall and bald as he was, he stood up behind the podium and spoke in Polish like this, I wrote what he said in my notebook from what a young man translated for me. I won't read everything for you, only what's most important, in my opinion. This is what Kopciński said:

'I will take this opportunity, my friends, to share with you our experiences regarding the rearing of the Macedonian children and other young people in the people's Poland. The Macedonian young people, together with the Greek and Polish youth, are learning and are educated as conscious fighters for peace and socialism. The young people are having thoughts about liberating Macedonia...'

Did you hear what I said? Let me repeat it 'the Macedonian youth is thinking about the liberation of Macedonia...' That's what the Pole said loudly and we all heard it. There was dead silence in the hall, and then there was a rustling sound and coughing. A man sitting

next to me whispered: ‘The bald man overstepped his bounds; tomorrow someone will pull his ears.’ I didn’t get to write what he said next. I listened and listened but forgot to write. The Pole stopped talking and looked around the hall. People in the audience were whispering. When the whispering stopped he continued:

‘The Macedonian teacher, like the Greek and Polish teacher, instilled in the youth love for their homeland and for their national culture. However, so far we don’t have a sufficient number of appropriate textbooks, reading books and scientific aids. Our desire, aspiration and goal, comrades, is to educate Macedonian children in the spirit of Macedonian patriotism. The youth want to know the history of Macedonia. Macedonia in its past has wonderful pages of liberation and revolutionary struggles. It would be good for the young Macedonians to read Macedonian history.’

The Polish man stopped talking again because there was noise in the hall, someone was coughing loudly. Here is what else I still wrote in my notebook about what the Polish man said.

‘It isn’t possible to love one’s homeland if one doesn’t know its history and geography... In our school work we lack grammar, spelling and proofreading in the Macedonian language. Without these aids, you can’t learn your mother tongue. Learning the Macedonian language without these textbooks is a waste of time for the students and the teachers...’ This is what the Polish speaker said. I listened to him with my mouth wide open. I was unable to write everything down but I didn’t miss this, Kopciński said:

‘We need 10 Macedonian kindergarten teachers and 15 Macedonian teachers for the boarding houses. The situation with Macedonian teachers is very bad. We’ll need at least 2 more qualified teachers. We have no teachers to teach Macedonian in the higher grades and no one to teach the unqualified teachers we already have. Comrades, we need you to find these teachers for us. Look at your staff, comrades, you may be able to find qualified teachers among them’...’ said Kiro and was interrupted by someone who asked:

“What are unqualified teachers?”

“Those who are uneducated...” replied Kiro and continued:

When I heard the Polish man say out loud that at least two qualified teachers were needed, I felt like shouting sarcastically: ‘The party will find them among its cadres... The party knows what kinds of people are needed. It will find them like it found those with whom it’s now making a revolutionary organization and shamefully calling it Ilinden. Ilinden, which belongs to the Macedonians, will be divided among the Macedonians and the Slavo-Macedonians... The first invented by Tito and the second by Zahariadis and the CPG. There’s nothing new to see here, they’re dancing the same old dance and singing the same old song. Comrades today and maybe just citizens tomorrow, nameless citizens...’ So, my dear deceived people, the congress ended with an already decided resolution which was forged out of our hands and brought here from Bucharest. It was written in Greek and translated into Slavo-Macedonian by our amiable and beloved leader... There was plenty of applause, slogans shouted, joy and great new promises... To tell you the truth, I tried to tell the Polish man that I was touched by his speech but the security services stopped me...”

After the congress ended, Polish congressional representative Lukashovich from the Central Committee of the United Polish Workers Party and Kopciński from the Ministry of Education went to the railway station and got on a cold railway car, a remnant from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and sat in a narrow wooden compartment waiting for the train to leave for Warsaw.

Their trip was very slow during the first dozen or so kilometres. The old steam locomotive struggled to gain speed as it frequently blew its whistle. Its passengers sat in the cold in silence. Like the two sleepless nights which left a mark on the faces of the two men, so did the impressions which they'd picked up at the congress in Krushchenko.

Lukashovich broke the silence and said:

“Do you think that our participation in the congress was a good idea and do you think that the comments you made were well-received, Pan Kopciński? When you spoke about raising the Macedonian children in the spirit of Macedonian patriotism and the rich history of Macedonia, the faces of those sitting in the front row, I noticed, were bitter and discontent. I'm sure they didn't approve of your speech. You, Pan Kopciński, spoke about Macedonians and all the others who spoke said Slavo-Macedonians. What's the difference? And what was the purpose of the congress? Here with me, Pan Kopchinhski, I have a copy of the telegram sent to the Central Committee of our party by Zahariadis, their party leader. I will read you what it said:

‘Dear Comrades, on March 5, 1952, the Slavo-Macedonians who are in the various People's Republics will be holding a congress to decide NOF's dissolution, an organization formed under the proposal of Tito's agents, and the formation of “ILINDEN”, a new

national liberation organization for the Slavo-Macedonians. Please give us approval to hold the congress in your country, in the new kolhoz where most Slavo-Macedonians are located. If you agree to have the congress in your country we will send 80-100 delegates from other countries for a stay of 10 days. In addition 80 more delegates from your country will attend. Please give us your answer by January 2, 1952. On behalf of the CPG Central Committee, regards, N. Zahariadis, s.r.’

“The purpose of the congress is clearly written in the telegram. To tell you the truth, Pan Kopciński, to me it looks like some kind of dirty work is done here and I wonder why we’re getting involved in it? I told my Central Committee comrades that if we allowed this congress to take place here with these objectives in mind, then Greece and Yugoslavia will accuse us of allowing the establishment of organizations that could act against them on our territory. And then we’ll be getting protest letters, diplomatic postures and maybe a debate in the United Nations. That’s all the West needs... And you know what something inside my head was telling me? You, comrade Lukeshevich, made a mistake. First, you knew that Comrade Zahariadis was close to Comrade Stalin, and most of all closer to Comrade Beria... And you knew that Beria was in the same company of comrades as our own Beirut. Keep that in mind, Comrade Lukashevich. Of course I didn’t pay attention to it and said nothing to anyone. I kept my mouth shut. I told myself maybe at the moment silence was my best friend. And you, Pan Kopciński, I’m sure members of our central committee will charge you with irresponsibility and political immaturity for the demands you put forward regarding the Macedonian language, history, tradition and some other things... I know you’re justified in raising the children in the spirit of patriotism, using the best pedagogical methods and that, as a very experienced pedagogue, you educate children according to their traditions and values... In this case you educate them to be Macedonian patriots and to love Macedonia... I, Pan Kopciński, understand what’s going on with those refugees a little differently. We Poles understand refugees because in the past we were refugees and that’s why we are like that now. Instead of giving them opportunities to organize themselves in some revolutionary and liberation organizations, I advocated for organizing them in organizations that nurtured their folk and national traditions, their

folk songs, dances and faith, just like we Poles did during the times when we were torn apart as a state for over a hundred years, but we managed not only to preserve but also strengthened ‘nasza polska narodowa tożsamość...’ (Our Polish national identity...) and we did that with the help of our folk traditions, national customs, education, culture and religion. Therefore we owe it to the refugees to connect them with their own traditions and national consciousness... I wasn’t impressed by the empty speeches and slogans delivered by that group of ‘półgłówki’ (fools) brought here from the so-called countries of popular democracy, which strongly interfere with American imperialism and most notably with Tito. And instead of striving to take advantage of all the opportunities available to them to learn, master knowledge, professions, as they would otherwise melt into the mass of a more educated and cultured environment, they persistently trampled on their tragic past imposed by others. You know, Pan Kopciński, I just pity them... They gathered those poor people in that wasteland to make a revolutionary and liberation organization, only because that’s what he (Zahariadis) wished to do, and that is the truth. What they need most though, a thought that constantly circles in my head, is an organization that will nurture their traditions, customs, songs, dances and faith so that they will remain who they are with their own name...” concluded Lukashovich.

“You’re right, Pan Lukashovich. All that is being done now is just a bad and blurry storm. I’m sure it will all blow away and we, the Polish pedagogues, will continue with our work. I’m in the right, Pan Lukashovich, and I’m ready to face the consequences...” replied Kopciński.

“I hope to God you are right, but there, high up in Warsaw, surely someone will say: ‘Comrade, Kopciński, keep educating but don’t forget the politics...’ That’s that, Pan Kopciński, politics. Politics was the game played out in front of those present at the congress. No one applauded you when you spoke about the problems of educating the children in the spirit of Macedonian patriotism. They were all silent. In some I noticed surprise. Others were looking up at the ceiling hoping that it would thunder and silence your blasphemous demands made on them. But when you finally shouted a few slogans about their leader and their party, they all jumped to

their feet... Right? The hall thundered and it seemed to me that the thunder melted away your hopes...” said Lukashevich.

“Exactly. And then and even now I feel uncomfortable,” replied Kopciński.

“Yes. It became obvious what the aim was here when you praised their leader and by the slogans shouted out. But will the passing of time correct this?” asked Lukashevich.

The train was slowly moving in the dark. Pan Kopciński and Comrade Lukashevich didn't sleep that night. They spent the entire night discussing the congress and reflected on it. They were greeted by dawn in Krakow. Comrade Lukashevich took another train, a fast train, and arrived in Warsaw at noon. He then went straight to the central committee headquarters. He went into one of the offices and by the evening had compiled his report on the congress in Krushchenko.

Kopchinhski traveled through Vrotslav and arrived at the train station in Zgozhelets the next morning. He didn't go to breakfast, but went straight to his office where, after he drank two cups of strong coffee, he continued to write his unfinished report on conditions at the State Educational Centre.

“Mihail, go to Ristovich’s house and ask what’s all the noise about going home? I understood that this Popodas or Popos...” said Mihail’s mother when Mihail interrupted her and said:

“Papagos, mother, Papagos...”

“Okay let it be Papagos... Well, they’re saying that this Papagos gave us the right to go back home... Go and ask. It’s time we go back home... It’s time to go... Some people are saying that lists are being made of those who want to go... Go, ask... Krsto was here and said that many of the prisoners had been released from the Greek prisons and the Greek island concentration camps and they were allowed to go home. Krsto said he found this out from his brother in Canada. He received a letter saying that many have been released and they have returned home. It looks like they were pardoned... maybe there will be something similar for us? Go ask. We have been here too long; it’s time to go home... I have heard that some people are already packing their things...” said Mihail’s mother.

Mihail didn’t believe something like this was possible. He hesitated, but when he ran into his grandmother Baba Stoina, she insisted that it was possible. Baba Stoina kept spreading the news among more and more people.

Everyone wanted to know what was happening... people inquired, some were even packing their things, getting ready to go...

On the way to the office, Mihail met Lazo and asked him if he had heard if Papagos had granted amnesty.

“That’s what people are saying, Mihail. Papagos granted partial amnesty. People are signing up, taking their savings out of the banks and shopping for clothes, blankets, pillows and various other

household items that they may need... And you, where are you going?” asked Lazo.

“I’m going to the office. They’ll know more, won’t they?” replied Mihail.

The Kolhoz administration office was packed with people curious to know what was happening. Mihail made his way to Karanikas’s door and when he extended his hand to open it he heard people arguing.

“What have you done, Karanikas, Tito’s agents this and Tito’s agents that, and you don’t know how to stop. Did you know that I spent two whole years in the Kostur and Prespa villages? Did you know whose bread I ate? On whose bed I slept. And did you know that the woman you just slandered was carrying me on her shoulders when I was wounded? She was feeding me, looking after me, comforting me and begging me to hold on and not die? Who do you think you are you useless roufianos (creep, villain), what have you done to earn the right to slander these people?” Mihail heard old partisan Sotirakis yelling at Karanikas. Sotirakis continued: “Are we blaming the honest and devoted villagers for the mistakes made by the fools who led us?” Sotirakis said, angrily spat and continued: “Here we work with them, we share our labour, our sweat, we rejoice and grieve together, we visit, we socialize... Shame on you! Does being together bother you? Does it bother you that we want to find peace after everything that has happened to us? We live with them Karanikas, we live together, we share things and all you want to do is make enemies of them... You, who sat in Prespa for a long time, didn’t you hear their voices, did you forget that they fed you, fed all of us, healed us when we were wounded, comforted us when we were in pain and gave us their beds to rest and sleep on? You, Karanikas, you and those around you and those above aren’t only becoming their enemies, you’re becoming our enemies, the enemies of all the honest fighters. I’m leaving. I can no longer tolerate the stench here,” concluded Sotirakis.

Old Sotirakis then left the office and quickly disappeared.

Visibly angry Karanikas crossed the door's threshold and loudly yelled:

“What are you all doing here? What are you looking for? Why have you gathered here, huh?”

Mihail stepped in front of the crowd and said:

“We heard that Papagos had granted amnesty. Is it true, Comrade Karanikas?”

“It's true...” replied Karanikas quietly.

