

THE WHITE STONE



By Petre Nakovski

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

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To my wife Ditta (Aphrodita)
and
my daughters Milenka and Tatjana

Introduction by Risto Stefov

The novel “The White Stone”, eloquently written by Petre Nakovski, is dedicated to the Macedonians from Greek Occupied Macedonia and their traumatic experience in the Greek Civil War (1946-1949). Written in a poetic style, it covers events that took place around and during this war. The novel describes the fate of the Macedonian people and their sad and tragic experiences trying to survive in turbulent times.

This book is a living record of what the Greeks and their benefactors did to the Macedonian people in their attempt to eradicate them from their homeland. A warning to the reader; if you or any member of your family experienced this war, this novel will leave you in tears.

The novel is based on the most essential historical and social events with special attention to the tragic Macedonian exodus when the Macedonian people were driven out of their homes and homeland and never allowed to return.

The main features of this novel are its true representation of the historically authentic events. Here, Petre has not only captured the facts on the ground but he has also captured the raw emotions and trauma that the Macedonian people in Greek occupied Macedonia experienced. With his literary work, Petre Nakovski has revealed the tragic individual and collective truth about the Macedonian people’s experience and has put all this on paper for posterity so that nothing is forgotten. This, and Petre’s other books, are historical documents designed to communicate and preserve, for future generations, the long ignored tragic Macedonian experience.

Petre Nakovski, now 90 years old, is not only an observer and chronicler but also a participant in this drama and in part has also given us a glimpse into his own life experience, describing what it was like to have lived through treacheries, lies and abuse during this tragic war being tormented, shot at and bombed and having to live under the thumb of the Greek occupiers. Petre has

also emphasized that throughout their suffering, the Macedonian people showed bravery, resilience, strength and vitality.

After being evacuated and exiled from his homeland in 1948, for most of his adult life, about more than fifty years later, Petre and his wife were finally allowed to return and see their ancestral homes. When Petre was taken away from his home and sent to Eastern European countries, as part of the save the children program, he and everyone else were told that they would be returned to their homes when the conflict was over and DAG had won. That, however, never happened. It did not happen for the exiled children. It did not happen for the entire exiled Macedonian population that was evicted on the last days of the war, and it did not happen for anyone who fled over the border to save their lives. DAG was defeated on the battlefield. The promise that DAG would win and that everyone would be returned to their homes was a lie. The Macedonian people were lied to about everything; about the objectives of the war, about their human rights, about their cultural rights... about everything. The real objective of the Greek Civil War was to get rid of the Macedonians from Greece. The architects of this war used the communists to do it. (To learn more about this read the book: - "Macedonians and the NOT so Civil War in Greece", by Risto Stefov which can be found at

<https://www.pollitecon.com/Assets/Ebooks/Macedonians-and-the-NOT-so-Civil-War-in-Greece.pdf>

Very little to nothing has been written in the international forum about the Macedonians in Greece and their involvement in the Greek Civil War, like they never existed. Macedonians who lived and still live inside and outside of Greece, to this day, are afraid to speak of the terrible ordeals that they went through during this war for fear of repercussions from the Greek authorities, for fear of being humiliated or just because it is too painful for them to remember. To this day it is taboo in Greece to speak of the dreaded so-called Greek Civil War. Petre, however, is an exception. He has dedicated his life to not only research and

chronicle this tragic event, but to also help other Macedonians in his situation recover from the shock of this war.

Petre Nakovski was born on July 17, 1937 in the village Krchishta, Kostur Region, Aegean (Greek occupied) Macedonia. He was exiled from his homeland in 1948 under save the children program, when he was eleven years old and was not allowed to return. He eventually ended up in Poland where he and many other Macedonian children lived in boarding houses. Petre studied at the Pedagogical Literary Institute in Poland and at the Faculty of Philology in Skopje. He received his PhD from the Institute of Political Science at the University of Vroclavsk in Poland. He worked as a journalist for the newspapers “Vecher” and “Nova Makedonija” as well as for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was the first Ambassador of the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of Poland. He has been a member of MWA since 1989.

Dr. Nakovski has authored numerous articles published in Macedonian periodicals as well as a number of books including the books listed at the end of this book and has translated and published over 40 literary works and many songs and stories from Polish to Macedonian written by Macedonian authors in the Polish language. He is a recipient of the “Golden pen” and “Kiril Pejcinovic” (translation of opus) awards (awards for Polish authors). He was also awarded the Gold Medal of Merit for Polish Culture and the Gold Medal of Command.

Petre’s greatest contribution to Macedonian literature, however, is his ability to meticulously capture and chronicle the Macedonian experience, the story of what truly happened to the Macedonian people, on an individual as well as on a group basis, during the Greek Civil War, especially during the great exodus when the Macedonian people were forced to leave their homes and flee to save their lives. He has not only captured the tragic events but also the people’s emotions as they made the trek through the turmoil.

About fifty years after being evacuated and exiled from their homeland, Petre and his wife arrived in Kostur through

Bigla and from there they first went to his wife's village to visit her parents.

The next morning they went to Petre's village Krchishta. Petre got out of the car in front of the village entrance and, very excitedly, stepped forward along the grassy road, which at one time was the village evening promenade. Everything in front of him was destroyed except for the church, which was beginning to fall apart; the only building left standing as the only sign that there had once been a village and life existed there.

Everything was demolished. Bulldozers had plowed the foundations of the buildings to recover the rocks for use in other building projects. While digging with the bulldozer, those digging up the rocks failed to unearth a stone that lay deep in the ashen ground. Only a part of the stone was visible. It was white and smooth, washed by the rain, and the sun's rays shone on its whiteness. From where Petre stood he could see the exposed stone and he stared at it for a while with recognition. His memories as a child slowly began to come alive. He felt sweat pouring down his face and with a shaky, uncertain step he went closer, stopped, looked at it and quietly said to himself – that's the stone that was in front of the threshold of my house in which I was born.

He sat down on the white stone, rested his head on his crossed arms and felt his memories well up in him. They awakened his childhood and tied the broken thread from the ball, in which the yarn of his life was wound and now, unwinding, it began to painfully speak to him, recounting his fate and that of his fellow villagers.

1

My wife and I visited our hometowns fifty-five years after we left in March 1948, when the Greek Civil War was raging in our hometowns. We were young then and, along with many other young children, we were separated from our mothers. Our poor mothers accepted the call “Save our children” that echoed at the Balkan Youth Congress in Belgrade and with pain in their souls and hearts they allowed us to leave for unknown climes. We always had a great dream to see our native village. When we were adults and wanted our dream to come true, then for us, already in years and with families, the border had long been closed.

We arrived in Kostur via Bigla and from there to my wife’s village to visit her parents. Our meeting was joyful and sad, but not as painfully sad as when, at the age of not quite eleven, she was sent to a foreign land with many other children from the village.

Her parents are old now. They were born in Turkey, before the Balkan Wars began. On their faces you can see the stamp of suffering from time spent in four and later five wars, the last being the most terrible, hellishly and destructive - the Greek Civil War. And now, they finally felt something joyful in their hearts and souls as they got to see their grown adult daughter.

Her mother sat her on her knee, caressed her and said:

- Oh, my dear, we sent you away as a little baby, and now we welcome you as a mother of two...

The next day, in the morning, we left for my village Krchishta. Before the entrance to the village, I got out of the car and, very excited, walked along the grassy road, which was once a village evening promenade. Everything in front of me was destroyed except for the church, which was left standing after the Greek Civil War, as the only sign that there had once been a

village and life here, and it was beginning to fall apart. Swallows flew in through the broken windows during the day and built nests in the corners, and bats filled it at night.

With a desire and God's grace, the Bishop of Kostur gave his blessing for the church to be rebuilt. They brought masons, who demolished the abandoned houses that the Madgirls had built, and since there was no more stones, they brought a bulldozer with which they plowed the foundations. They failed to uproot a single stone while digging. It lied motionless in the ashen ground. It was covered with dried grass in which its smooth whiteness shone, unscratched by the iron teeth of the bulldozer.

I stood at the place where the large, thick outer gate once stood, under which this white stone was part of our home's threshold. With unbridled curiosity and unquenchable excitement, I stared at the resting white stone and the time of my childhood slowly began to come alive in me.

I felt sweat pouring down my face and with a shaky, uncertain step I approached, I stopped for a moment, I looked timidly and quietly and said to myself - that is it, it must be that - the stone that lay on the threshold of our house in which I was born eighty-something years ago.

I took another step, I stopped, I approached timidly and suddenly, like a spark plucked from a burning hearth, a faint memory came. Then, after a moment of encouragement, I sat down on the white stone. I rested my head on my trembling hands and felt memories surging inside my head, awakening my childhood and tying the torn thread from the ball, in which the thread of life was wound and now, unwinding, it began to painfully reveal my fate and the fate of my fellow villagers.

I could not hold back the joy of seeing something that was in my company like a living being from my old life. I could not hold back my tears. I could not calm my heart and soul.

I got up with the intention of looking at myself and making sure whether it is a ghost or the real part of the threshold belonging to my native house?

I looked at the white stone for a long time, which at this moment seemed to be speaking to me with a quiet and warm voice, like a half-whispered prayer saying:

- Son, you are home now... sit down...