“We can all go home now!” cried Mihail loudly.

“No! Not all. A man from the party came here today and said that we could return only after a people's democracy was established in Greece and the proletariat came to power. Now, people, sit still, do your job here and the top party leadership will decide when we can go back home,” replied Karanikas.

So, what was bright for the people suddenly turned dark...

Mihail went back to the hata and informed those few who were impatiently waiting for him to return. He said:

“I went to the office. There was a crowd of people there. Karanikas came out and announced that the party would decide who will return. He said that there was no democracy in Greece yet, and when democracy comes we will all return in wagons and be greeted with music and flowers. He said that we will all be back en masse and with our heads raised high. The party now will only allow women whose husbands are in Australia, America and Canada to leave and go to their husbands in those countries... So that's what the party has decided...”

“Does this mean that even those allowed to leave won't be returning back home to their own places?” someone asked.

“Yes, that’s what it looks like... this is how the game is played... It’s a great game and well thought out, like all the previous games in which they made us play...” said Mihail.

A few days later, Baba Stoina called Mihail over and said:

“Please Mihail, get rid of the talking box from the wall. It just talks, talks and talks. Go to Mitre and Mara’s house and see the nice box they bought. They only listen to what they want to listen to. They can turn a wheel left or right and listen to voices which speak our language and play our songs. Ask them where they bought it and then go buy one for our house, the kind that will sing our songs...”

Mihail, Stoina’s grandson, laughed out loud and said:

“That talking box, Baba, is called a radio.”

Baba Stoina wasn’t happy being made fun of and said: “Mihail, my grandson, don’t make fun of me, listen to me, listen to what I tell you, go to Mitre and Mara’s house and ask. I don’t want to listen to voices I don’t understand. Buy a radio and throw this box in the brook.”

Mihail did go to see Mitre and Mara in the evening. At the end of the visit, he said:

“I came with a plea to tell me where you bought the radio.”

“In the city but you need to order it first,” replied Mitre.

It took twenty days before Mihail could pick up the new radio. He brought it to Baba Stoina and taught her how to operate the wheels. He then removed the box from the wall, took out whatever was inside it and hung the empty box on the old pear tree. The birds slept in it at night and hid in it from the rain during the day.

Baba Stoina, who never let her knitting needles out of her hands, turned the radio on every day and happily listened intently to the familiar beloved songs and to the advice given.

The one who gave me the ring,
For him I will pave the way,
For him I will pave the way...

The room was filled with the song. Baba Stoina knitted her sock while listening to it. Then a voice came on the radio and loudly asked:

And where were your eyes, you poor dear, that you did not see?

He who gave me the apple
May he be green until his death...

Hey, hey mean, hey mean and toxic girl...?

He who gave me the ring
Through him the way will pave
Through him the way will pave...

What wrong did the boy do to you, you mean girl?

He who made me whole
Give him to me mother. Give him to me...

Well, that's how it was... How else could it have been?

Baba Stoina was happy listening to the same songs she had sung with her friends when she was young back home when they gathered together to knit, weave and remove corn kernels from the cob... Certainly there were also village bachelors. Those were good times...

The songs awakened many memories in Baba Stoina...

A few moments of joy, many moments of sadness...

Five long-term patients from Hospital 250 were housed in a semi-dark room in one of the newly built wooden houses in the village Kroshchenko which they now called NEW LIFE. After they were discharged from the hospital they learned how to operate tractors and were sent to the kolhoz NEW LIFE. All discussions about the war and their experiences took place after work, which ended sometime before the evening. The most talkative was Traiche. Beneath his overgrown hair above his right ear, Traiche had a large scar and in the middle of it was a red spot. The scar was the result of a wound he had received from a mortar shell explosion. The metal piece had been removed in hospital 250 but his scar would remain there for life.

Traiche always talked about the war, sometimes for a long time and then he would go silent, which to others seemed like he had fallen asleep. But he hadn't. He would then suddenly touch his scar, slowly rub it, tighten his body and say:

“We, yesterday’s warriors - soldiers, accustomed to strict discipline and warfare, now disabled, are sent to the state agricultural holdings not to work but to convince the poor villagers that we haven’t lost the war, but are resting with our rifles at our side. What rifles, huh? Do you know where those rifles are now? In the storehouses of the Albanian army! That’s where they are. They sent us there to lie to our people, look them in the eye and say our rifles are resting by our side... They told us, to go to, what do they call them now, the kolhozes and protect the people from the harsh weather and warm them with our stories of victories, to lift their spirits. The poor people, and more so poor us, instead of telling them fairytales we remind them of the evil we all encountered. We truly break their hearts, minds and souls. On top of that the poor people are being humiliated for no reason, insulted daily and accused of being Tito’s agents. Now at a time when we stopped bleeding we are Tito’s

agents. But when they needed our blood the most, they praised and exalted us. Now that we aren't needed for the war they need us to justify the evil... to pin it on us even though there wasn't a single Macedonian leading the war. You know that Zahariadis, his semi-literate gang and his entire politburo were made up of Madzhirs (Madzhir – Muhazdir - Arabic word - meaning: refugee, immigrant. This is what the Macedonian people called the Turkish Christian settlers and colonists the Greek government deposited in Greek occupied Macedonia after the Greek-Turkish War (1919-1922) under the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and the exchange of populations between Turkey and Greece. 600,000 of them were deposited in Greek occupied Macedonia, enough to permanently change its ethnic composition. During the time when the so-called White Terror (1945-1946) was at its height, the Madzhiri in Kostur Region participated en masse in looting and terrorizing the Macedonian villagers.) Zahariadis too was a Madzhir. The vast majority of people in the command that led the war were semi-literate Vlachs and Madzhirs. Which of the high commanders wasn't Vlach or Madzhir? No one! Not a single Macedonian was responsible for what took place during the war. Whatever the Macedonians did was done under orders from the non-Macedonians who were in command. At the same time Zahariadis couldn't have fought the war without us, the Macedonian boys and girls. Without us he couldn't have defended a single small hill, let alone keep the whole of Gramos in flames for two months. We fought one partisan against ten Greek government soldiers, and later one against twenty. We were his strength, his front in the struggle and his defense in the back, and not those ναυτεργατες (naftergates - port and ship workers), mighty sons of the poor shipyard and dock workers who Zahariadis said were the most warlike part of the proletariat, and we, not knowing what a proletariat was, believed him. Did we ever ask what that was? No! Never! We just believed every word Zahariadis said to us. He told us they were the real proletariat. He told us that the proletariats were the ones who made revolutions and we the villagers were their reserves. But when the poor ναυτεργατες got here and saw the mountains and forests they showed their true colours; they were grief stricken. On top of that they weren't good people. The Macedonians found them to be dishonest, gamblers, womanizers, liars, lazy, pushy, few literate but resourceful. Unlike us who fought on the frontlines, they worked in the headquarters and

back offices similar to those from Rumeli and Thessaly. Here in Poland they aren't in the factories or in the kolhozes. Life for them revolved around the Polish cities, boasting to the Polish people and deceiving them about their rich lives in Greece. Telling them about the party connections they had which they never had, about feeding the pigs oranges, even though their own daily diet consisted mostly of stale bread, onions and olives. They also bad-mouthed our dearest comrade, dearest, wisest, eldest son, dear, meek and now our cure, a balm for our wounds, Zahariadis... They were his closest and most beloved associates, and in fact greatest enemies because they were the first to accuse him of being semi-literate, of not having finished elementary school, etc. Because of his father's work, a salesman for tobacco companies, Zahariadis spent his childhood and boyhood under the roof of many cities. As a child he also lived in Skopje. It was easy to blame your guilt on someone else. Someone had to be blamed to justify what had happened. The top, responsible for everything that happened, unfortunately in simple people's minds, was never at fault, even after it sent so-called instructors to lie to the people. They lied to protect the truth. I still can't understand why they sowed so much hatred in the past and why they're still doing it today. We have no choice now but to reap the strife and disunity they sowed in us. The party servants in those small party headquarters began to call their former comrades and families Slavo-Macedonians and accuse them of being Tito's agents. The poor villagers kept quiet and remained patient. No one raised their voice. They firmly hid the anger deep inside them, like an unruly horse is held by its reins. They accused my commander Pando Vaina of leaving Lisets and reserved a chair for his court marshal. I think he did well to leave Lisets. He saved everyone in the eleventh division and its headquarters. Yes, that's what he did even though his orders were to stay put and fight. The entire division was composed of Macedonian boys and girls. They were young people from Kostur, Lerin and Voden Regions. Flying aircraft were bombing them from above... Cannons and artillery were pounding them from the sides... The bunkers were being blown up and the hills were on fire. Everything was turning to ash. The enemy special forces, who we called lokadzii (Lohi orinon katadromon - mountain warfare detachment), were a step away from the hill. We were being slaughtered in our defensive positions. We were facing the approach of a great force. The enemy infantry looked like a hive of ants

climbing up the hill and attacking in waves. I think Pando didn't want us all to die. He certainly estimated that we had no way of saving Lisets and so he ordered a retreat, a withdrawal. He preferred to face a court marshal rather than conscientiously cause unnecessary casualties. He didn't want to be famous. He valued the lives of those boys and girls and wanted them alive. Those who lost the battles fought at Voden, Sobotsko and Lerin were declared deserters. The battle for Vicho lasted only three days. The other two days were used for clean-up operations. It took five days for the government army to pummel everything that the villagers from Kostur and Lerin Regions had taken six months to build at Vicho. But it took a lot of strength to destroy that fortress. The bunkers were turned to ash by new and special bombs brought there by the Americans. All that work done by the villagers, mostly on the backs of Macedonian women, was done for nothing. Our positions were falling one after another. There was no way we could have beaten back that large and well-equipped army. Our comrades from above were later saying that we overestimated the strength of the enemy. They said there weren't so many planes, not so many cannons, not so many mortars, not so many tanks and not so many enemy soldiers. They said if there was such a large force as we claimed, we couldn't have withstood it for the length of time we did. Who could withstand such a large force in such a small space? I'm alive today only because we withdrew. And there in Bureli, there in Albania, the ones who were most guilty for our failures put the blame on Pando. There was one person among us who had the courage to say to them: 'If you judge our commander, then you should also judge us, and only because we are still alive... We are still alive thanks to Pando.' Let me also tell you this... When I look at all these nasty things they did, I start thinking about what I'm most sorry about. Why did I stay alive... why didn't I burn under the napalm, why didn't they kill me?"

"Our rifles are resting by our side. What rifles, huh? They disarmed us at gunpoint the moment we crossed the Albanian border. We felt naked without our rifles. We had slept, thought and defended ourselves with them for over three years."

"Almost without exception all of us were supporters of Zahariadis. That attachment had been forced upon us since we were children.

Now that he isn't here it should be easy to throw stones and mud at him but who has the courage to even say one bad word about him? We were hypnotized when someone said his name. We were overjoyed to see him. Like the Germans who fell in love with Hitler or like the Russians and all the Caucasians and Asians and communists in the world who loved the great Stalin, father of the people, as was written only in capital letters... And there in Yugoslavia was there a brave person to say a single bad word about Tito? No! Their names and fame were well-protected with the help of the concentration camps. They didn't re-educate anyone there... And we, at the behest of the party and our own minions, weren't forced to celebrate Tito until after that damn INFORM-BUREAU (Communist and Labour Party Information Bureau. One of the bloc's most important institutions of Soviet influence. Its genesis should be sought in the worsening relations between the United States and its Western allies and the USSR. Influenced by the USSR, Stalin needed closer co-ordination and control of activities in state organizations belonging to the eastern bloc countries. Hence, a decision was made in Moscow to hold a meeting between the senior communist representatives of the USSR, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, France and Italy. The meeting was held on September 22-27, 1947, in Shklarska Poreba, western Poland. At first the headquarters was located in Belgrade, but after misunderstandings between Tito and Stalin it was moved to Bucharest. It was officially liquidated in 1956 when it was virtually no longer needed. The Communist Party of Greece adopted a resolution that sharply strained relations with Yugoslavia. The CPG blamed Yugoslavia for the defeat of the Communists during the Greek Civil War. The Macedonian leadership and many activists and individuals were declared Tito's agents) resolution was proclaimed, and after the proclamation they made us hate him, swear at him and defile him with the dirtiest words we could think of... We went to war with weaklings and lost the war with weaklings. But then Tito was blamed for that, right? If Tito was the cause of our demise because we all followed him, then why were the Greek partisans, our comrades, not accused of being Tito's agents? Why only us Macedonians? There has to be a reason for that, right? As you can see they, those above, placed a clear dividing line between the Macedonian and Greek partisans. The Macedonian partisans who were labeled Tito's agents became the enemy of the

Greek partisans. By being forced to hate Tito the Macedonian partisans became enemies of those Macedonians who worshipped Tito. You hate them when they are alive and you hate them when they are dead. You hate them as if they were alive because nothing dies... We humans are weird, right? As for the Macedonian language and alphabet, Tito was the only finger behind which they could hide their true intention to destroy them. They were going to create a Slavo-Macedonian language and alphabet, modeled after the Russian and Bulgarian alphabets, and thus open a front against Tito. And why not? We all followed Zahariadis like sheep without question. He and his cronies opened up a front against us Macedonians. And after they eradicate our language, they will uproot us too... People, they have attacked our language and our alphabet here in Poland just as they attacked our language and alphabet back home. What's the difference? There they did it by law and coercion, here by party decisions. And those who led us, our own people, were the first to accept the label Slavo-Macedonians. And they did so because the party asked them to. When they were worshiping Zahariadis they were Slavo-Macedonians, when they were with Kulishevski they were Macedonians. They had no problem sitting in two different chairs... We created the blackest kind of history. Yet, no has been held responsible."

"Do I really believe in that?"

"Yes I do! I want to believe in it very much, I even have hope."

"With people born and raised in three different countries you can't build a village, let alone a state. Add on top of that a variety of newcomer refugees, brought there by the state, who tap you on the shoulder and suckle off your land, not as businessmen but as spies and agents. Am I saying anything incorrect? All kinds of people exist there both beautiful and ugly, and no one thinks well of you. Everyone makes great promises and expects you to respond in kind by spilling your blood. Most of all, they ask you to do that because they say they are your best friends. And how do they confirm this friendship? By dropping napalm bombs on you or even something more sophisticated. But worst of all are their lies..."

“They collected all those who believed in him (Zahariadis) in Bureli and he sat them on a chair.

“He should have sat them under a noose!”

“He found them guilty of spying, saying they were to blame for the (DAG’s) defeat.”

“How should they have responded to his accusations?”

“They should have spat on his face and then told him ‘Don’t blame us, you should be blaming yourself and your comrades for the defeat. We gave you everything. We gave you our people who fought and died for you, we gave you everything we had and you are blaming us and our people for the defeat? We are victims of this defeat and you are to blame!’ That’s what they should have said...”

“Well, had they said that they would have been hung! One by one he would have shot or hung them.”

“They knew how to act and by their silence they saved their skins. They would have saved face and preserved dignity had they spoken up. And we would have celebrated them later and in some future time we would have erected monuments to them.”

“But, as it turned out... No monuments for them. Are you kidding me? Monuments for people who sat on two chairs at the same time (Greek and Yugoslav communists)? Obedient in Prespa and, at the same time, obedient in Skopje? Monuments? And what did they do when they were released from the USSR camps? They stayed in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan instead of running back to be with the refugees in the eastern European countries. And all the time they were there they argued and made plans on how to return to Skopje as soon as possible. It is rumoured that when Khrushchev was visiting Alma-Ata, they agreed to send him a letter asking him to allow them to return to Yugoslavia. They wrote a letter and sent Urania, the youngest among them, to run and yell from the crowd: ‘Comrade Khrushchev, please accept this letter and let the Yugoslav communists go to Yugoslavia.’ Khrushchev granted their request. I will say it again, instead of going to join our people who were

dispersed in the eastern European countries and taking charge of them, like they did during the war years, they all returned to Yugoslavia and became even bigger Yugoslavs than the Yugoslavs.

Poor Pavle, he said to the Yugoslavs: “Comrades, we have led these people here in accordance with the promises made by the CPG and its leader who is now falling apart and going to hell. Therefore, I think it is best for us to go to the various countries where our people are now and from there return to Skopje.” That’s all Pavle said and because of that he was labeled a dissident... An enemy...

They continued to argue with their dissidents who sat comfortably in Skopje. The division among them became paramount. The only good thing was that blood wasn’t flowing. Mutual accusations and slander were on their daily agenda. So, with them we were left leaderless... beheaded.

“Hey, hey, you idiots, who is going to believe you now, eh? Our people who fled to the Eastern European countries have awakened and have discovered your deceit. They have opened their eyes and realized that they were dealing with illiterate and semi-illiterate people who didn’t know what they were doing and were led by other illiterates whose interest didn’t rest with our people. They have realized that idiots came to power and that’s why our struggle became a disaster. As for Zahariadis who led us in this mess, they say he never spent a day behind a school bench and that’s why he was a good student for Stalin and an even better one for Lavrentia Beria. You know who Beria was, right? They all became strong and untouchable. While the westerners worked with their minds, adding and subtracting, multiplying and dividing, tying and untying and making great gains, we the fools accepted anyone who gave us their dirty hand. Hey, why are you surprised?”

The situation was also boiling in Kroschenko and Liskovate and in all the other places where there were Macedonians. The Macedonians wanted to have their own Macedonian organization in Poland, something they couldn’t have before. The Greeks wouldn’t allow it. The Greeks already had an organization called “Association of Greek Refugees in Poland” and wanted to change it to “Union of Political Refugees from Greece in Poland” to be more inclusive but

at the same time still wanted to hide the fact that all the refugees weren't Greek. The Macedonians demanded that they be given the right to have education in schools where the Macedonian children would be taught in the Macedonian language using the Macedonian Cyrillic alphabet. At the same time, Markos Vafiadis was staying in Poland. This was the same General Markos Vafiadis who opposed Zahariadis and who was removed and sent to the USSR to be rehabilitated. He was rehabilitated now and had returned to the CPG Central Committee Politburo. At a gathering of educators at the Skorliska Poremba picnic site, Markos, without saying the name of the language, said that the party and politburo had decided to allow the children to return to the language studied at Kiril and Metodi University in Skopje. After that decision, the printing of the already party-prepared textbooks was stopped and the textbooks with the artificial party-created Macedonian language printed by the publisher NEA ELADA in Bucharest were removed. Then, with financial assistance from the Polish Ministry of Education, Macedonian books in the Macedonian literary language with the Cyrillic alphabet were printed in Poland. These were a complete set of first to seventh grade textbooks and a few aids for the Macedonian schools in Poland and other eastern European countries where there were Macedonian schools. While Gomulka was popular the Macedonian people were allowed use the Macedonian Cyrillic alphabet in the Macedonian schools in Shchechin, Politse, Pienisk, Zgozhelets, Legnitsa, Vrotslav, Kroshchenko and Liskovate. Textbooks for primary education were prepared and released by the tireless Macedonian defenders Kole Simichiev and Pando Shapkarev. This was assisted by the expert knowledge, commitment and great self-sacrifice of Pan Vatslav Kopciński.

A few months later, the roads were opened for a freer influx of Macedonian newspapers, books and gramophone records with Macedonian folk songs from the People's Republic of Macedonia. Macedonian songs echoed through the windows and balconies. Passers-by looked and listened wondering what kind of music this was that employed the flute, the zurla, the drum? The loudest and most rebellious in this regard were the students of the Macedonian high schools in Vrotslav and Shchechin.

“And you are looking for justice from them? You are looking for justice? Please don’t get carried away. Justice rests in the hands of the stronger. They determine what is just and what isn’t. The powerful invent justice when they need it and erase it when they don’t... They make the agreements and break them and if you happen to get in the way they will trample you. They are they and we are we. They are somebody and we are nobody. And if we are somebody then we are their obedient minion, to use us as they wish. And now, that our dear and intelligent leader is no longer here, we play around a dead lion like little rabbits. He left and we think the time has come for us to find our voice. My dear people, just because you can’t see the strong around you doesn’t mean they are gone. I can tell you a lot more but I fear another bully will come along and wilt my voice and freeze my thoughts in my brain. Do you think that can happen? Yes it can. The old used to say man is the most feared creature on the planet, even the great beasts are afraid of him. And do you know why? Because man can think and kill with his thoughts, which means that he can do whatever he wants by putting his mind to it. The old people used to say that the Lord is never wrong. I think he is wrong, not always of course, but once he was wrong. And his sin cannot be forgiven. Here is why. The Lord sinned when he created man in his own image and imprisoned him in a camp, which he called Paradise.

Oh, Adam, Adam, why did you have to eat that forbidden apple? You found yourself expelled from paradise for eating one apple. Did you find yourself threatened by someone powerful who said if you don’t eat the apple they will eat you alive? Well, for some reason, this nonsense comes to my mind...

And so that he wouldn’t be bored and lonely, alone in that camp, the Lord created a beautiful landscape with lots of plants and animals. The only thing the Lord asked of man was not to eat the fruit from one tree. But to the Lord man seemed unhappy and whether because of pity or for any other reason, the Lord cut one of man’s ribs and made something he called a woman. He told the woman to be faithful to him and not persuade him to do bad things. And all was well until the woman began to listen to the serpent which deceived her to get the man to take a bite from the forbidden apples. When the Lord found out he became angry and angrily asked the man, didn’t I

tell you not to eat apples, be they from Tetovo or Prespa? And what have you done? You didn't listen to me so get out of paradise. And so the Lord banished the man from paradise for his disobedience. With the passing of time which grew to ages, centuries and years, many people were born from that first disobedient man. They sought to have many obedient creatures to help them create their own paradises, in which they lived well. There they didn't listen to their wives and their wives hated them for sleeping with other women. There the disobedient were imprisoned in other paradises where the cheapest apples were from Prespa. Thousands, even millions of disobedient people were imprisoned in those paradises. I don't know what happened to them, but it is said that some time ago an old woman had a dream about which she told the villagers the next morning. She foretold that in a small country, today divided into three paradises, a person would be born in a village and this person would come to power and create a paradise in which he wouldn't send his small number of disobedient compatriots to another paradise but would eat them alive. That's what the old woman foretold... God protect us all from something like that... I don't think I said anything bad but be warned my naïve friends, stay away from agreements, laws, regulations. The strong write and the strong unwrite these things... and today we aren't the strong. There isn't a drop of vodka in the bottle. Go and look around and see what you can find. Hey, if you want me to continue talking I will need my shot glass filled. Am I now the smartest of you all? I am telling you the vodka is like the party. It will lift you up and then knock you down. If you are obedient the party will raise you and if you become disobedient, then you will be trampled down and you will find yourself in a different kind of paradise... I even dream when I'm not asleep. I dream of fires, fires, fires, fire to fire, flame to flame and light thrown from high above in which whole hills and brooks are sinking. In my dream I watch Aliavitsa, Krastavets, Charno, Golio Kamenik burn. The fires are fires of victory, not ours of course but theirs. The big fires were great for their victory, fires of joy for our defeat. Lying on Albanian soil, a step away from the border, we watched the mountain peaks burn. The peaks were burning and our souls were burning with them. Our hopes burned and burned in those fires. We were burning. Our faith was burning... our hopes were burning... The fires were fires of victory, of course not of our victory, theirs. The great fires were for their victory. They were fires

of joy for our defeat. Lying on Albanian soil, one step away from the border, we watched the mountain peaks burn. As the peaks burned, so did our souls. Our faith burned and burned in those fires. We were burning... Our hope was burning... And there, in Bureli, where they rallied us for days, they convinced us that we weren't defeated, that we had just put our rifles to the side... What rifles, huh? Didn't the Albanians take our rifles at the border? Which rifles did we put to the side, the rifles that those who led us never picked up, those non-existent rifles? Which rifles, huh? Did they forget that the Albanian officers ordered us to throw the rifles into a pile at the border? As soon as we stepped onto Albanian soil the rifles and all the other weapons we carried with us were thrown into separate piles; pistols, rifles, machine guns, bullets, mine throwers, mortars... Along with them we threw our tears, curses and pain for the people we had lost and for the shame of our defeat... They told us not to lose hope, as soon as it calmed down the party would need us again... The party knows what to do, how to do it and when... Faith, they said, must not be lost. For three years they washed us in that faith and none of us seemed to have had the brains to figure out what they were doing to us. They kept muddying and muddying the waters and did whatever they felt like. We did as they asked and when they were done with what they were doing they had a ready made answer of who to blame for their misdeeds. I understand. They put the blame on us, specifically on NOF and AFZH. And while we sat around in those big gatherings in Bureli, every day and every hour of every day they slandered NOF and AFZH and accused its leaders of treason. In fact all of us, every Macedonian was slandered. And in all this they never once mentioned KOEM (Communist Organization of Aegean Macedonia - established by the CPG in March 1949 in the village Nivitsi in Prespa Region) the crazy child which they had created and left quietly to be destroyed. And in all this they managed to hide the great fraud they had committed. During their Fifth Plenum they unanimously passed a resolution, the CPG Central Committee decided that: 'The Macedonian people are granted the right to self-determination'. Then during the 2nd NOF Congress held in the village Nivitsi, a resolution was adopted to invite the Macedonian people to join the struggle (Greek Civil War) en masse. The Greek communists told and retold the Macedonian people that they would allow them to create their own Macedonian state but they needed to fight and win