In front of me was the rebuilt church in which they have also incorporated the stones torn from the centuries-old foundations, but with a new look. It does not look like the church in which I was baptized.

I remember that the bell tower that was on the south side was moved to the west side and was very tall. Looking at it, I had a great desire to pull the rope that is tied to the heart of the bell and pull hard. I got up. I slowly approached and grabbed the rope with both hands trembling and pulled it. And while the bell rang from above, its ringing sound mixed with my voice saying the words: “Vivos voco, mortuos plango, fulgura frango”¹ Then again, painfully and gently I pulled the rope three times for those who rest here, and once again three times for those who rest in another’s land, and again three times for those who died on the battlefields. Like thunder, the ringing of the bell resounded and spread throughout the entire area. The ringing was transmitted

¹ I call upon the living, I mourn the dead, I crush the thunderbolts - an inscription on the great bell in the cathedral in the town of Schaffhausen (northern Switzerland), which was taken as a motto by Friedrich Schiller in Song of the Bell (1800).

from hill to hill, from forest to forest, bouncing from rock to rock and filling the brooks and ravines.

I listened. The ringing of the bell spread melodiously and its echo was carried by the wind into the distance. I pulled again, it was a strong pull. This one was for us who, wherever we were in the past, we were always here with our thoughts and souls.

I was interrupted. The echoes died down in the distance. The bell fell silent, which in peaceful times and evil times called for worship and prayer, announcing joy, the beginning and end of life, pain and sorrow. It was always the voice of my villagers.

The sounds of the bell slowly brought back and revived my memories from the time when I was a child. My memories stirred. They awakened my childhood and tied the broken string of my childhood dreams and reveries.

Without wanting, a desire seized me and held me petrified on this white stone, on which lie joyful and martyr days, the dreams and hopes of the people of Vitosha.

I sat down for a moment. A deep sigh tore my chest apart. I peeled myself away from the stone and with shaky steps I walked up to the top of the hill. There I found remnants of trenches and grassy holes left behind from exploding bombs and cannon shells. The ground was soaked with blood from both warring sides. Now some lie in a mass grave behind the altar, above which a large cross was placed and nailed on it was a rusty tin plate with the inscription:

The grateful homeland in honor of its heroes.

The concrete slab of the grave is large and dirty, and carelessness and time have already broken it over the unknown number of those who lie beneath it.

I do not know if those on the opposite side of the battlefield also lie in a common grave or are scattered in the grassy meadow that is their common grave. There I do not see a concrete slab, nor a wooden cross, nor a written word of gratitude.

They too fought for their homeland, but different from the homeland of those for whom gratitude is expressed on the rusty tin plate.

Death for a homeland, but with a letter from their own and others' disfigured, in which for both those who fell on the battlefields, where the hot bullet of death did not spare them, the pain and tears of mothers were not different, they had the same weight, the same pain, the same desires.

Mothers waited in front of open doors or sat on the threshold. They waited day and night, and those for whom they waited never returned to their mothers' arms and laps.

Mothers waited, waited and while waiting they only hoped, sighed, as if the sighing would ease their pain and the weight and anguish in their souls.

They waited in pain for them...

They waited with hope for them.

They waited...

2

I walked towards the hill from where I could see the village that once was.

Now everything is overgrown with thorns and brambles. The blackberries, barely ripe, hung like clusters. A hundred

meters from me, on the slopes of the low hill called Sinadev Rid, they didn't know how to change its name, still, although burned, grow my Aunt Fima's almond trees. Aunt Fima was my grandfather's youngest daughter.

I remember how we children used to climb the almond trees barefoot, shake the branches, knock the almonds down with sticks and crush the almonds we collected with stones to get the seeds out. Now one of the trunks is black, charred halfway. Did someone set it on fire to erase the last green spire that has been growing and giving birth and has been a sign of life for years? Did someone pour out their hatred with fire to burn the almond tree the way the village was burned by the phosphorus Canadian mortar shells that the army fired from the rocks? The shells that reduced the village to ashes were Canadian. They were Canadian and that's why I don't like Canada.

A bare space spreads out before me. Where there were houses, now there are many blackberries. Most of them are on the plain south of the church.

There were large houses there, some with two bedrooms and full of children. Now there are no houses. Only blackberries. They ripen under the warm autumn sun. Some are red, some black, swollen and juicy. I picked blackberry after blackberry and with a full hand I approach my wife and said to her:

- Here, take a bite so that you can see how sweet and juicy the blackberries in Krchishta are.

3

I returned to the white stone and sat down on it again. My hand trembled and the pen trembled over the white paper.

Now, when I write these notes and in the years that have passed, the desire has not left me in the foggy imagination to see the meadows, hills, forests and vineyards, the springs and fountains that I saw as a child. And like an unhealed wound, the realization burns me because in my younger years, there in a foreign land, I failed to revive and preserve the village on paper, its inhabitants while they were alive, and the entire surrounding area.

An empty desire!

The bad winds have blown us away across the world from where no one has returned home. This is exactly what torments my soul and thoughts. My hand with which I hold my pen trembles as I want to give life to everyone by carving their names on the white stone so that everyone, even a random person, would know that life once existed here.

Sitting on the white stone, coexisting and being absorbed by it, I remember my childhood and all my ancestors who walked over it with the hope of better times...

4

I looked into the distance and stared at the slumbering elongated mountain, which has existed since the creation of the world, which we called Stenite, which on military maps is recorded with the name Faltsata.

A rocky outcrop on which only a low spruce grows, looking like a huge knife stabbing between the Northern Pindus region, called Gramos, and the Mali-Madi mountain, behind which is Vicho and the surrounding hills and mountains. Hence its important significance, since it represents a western defensive rampart in the defense of Kostur. The southern side is bare like a bald head, and from the eastern side one can see the green,

beautiful view of the Kostur field with its picturesque villages, the blue of Lake Kostur and the western part of Kostur the city.

The southern side is crossed by a narrow goat-tracked stone path along which my villagers used to walk to the market in Kostur and Rupishta. On their way there and on their way back, they would stop for a short rest, unroll their saddlebags and bags, sit down by the water that springs from under the cracks of the large rock and wash the sweat from their foreheads and faces and quench their thirst with full open hands. The place is called the Noshvi of Krali Marko and from generation to generation for centuries the folk legend has been passed down that it was here, next to the spring, that Krali Marko rested. Near the spring, on a flat and smooth stone, Krali Marko carved the noshvi in which he kneaded bread and baked it under the hot sun, and a little further on a large stone, the hooves of his horse can be seen.

High above the large rock, a large, hollow stone juts out. Its name has not been changed, and the villagers said that it's hollow, just like their fate is hollow.

As a child shepherd, I used to visit those places and I always wanted to see Kostur through the hole of Dupen Kamen, the green and flat Kostur field, the lake and beyond it the high and bare mountain, which because it is always covered with blue is called Sinjachka. To the right, as if strung on a rosary, are the Orle mountains, whose peak has an eagle's head, along which the Odreto river extends, slightly crooked. And in that chain are Krusha, Gorusha, Dolna and Gorna Arena, Aljavitsa and further on at the foot of the mountains covered with dense pine forests and even higher up, only bare, cracked rocks, other hills and mountains line up to the pointed peak of the mountain called Gramos. To the left is the rocky mountain Mali-Madi, behind which the pointed peak of Mount Vicho and the mountain peaks around it can be seen. To the west is Morava, in Albania, at the

foot of which spreads the Devol Plain, in the middle of which lies the town Bilishta and the surrounding villages where the villagers understand each other in two languages – Albanian and Macedonian.

In the middle, between Pindus, popularly called Gramos and Mali Madi is (was) my village, about which in the old and dusty Turkish parchment scrolls was written that in 1535 the village became a collection of five villages, together with the fields, meadows, pastures, forests, hills, springs and villagers, a gift from the Sultan to a Christian Janissary for his loyalty and courage shown in the bloody and victorious wars in the glory of Allah and the Sultan.

The village is located on a low and waterless sandy hill surrounded by fertile grain plains, lush and green meadows, vineyards, pastures and dense forests full of game. Of the devastated villages, whose names have been forgotten in the centuries of darkness, only the churches of St. Tanas, St. Petka, St. Theologian and St. George, shaded by thick branching oaks and a little further away from them, the grassy Christian cemetery, remain as eternal landmarks. At the crossroads there are two small chapels which, in addition to being witnesses and guardians to the time of centuries-old existence, in the past and now, welcome and send off passers-by and those who intend to visit.

And so that collective village was a farmstead with a tall mosque and opposite it a two-room inn and without a church.

In order to have more space for fields, meadows and pastures, at the request of the bey, the kauri, as the Turks called the Christians, uprooted the trees and built house after house in places measured by the foot, with small courtyards, high courtyards and thick gates, barred at night with double bars.

Hence, the name of the village has been Krchishta for centuries and it is also known for the fact that in late autumn, and especially in winter, it is lit for whole days and nights. A sharp, mad and hurricane-force north wind blows, which with its strong gusts tears apart roofs, howls and howls in chimneys, breaks branches, uproots trees, blows high blankets of snow with which it closes roads, and in the spring it calms down and with its gentle gusts it calmly waves the blossoming fruit trees, spreads the scents of the roadside and meadow flowers, and in the summer, when the day burns with great heat, it dries the sweat of the plowmen, the harvesters and all who are under the strict eye of the Beygovi Pole. Such a gentle wind blows until the leaves begin to turn yellow and with light gusts it strips the trees bare and sometimes unexpectedly brings black clouds and disperses a storm.