the war. For that to happen, however, every able bodied man and woman had to join the struggle. In other words, like Zahariadis said: 'All to arms and everything for victory.' Zahariadis also said: 'You Macedonians have a right to secession, within a Balkan federation...' There were many slogans written especially in honour of Zahariadis, the so-called 'greatest', wisest and most respected son of Macedonia and then, a little later, no one wanted to believe that he was a traitor. Unfortunately the NOF leaders and all those who served under him believed and trusted him. But despite their trust, the NOF leadership refused to accept Zahariadis's claims that Yugoslavia was their enemy. Only a month or so later Zahariadis canceled the offer but we continued to believe in him. Now, when I think of that lie, when I try to get rid of those thoughts from my mind, it seems to me like someone is still kidding me and spitting on my face... And do you know why they silenced KOEM? Because they created it for themselves and then forgot about it. Zahariadis himself looked us in the eyes and without shame said that the Democratic Army wasn't defeated, that we hadn't suffered defeat and that we had just put our rifles to the side. That lie sickened me and opened a living wound full of pus in me. That wound is a cry of our defeat. It's a wound of the heart and now we carry it in our souls... The defeat, and us being stuck in this mud, is a wound of life... Pure and simple! They asked us to have faith. In what?! When I wake up at night, I seem to hear the screams and cries of mutilated boys and girls, the thunder of cannon shells and the voices of despair ringing in my ears... They shout, beg and I can't help them. I hear their voices and I'm afraid to open my eyes. If I open them then I see crippled girls, faces without eyes, bodies without arms and legs, blood on the rocks, shattered beech trees and flames and fire. These things have taken root in me. The lie that we will win hurts badly... How are we going to win? Who are we going to defeat? Are we going to fight against America and win?! But they did tell us, they constantly told us that we were fighting against Anglo-American imperialism. And did they know what Anglo-American imperialism was? Of course they knew! They must have also known that no one could defeat America! Were we, dressed in these tattered clothes, barefoot and half-starving, fighting with these old Italian rifles, German machineguns and Czech cannons built before World War I, expected to defeat the Americans? Were we, who were dying of starvation and cold, going to defeat America? Were we, the villagers

who were fed more lies than crumbs of bread, going to defeat America...? And now they're not only sowing lies that they didn't beat us, but are sowing lies about having our rifles by our sides, when they clearly know the rifles are somewhere in some Albanian weapons depot. They defeated us alright, they drove us into the ground and they ground us up like minced meat. The only thing that remains now is to put us underground. They just haven't killed us all... When will we ever learn to think for ourselves?! And now what?! Now we lay on top of the sharp axe of mistrust, hatred, scorn and division, long forged by the slogans of brotherhood and unity, knitted with our blood, our wounds, our sacrifices and our obedience and silence..."

"How will you awaken this nation? With education! We need to replenish our minds and souls. Our slave mentality must be uprooted from us. New blood must be poured into our veins, which will give our minds the power to think independently. I mean - we need a revival. We need it badly. From the root up... We should socialize, have friends, cooperate with everyone but without conditions. We need to be ourselves... We need to be on our own. We must not allow them to touch us with dirty fingers. We are Macedonians, not Slavo-Macedonians. Our language is real, it wasn't invented. Our nation is real, it wasn't artificially created by Tito who became a lodged bone in their throat... They wanted our blood and that by resolution. Blood, blood, lots of blood. The more blood, the greater the deception... Blood, the leader wanted a lot of blood. In that hell we bled and burned..." concluded Traiche.

They spent their long nights, far away from home, in those wooden Ukrainian hatas desperately searching for the truth.

Among them were those who, at every moment, by order, directive, or decision, ruthlessly cut the thread of hope, faith, aspiration and longing. They were the party's most faithful lost angels...

A broken voice, Traiche's voice, was heard in the room submerged in mold and moisture that was rotting the floor. It seemed like he had two voices quietly whining in the dark, his voice and the voices of the souls of those left behind on the hills of Vicho and Gramos...

The same debate resumed every night, night after night, and they became hostages of anger, contempt and hatred.

“Now,” the voice said, “now we are far away from home, from the flames and fires... we aren’t divided by countries, by borders, or by our unyielding desire to return. Let’s go back with an olive branch in our hands...”

There was a long silence.

“Whether I want to admit it or not, I have died many times. I have died of fear when we were ordered to go on the attack; I have died of exhaustion from the long night marches; I have died of hunger; I have died freezing cold; I have died of thirst; I have died in hospitals when my wounds were healing; I have died of pain when I watched my friends die in the trenches and bunkers; and now I am dying of disappointment... I am dying. But I am still alive...” said Traiche, sighed in exhaustion, and continued to crackle like a broken, dry branch:

“Oh! I don’t remember if the fire in the fireplace at our house ever went out. The burning embers were covered with ash. My grandfather used to say that fire, even the smallest spark, is a sign of life... Are there any sparks left in our houses now? During the long winter evenings when my mother wove, knit and mended our clothes, she always sat in front of the burning fire. She was a small woman but her shadow on the wall was big, huge for us children. We sat in her lap by the fire and watched the flames dance and our shadows merge. But then the grown ups came and separated us from her shadow, from her warm lap in which she caressed us. They gathered us, some of us in the mountains, others in foreign countries and left our mothers alone... She was left alone. In that solitude she kept the fire persistently and attentively burning, reinforcing her faith and hope that we would return. Time unfortunately was against us all. I would be very happy if I could close my eyes and, just for a moment, see my mother in whose lap I sat so contently and was never hungry or thirsty... Unfortunately when I close my eyes all I see now is misery. I see the wet trenches and bunkers of the 103rd Brigade in which every day our political commissar breathed down on me, yelling many words most of which I didn’t understand. He

filled our heads with words of faith in which he repeatedly said we were fighting against Anglo-American imperialism. I was so tired of it I wanted to sleep but I had to stay alert. He overwhelmed me, swallowed me and drowned me. And being half asleep I often dreamed of sitting on my mother's lap. This was my faith which kept me sane to which I prayed deeply. I never forgot my mother's warmth. And now when I fall asleep all I see are fires burning on Iarno, Golio, Kamenik... and these lice, mooching off me... calling me Tito's agent... Our mothers were left without their children. They were left waiting, arms stretched and eyes looking into the distance... Waiting... Waiting has become their hope... When I am alone and close my eyes, even for a moment, I see my comrades-in-arms, boys and girls, mutilated, some with no arms or legs, some with broken arms and some with crushed skulls... I hear the voices of the wounded, sick and dying calling for help... I hear that we lost the war because Tito closed the border. It's true that Tito closed the border... And then we attacked him and now we slander him... You know how it was during the battles for Voden, Sobotsko and Lerin, right? They took me to Iasenovo with a lot of other wounded... From there to Katlanovo. The hospital was packed. They were putting two wounded in every bed and still there was no place for the new wounded. They took us by train from Skopje, put us in freight cars and sent us to Berkovitsa in Bulgaria. There was no place for us there either. Back on the train and to Sinaia, Romania. There they used the royal palaces as hospitals for our wounded. But before our wounds had a chance to close, back on the train to Bulgaria. From there by train to Nish, Skopje and Bitola. Trucks were waiting for us there, Yugoslav military trucks. We traveled during the night and arrived in the village Rabi in Prespa. There were about seven hundred of us. Our people crossed the Yugoslav border many times in this way? So, how did we get from Bitola to Prespa if the border was closed? On top of that who was feeding us along the way? Whose doctors and nurses cared for us? We were seven hundred people... The next day we were told the border was closed. Who was lying then? Who is lying today? Our leaders in those days and in the days during the entire civil war were persistently imposing mass blindness on us... Was that right or not? The war ended and they insisted that it hadn't! My mother was killed by a bomb dropped from an airplane while she was carrying wounded. My father is still imprisoned in the concentration camp on Makronisos... and I, I am

here, in this paradise called Nea Zoi (New Life)... The war is over and I am convinced that the Greeks, like they haven't done before, won't kill, torture and mutilate thousands of Greeks, their own people, in their camps and prisons. But I'm not certain about the fate of those who aren't of their kind... They say the war is over, but for whom? All I have to do is close my eyes and, only for a moment, I see nothing but war and hear shouts and pleas. I can't help it ... War ... war ... war ... And when I drive the tractor, the noise it makes reminds me of a machine gun firing endlessly. When I give it more gas the noise escalates and I catch myself yelling FORWARD! And he, that slippery and unreliable no good, the head of the Kolhoz, the useless Greek from Rumeli once heard me yell forward. He came over, patted me on the shoulder and praised me. With joy he said: 'Traiche... Bravo! Bravo! Shout! Shout louder... This is how we will build Socialism...' Now, I ask you, how could he build Socialism in this wasteland with our stupid shouting... That stupid useless Greek from Rumeli... What a fool. What a world we live in today. A world full of fools. Sowers of insanity... It is rare to find a level-headed smart person... Only self-absorbed, empty-headed idiots with shovels in their hands. No matter how much you clean, you will never clean the amount of mess they make... Such is the world today. And who is leading it?

And don't think for a moment that they send us here because we are some great tractor operators... The other day they called me in to tell me how much of the norm I had completed. There was no one in the office. While waiting for my friends to come, by chance, out of curiosity I opened the desk drawer and found a thick envelope inside. I opened it and what do you think I saw? All our names were there and written beside them were the words 'Τιτικός πρακτορας' (Tito's agent)... said Traiche and was surprised by the reaction of those listening to him. He looked at them and said:

“What's your problem? Why are you all suddenly surprised, huh?! Get hold of yourselves. Let me make you happy. It wasn't just our names that were in the envelope. There were some others, members of the central committee. According to the document they were sent here to study the agrarian question... This is because those poor fools weren't of the same mindset as Zahariadis and his obedient ones, so Zahariadis sent them here to the Kolhoz NEW LIFE to be

re-educated... Like us fools... The Polish man told us to go work in the factories, learn a craft, pick up a skill, go, go to high school and then to college... The state will pay for everything... But we never listened, we wanted to be villagers and from there progress to workers, I mean proletarians, and so we ended up operating tractors... And I think that's good for the uneducated... like us... I heard that Kiro and Micho are studying at the University... They are studying metallurgy... they will make steel in steel mills and will run these huge factories. But we, we will remain, well, tractor operators... Those damn tractors... my ears are swollen from the noise they make. We will toil in the mud which we will never be able to shake off of our boots. We will walk around with black hands soiled with black oil which we can barely wipe off. We will wait in line to have a bath with two handfuls of hot water from the rusty boiler. We will wait for spring to come, for Easter and for a chance to wash in the river... Yes we are fools... We didn't listen to the Polish man when we were taking the course to learn how to operate the damn tractors... He told us 'boys you should be going to university' but who was listening... He told us 'the state will pay for your tuition', and we, the fools, told him 'my friend what you say is well and good but our party sent us here to turn us into factory workers so that from villagers we can become proletariats... They, the children who were collected, brought here and placed in the boarding houses, are now attending high school and technical school and some are nearing the end of their studies. Everything for them is paid by the state, by the Polish people, most of whom are workers and some, like us, tractor operators. I've heard that most of the children are in schools here. Only a small number aren't. These are the children of parents who came here from other countries or were planning to go to other countries and are still waiting. These people kept their children with them and left them without an education. Now they work in the factories and have become proletariats... Today or tomorrow I will write Kiro and Micho and ask how they are doing with their studies in metallurgy...' concluded Traiche.

The night was long and the nights that followed were even longer. The nights were loud. The nights were full of outbursts, like a whirlwind of storms, mudslides, scams and infuriation. The nights were full of bitterness, lies and slander...

“They were silent so that their thoughts didn’t flow from their mouths. They were deaf so that they couldn’t hear the voices of reason. But they weren’t blind and they could see that the others were leading them into blindness...

This is how our leaders were. They sat on two chairs. They were well-fed, warmly dressed, talkative and always victorious in the battles they never fought... On Sunday, like every other Sunday, there was a dance in the tavern. The composition of instruments included a mandolin, a violin and a drum. It was always good to listen to the music. The least it could do was remind them of the thundering drums and shrills of the zurla they used to listen to in their villages in Kostur Region...” concluded Traiche.

Traiche’s health began to decline day by day. They took his tractor. They gave him a notebook, a pencil with the task of writing down who plowed and how much, who sowed and how much, who cut and how much, and how close they came to or exceeded the specified norm. Traiche did his job wholeheartedly but he kept losing his strength with every passing day until one day he couldn’t get up.

They called a doctor who, after examining him, wrote something down and said:

“Take him to the hospital.”

The other tractor operators went to visit him, to cheer him up but Traiche was all on fire. Fire in his eyes, fire on his forehead and cheeks... Fire was burning Traiche. Two weeks later he was placed on a tractor pulled trailer covered with a blanket. They brought him back to Kroshchenko.

The president of the Kolhoz ordered a band from the city to play Lenin’s march while Traiche’s dead body was escorted to the new cemetery...

Times in Poland were bleak and difficult. Krushchenko and Liskovate weren't left out of what was happening all over the country. And there, during those blurry times, the law wasn't the law. The law was what the party wanted it to be. The liars and slanderers had the upper hand. Krushchenko, in the political scene, had become a place of slandering, deceit, humiliation, fear, submission and obedience. And there were also rare attempts of drowning in some of the abandoned wells filled up with murky and stinking water. In that atmosphere the biggest offence was to think differently. This was especially dangerous for those of different national origin who carried the label "Tito's agent". Thinking differently was enough to shut down all possibilities of getting a job, of being praised for achieving a higher standard, of being promoted, or of being allowed to study in school. That's how it was. The Association of Political Refugees kept sending its assessments of the situation to the competent Polish services in Warsaw, where they were often rejected.

Those who found it difficult to accept and follow party directives, often secretly, under the guise of darkness, left the NEW LIFE kolhoz and searched for a new life in the cities. There they weren't only freed from the eyes and fingers of the slanderers, but also from the mold and dampness that had taken root in the long-abandoned Ukrainian hatas. They were free from the mud, from the stench of their clothes that hadn't been washed for months, from the long nights of being brainwashed, and from the low pay they were receiving for their hard labour. With some effort they began to fit into the local Polish environment.

There were also cases of people who found themselves in Krushchenko and then disappeared. The most common were those who had a different opinion than those above them and dared to express them. Having opinions that were different from those of

your boss was enough of a reason for you to be sent to do party work in the field for practical improvement in order to be cleansed of your sins. This supposedly was a place where you were given the opportunity to become more familiar with the problems of agricultural policy, and the most appropriate place for that was Krushchenko. Some ended up hanging from a ceiling beam or in a mud well. At that time there were more lies, slander and destruction of the human spirit in Krushchenko than there were potatoes and vodka.

After one of the closed party meetings, Karanikos, head of the kolhoz, took Zahariadis aside and whispered in his ear. He said:

“Comrade Zahariadis the problem with the Slavo-Macedonians appears to be growing more and more here in the Kolhoz. It’s not good when most of the people in the Kolhoz are Slavo-Macedonians. They are gathering together more often, singing songs in their own language, celebrating together in family celebrations and, according to some information we have, they have bought radios and are secretly listening to Radio Skopje. One such radio was purchased by Argiris Kovatsis, whom I suspect supports Tito’s agents...”

Zahariadis laughed quietly and even more quietly said:

“I know Kovatsis well. He was a good and brave fighter. He was a major in DAG. He and I persuaded the Polish authorities to form this kolhoz. He is a hard-line communist, rightly seeking justice, but keep an eye on him... People change... And as for Tito’s agents in the kolhoz, keep your eyes wide open. The Slavo-Macedonians are now without their own organization. We at the Politburo are already thinking of forming a new organization for them, unlike Tito’s organization NOF and AFZH. We’ll gather all the healthy elements who oppose those in Skopje and slowly let them loose on the others and fuel their quarrels... The Slavo-Macedonians are good, peaceful and meek people... they are at their best when they are quarreling and divided and when someone else is instigating them. It’s as if God created them for eternal slaves, like the Jews, until they created their own state and with it, now and in the future, will make a mess in the Middle East. I’ve never respected them because they don’t

respect themselves. Keep Argiris in mind and don't let him out of your sight. I said he is faithful but sometimes even the most faithful become the greatest unbelievers. Keep that in mind..."

Pressured by the notion that the co-operative NEW LIFE, popularly called the kolhoz, was led by people who were exclusively guided by the power of party directives and personal greed, who exercised excessive party discipline and in many cases physical force, who constantly insulted and denigrated the Macedonians with the generally accepted suspicion that they were Tito's, and due to lack of personal interest in becoming rich, Argir decided to do something to reverse the openly visible injustice. He decided to write a letter to the party secretary general.

There he saw a solution to all the abuse.

Blinded by his unlimited confidence and belief in him, Argir figured that if Zahariadis was informed of the things that were going on in the kolhoz, he was certain that he would personally take the lead in changing the situation and punish the culprits accordingly. After he left the Kolhoz in Krushchenko and went back to his school in Romania, Argir began to write his notes in secret, away from the eyes of his comrades with whom he boarded in the common bedroom in the party boarding school. He wrote down his thoughts on pieces of paper and about a month later turned them into a letter.

It was clear to him that each word bore great responsibility and was convinced that if the facts were well-presented they would convince the secretary general to punish the guilty ones in the kolhoz in Krushchenko. He typed up two copies and gave one to Zahariadis's secretary in person in a sealed envelope addressed to the secretary general, and asked her to make sure the letter was given to him as soon as possible.

Whether out of carelessness or forgetfulness, Argir later realized that all letters coming out of the school were censored. He wanted to go back and retrieve his envelope but it was too late. The secretary

probably had handed it over to the person who was in charge of checking everything that came in and went out of the party school...

On his way back to the boarding school, not far from the CPG Central Committee headquarters in Bucharest, he thought of what he had written in the letter. He wrote:

On the way, returning to the boarding school not far from the CPG Central Committee headquarters in Bucharest, he repeated the contents of the letter:

“Comrade Zahariadis,

I wrote a lengthy letter to the CPG Central Committee about the state of affairs in the kolhoz in Krushchenko. Since you are the most empowered and responsible person for the kolhoz more than anyone else in the party, I’m writing to you personally because you know me very well from DAG. You know about my participation and my character and, even more so, you personally sent me to this college. At DAG you personally invited me several times, during critical combat situations, and obliged me to act in Siniachko behind enemy lines to prevent an attack in Mali-Madi in September 1948. You ordered me to command a death squad in Bela Voda. And finally you appointed me commander of the Bigla-Lundzer Sector in the Vicho area in 1949, or as you personally called it ‘the most strategic point on the front’. In August 1949, during the battle for Vicho, the units in the Bigla-Lundzer sector not only endured in saving the last front line, but also repelled the enemy and retained its fortified positions. You personally sent many greetings, praises and gifts to the front to commemorate our sacrifices. You’ve known me since Vicho where we first met, and later you found me and came to see me here, abroad, Comrade Zahariadis, and together with your companion Timios Bratsos, you came to the city Legnitsa in Poland and took me in your car for a ride, you said: ‘Argir, another difficult task awaits you, more difficult than that at the beginning of 1946 in Gramos...’ those were your words, Comrade Zahariadis.

I thought you were going send me to Greece on a special assignment. I accepted with pride and joy and was happy that the party again would choose me for new sacrifices and struggles. When

we arrived in Zgozhelets you told me that a kolhoz was going to be created in a desolate area near the Polish-Soviet border.

Even though I was 90% disabled, wearing iron braces and orthopedic shoes, and I'd have to do a lot of running and hiking as I did as a partisan, I didn't tell you that I was unable to do the job. I didn't tell you that I was unable to do the job because I was enrolled to study at the Warsaw Technical School. I didn't tell you that I was unable to do the job because my wife was pregnant and had to lie in bed at all times because she had a problem with her pregnancy, and I didn't tell you that I was unable to do the job because we had three children who needed looking after...

I accepted the task you gave me and went to that wasteland to organize the kolhoz. I put my disability, studies, wife and children aside and followed your directive. I faced more difficulties in the kolhoz than I had in early 1946.

But, despite the sacrifice and hardship, I was proud to carry out the tasks assigned to me by you, Comrade Zahariadis, and by the CPG. But when the kolhoz began to operate others were sent to manage it, even though they had no experience with farming, animal husbandry and similar activities performed at the kolhoz. You appointed Timios Bratsos president of the kolhoz after Alekos Eksarhos, the first president, committed suicide. Theoharis Aristidis, a close friend of Bratsos from Rumeli, was given responsibility for sowing the large acreage but the man didn't know the difference between wheat and oats.

After almost all the political refugees from all the other kolhozes (state agricultural holdings) arrived at the kolhoz in Krushchenko, almost two thousand people, mostly Macedonians from Vicho, Prespa and Gramos, were managed exclusively by non-Macedonians, people from Rumeli. These were Timios Bratsos's people, Theoharis Aristidis, president, and Panos Karanikas, secretary, who by profession proved to be beehive thieves in Rumeli. Their first concern was to organize a security group, exclusively under their command, which they then secretly armed. They have lied to the Poles, telling them that there is a clique of Tito's agents in the kolhoz. Anyone who complained about

irregularities, including torture by their guards, was accused of being Tito's agent. Every day dozens of Macedonians came to my house crying and complaining that their income had been cut and when they demanded justice they were accused of being Tito's agents, saboteurs and the like. Of course, I didn't support such behaviour, but I also openly, with facts, acquainted the authorities and members of the kolhoz council and the party organization with the situation. I condemned the culprits and their subordinates in protest. I followed party discipline, promoted unity in the kolhoz and talked openly about irregularities in front of the various authorities.

They did everything to get rid of me, not with accusations against me, because they didn't work, but with vicious intrigue. They informed on me to the party with allegations that I wasn't trustworthy and that I wasn't worthy of being sent to the CPG Central Committee school in Romania. As you know this was a two year course in which cadres were prepared to be sent back to Greece to perform covert activities. As you also know, you Comrade Zahariadis and the CPG Central Committee asked me to take this course. Despite my severe disability, sick wife, three children at home, a house that desperately needed repair, I put all my effort into preparing the houses for others in the kolhozes. I left my wife and children alone at home in the summer of 1953 and went to work at the kolhozes, being promised that the party would look after my family. But the party did nothing. They left my wife helpless. A year later, in the summer of 1954, I was sent back to the kolhoz in Poland and given a month's leave to see my family. Comrade Zahariadis, when I came to the kolhoz, after a year's absence, I found a dynastic state ruled by Aga Aristidis. Hundreds of our former activists, even simple people, were accused of being Tito's agents. All technical and other personnel, garage employees, tractor operators, drivers, 90% of whom are Macedonians, are labeled Tito's agents. They deceived the Poles and got Comrade Ilia Blagoev, manager of the tractor operators, fired. Comrade Blagoev, a very capable manager, was replaced by an incompetent individual from Rumeli. Included in the list of accused of being Tito's agents and enemies of the party, were G. Buntsiotti, Andon Galiov and Liapche, the only technicians in the kolhoz.

The Poles who clearly saw these injustices didn't want to interfere in the internal affairs of the Greek organization and leadership. When I arrived at the kolhoz in Poland from Romania, I told the Poles what was going on. I also told Aristidis and Harizopoulos that they had literally destroyed our team of activists, the very people who had created the kolhoz.

While working in the kolhoz I was repeatedly accused of being Tito's agent and the leader of Tito's clique and was threatened to be expelled from the party and the party school. Comrade Zahariadis, I want to remind you of something similar that happened to me in Vicho about which you know personally. In September 1947, when the enemy attacked one of our positions, Amindas Katsakos commander of the Vicho detachments, along with the headquarters, couriers, cooks and so on, fled and disappeared. They hid in the dense forest. About 14 days later, when the offensive was over, they came to my battalion, the only battalion left in Vicho. To justify abandoning their position and deserting, they proclaimed me a hero, and so on. In return I openly explained to them that what they had done was desertion and that it was damaging to DAG. The next day I was accused of being a satrap, an anarchist with a partisan spirit and was demoted from major to corporal.

I don't believe, Comrade Zahariadis that you have forgotten. On your orders, Petros Kokalis, Minister of Health, came to the hospital, took me with open wounds and brought me to the Headquarters where you personally ordered me to move to Siniachko. At that time, Comrade Zahariadis, I was good enough to take the hill that others had abandoned. Now here in the kolhoz, let me prove it to you with words, that murderers, opportunists and careerists are accusing the honest and hard working people of being the enemy.

Comrade Zahariadis, with my respect for you as the party leader, for you as the CPG Central Committee Secretary and with my boundless faith in you, I was always ready, every moment of my life, to sacrifice myself for the CPG. As for the kolhoz, as you said, 'we will gather all the Slavo-Macedonian people there, together, to protect them from the difficulties of the other kolhozes and therefore the few Slavo-Macedonian cadres who have remained honest and

loyal to the party will stand by them to protect them'. That's what you told me.

Your words convinced me to leave my career path and stay with the people who gave birth to me, raised me, with whom, with a rifle in my hand, I fought side by side for ten years for freedom and democracy in the struggle led by the CPG.

Comrade Zahariadis, before any random accusations against me reach your hands, accusations leveled against me by these useless opportunists, tyrants and tormentors of the celebrated people who fought in Vicho and Gramos, I want to tell you in advance that I will quit my position and I am ready to relinquish all responsibility in my job in the party if these persecutions against the Slavo-Macedonians here in the kolhoz continue. These tormentors are the people who were dragged from southern Greece into Albania in September 1949 after DAG withdrew. They came with the remnants of the Slavo-Macedonian DAG fighters from the five battalions that were sent to Vicho and Kaimakchalan from 1947 to 1948 to strengthen the partisans in Rumeli. Those individuals from Rumeli today run the kolhoz like it was their own business and abuse the Slavo-Macedonian people by using threats and unfounded accusations, accusing them of being Tito's agents and spreading Tito's propaganda.