After the Turks left, the new rulers, after the strong autumn and winter north wind, changed the name of the village and baptized it to Polyanemos (much wind) and recorded it as such in both state and church ledgers, but the people of Krchishta and the villagers from the surrounding villages always called the village Krchishta.

Krchishta is what I still call, to this day, the corner where I was born.

5

Somewhat from a hazy memory, and more from a story, I know that houses were built on this sandy hill separated by narrow alleys. And so, here behind me, to the left and right, there were once houses, some built of hewn stone, some of brick, and all of them had high courtyards and thick gates, barred at night for defence, mostly against robbers.

So I will try to revive a little of what I saw, what I heard, what I learned and how I experienced my childhood.

I will try to collect forgotten events and, in a word or two, note everything I have heard, seen and remembered about my fellow villagers, about the time in which they lived and to find myself in their arms and embraces.

I will tell about the known and about something that I know more about, but others do not, I will note something that I remembered and that filled my life with bitter experiences and thoughts burdened with little joy, and more with pain and sadness, with dreams and hopes. I will write down only what I know, and in my knowledge I will try to include something that I learned from others, who broke up, scattered around the world, emerged like sand emerges between the fingers.

Because of the passage of time and the oblivion that the century brought, I painstakingly wonder if I am able to gather in one long record all the bad and good times in which the happiness and the misfortunes, the joys and the sorrows, the bitterness and the sickness, the promises and the deceptions of my and my villagers are spread. Will I be able to gather at least some of them into one bundle with the desire to leave it to my descendants from which, unwrapping it, they will at least learn a part about the fate of their ancestors.

The living word is only a supplement to what is written in old parchments, in yellowed archive books, in jealously guarded notes in family libraries, in memory books and photo albums in which lies the testimony of the past that most often the powerful, the oppressors and the wicked, hide the truth.

I came to this scorched piece of land, where not a stone remained on a stone, to find my villagers, who not only long ago but also in current times have been divided and separated by

foreigners, as if leaving them a legacy to be like that in future times. And so my villagers, before the fall of the Turkish Empire, were divided into patriarchists and exarchists. The same in race and language, the same in faith and customs, only different in priests who came from a neighbouring state and from a neighbouring principality, who, with a little of their own money, and with more government money, paid spies from outside, were convinced to pray to the same God in separate churches.

The exarchists who prayed in the small old church of St. Tanas were in the lower neighbourhood. The people of Gornomala (upper neighbourhood), who were patriarchs, did not have a church, so they decided, with some of their own money and some of the money from the patriarchate, and with permission from Istanbul, in 1875,² to build a large church in the middle of the village under the protection of the Holy Mother of God.

The neighbouring states (Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia), although they had the same faith as the villagers of Krchishta, with promises, money and paid spies, wanted to rule their country through faith, even though it was still ruled by the great Turkish Empire, which allowed the existence of both patriarchs and exarchs. In the middle neighbourhood were the Turks, who had a mosque, and the owner of the farmstead had a guest house in addition to the large house, where he received his guests and caravans.

But regardless of the church division, the villagers lived in harmony, spoke the same language, celebrated the same holidays and spiritually preserved and commemorated their common customs. They were as close as fingers clenched into a fist.

² The year of the robbery is carved on a stone wall above the outer side of the altar

6

My villagers are no longer here and there is no one to tell me about the time that was their destiny, because stories are only told about the past, and from the stories told by the old, the literate write books, and the illiterate remember with a sound mind the past time of their ancestors, which they keep alive with their memory. Some of those memories are pale, hazy and bitter, indelible, close or distant, sickly, gloomy, sad or dark, and they are all gathered in one trap in which the life of my villagers has been smoldering for centuries.

On this grassy meadow full of thorns and rosehip bushes, there were houses and people who, in the darkness of five centuries of slavery, lived in their own corner and in the sweat of their labour knew how to earn their daily bread with a plow, hoe and sickle, raising cattle and poultry, and in their own language, faith and customs, as if woven on a loom, to live their joys, celebrations, holidays, weddings, name days, bitterness and illness. They grew in the fields, meadows, vineyards, orchards and gardens and lasted, creating new generations, which continued their survival to the chain forged by the past. Now, in this place there are only remains of deeply dug foundations and above them tall grass dried by the scorching sun.

The desire has matured in me not to leave anyone forgotten. Everyone is dear, loved and unforgettable to me. The voice of the heart, mournfully and muffled, now silent, now thunderous, trembling and uncontrollably spills out, for a moment it tears and falls silent and again soulfully echoes and cries:

- People, wherever you are, alive or dead, I love you all infinitely...

Now I know almost nothing about many of my fellow villagers. My villagers are no longer here and there is no one to tell me about the time that was their fate.

Returning to memories is returning to the life of ancestors and for a moment or longer it makes you move away from the present to merge with the past in which you will find dear, not forgotten faces, you will nestle in time, and even sink into the depths in which the veins of your ancestors are rooted and in the whirlwind of times you will bind yourself to them. And so the memory revives the time that awakens, returns, excites, forces you to dig deeper into it even though it will burn and set you on fire, and you will delve deeper and burn in it and you will bow your head when you hear that those who died on the Macedonian hills and mountains, their mothers did not mourn them at home, but in foreign lands. And they are long gone, just as the village is gone, and the state that insidiously entered their courtyards does not love them either alive or dead.

Here, in this place, where I am now standing, was the house in which I was born, and in front of me is the church of the Holy Mother of God, in which I was baptized. Only it has walls in whose corners the swallows build their nests in the spring.

7

With my gaze fixed in the distance, beyond the brook, I see the green plain, where the unburned church of St. Petka is and a little further away, the tall oak. We called it D'mbot. I often went to that place and stared in amazement at that thick and tall oak for a long time. Did old age or bad winds strip it bare?

Its bark is cracked like the rough palm of a plowman. And up high I see three branches, and on the highest there is only one leaf. The wind blows it, and even with the strongest gusts it fails to tear it off.

When I got further away, I turned and stared at the old oak for a long time and wondered how one thick old trunk supports three branches. I couldn't take my eyes off it, fascinated and dazed. I stood there, looking and looking and looking, and in an instant a question crossed my mind:

- What does that big and old trunk that supports three equally thick branches look like?

I have reworked the text about D'mbot, in which two destinies exist, its and mine, connected several times, with the intention of reminding me of my own fate and the fate of my native land.

I note:

“And on the hill, bare and washed away by the rains, with only three raised and mangled branches and with the trunk riddled with shrapnel, stands, the – D'MBOT - a mute witness of the times... On the highest branch, on a lonely peak – exists a single leaf. It seems that gold is shimmering there high, and the gilding has been naturally applied to it by the clear dawns, the warm noons and the evening blues. It is autumn. In the light gusts of wind, it trembles like a handkerchief in a shy bride's hand. Suddenly it bends here and there and straightens up as if it were a handkerchief fluttering in the hand of an old man when he plays the “Bajracheto”.

The wind howls in the great hollow and it seems that loneliness and pain echo there, the secrets hidden in the centuries, something painful and torn breathes and in those breaths one hears quiet murmurs - and it seems that memories and the transience of time are howling... The wind howls in the hollow and some echoes mix in it, and most of all it seems that from there comes crying, begging, even whining, it calms down for a moment and while it howls, something there sobs and sobs... The great cobweb trembles and from inside a black spider quickly pounces on it, pausing, waiting, lurking for a victim...

The once large, ornate and dense crown - now is gone. And together with it the wide, thick shadow under which the centuries have flowed and found rest has also disappeared. The D'mbot is dry now; stripped of leaves and branches; crippled by bullets and shrapnel, stands silent on the hill. A raven lands for just a moment and, having folded its wings, flies away over the hill, there, between the rocks and into the forest, where already gnawed bones are white...

Giorgij stood for a long time in front of the bare and mutilated trunk. He looked silently at its branches and at the land above which it rose and persisted. Until a few months ago – D'mbot - graceful and slender, and now... One trunk and three branches... With a fixed gaze, he looked at the trunk, at the three branches and felt a sharp pain inflicted by a knife that awakened a painful memory that reminded him of something torn apart by a vulture. One trunk and three branches bent in pain and endless spasm. Giorgij stood silent in front of the D'mbot. They stood alone and mute, each with its own weighted years and the burden of time on them and the pain of non-existence within them. Giorgij wiped away the tear squeezed out by the pain and moved his feet... And he scratched, dug, dug into his memory... He did not take his eyes off the bare trunk and it seemed to him that by remembering he would return the beauty in which until a few months ago the voice of ancient human worries, joy and sorrow, despair and pain was gathered. And now only loneliness, pain and hopelessness accompanied him. And until recently, within him was the joy of thousands of bird throats, beneath him the laughter and sighs of young lovers. Were they returning from vineyards, from gardens, from fields, from mowing, from harvesting, from markets, from weddings and - here, under the shadow of the D'mbot, they returned. Under it, it smelled of a mown meadow, mint, young cheese, warm bread, and a warm maiden's sigh... And before sunset, birds would fly in and rest in its branches, which in the dawns of the centuries had been one song, as if it were an eternal celebration of love and joy. And now it remained in the wilderness, stripped of its grandeur and beauty, and only

the wind that blows and whistles on its trunk, and that alone is its companion. The three thick and bent branches resist the strong winds and storms. Rains wash and rinse the dust off it that is blown here by the north wind, here by the south wind. But nothing can wash it away from it except the silent pain, the cry of the wounded turtledove, the glare of the sun, the breath of the sunset, the mournful creak of the broken branch, and the old and present cicadas. The silence and pain of the times are glued to it like lichen. And Giorgij knows and remembers from his childhood and youth the many experiences that happened under the shadow of the D'mbot, the sighs and joys that intertwined under its crown with the rustling of the wind and the playfulness of the leaves. With the first melting of the snow, its swollen buds heralded a warm spring, and then, when it was leafing out with a dark green color and the leaf was developing, a cuckoo, a mischievous bird, clucked near the village and the first swallows cut through the sky, The D'mbot cast a shadow for the plowmen, the mowers, the gardeners, the winegrowers.

No one knows its age. And none of the oldest has heard from their oldest how many years it counts. It seems like birds flew by the years and grew into centuries. Thick as twelve hands in a circle; the bark is cracked like the crust of a loaf just taken out of the village oven. Everyone who walks by it, stares at it, shakes their heads in amazement at its grandeur and beauty. And it was born on a hill where the wind blows from all sides and from where you can see the entire Kostursko Pole and the blue of the lake. And the wind, as for the wind, when it blew most madly, was lost in its dense foliage. And then the D'mbot, returned it like a soft rustling similar to the flutter of a bee's wing pouring out of its branches and, it seemed, a sigh of relief and an eternal song for the sky and the earth that gave birth to it, grew it and strengthened it. And around it and next to it, all the way to where its shadow lay and beyond it, the earth was more than once defiled by other people's feet. Next to it and here by the little church, even the oldest cemeteries did not remain in peace. The bad ones plowed them. The dead shared the fate of the living... They too have

fallen from their eternal resting places... And about them, about the cemetery, people always spoke quietly, as if in a prayer uttered only in secret, that here Samuel's warriors rest eternally and only once a year did the village bell ring long and intermittently for them until the arrival of the new masters and until the demolition of the bell tower by them, because everything that was not built under their rule was pagan and ugly. And then when with threats and eavesdropping under windows and in front of the gate, by gathering in a crowd in the middle of the village to bring silence and to have a feeling of danger at every moment; everyone to feel the horror of the day, the uncertainty of the dawn, the nightmare to turn into a daytime reality of fear and all together in silence, when silence had to reign in each one separately and in all together, and the daily and nightly prayer of the old to be - be silent, to become a daily habit for the young; be silent to be heard only in a whisper as a warning and that to be the only word or thought. Silence. Fear to darken consciousness, and silence to create and strengthen obedience; back when for a single word spoken not in the language of the new masters, honour was taken away, hidden from the eyes and ears of others, secretly, in the late afternoon or before dawn, on All Souls' Day, shadows passed over the old tombstones without a mark, leaving boiled wheat, pie, milk cake, bread, wine and a jug of brandy...

Giorgij watched dumbly and it seemed to him that under the D'mbot the pain and curses of the outcasts, the mother's painful and incessant crying and the silent pleading of children, and does it seem to him that he reached beyond the hills and beyond the unknown lands!? He embraced its entire trunk with his gaze and slowly, walking backwards, began to move away. He started down. And here, on the hill, the D'mbot remained, a gaunt old man - and who knows how long it and its three raised branches will bask in the first rays of the sun, in the fresh dawn it will take on the colour of gold, and in the evening - the colour of bronze? And how many times will the full moon turn over the earth, which on all clear nights will illuminate the bare trunk of the D'MBOT?

And now, looking at the D'mbot, I still think and wonder:

- What does that old oak tree look like or remind me of, whose thick and hard trunk supports three branches?

8

Stone, in my company with you, from the moment I sat on you and gazed into the space filled only with your presence in this silent wilderness, my pain softened, but the wound in my soul is still unhealed. I kneel before you with a desire to hug you tightly as if everything that was here on this sandy hill where part of my childhood passed would be gathered in my arms.

How much strength do I need to heal you, my illness, because now there are no foundations in my village? Did some wish to eradicate the remains of the centuries forever through their eradication, and now everywhere, wherever I look, I see cracked rocks covered with black moss, crushed foundation stones, huge thick, tall and ragged oak trunks with cracked bark, under whose shadows the old churches still exist as witnesses of our time, St. Thanas, St. Petka, St. George and the two chapels, guardians of decay, with cracked walls, bare roofs, on whose scratched walls there are only parts of the saints and angels covered with the blackness of time and blinded by the daggers, knives and bullets of impure minds.

When as a child I entered those abandoned churches, it seemed to me that bloody tears were dripping from the scratched eyes and cheeks of the saints. Seeing their mutilation, I thought that they were still suffering and that is why they were crying.

I returned home sad and burdened with the pain of the unhealed wounds of the saints and angels who suffer in abandoned churches.

9

In this place, where I now stand, there was once the Postolovtzi house, with a large yard in which a cherry tree grew, an old, tall and branched pear tree. A single-stemmed plant that had long since taken root in the depths of this sandy and waterless hill.

The mother - a housewife, whose name I do not remember, raised two daughters and two sons. The father, after the Greco-Turkish war in 1922, disappeared somewhere in America from where neither letters nor money arrived. The eldest daughter married a merchant in Solun. The eldest son, Mikhail, early separated from the plow, hoe and sickle, went to Athens, where he studied carpentry and along with carpentry, his comrades taught him something, which was then and later outside the government laws, so he spent two years in prison where his fellow prisoners filled his head with what others had already filled theirs.

In prison, he made friends more with those whose language was forbidden. From them he understood who he was and where his roots were. After leaving prison, he returned to the village and instead of taking up the plow, hoe and sickle, he began to teach the youth the lessons he had learned in prison. When some of the elders heard what he was telling the young people, they took him aside and whispered to him that the place where he was born and wider needed a different lesson, not the one spread by those who call themselves communists.

One of the elders, who spent his youth in foreign countries, told me how old Kiro, who was working in France, where he read French books after work, would say to people like Mikhail, "Take your mind. Don't listen to what others tell you, because others will lie to you. Go, he said, according to your own

mind, not someone else's. Under this government we will only suffer, and by being tied to the communists we Macedonians will never be who we are and what we want to be, and we will be what they want us to be - humiliated and dehumanized. The communists, my people, do not want faith and do not want family. Their extended hand will be a hand of deceit, just as the hand of the merchant is deceitful. No one has ever extended a hand of support to us, and we ourselves do not support each other. We were under the Turks ourselves and survived. Now we are looking for someone to support us. He will strengthen us and promise us as long as we need him. Anyone who wants someone else to protect us will do so until we need him. Then the water will flow murkily. Do they promise? If so, then they are lying. And remember that there is no hope for the deceived. There is only bitterness and with it dehumanization.

I cannot leave the impression that old Kiro's advice of was prophetic.

Those who, during the Greek Civil War, at village gatherings called everyone to arms, all for victory, and convinced my villagers that, led by the beloved leader, victory was just around the corner, did not listen to old Kiro.

Now, after many years, I am aware that old Kiro was right and I wonder if those who did not listen to him after the terrible defeat felt the burden of deception? Does their conscience bite them?

Mihail's lessons from his elders came to mind and he found himself in the first ranks of those who began the resistance and began the fight for the country in which they were born. And from then on he gradually matured in the spirit of the Ilinden times. He completed his maturation as a major in the Greek Civil War. He was a participant in the armed resistance against the

Italians and Germans and after the clash with ELAS ³he commanded a company in the Aegean Brigade, cleared the Federal Republic of Macedonia of the Ballists, after the disbandment. From the brigade, together with others like him, in 1946 in the Vicho region he formed the first Macedonian partisan detachments in order to defend my people from the white terror. He finished his maturing as a major in the Democratic Army of Greece. Slandered as an incorrigible Macedonian nationalist with the famous nickname Granitis, which means hard as granite, who conveyed his thoughts to his subordinates, contrary to the position of the high communist leadership, he died on Gramos from a landmine, which someone had forgotten on the way that he was supposed to return to the command dugout.

Mihail - Graniti was famous among my villagers and the villagers of this part of Macedonia.

The second son, Apostol, was torn to pieces by a bomb on Gorusha. Lefka, the youngest sister, an old maid and dressed in black until her last breath, died in Skopje, and the mother ended her life far from Krchishta, in a Carpathian village in Romania. Other villagers of mine, who were taken there by evil, also lie next to her. There are no crosses on their graves, but only a pile of earth overgrown with dry grass that spring renews and summer scorches. The same is true for other villagers of mine who, after their martyred escape, rest in grassy graves in those eastern countries, where evil drove them and left them there forever.

Now that is their homeland. In their true homeland, the newcomers from Turkey have installed tombstones and stone crosses in foreign languages in their renovated houses.

The land accepts everyone. It makes no distinctions. It makes no divisions in its bosom. And that is why it is easy on

³ Greek People's Liberation Army

some, hard on others, regardless of who and how they loved their country or betrayed it. Both those with big and loud names and those without big and loud titles, when their day comes, regardless of their merits, the land will bite them to the bare bone.