Comrade Zahariadis I address you with all my courage and thoughts because you have personally known me since we met at Vicho, but also here abroad. You personally sought me again and again and this time you gave me the task of organizing the kolhoz NEW LIFE.

And, as you said before, we have gathered most of the Slavo-Macedonians in this kolhoz in order to protect them, not to destroy the very people who gave up their children, who fell on the battlefields, who mobilized en masse... And those who didn't carry a rifle worked hard on the fortifications. These people gave everything they had for the struggle and, as a result of the struggle, lost everything. And now they are being oppressed here, just like they were back home, instead of being protected like you promised.

The tone of this letter may be overwhelmingly filled with indignation, Comrade Zahariadis, but it is done so that you can better grasp the situation. I will give you just one example of the dozens of incidents that took place in the kolhoz. Two comrades, Thasos Botsis and Naumis Dimopoulos were sent from the school (500) in Zgozhelets to the kolhoz. They were both captains and served in my Vicho battalion. When they fought the battalion always won and they were considered heroic DAG fighters. When they arrived at the kolhoz, P. Karanikas, secretary of the party organization, labeled them Tito's agents. During a party sitting he wrote a letter to the central committee and told them to keep an eye on them because they were Tito's agents...

I am categorically saying, Comrade Zahariadis, if any of these DAG heroes, as well as all the Slavo-Macedonian comrades who laid the foundations of the kolhozes are characterized as Tito's agents, then I too am a Tito agent. If our sacrifices for DAG weren't enough, then by all means allow our complete destruction here, abroad. The first year of my absence from college, when I was at the CPG Central Committee School, I found people savagely beaten. Among them were D. Duketis and Baios. Some maybe less, but many were badly beaten.

I have spoken to the appropriate people in the kolhoz about these events and they have in some way threatened to report me to the party... Friends of the Polish leadership are deeply resentful of these actions and are concerned about the kolhoz's survival.

This is why I have written this long and detailed letter to you personally and to the CPG Central Committee. I am confident in you as the Secretary General of the CPG Central Committee, to make it your personal responsibility to look into the situation at the kolhoz. I urge you to intervene as soon as possible and put an end to the destruction of the kolhoz, whose foundation was built on the sacrificial bones of Alekos Eksarhou, the kolhoz's first president and agronomist. In addition to Eksarhou's sacrifice, much sweat has been poured by many other of my people and under difficult conditions. I see myself as a product of my people. I willingly sacrificed myself in the war in Vicho and Gramos for my people and for all of Greece, so now, when the party is with me, Comrade

Zahariadis, I seek to protect the rest of the Slavo-Macedonian people, my people whom we uprooted from their homes and sent abroad.

Best regards, Argiris Kovatsis” (Copy of the letter - in the archives of the author’s collection).

Argir stayed awake all night. He read and re-read the letter. The words he had written in the letter swirled and boiled over his head. He was tormented by doubt and fear that Zahariadis might not understand or might misinterpret what he had written. Wasn’t it with his approval that the management of the kolhoz was taken over by the very people he blamed in his letter for all the misdeeds?

Argir knew that nothing would be done without Zahariadis’s approval. His word was the law, and above everything.

Argir was most disturbed by the last sentence that he wrote in his letter. He was convinced that he would soon be summoned and, if not for anything else, would surely be reprimanded for the last sentence he wrote. Perhaps he would receive a slap on the wrist or, God forbid, he would be accused of being Tito’s agent. If so, then he would be expelled from the party and ashes would be thrown on his merits. For him, that would be the worst punishment. There were moments when he was sorry that he wrote the words “my people whom we uprooted from their homes and sent abroad.”

That thought wasn’t his. He picked it up during his preparations for the defense of the Vicho Region. In those days when it was believed that the ultimate victory was within grasp and the slogan “The enemy will never cross over Vicho” was coined, someone quietly whispered in Argir’s ear and said “What if the enemy does cross?” The two then stepped aside and the person, in confidence, explained to Argir that a decision had already been made that, before the hostile attacks begin, the entire population, including livestock, was going to be moved out of their homes and settled close to the Albanian border. He also told Argir that this must be done by the activists of the Macedonian organizations. And that’s exactly what happened when the battle for Gramos started. Thousands of villagers from the Kostur Region villages were moved to Albania. They were

told to run and save themselves because the enemy would destroy everything and the people would be left with nothing, and on top of that there wasn't going to be anyone to help them. They were told the enemy didn't care about the great poverty that the war would bring to the Macedonian villagers because the Greek state no longer needed them. With its great ships, the United States would supply Greece with everything it needed. And indeed the Macedonian people abandoned their lands and left them empty. This was a gift of gold for the Greeks...

...I seek to protect the rest of the Slavo-Macedonian people, my people whom we uprooted from their homes and sent abroad...

It hurt to think that these were words of accusation. "Who was to blame? Myself? The party? Zahariadis? The entire movement? The struggle? Trust in someone else? Why did we uproot ourselves? Who is benefitting from our misfortune?"

Argir kept asking himself:

"From whom are we now going to protect the rest of the people they uprooted?"

He kept wondering:

"Is there anyone left untouched by that people and what fate awaits them? Has evil been done or not done? And what is it called? Does it have a name?"

"Strong words..." he thought and continued asking himself: "Who made the mistakes? The party? Zahariadis? No, the party is never wrong and neither is its leader. That's what we were told... Who then? Maybe we were wrong? Maybe we were wrong to accept the party as our protector? The party, held by one pair of hands, those of our leader... Perhaps we were wrong in unquestionably believing all the promises made to us, all the faith instilled in us and all the hope raised in us? With mind, heart, spirit, body... all united into one, we dedicated ourselves to the party. It became our family, home, hope and faith. But now it's broken, disappointing, empty, lost. Why did this happen?" These were the questions and thoughts circling in

Argir's mind. They were welded deep into his soul. They were like a scar he couldn't detach from his body...

He felt broken, crushed and thrown into oblivion...

The questions and fear that lingered over him multiplied and repeated. And the most troubling question was: "Keep silent or silence the evil?"

His lectures and practical exercises in spying at the party school ended in late June. With the exception of a couple of pairs of underwear, one suit, two shirts and a shaving kit, there was nothing else to pack in his old suitcase that he had bought at the clothes market. He took an express train from Bucharest to Warsaw and got off at Katovitse and, after taking two more trains to Krakow and Zheshuv, arrived at Krushchenko at noon after a two-day journey.

His wife and four young children were standing on the doorstep of the wooden Ukrainian hata. They didn't rush to greet him. They were quiet. There was no joy in their eyes and no smiles on their faces. They were sad. He had been away from them for two years, a very long time for children... A wide gap to alienate them... They were without their father's care and warmth. They didn't play games with the children of their parent's friends. They didn't share the joy of childhood, and when they saw their friends in the arms of their fathers, they felt like they had been abandoned. They were sad and burdened with a sense of loneliness. They hadn't been abandoned, but in their souls they carried the pain of being abandoned and that was present in their eyes and faces...

Argir was agitated and couldn't sleep. He was tormented by his thoughts and more so by his conscience and the many unanswered questions he had. Was it a good idea to place the party and his faith in it ahead of his own children? What was more important and valuable to him, his party or his family? Had his long separation alienated his family from him? Had his long absence distanced his fellow comrades and friends? How was he going to restore the lost joy and fatherly warmth to his children? These and many other similar questions aggravated him; they inflicted guilt and bit his conscience. There were many questions swirling in his head which

he couldn't answer and which caused him pain. Did his allegiance to the party and his idol leader change that night and in the many other sleepless nights he spent?

He waited. His days were long and months longer after he returned from Bucharest. He was secretly hoping that while he was absent, something had changed in the kolhoz. But that wasn't the case; he found the same people and the same problems. He told himself that there would be changes after the comrade-in-chief received the letter. There would be changes. That hope didn't leave him. He was convinced that the letter had reached the hands of the secretary general, but surely he was busy with other, bigger, more serious issues. He waited patiently and that waiting was his dream. He was sure he would receive a letter with all the answers... So far no such letter had arrived... And there, in Bucharest, he believed that if he met the secretary general in person, then Argir would tell him everything... But such a meeting never took place. For two years he was sure he would have such a meeting and waited. There, in Bucharest, he didn't wait to see him but wrote to him instead. After returning to Poland Argir waited for an answer and never lost hope that he would meet with Zahariadis in person. Day in and day out he went to the administration and nervously, impatiently and anxiously asked if there were any messages for him. But the answer was always no. He then went home and checked to see if the postman had delivered a letter for him. In the meantime his health kept deteriorating, especially after one of the people from the party, with whom he had good relations, whispered to him to beware. He didn't tell him anything of any importance but his warning caused him grief and doubt. A few days later, as they were walking along the river bank, his comrade openly said:

“The party will be having an extended meeting. There will be discussions about various things and one of those discussions will be whether to expel you from the party or not, which may mean expelling you from the kolhoz. Some people have already been expelled in the past few months.”

To this Argir replied that he wasn't one of those who would kneel easily. But, at the same time his hope that somehow Zahariadis would come to his rescue was going down the drain.

News came from Tashkent that there were bloody feuds between party members. There was a great schism among them, a division between supporters and opponents of Zahariadis. A reel began to unwind in Argir's head. He realized that the chair of the secretary general was no longer safe.

In the meantime, the KPSS (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) Twentieth Congress ended in Moscow. Stalin's myth had fallen. The Congress untied the people's mouths and the rivers began to flow.

In the following months the river of great change began to flow and questions began to be answered, not only about the kolhoz but also about things far and wide.

Argir decided to seek the other side. He traveled to Warsaw and made an appointment to see Comrade Ptashavska who was in charge of relations between the Polish and Greek parties. After a long conversation, Ptashavska finally said:

“There will no longer be party organizations in Poland that belong to the Communist Party of Greece. Whoever wants to be a party member can join the Polish party. This is how we will clear things in Kroshchenko...”

Khrushchev started the de-Stalin-ization...

Poland began to boil...

On October 24, 1956, at a tribune set up on Victory Square, in the centre of Warsaw, Gomulka (Władysław Gomułka (Vladislav Gomulka), February 6, 1905-September 1, 1982 – a Polish Communist politician), the popular Vieslav as the Poles called him, made an appearance. The square was packed with people who wanted to hear him speak and tell them what they had been expecting to hear for a long time. In the ensuing silence, Gomulka's voice began to roar:

“Comrades! Citizens! Working people of the capital! I welcome you on behalf of the Polish United Workers Party Central Committee,

which at the last plenary session placed the party's helm in the hands of the new leadership..."

About one hundred thousand people came to Victory Square in Warsaw and another thirty-something million all across Poland, workers, intellectuals, youth, war veterans from all fronts... huddled together and anxiously waited for Gomulka to speak. Gomulka had just been released from prison and was immediately elected the first party secretary. The people were thrilled and filled with long-awaited waves of hope for something better, as they listened to Gomulka's long speech. Everything was at a standstill and everyone was silent as he spoke. There was silence in the factories, universities, schools, restaurants, cafés... The trains stopped on the tracks... Entire families held their breath as they listened to the radio. The streets were empty. Everyone waited to hear what they had expected and hoped for years for themselves in secret and in silence... He knew what he had to say to his Poles to touch their minds, hearts, souls and to give them hope. He needed to tell them what they most expected, the bitter truth, to encourage them, to give them confidence...

"Over the past years," Gomulka's voice thundered, "a lot of evil, hatred and painful disappointments have accumulated in Polish life. The ideas of socialism infused with the spirit of human freedom and respect for the rights of the citizens have, in practice, suffered profound distortions. The words found no cover in reality. The hard work of the working class and the entire people didn't produce the expected fruits. I deeply believe that those years have passed without a doubt and will remain in the past..."

The Poles held their breath as they listened and believed him, glorified him in the moment and for the next few years, they swore by him, repeating his words that contained truth, words that others had long silenced and concealed.

The same day after the speech, Argir left Warsaw by evening train. On his way to Krushchenko he decided to get more involved in cleaning up the dirty mess. First he thought the people needed to be cleaned up. Start with them. They carry the evil, the evil doesn't carry them. Start cleaning from the top all the way to the bottom. Do

a general cleaning of not only the people, but also the political blindness to the unreasonable, shameful and dangerous disease. He arrived in Krushchenko in the early hours and on his way home the first person he met told him that the secretary general was no longer a secretary general. The following days there was more and more news that many secretary generals in the eastern bloc were no longer secretary generals.

The entire region was a boiling pot. That day and the next days all of Poland was on its feet...