10

I looked around and remembered that to my right was the Trajkovtsi house, next to them the Shkoklovtsi, on the other side of the narrow alley, literally glued wall to wall, were the Penovtsi and next to our house were the Labrovtsi, and Gulevtsi. Beyond that, the large house belonged to godmother Meljovitsa, a short, fat, proud and rich woman, childless whose husband was not at home and who sent her money from America every month that fed the labourers, plowmen, shepherds, cattle herders...

Why did Meljo leave the sheep, cattle, goats, fields and the orchard? Godmother Meljovitsa lived alone in the large house. Only in her old age, in the spring of 1946, did Meljo take her to America. The house remained empty and alone, just as Godmother Meljovitsa was alone, who was now gone. When she left for America, she did not put a key or a padlock on the large outer gate. Whoever wanted and whenever they wanted, they entered and did not leave empty-handed. The whitewashed, richly decorated rooms were emptied at night and every day the house was ravaged. It remained desolate and empty. Bats filled it at night, in the spring swallows built nests in all corners.

Two years later, a rumour was heard in the village that there, in Detroit, Meljo and Meljovitsa had died without leaving any children, and some said and envied that they had left behind a large account in some bank, where it is still kept.

That was how it was said.

They were also Kirovtsi, they had four children, two daughters and two sons. The eldest was Lefka. A participant in the Greek Civil War. Their second child was Ilija. He was eighteen years old when he was burned inside a bunker on Gramos. I was with the two remaining children, Stavre and Lenka, when we arrived in Romania, where Stavre, a tall boy, was picked up at the age of fifteen and returned to Prespa to help victory come faster. I arrived in Poland with Lenka, who was my age. I know nothing about what happened to them after that and that is why I kept them, alive or dead, in my memories.

Next to the Kirovtsi were the Pandovtsi. A large family, each with three or four children. The men left to work abroad. Before the Greek Civil War started, they locked up their houses and left for America. Next to the Pandovtsi were the Geljachkis, then the Filjovtsi, the Damovtsi. Then there were the Gulovtsi, Penovtsi, Pinzovtsi and the largest family – the Popovtsi, and in it were the village children, the most terrible was Dono Popov. He was not tall, but of medium height, with a large white mustache and thick eyebrows, a black hat on his head, a black jacket thrown over his shoulders, he was dressed all in black. Trousers, a belt, a vest, a coat, all woven and felted. Sewn by the village tailor. In the pocket of his vest, on a silver chain, he had a watch as big as an onion. Only his mustache and his cane were white. He walked straight, proudly, staring straight ahead. I don't know why the other children were afraid when they saw him, but I was always afraid. When I saw him from afar, only dust remained behind me. He was not a bad person and not very talkative like the others of his age with whom he didn't talk much, because he couldn't stand the stinking smoke from the thickly cut tobacco. Years later I learned that he died on the road not far from Pogradets while escaping from the Greek Civil War with the refugees. They buried him in a shallow grave, because the refugees didn't even have time to light a candle for him, which they found in Dina's

bag, which she had left behind. The fatigue or the trouble left the soul the moment it crossed the border. One foot on this side, the other foot on the other side of the border. It remained there with part of it on this side, and part on that side, in a place called the border, and that border became the border when Dina was eighteen years old and already a young bride. She was married to a boy from a rich family, who three months after the wedding was selected to serve in the army. Tall, well-built and with strong muscles, he stood up before the doctors who looked at him from all sides and decided that he should serve in the infantry.

The general, who was sitting on the side, then stood up and said:

- Not in the infantry, sir, but in the royal guard. He will serve Cholias.⁴ Such well-built people, like him, serve in front of the royal palace.

They took him to Athens. There they taught him, and when asked many questions he said - I don't know - and the officers called him a stranger.

Together with other tall and strong boys like him, they practiced for whole days, and when he learned to walk high, raising his left and then his right leg and waving his right hand, and, like the others, they dressed him in tight white pants, then a white dress with many pleats, a shirt with wide sleeves and a colourful vest and a red kilt on his head. Finally, they put opinci (slippers) on him with a large velvet bow, And so my peasant boy - unknown - whom I have never seen alive except in a picture, was a cholias, who walked twice a day in front of the royal palace, guarding the king with German blood in his veins.

⁴ A member of one of the branches of the Greek army which is basically a royal guard.

When I turned four, our cholias - unknown, was sent to the border with Albania. Mussolini, from all the balconies of Italy, demanded to restore the Roman Empire, Metaxas sought Byzantium, Sofia tearfully begged to lie down in a space splashed by three seas, and their friend from Berlin dreamed of all of Europe, and even the whole world. Mussolini was impatient and early in the morning of 1940 he attacked Greece and our unknown man with all his choljas found himself on the border with Albania and remained in the trenches of one of the Albanian mountains forever. And so Dina, at a young age, became a widow, the most beautiful girl in the village, who when she danced in the middle of the village, the ground did not touch her feet, and when she sang, the birds fell silent. Slender, with a braid as thick as a rope, when she returned from the fountain with the pitcher on her head, then a boy's eye would not take itself off her and for whole nights he would dream only of her. They said about her: beautiful hair, may it be blessed to the one who will have it. They loved her very much, but only one of them was lucky.

Dina fell on the path of escape when, with difficulty carrying her misfortune in her soul, and on her back the trunk in which she had collected the most necessary things, she, like many others, remained on the path of escape - half in one, half in the other country, which was once part of the great Turkish empire.

Whose land will she guard?

11

The new rulers of my villagers and all other villagers from the conquered part of Macedonia, changed their personal names and surnames, and then by law they changed the names of the villages, fountains, springs, hills, mountains, rivers. Everything that was movable and immovable was renamed according to the features that nature had given them, whose names passed from

generation to generation into the collective and family heritage. In the five centuries of rule, the Turks did not perform such vile miracles and have no reason to burn with shame for the meanness with which our neighbours tore apart the Balkan pearl (Macedonia).

After the Balkan Wars and before them, and even now, the specter of great power, aided from abroad, hovers over the Balkans.

All my villagers, as long as the Turks were there, were recorded in Turkish notebooks with their old family surnames. Hence some said:

- We were better off in Turkey. Language, faith, customs did not protect us. And what can I say about these new ones? What did we see in them?

Unwinding the thread from the ball, I find out that our centuries-old surname Nakovtsi was changed to Ioanu. Perhaps because they found in Turkish notebooks that some of my ancestors, such as Dimitar Nakovski - who was a village epitrop and an activist of the VMORO, Naum Dimitar Nakovski - a tailor and an active activist of the VMORO, Trpo Nakovski, an officer, photographer and teacher in Kostur and Athens, who died in some war (it does not say on which side he fought).

All the Nakovtsi were rebaptized to Ioanu – that was the surname of half the villagers from the upper neighborhood. I do not know why and for what punishment, the new rulers erased their old surnames, and the others, from Damovtsi became Damopoulou, Filjovtsi – Filipou, Stavrovtsi – Stavropoulos, Zisovtsi – Zisopoulos. And so, with the addition -u, os, is – they became Greeks and that is how they are recorded in the church, municipal, district, and court registers, but in the village, at home, at the fountain, on guests, on birthdays, at funerals, in the church,

in the field, in the vineyard, at the mill, at fairs and at the market, they called each other by their old, home names and surnames and understood each other in their native Macedonian language.

12

After the population exchange between Greece and Turkey and an agreement between Athens and Sofia, the exarchs moved to Bulgaria. They loaded their backs with trunks and saddlebags and set off on a journey that took them to Plovdiv, where the authorities and the church promised them houses and land, and handed them a piece of paper with a seal on which the literate had to write, and the illiterate had to put a finger or a cross in their own hand, that they were Bulgarians by birth, and instead of receiving what was promised, they found themselves with damp and moldy, unknown bare earth beneath them and a foggy sky above them.

They regretted it.

In Krchishta they had houses, fields, gardens, meadows, sheep, goats, oxen, chickens, and there in Plovdiv – poverty and a piece of paper with a stamp that they were Bulgarians. They begged for work, swept streets, scrounged houses, their children begged on the streets, in front of cafés or waited in front of bakeries for someone to give them a piece of bread.

In the upper neighbourhood, the Macedonian patriarchists, as the new authorities called them, remained at home, forbidding them to pray to God in their own language.

Between the upper and lower neighbourhoods were the Turks. They had also been moved to Turkey a year or two earlier. All that remained of them was the dormitory and the mosque, which the new rulers demolished. And in the lower neighbourhood, the Macedonian patriarchists spread into the

houses of the relocated exarchists, namely the Ljapovtsi, Porjazovtsi, Donovtsi, a few from Popovtsi and Purdovtsi.

The Purdovtsi were three families with three or four children each, whose husbands and fathers had gone to work in Perth, Australia, where they themselves did not know where it was. Where Perth was no one at home knew, but from there once a month the postman brought money, so they sent their children to Kostur to study. When they came to the village on holidays, they were always dressed in city clothes and never wore opinci (slippers) and did not graze cattle and in the village they were the only ones who ate candy and other sweets and threw the wrappers on the ground, and we, the peasants, collected them, wrapped pebbles in them and boasted that our pockets were full of candy too.

The village had more women and fewer men, because the men went to work in unknown lands the women were left all alone. There were plenty of children laughing, crying and screaming in the village. The lonely housewives plowed, mowed, reaped and did other things; they were the labourers.

13

The most famous labourer was Ristanka. A small, thin woman. She worked from dawn to dusk. On one shoulder – a hoe, on the other a bag. In it was a little bread, and a little cheese or cottage cheese. On her feet not a sock or slipper. Barefoot she trod the land, the fields, the gardens, the barns, the threshing floor. She fed three mouths. Her husband was a master at playing cards and lying under thick shadows, and her two sons, who were responsible for herding calves and pigs, usually went to bed with empty stomachs. From the horrors of the Greek Civil War, which burned the village and abandoned the fields, meadows, gardens and orchards, in the great escape, she crossed the border barefoot

and even there to a distant and unknown land, where she and many others like her were taken away on a ship. The good people there clothed her, gave her shoes and she no longer walked barefoot and did not carry a bag and a hoe on her shoulder, she did not eat only dry bread, often sprinkled with salt mixed with ground pepper. She was well fed, she slept in a warm room with many women, most of them widows or wives of migrant workers from whom not only did they not receive money, but even the letters they received were opened, read and crossed out by someone who did not write along party lines. If someone happened to be lucky enough to find a check or cash in a letter, she was called to the party committee, where a long story about imperialism and Titoism was sung to her. And in order to have a bright day and a peaceful sleep, they did as the party wanted. And what the party wanted, they had to want too.

Ristanka did not receive letters. Her husband died while building bunkers, and her children were taken care of in some unknown country. She was pleased that from the party, she and all the other women, instead of money for the work done in the agricultural cooperative, received food from the common pot and a small package with a few candies, threads, needles and other trifles. Everything was a reward from the party. And she was pleased with that. Poverty and hard work were never under her feet again. She was clothed and well-fed. As they said, thanks to the party and socialism.

14

At the end of the lower neighbourhood were the Nanovtsi. One of the richest families. The husbands were also working for the government. They left five sons and one daughter at home. The sons died in the Greek Civil War as fighters against the government army, and the daughter reached Budapest where both her legs were cut off above the knees. There she found a kindred

spirit without one leg and together they gave birth to three sons and one daughter and baptized them with the names of their uncles so that the family line would not be interrupted. Years later, they moved to Skopje, where their long journey towards their dreams ended.

The Nanovtsi house was the most beautiful house in the area, and was built with government money, as a thank you to the homeland for one of the men who had graduated from a military academy in Germany and fought with the rank of major in the Greco-Turkish war for Megali Elada (Greater Greece) and remained forever in Asia Minor, where Greece suffered a terrible defeat. He was captured by the Turks and slaughtered. For his heroism, the grateful new homeland built his family such a magnificent house, the likes of which was not found in the entire Kostur region. The house was large and in the largest room on festive days the young people gathered and sang old Macedonian songs and danced Macedonian dances together.

It was cheerful until the moment when the police appeared. Then the voices fell silent, but the souls sang.

Men from the islands, with thick necks and large fists, hard as stone, did not look where they struck. And the blow was not a blow to cause pain, but to instill fear, to silence the singing, to break the dancing, to instill fear in the souls, as a warning that it was forbidden to sing such songs and to dance such dances that did not resemble the songs and dances of the new rulers. Then the songs fell silent and the chain of the dance was broken. The place also fell silent. On the days when the horofilakes (guardians of the Greek state) came to the place, everyone was silent except for the dogs. All the dogs, big and small, barked in front of them, behind them, and on the sides. And when they left and disappeared behind the hill, the dogs stopped barking and one of the elders would say:

- Not only us, but even the dogs don't like them.

Thus, those two or three horofilakes (guardians of the Greek state) represented the state and defended it from people who were dangerous only because they spoke, sang, danced and spoke the forbidden (Macedonian) language. Those horofilakes did not guard the state according to the laws, but with their fists. The fist was the law.

The authorities realized that the fist was not a sufficient means of changing the feeling of the people, they came to the conclusion that through literacy, my people from Krchishta would be the kind the state wanted them to be. They built a school with one classroom in the middle of the village and placed the village tavern under it. They brought two teachers and three horses loaded with books, which they placed in the school cupboards, and on the walls they hung portraits of their heroes. The teachers found a bed in one of the more beautiful village houses, and according to an agreement made with the serf, they ate in the houses of my villagers, because the state did not have money to pay for their food.

When spring came, two teachers came to the village. They enrolled the young children and divided them, some into kindergarten, others into a nursery school, and for whole days they taught them to sing and listen to stories in a language they did not understand. But because of this, the mothers were freed from caring for their children and could be busy with household chores, and mostly with agricultural and gardening work. It was a way for the children to learn a foreign language word by word from a young age and not speak their native language all day long.

One teacher taught from the first to the fourth grade, and the second, in the so-called evening school, in the village tavern, taught adults, with whom he had difficulty communicating. While

he told them about the names of the door, water, bread, house, grandparents in his language, the old people chatted amongst themselves in their own language. Then the teacher would get angry, scold them and most often tell them that they were hondrokephali (fatheads).

In the first and the next few school years, the hondrokephali continued to speak in their own language, so the new authorities made a decision to ban their language, and for those who continued to speak it (their native language), they defined appropriate penalties. And so the hondrokephali had to pay an appropriate fine depending on the number of non-Greek words spoken, which was determined by the judge. They paid the fine and after leaving the courtroom, they continued to greet each other in their own language. And if the punishment was not enough for those who were caught on the street, in the field, in the orchard and garden, at plowing and sowing, at harvest and threshing, speaking the forbidden language, the authorities ordered that every police station should always have a bottle of castor oil, a turnip, a bucket of ice, a braided leather whip for beating the feet and shoulders, hot peppers, tongs for pulling out nails, an iron hoop for clamping the head, scissors for cutting a cross over the head, a live cat, hot eggs to put under the armpits, paper and pencil for signing a statement of repentance, and if that was not enough, then they were sent to court, to prison, or to a camp on some dry island. They were very concerned about those who even secretly spoke the forbidden language, and they did so with indescribable cruelty, beating them so as not to kill, but to maim and thus sow fear that brought anxiety, horror, restlessness, nightmares, disempowerment, humiliation and dishonour into the mind, heart and soul.

These kinds of “rewards” were given by the state to those people who spoke the forbidden language.

But despite all the prohibitions, the hondrokephali by the fireplace, around the table, on the street, in the field, meadow, at harvest, at the funeral, at weddings, at baptisms, at holidays, name days and birthdays, at mourning and funerals, at fairs, at the market - now quietly, now loudly spoke, sang, quarreled, cursed and made peace, prayed in their language which they learned with the first sip of their mother's milk and listening to the gentle song above the cradle, they learned it, spoke it and passed it on to their descendants. Thus, with the language, songs and customs in times of slavery, and then with the written word, they kept the shattered homeland in their hearts.

Although the authorities banned the language, they did not succeed in banning the story, the old home customs and the song in which the language lasted, which strengthened the soul, spread joys, soothed illnesses, preserved joy, youthful dreams and hopes and was a great power that connected hearts and souls like a steel chain. Everything that was movable and immovable in the village and around it and above it - the sky, the sun, the stars and the moon, the foreignness and separations were in the song. That language and voice were not only heard at evening gatherings, family celebrations, in the fields, meadows, pastures, hills, fountains, springs and above the cradles of the children, not only was it an image and mirror of the life of my villagers, but a strong, unbreakable thread on which, like pearls, joys, desires, sorrows and dreams were strung, and with every melody it connected the past with the present and the resistance against the forcibly imposed darkness of the new slavery.

The song was the soul of my villagers.

The broom for sweeping away Macedonianness was also perfected with written orders. The Minister of Internal Affairs, every year with a written order certified with a seal and signature, ordered officers, soldiers, policemen, judges, lawyers, civil

servants, merchants, agents, spies, to marry girls from the local Macedonian population.

At night motionless shadows kneeled under the windows with a perked ear, listened in what language the husband spoke to his wife in the dark room. In this way, the Greek language and customs were introduced into Macedonian houses, with which the poison of Greekism insidiously and without resistance spread throughout the Macedonian family.

In their fierce hatred for the language and their obsessive desire to turn the Macedonian people into Greeks, they even wanted to silence the singing of birds. It was said that Krsto, from the lower neighbourhood, was beaten because when the cuckoo croaked: cuckoo, he loudly added: E.

Someone reported him and the police proved to him that he publicly recognized the KKE (CPG), which was also called Ku-Ku-E for short. And that Ku-Ku-E, with skillful cunning and hopeful promises, attracted people like Krsto, who believed that that Ku-Ku-E would stand up and fight firmly for us. They naively believed and stood on its side. In the following years, the Macedonians paid for their unforgivable faith and naivety with the lives of their sons and daughters, with the loss of their property and expulsion.

Krsto, and not only he, overcame the blows of the wet rope and when he got rid of the castor oil and horseradish, he loudly cursed those who beat him and those who promised him freedom, and with the most derogatory curses he cursed the cuckoo.

Aged, but already cleansed of the great promises and insidious deceptions, he now rests in an abandoned and desolate Polish village.