New expressions began to appear in the political vocabulary: "Polish October 1956". "Gomulka's Oblation", "The October warming..." These were expressions adopted to create a movement, to change the internal politics related to the central government and the liberalization of the political system, to release political and religious prisoners, to destabilize the country and to reduce Soviet restraints. The truth resonated strongly in Poland and spread like an infection all across Eastern Europe. The first to support Poland was Hungary, whose strong voice had grown into a Hungarian revolution...

Hungary was on fire and bleeding.

The Hungarians cried freedom and took their hatred and revenge to the streets.

Hungarians were hanging Hungarians on Budapest banners.

Soviet tanks trampled the streets and cannon and machine gun barrels targeted the windows and balconies...

Hungary was on fire.

The support the West promised was a lie...

The East lit up...

Gomulka's warmth, which suited the new times, strengthened the Macedonian spirit in Poland.

But, over time, Gomulka's star began to lose its lustre. This was because of mistakes made in running the economy, and perhaps something else, but the Poles began to hate him. Anger broke out the day meat and potato prices went up. Gdansk and the entire coastline were hit with unprecedented strikes. Barricades, police and tanks filled the streets and city squares. Strong force was used against worker dissatisfaction. Orders were carried out and seventy lives were lost. Gomulka fell from the wrath of the people.

The seventy protesters killed were mostly workers. They were buried at night without the presence of a priest...

Peace was brought by a miner from Silesia but unfortunately his star didn't shine for long in the Polish sky. It didn't last long. Some new winds began to blow and a big storm was approaching.

Poland was boiling again.

At the same time, Zahariadis's star was also starting to lose its lustre. He no longer had the power he'd wielded over the last three years, while he was still holding the party by the neck and rushing to organize a revolutionary organization. He probably felt that he'd need the loyalty of the Macedonians again... He needed their support because his high-ranking Madzhars and Vlachs, and some educated Greeks, especially in the political party and in the military, refused to follow him. He was certain they would turn on him because of all the mistakes he'd made. While he still had influence he accused some of them of being provocateurs and agents and managed to make his high ranking cadres slander one another. For some time he was able to take a sharp axe in his hand and hold it over their heads, especially over the dissidents. The star that led him to Moscow, Belgrade, Sofia, Bucharest, Budapest, Tirana, Prague and Warsaw eventually disappeared when he was ousted from the party. He was left alone. He committed suicide; he hung himself with a rope around his neck in Surgut, in distant Siberia.

This changing situation in Poland, during the long and cold late autumn and winter nights, reopened wounds in the Macedonian refugees. Everyone had their own explanation and judgment for the defeat and reason to condemn the evil. Everyone was a prosecutor and a judge; each person held a key in their hand which they were convinced would unlock the truth and expose the lies. And the more heated the conversations were, which often turned into mutual quarrels, swearing and humiliation, the more their mutual intolerance, division and disunity spread and intensified. The worm of doubt and discontent had infected everyone. Shameful and dishonest political blindness prevailed among them. Their political blindness was a dangerous disease, which afflicted mostly the former activists, and encouraged and nourished more worms of doubt and discontent. This is how it was for years. The more ignorant they were, the more susceptible they became to alien games, promises and deception. In their strife there were good players, players who made many promises and players who lied and cheated. They had something to gain. Everyone measured the situation with their own yardstick, with their own opinion and trimmed those rough logs their own way. No one appreciated anyone and no one respected anyone. Their political blindness, restlessness and disrespect for personal dignity caused them to quarrel and blame each other for their ills. Their division spread and fueled hatred which resulted in fist fights many times.

Naturally the strings of blindness were pulled by those who had something to gain and who had deliberately planned this well in advance. This hadn't been done now it was done a long time ago. The culprit in all this was the party. The party nourished the worm that ruthlessly nibbled on people causing them to doubt one another, to quarrel with each other and to divide themselves. For some the disease of ideological blindness overshadowed the other disease - the division. The party further widened the gap by introducing new

impatience and strife and opening new wounds. And then some thoughtfully and deliberately thought that the divisions among the refugees could be stopped if they were broken apart. They cared about the game and the work they needed to do but for that they needed good players. They sought and they found. They found Argir Argirov, a former soldier of the Greek government army, captured by DAG partisans and imprisoned in a Bulgarian prison camp. To those who found him, Argir Argirov introduced himself as a Bulgarian Macedonian from Belomorie. After he was briefed and well-looked after, the Bulgarian authorities transferred him to the leadership of the Greek Association in Sofia. From there he was sent somewhere else where he received his assignment and then he was sent to Poland. In the meantime the Bulgarian embassy in Warsaw was attempting to offer its services to the Macedonian refugees, perhaps to entice them to make links with Bulgaria. But the Macedonians didn't want anything to do with Bulgaria and openly advocated for greater links with the People's Republic of Macedonia. Many had already applied for resettlement there. Not being happy with the CPG Central Committee led by Kolianis, the advocates of the break-up made an agreement with Comrade Todor Zivkov to move the Macedonian refugees from the Eastern European countries and from Tashkent to Bulgaria where they would only be Bulgarians and not Macedonians. But for that they needed a man on the inside, a well-groomed man to do the job. They didn't need to look further than Argir Argirov. He had already taken up residence in Vrotslav and had made contact with the Association of Political Refugees from Greece in Poland. And slowly, like a worm nibbling under the bark of an oak tree, Argir Argirov, patiently, as they had taught him, nibbled on the souls of the Macedonians. He also adhered to the proverb - patience is the master of all things... He wasted no time. He visited places where there were larger groups of Macedonians but never talked to them as a group. His approach was to talk to individuals when they were alone. Most often he went to their homes, or walked with them while they went for a walk, or met them in a bar. He always cared to ask how they were doing, how they were doing at their job, what their wishes were, where would they like to live and so on. If he thought they were impressionable, he brought them Bulgarian newspapers, books, gifts, and convincingly told them that the Bulgarian government would take care of all their expenses should

they want go to Bulgaria. He also told them that they could get better jobs, earn more money, get better apartments, free hospital care, paid monthly vacations in spas and resorts, child care support and higher pensions. He told them that the climate in Bulgaria was much better and brighter, less cold, more sunshine, less rain and no fog. He told them they wouldn't have to wait in line for bread, milk, meat and so on. And to every participant in the wars who fought against fascism and capitalism, Comrade Todor Zivkov would double their pension.

“And I will tell you one more thing,” Argirov whispered in their ears. “If you have saved money in the banks here in Poland, the Bulgarian bank will give it back to you, one Lev for every Zlota, unlike those who have gone to Yugoslavia and lost their savings. The banks in Poland have no agreements with those in Yugoslavia. If you want to go to Yugoslavia, Macedonia, then go but don't think you will be welcomed with open arms. I was there and you know what I heard about those who have gone there? I've heard many ugly words. The people from that part of Macedonia see them as bad people. They have sown fear into their own children, telling them that if they are bad they'll be given to the Aegeans. That's what they call them, the people that go there from here, Aegeans. And do you know where they put the Aegeans? They put them in ghettos, barns and Turkish inns with yards that have donkeys and horses... Not to mention apartments or work. The Aegeans are the people that no one likes and everyone wants to humiliate with the ugliest words. Go there and find out for yourself. These things don't exist in Bulgaria.”

The seeds that Argirov sowed began to germinate...

He found his impressionable people.

Lazo was first to sign up, but before he did he spent fifteen days in Bulgaria. He visited Sofia, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Blagoevgrad and Plovdiv where he stayed the longest. He went to see some distant relatives he had in Plovdiv who were expelled to Bulgaria in 1925 as part of the Molof-Kafandaris Agreement under which the two countries exchanged populations to create ethnically pure states. Just like Turkey and Greece did after Greece's Asia Minor military

disaster in 1922. Lazo's relatives, as well as thousands of other Macedonian families, were moved to Bulgaria and scattered all across the country. People looked for their relatives for months. Many didn't like it there and moved to other places. Some moved to Yugoslavia, to the Macedonian cities, and others moved to Greece...

People's memories flowed like beads strung on a long cord of life, the life that was then, there, at home. Now their lives and hopes flowed like crumbs scattered under the table. A series of pains, sighs and sorrows collecting, burning and resting on their heads...

Mara gently placed her head on the pillow and with eyes half open, took a long breath and fell asleep. It seemed to her that lately she was able to fall asleep easier and sleep better. It seemed to her that it was easier to hold onto her thoughts and memories which constantly kept her on the road home, and in those moments a rare shade of joy appeared on her cheeks. Her cheeks were always tight and in pain. Countless wrinkles much pain. With tears in her eyes she stared at the surrounding misty hills over which there were slow moving grey clouds going south. There were many bare treeless hills but green with grass. They weren't mountains like those around the village that always filled the eyes. On the mountains and hills back home one could see fields, gardens, pine trees, oak groves and rocks and between them flowing streams of clear water. And resting over those mountains were white, woolly clouds that stood there motionless for hours, resting, splitting up and reconnecting. In the evenings, at sunset, the sun looked like a burning ball of fire slowly diminishing over the mountains with its last rays of exhalation. Sitting on the doorstep of the main hata door, Mara watched the clouds for many, many hours as they traveled south, wishing they could take her soul south with them. She often thought of sending her soul south, crossed herself and prayed, hoping that God would hear her prayers...

Mitre often sat beside her and humbly watched her. This time he spoke up and said:

“Mara, I see so much sadness in your eyes... Why so much sadness my dear Mara...? It seems like they aren't your eyes. What happened

to those eyes that were always filled with some kind of weird, unusually attractive shine that always filled me with joy...? And that gentle smile of yours, and now it's somehow full of bitterness. I always saw a smile in your eyes, on your lips, on your face... Your smile opened everything everywhere... your eyes, your heart, you Mara. You always had a blossoming smile and it always seemed to me that with that sweet smile all the bad was washed away... Your smile and your serenity always settled the violent winds in my soul and calmed me down. Your smile drove out my bitter thoughts... Your smile eased my pain and warmed me inside; it warmed my heart when I watched you smile... Smile my dear Mara, smile..."

Mara's eyes became sadder and sadder with each passing day... Something was eating at her inside. She had a burning fever which caused her nausea and to feel sick. She was slowly melting before Mitre's eyes; he never let her out of his sight not even for a moment. With his warm palm he wiped the cold sweat from her cool forehead and pale cheeks, and smeared her with healing herbs he had collected in the forest and meadows. He caressed her dry and thinning hair, and kept her warm in his arms...

Mara's fever lasted a few days but left Mara visibly weak and feeling cold. When the sun was up and warm Mitre wrapped her legs in a warm blanket and took her outside. He gave her warm soup. Mara's smile slowly began to return.

Leaning next to each other, Mitre and Mara sat on the wooden door threshold and stared at the hill on the opposite side. They sighed in silence.

Mara broke the silence.

"You know, Mitre, I would very much like to go and fetch some water from the fountain in Petkovets. I want to fetch it in that little earthenware jug that you used to love to drink from when you sat under and leaned against the thick trunk of the old oak tree. Then and now I tell myself how sweet every sip of that water was under that thick shade. I remember how happy we were as we slowly and with much delight drank that cool water. That water was sweet, wasn't it? And do you know what I would like now?" asked Mara,

sighed deeply and continued. “I would like, Mitre, to bring you all the scents from our meadows and gardens, I would like, Mitre, to bring you all the bird songs from our nightingales... Do you remember how it was in the morning and in the evening, birds bouncing on top of the highest branch of our cherry tree and the nightingale singing? And you gave me a sign with your hand, not to move, not to breathe while the nightingale sang. It sang, the dear bird, it sang, for a moment it stopped and waited, waited the dear bird to hear its echo...”

Mara leaned her head on Mitre’s shoulder, closed her eyes and thought of her younger days when Mitre wasn’t at home, when all the love for him she focused on their children, on the farm, on the house and how she managed on her own to plow, sow and harvest all their fields... Time flowed without him but her attachment to him never expired... And now, leaning on his shoulder, she quietly whispered to him about herself, about him and about the people who, here in the Ukrainian hatas, were waiting and praying in silence trying to heal their wounded souls and mourn their loved ones...

She leaned on Mitre’s warm and firm shoulder with her thoughts and memories flowing... She quietly prayed to the Mother of God, while unrolling the cloak of time, of life, of living together, and of the times when they were separated and she spent many days and nights in loneliness, pain, sorrow and waiting in anticipation. She paused but only for a moment, enough to say something, to remind Mitre of something, to take a deep sigh... She moved her head slightly and whispered:

“Remember Mitre...”

Without waiting for Mara to ask her question, Mitre interrupted her and, looking south at the immense space, as far as the eye could see, said:

“Aha...”

“Aha what? You got up early this morning... Where did you go?” asked Mara.

“Up there...” replied Mitre.

“Where up there?” asked Mara.

“At the top of the hill...” replied Mitre.

“What were you looking for up there?” asked Mara.