Infused with the spirit of freedom and lacking support for defense, a large number of foreign-speaking people believed that the communist party, which was more concerned with attracting the Macedonians to its ideological and political goals, would stand up for their defense, than with their desire to have someone to defend them. The regime's terror pushed them into the arms of the communists, who paid dearly for their trust and political naivety after years of torture in prisons and camps and with the lives of their children killed in the Greek Civil War, their houses burned to the ground, their property lost and their long-term exile to foreign countries. The witnesses to the naivety and betrayal of the Macedonian "politicians" are no longer alive, but the memories and numerous documents are alive, which are also living testimony that lies in the archives covered with a blanket of dust.

15

Further from the Nanovtsi house was the threshing floor. Here they brought sheaves from the harvested fields, which they lined up in a circle next to each other, and the horses or oxen tied to the pivot around which they turned, separated the grain from the chaff. When the threshing was finished, they threw the straw, chaff and grain into the air with wooden shovels, and the wind blew the straw and chaff to the side, and the wheat fell below and was gathered in a heap on the threshing floor. It was measured with rods and was not taken to the granaries until an official arrived who measured the pile with a stick and determined how many rods should be set aside for the state tax. That measure, by which the tax was determined, remained as a legacy of Turkish rule. So it was in those old times, and in more recent times, part of the sweat of my peasants ended up in the mouths of the aramolepsi (corrupt officials) of the new state.

Now the threshing floor is a grassy meadow.

16

In the yard where I took my first steps in childhood, I felt something poking under my foot in the ashy earth, I dug it up, it was a small bell. It was dirty and full of black earth. I wiped it with the skirt of my coat and scratched the black earth inside with my pen. When I shook it, it was squeaky at first, and after I had cleaned it well, it rang with the same ringing that I had heard as a child. I shook it again and the same ringing that had rung in my childhood rang again. With shivers and trembling hands, I gathered it in both palms, warmed it, and as mothers hug and warm their newborns with the warmth of their souls, I smothered it in my arms, and from boundless, immeasurable, inexpressibly tender and life-giving excitement it moved me, and my tears dripped onto it. Its ringing wounded my soul painfully and brought back much of the lost joy to my childhood. Gently warming it with my breath and the warmth of my arms, I set off for the hill to see the rural expanse, once green and fertile, and now dry and desolate.

At the foot of the hill, a little above Aunt Fima's almond trees – I almost stepped on a barely blooming snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*). I knelt down, slowly and gently plucked it. It was cold. I gathered it in my hands to warm it. I brought both the bell and the blooming snowdrop with me. Now I keep them in my study. Occasionally I touch the bell, and it rings softly and gently, and at that moment it reminds me of my childhood. I stop writing, rest my head on my hands, and for just a moment it seems to me that I am returning to the old house, but after a short silence I come to my senses and stop thinking that I am going home, which is close, across the border, but very far from here.

The bell and the snowdrop are hung together on the frame of the window that looks out on the south side of the study. I touch it gently, and it rings softly, and then the unrolling of the

ball on whose black thread all the memories are strung begins again. I jealously guard and dust the bell and the already dried snowdrop, I do not let dust fall on them, just as many years ago the darkness of hatred fell on it and filled it with ashen earth.

I guard it carefully because it and its ringing are part of the voice of my childhood and the only inheritance from my ancestors and my homeland.

17

An incident that remained in my memory, as a minor child, was the large number of Greek troops that came to the village in the fall of 1939. The command was located in the school, which ended the teaching, and the teachers. After that the teachers left.

The soldiers were deployed in the village houses and a large part in tents. With them, the villagers and we children spoke in our language. Most of them were boys from Kostur and Lerin, and there were few who did not understand us. Why so many troops came, I did not understand. In all the conversations with the soldiers and the peasants who spoke our language, the word *polemos* (war) was most often heard. The men, especially those who had already served in the Greek army, knew what it meant, and when they met soldiers with various insignia on their shoulders on the road, they would translate the word into broken Greek.

The soldiers spent whole days unloading iron stakes and barbed wire from the arriving trucks. They drove the stakes into the fields and meadows in rows and tied them with barbed wire, and on the hills they dug trenches and built bunkers that looked towards Albania. They said that these were obstacles so that the Italians could not pass.

At the same time, they forced all the peasants outside the village, in the forests, in places, they said, that could hardly be seen from the sky, to dig dugouts and move there and not go out during the day. And I still remember how my grandfather and my father, like all the other villagers, dug dugouts outside the village, where there was the thickest forest, carried rugs, blankets, and velensa (thick woolen blankets), and threw branches on the roof. They covered it with ferns and green grass. We moved there and were forbidden to go outside during the day. Soldiers would come, check and order us to act according to the regulations they had set. Grandfather would not come to sleep in the dugout at night. At the entrance to the vineyard, he built a hut and from there he guarded the vineyard in which the grapes had already ripened, and the army would not let us pick them during the day. They said that it was dangerous during the day.

We picked the grapes at night under the light of the full moon and brought them home in baskets loaded on an ox cart. In the yard, we loaded them in large cauldrons and tubs and crushed them all night. When we had thoroughly squeezed the juice, we put it in the barrels. Grandpa stayed home to watch that it didn't boil over. He knew from his grandfather how to make good wine and was the only one who drank the first and last glass for years.

After three nights, Grandpa came to the dugout, carrying with him a full jug of must and after taking some food, he returned home.

Every day, in the evening, I brought him dinner from the dugout, boiled beans in which there were always two boiled red hot peppers, which before he started eating, he first crushed and spread with a wooden spoon and after they were well mixed with the beans, he began to slurp loudly. The hotness made him sweat and so he held a towel on his knee with which he wiped the sweat from his neck, face and forehead.

I did not return to the dugout at night. I stayed in the hut with my grandfather. I always wanted to listen to the same stories and fall asleep on his knee and I did not mind the stinking smell of thickly ground tobacco and his loud snoring and farting. Until I fell asleep, my grandfather gently ruffled my hair and quietly told me old stories. When I was already falling asleep, he laid me down next to him and we welcomed the day together.

Grandpa would get up early and light a fire in front of the entrance to the guard house, and when the embers died down, he would put the pot in the hot charcoal, in which he brewed coffee from roasted rye and chickpeas.

18

It was the end of October and in the morning we were not woken by the first rays of the sun, but by a strong noise even stronger than thunder. We went out of the guard house and saw large black birds flying in from Albania, (what I thought were birds) which made a lot of noise. They flew over the hills, fields and meadows, and wherever there were spiked iron stakes tied with barbed wire, they threw black sacks (what seemed to me to be sacks) that thundered loudly when they fell to the ground and threw up heaps of earth. From Albania, from morning to night, those black birds flew in and dropped sacks (I was later told they were called bombs) everywhere where the soldiers had erected high walls of iron stakes tied with barbed wire the previous days. We quickly left the house and, riding a horse, went to the dugout. Everyone was outside there, watching as piles of earth and black smoke obscured the sunrise. The ground shook under our feet.

The men said that Italy had attacked Greece. The soldiers who were in my village lined up, the old priest blessed them and during the day they crossed the border into Albania, crossed the Devolsko Pole on foot, and in the evening they lay down to rest

near the Morava mountain. The next day, dull rifle and machine gun shots and long thunderous cannon shots could be heard from there. From the hill above the village we watched Italian planes fly over Morava and Greek planes fly in from Kostur to meet them.

My brother and I went to the village and saw that there was writing, large black letters, on all the courtyard doors and walls. The sign “OHI” was written everywhere. My brother, pointing to the letters, said that they meant NO. And that OHI meant that Greece would not accept what Mussolini was demanding.

The end of autumn was approaching. The days were sunny and warm, yellowed leaves were falling from the trees. The swallows had left their nests. The ravens, frightened by the thunderstorms, had also disappeared. The large white birds were flying south. In the first days of the snowstorm (after the new November) a lot of snow fell. Soldiers with stars on their shoulders came to the village, gathered the men from the village, gave them shovels and made them clear a path in the snow. They carried the wounded on stretchers, covered with blankets, and took them to Kostur.

One day, word reached the village that the Kostur and Lerin boys had broken through the Italian trenches and bunkers on Ivan Planina, the peak of which is visible from my village. The Italians, it was said, fled to Korcha and, pursued, from there they took the road to Elbasan and when they reached Pogradets, they were told that the Germans had come to the Italians’ aid through Yugoslavia.

In April, 1940, Greece lost the war with Italy thanks to Germany and Bulgaria.

19

I remember the loud, desperate and mournful crying of the Popovtsi family. That day, the Popovtsi were informed by letter that their son had died on Mount Morava, in Albania. A few days later, the bell rang three times again and everyone understood that someone else would never be returning home. Word quickly spread that Laki of Filjovtsi had died on Ivan Planina (Mountain). His family cried, his relatives cried, the whole village cried, in which the pain of one family was the pain of all families.

I also remember the days when Greek soldiers fled from Albania and passed by my village in large groups. They threw away rifles, overcoats, blankets, trying to get as far away as possible from the Italians who were walking behind them. They left a lot of weapons, military clothing in the trenches and bunkers and rushed as quickly as possible to cross the roads that go south. In our hills and fields where there were trenches and bunkers, many rifles, machine guns, blankets and overcoats remained, and in the stores under Stenite there were many crates of canned goods, bags of flour, rice, beans, macaroni, biscuits, vats of cheese, yellow cheese, olive oil and everything else that the army needed. Before the Italians arrived, the hardworking people from my village managed to collect much of what was left and then sold it at the markets in Kostur and Rupishta. Two brothers from the lower neighbourhoods set out to collect barbed wire and iron stakes, which they took to the farm in Trstenik and sold them to Albanian merchants. Thus, cursed wealth entered some of our houses.