“Mara, I went up there to see the sun rise and stayed there long enough to see the sun set. Since we arrived here I haven’t seen the sun rise or set. The high hills stand in the way. Here it’s like we are inside a cauldron. Haven’t you noticed that suddenly the sun comes out high in our yard? I haven’t seen the sun rise for a long time. I haven’t seen it set either. It hangs above us between these two hills and suddenly disappears...” replied Mitre.

He then told Mara how he had to hurry going up the hill to catch the sunrise and how the tall grass obstructed his movement and how difficult it was to breathe the heavy and stuffy early morning air.

It was still dark when he reached the top. He faced east and didn’t have to wait long. The distant pale lazily transformed into a blush and a few moments later there, in the distance, the sky turned blue, and shortly afterwards, the first rays of the morning sun, all dressed in fiery red gildings, slowly passed into blush. The morning light was scattered over the wide valley and fields. Mitre’s pupils were filled with sunlight. This was the first time, after settling in Liskovate all surrounded by high hills, that Mitre was greeted by the rising sun, which lacked the same warmth and joy that it had always brought at the start of a new day. The sunrise on the Liskovate hill didn’t resemble the sunrise at home... And the sky, though clear and blue that day, didn’t have that serenity and blue as the sky in his native village... Mitre took a long breath of the heavy and stuffy air and long steps downhill. By the time he got back the great shade of the hill diminished and the misty valley was filled with sunlight.

Many times Mitre and Mara sat and hugged for a long time at the doorstep. One time they watched the full moon and the stars in the milky way in silence thinking about their youth and being together.

Now in their golden years, they were growing old together. They sat on the doorstep of the old Ukrainian wooden hata and slowly grew old together.

“Do you remember...?” whispered Mara.

“Yes!” replied Mitre silently and sighed.

A burst of sadness flared inside Mara. Her eyes pooled with tears of sorrow that had accumulated in her from her youth until now.

There was silence. The crickets continued with their song. Mara slightly separated herself from Mitre’s shoulder and quietly, with pain in her voice, said:

“You know that the Pavlev’s and some others brought their children here from Romania and Hungary some time ago. What do you think, Mitre, should we bring our children here?”

“It would be good for us to be together. But first let’s ask them if they want to come here. Done is in Bucharest studying engineering and Slavka is in Prague studying to become a doctor. What do you think, should we shorten their education?” replied Mitre.

“But they can study here too,” said Mara.

“Like the Pavlev children and those of the others? They too studied in Hungary and Romania but when they came here they quit. They learned the language there but won’t know how to speak Polish. In what language, Mara, will they be studying here? The other children did go to the big Polish cities and enroll in the same kind of schools and universities, but gave up on their own because of the language. The language will be an obstacle for them, you understand?” replied Mitre.

“I understand, but I really want to be with my children, Mitre. A lot of time has passed without them. They’ve grown up without us and we’ve aged without them... let them come...” said Mara.

“I will write them and ask them to come when they have a break from their studies. We will have them here with us and when the break is over they can go back to their studies in the same schools. They, Mara, count up, and we count down, you understand?” replied Mitre.

“Enough, with the ‘you understand’, okay?!” Mara exclaimed. “I’m not one of those who doesn’t understand! Okay? Let it be like that! Let them study, and tomorrow you write them and ask them to come to visit us... Ask them to come and visit us and a few years from now, God willing, they will come and visit us with our grandchildren...” said Mara.

The end of the year was approaching. Mitre and Mara had visitors on Christmas Eve and New Year’s day. Done and Slavka came to visit them.

Mara was filled with great joy and excitement. All through the holidays her hata was filled with happiness. She didn’t lose the smile from her face despite the many years of pain caused by her long separation from her family.

Mitre was working in the yard making a sofra (low table) with the planks he had purchased a few days ago. He spent a lot of time with his plane smoothing the table’s surface and then sanding it to make sure it was perfect. Mara liked it. She told him it was perfect. She couldn’t wait to have her children eat lunch and dinner on it. All together, sitting cross-legged, around the low table just like at home...

It was Christmas Eve.

Everyone sat around the table - Mara, Mitre, Done, Slavka. All together parents and children... They didn’t have many relatives. Some died during the war and the rest were broken up and living somewhere in other countries.

There was silence.

Everyone was thinking of places and things far away from the Ukrainian hata.

Mara took the large pan with the food from the sofra and went out to the yard. She grabbed a handful, threw it on the ground and said something like she used to say on her balcony back home on Christmas Eve. She made sure she said for the Lord, for her husband, for her children, for everyone's good health, for the livestock, for the fields, the meadows, the vineyards and for the harvest...

They sat around the low table, just like they had years ago when they were celebrating holidays back home and ate their food thinking of a bygone era...

Mara brought the gium, full of wine made from black currants, from the adjoining room. Mitre filled everyone's glasses, raised his and, with a trembling voice and tearful eyes, said:

"To our good health and for many years..." He wanted to say something more but he lost his voice.

Mara stroked his trembling hand and shaking her finger at him said:

"Don't fall apart on me now, here in front of the children... Have another drink and you will be fine."

To change the subject and lighten the mood, Done said:

"I see you brought the gium here, mother."

She remembered him as a child filling the gium with water from the spring more than once. He drank from it many times to quench his thirst.

Mara looked at the gium from top to bottom, caressed it and quietly whispered:

“I did, son, I did...” and she too lost her voice. She quickly took off her black head kerchief and covered her face with it. She wept silently with shoulders shaking.

The guim was the oldest object on the table. It was even older than Mitre. Mitre stared at it with sad eyes and wondered:

Will this old guim, whose age he doesn't know and the key that hangs around Mara's neck on a silk rope be the only legacy of the many things he inherited from his ancestors, which he will leave for his children...? What will he leave behind from his home except this guim and the key?

The next day Mitre sat between Done and Slavka and started a conversation. He said:

“What are you going to do when you finish school?”

“We should get together somewhere, father,” replied Done.

“Where?” asked Mitre.

“Many Macedonians are thinking of moving to Macedonia, Skopje, Bitola, Kumanovo, Tetovo. Where they have relatives or where the state will find a place for them. That's what I think. Only there can we take refuge, father,” replied Done.

“What do you think about going home, to our place?” asked Mitre.

“Our place, father, is no longer our place. The Vlachs settled there. There is nothing left of us there. They even removed the stones, not only from the collapsed walls, but also from the foundations and built their houses with them... Greece doesn't want us... it doesn't want us... Maybe it will want us if it needs us to spill more blood...” replied Done.

“My dear son, who wants us?” interrupted Mara and added: “Is there anyone who wants us?”

“For the time being let it be like I said, father. After a year or so Slavka and I will finish our studies and then we will meet again and decide. Until then you stay here...” replied Done.

“And you, daughter, what do you say?” asked Mitre.

“I agree with Done, father...” replied Slavka.

Before they left for school Mara said to them:

“And don’t rush into planning any weddings. We will do them together in our tradition... Two drums and nine pipes... Just like we used to do them back home...”

Mitre and Mara, as well as all others like them, didn’t have this country in their hearts. They didn’t feel it was theirs even though they had laboured with sweat for years to rebuild the abandoned and plundered Ukrainian hatas; to repair the straw roofs and smoke stacks and to toil in the great green valley surrounded by green hills and pine forests. They didn’t feel it was theirs even though they’d brought human voices, crying and laughing of children and a school bell. Everything they did was accompanied by a lot of pain, sorrow and longing for their own homes which they had abandoned far, far away from here... They constantly prayed to God on the small icons they’d found scattered in the storm from where they collected them, cleaned them and hung them in their hatas. They felt terrible seeing the church bell abandoned, still lying in the brook covered by thorn trees... They didn’t feel this country was theirs even though they plowed, planted and harvested the wheatfields, potato, cabbage and beet fields. They did, however, enjoy watching the golden wheat ripple in waves on windy days. They enjoyed watching the sheep scattered on the hills and listened to the sound of the bells they carried around their necks. They enjoyed looking after their cows in the plains and in their houses and with their milk they made bureks and zelniks with onions and leeks roasted under a saach. They often baked pogachi and ate the hot bread on both hot and cold days. They also enjoyed the aroma of roasting pork rinds. They were similar but not the same as those at home.

Done and Slavka, as well as hundreds of other Kostur, Lerin and Voden Region villagers in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, completed their education. With their degrees and diplomas in hand they took to the stormy waters of life with widely opened sails. But, even as engineers, doctors, architects, economists, historians, teachers, professors, writers, many with master's degrees and doctorates, they and their parents found no open borders on the road to their place of birth.

They remained on the road of no return forever, searching for a new homeland...

THIS IS HOW IT WAS...

THE END

Skopje-Dolno Dupeni-Skopje
March 2017-October 2020
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Petre Nakovski, a novelist and translator, was born on July 17, 1937 (According to church records he was born on June 15, 1936) in the village Krchishta, Kostur Region, Aegean (Greek occupied) Macedonia. He studied in Poland and graduated with a degree in Pedagogy and then studied in the Republic of Macedonia where he earned a degree from the Faculty of Philology in Skopje. He received his PhD from the Polish Institute of Political Science at Wroslav University in Poland on the topic of Macedonian Children in Poland 1948-1968, published in Skopje in 1987.

Petre worked as a journalist for Vecher and Nova Makedonija. He also worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Petre was the first Macedonian Ambassador in the Republic of Poland (1995-1999).

Petre has been a member of the Macedonian Writers' Association since 1989.

Petre has authored several short stories published in Macedonian periodicals as well as the books: "A bed for the wrenched" (1985), "Macedonian Children in Poland 1948-1968" (Doctoral Thesis), "And the stone too is soil" (1988), "The Great Decline" (2003), "The Great Lie" (2007), "Macedonian Refugees in Poland 1948-1975", Selected Documents (2008), "On the road of time" (2010) [Lefter Manchev sponsored the printing of 100 copies], and "Kalina" (2016).

All of the above mentioned novels have been translated for free into English by the famous and well-deserved translator of Macedonian to English literature, Risto Stefov.

Petre has translated short stories by Macedonian authors from Macedonian to Polish and published 46 literary works and a number of poems and short stories. Petre has also translated the play “Darkness” by Kole Chashule (staged in the Polish town Kastovitse (1971)), the Anthology of Macedonian Contemporary Poetry under the title “Songs from Ohrid” performed in Krakow in 1974, “Selected Poetry” by Rade Siljan, “Footprints of Time” (2010) and “The Threshold of the Past” by Trajan Petrovski (2014), published in Torun by publisher Adam Marshalek.

Petre is winner of the “Golden Pen” and the “Kiril Peichivich Prize” (for translating works). In Poland Petre was awarded the “Golden Medal” for services to the Polish Culture (1976), the “ZaiKS Prize” (1982), the “Golden Order of Command” (1999) (This is a medal with which the Polish President honoured the successful ambassadors), and the “BENE MERITO” Medal, awarded by the Republic of Poland’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs for strengthening cooperation between the two countries (2010).

Petre is married to Ditta (Aphrodite) and is the father of two daughters, Milenka and Tatiana.

Petre Nakovski’s novels were the subject of a master’s thesis by Tatiana Pelivanova entitled “The Literature of Fact in Petre Nakovski’s Novels” defended on February 14, 2014, before a commission consisting of Professor Dr. Venko Andonovski, Professor Dr. Kristina Nikolovska and Professor Dr. Vesna Moisovska-Chepishavska, at the University of Kiril and Metodi, under the supervision of Professor Dr. Kristina Nikolovska.

ACRONYMS

AVNOJ – National Anti-Fascist Liberation Council of Yugoslavia
AFZH - Women’s Anti-Fascist Front
ASNOM – Anti-Fascist Assembly of National Liberation of Macedonia
BRP(k) – Communist Party of Bulgaria
CPG - Communist Party of Greece
CPM - Communist Party of Macedonia
CPY - Communist Party of Yugoslavia
CVG - Greek Civil War
DAG – Democratic Army of Greece
EAM – National Liberation Front
ELAS – National Liberation Army of Greece
EON – National Youth Organization
EPON – All Greek National Youth Organization
KOEM – Communist Organization of Aegean Macedonia
KOS - Counter-intelligence Sector of JAN
NKVD – People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs
NOBG - Peoples Liberation Struggle in Greece
NOBM - Peoples Liberation Struggle in Macedonia
PLM – People’s Liberation Movement
NOF - Peoples’ Liberation Front
NOMS - Peoples’ Liberation Youth Organization
OKNE - Communist Youth Organization of Greece
ONOO – Local People’s Liberation Council
OZNA – People’s Defense Division
PAO - Pan-Hellenic Liberation Organization
PDEG – Pan-Greek Democratic Union of Women
PDOG – International Federation of Democratic Women
POJ - Partisan Units of Yugoslavia
PRM – People’s Republic of Macedonia
SID - Information Services of the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs
SNOF - Slavo-Macedonian National Liberation Front
KPSS - Communist Party of the Soviet Union

UDBA - Directorate of State Security
USSR – United Soviet Socialist Republics