The boys from my village who served in the Greek army took off their military uniforms and came home dressed in civilian clothes.

In the afternoon, Italian soldiers arrived in the village from Albania. Some knew a few Greek words but they could not understand the elders. They quickly realized that the villagers were speaking an unknown language, which they were later told was Macedonian and that this language was banned by the state. In the village, the Italians announced that anyone who wanted to could speak their own language. The fear and terror that had been watching over the village disappeared. The Macedonian word and Macedonian song were heard everywhere. Some took this as liberation.

The Italian soldiers treated the villagers calmly and communicated more by waving their hands. They often asked for eggs, and for one egg they gave a pack of cigarettes, saying loudly: grace, grace Macedone. The villagers took the first two words as cursing, but they understood the second word well – Macedone – and with a broad smile, beating their chests – they said – that’s right, that’s right, we are Macedone, and you are Italian, right?

But because three people from my village died in the war with them, most of the villagers did not welcome the Italians. After a short stay, a kind of trade relationship was established with the Italians. Our people offered them eggs, and they boxes of cigarettes. And when some found out that the Italians liked to eat frogs and turtles, then real trade began. We children in particular would bring them bags full of frogs, for which we would receive sweets and chocolates. This trade, however, disappeared when one night they were attacked by the partisans. None of the Italians were injured. They left the village during the day and returned to Kostur and Rupishta. The trade in cigarettes, candy, chocolate, turtles and frogs disappeared. Shots from rifles and machine guns were heard more and more frequently from the hills and mountains, which brought back fear among the villagers.

And we the children, who were the greatest frog hunters and turtle collectors, gathered in the evenings in the middle of the village or at the threshing floor and instead of playing “long donkey”, we played war, fighting with sticks or carved wooden guns and returned home with bumps on our heads and bloody noses.

20

During the Italian occupation and later, through the policemen, teachers and civil servants who remained in Kostur Region, the old hatred towards the Macedonians continued. In order to defend themselves from the violence of organized groups of Greek nationalists and Greek-Americans, a number of men from Manjak, a suburb of Kostur, formed a group, which they called “the committee”, with the intention of asking the Italian command for help in defense against the Greeks.

Prof. Dr. Hristo Ivanovski was a descendant of that Ilinden family, a student of the Bitola high school, from which he was mobilized in the Democratic Army of Greece at age 17, and after DAG’s defeat went to Tashkent, where he completed his higher education. Prof. Dr. Hristo Ivanovski, described the event and its consequences in his book, “**Memories and Reflections**”. I would like to refer the reader to that source, because as a minor child at the time I only remember some things, but that is not enough to get the complete picture.

The Italian command, with the consent of Rome, accepted the request. The Macedonians from a large number of villages understood the request of the committee from Manjak as a renewal of the spirit of the Ilinden committees and without hesitation accepted rifles. The Greek partisans and some of the Macedonians, their ideological supporters, strongly opposed the committees and declared open war on them because of their arbitrariness and the great oppression they were committing

against their compatriots. Sofia did not lag behind in the organization and activities of the committees, which sent advisors, originally from Kostur, to the western part of Aegean Macedonia. The most famous was Andon Kalchev, born in the Kostur village of Zhuzheltsi, who moved to Bulgaria with his parents after the Balkan Wars. His fate ended in Solun. Towards the end of the war, during the retreat with the Germans, he was captured by the Vardar partisans, and in 1948 Belgrade handed him over to Athens. The Solun (Greek) court sentenced him to life imprisonment, and a few months later the trial was renewed and the court verdict was – death by shooting. Witnesses claimed that before being riddled with bullets, his last word was a rousing cry for the country in which he was born.

- Long live Macedonia!

Although raised and educated in Bulgaria and in the military academy in Germany, it seems that Andon Kalchev's blood was not water.

No one from my village received a rifle. Dono Popov threatened the gathering of older men that if anyone from Krchishta received a rifle from the occupier, then he would personally burn their house down. Hitting the stone in front of him with his crutch, he shouted:

- You don't ask for help from the occupier and you don't take a rifle. These komitas are not from the same clan as the komitas of Ilinden! The names of their self-proclaimed revolutionary leaders are written on the worst side of memory.

I will never forget when a man from the neighbouring village where all the men were Komites, came at night and said to my mother and Kosta's wife, my father's half-brother:

- Tomorrow Germans and Komites will come to Krehishta and arrest you because your men are partisans. Take your children and run away.

We gathered what we could carry in barrels and we entrusted the cattle to our relatives, and that same night we escaped and hid in the forest far from the village. The next day the Komites came to the village together with the Germans. They did not find what they were looking for but that's why they burned our houses.

At that time I could not understand why we had hidden from those Komites from that nearby village in which we gave and took brides, we were fraternal with many, they say, we were close relatives.

Later I realized that those who were against them, the Germans took to a distant country and burned them there in ovens. Thanks to the good man from the neighbouring village, we stayed alive.

And the Komites, about whom some writers wrote books of praise, stayed alive. They were only victims of cunning swindlers, some robbers, especially of the Vlach houses in Rupishta, others were rapists, and all of them later became victims of long remorse. When they realized the deception, they handed over the rifles they had been given and joined the ELAS reserves and, during the Greek Civil War, hundreds of them carried the deception with them. Only one remained in that village, and all the others died out in distant lands. After the Greek Civil War ended, the Greek government settled Vlachs there who brought thousands of sheep and goats for which the grass of Mali-Madi was not enough and they often found them dead on the mountain rocks. From the poor pastures in Epirus, the Vlachs brought their flocks to worse pastures in the Kostur villages under the slopes of Mali-Madi.

The Greek state did not suffer from their curses and swearing. It simply got rid of the foreign languages.

21

After Italy capitulated, in Kostur, Macedonian political organizations and partisan detachments were more actively alive, separate from the Greek ones, but the worm of disunity, envy and jealousy caused schisms, arguments, divisions and betrayals. In that twilight, the influence of the Greek communists was not absent.

The flame of the struggle against the occupiers in Kostur Region was first ignited by the Macedonians, who, convinced by the Greek communists that after the war they would be guaranteed all their rights, accepted the armed resistance to be waged jointly. They understood the game when the promise turned into domination and deception. In the Greek communist leadership, chauvinism not only smoldered, but flared up and flared up and burned. The Macedonians were called Slavo-Macedonians, to which some of our leaders, most often committee members, also leaned and behaved with unlimited distrust. A group of Macedonians separated from ELAS and, in the Vicho Region, formed their own detachments following the example of the partisans from Vardar Macedonia.

My father, together with several men from the village, joined ELAS, and Kosta, his childhood friend, joined the Macedonian partisan detachments, which crossed over into the Vardar part of Macedonia. His fate, after all his experiences in the Federal Republic of Macedonia, ended on the Prekopan Plain, not far from Kostur, where in November (cold as usual) 1947, as a DAG fighter, he died while fighting the government army.

During the dark times, the words communists, Paoists, EAMists, ELASists, EPONists, SNOFists, NOFists, AFZHists also became embedded in my vocabulary. All with their own leaders, but divided, divided, jealous, scheming and hated. They brought a storm into the minds of my villagers. And in the meantime, others appeared who promised a lot and attracted many with their promises and turned the water to their mill in which they ground their minds.

When I was in school, I remember well the day when soldiers with red stars on their caps and a waving red flag with a yellow star came to the village. They spoke the same way we did, and besides our songs, they also sang songs calling for a fight for a free Macedonia.

They spread out in the village rooms to rest and praised the zelniks the Krchishta housewives made for them. When I woke up the next day, the partisans with the red stars on their caps and the red flag with a yellow star were gone. My mother said that they left after midnight, and my older brother went with them.

They left and did not take with them the young men from my and other Kostur villages, who also wanted to fight under the red flag with a yellow star.

Two days later, my brother and about a dozen of his peers returned home. After going with the soldiers with the red stars on their caps, they shyly said that one of their elders ordered them to return to their homes. The partisans from Vardar Macedonia did not take with them the young men from Kostur who wanted to be dressed like them and wear a red star on their caps. But they did not stay home long. When they heard that over there on the Mali-Madi mountain, the Kostur kapidani danced the same dance, singing the same songs, as those who left my village at night, they shouldered their hidden rifles and joined them. Then our people

carried their own wishes and hopes across the border and joined those who wore red stars on their caps. News reached the village that they had gathered so many that they had created their own army which, after the last battles, they sent to clean up the ballisti and after they had done that, their superiors took their rifles and machine guns and dispersed them to various services. It wasn't long before some other great men returned them to the Lerin, Voden and Kostur Regions and sent them to the forests and rocks of Gramos where they tore off their red stars and sewed the letter delta from the Greek alphabet onto their caps. There they met their relatives who had been forcibly dragged from their warm beds at night. They all became fighters of the Democratic Army of Greece and all their hopes went down the drain.

When I grew up and learned to read and write, I put their courage and dedication to paper, but also their disappointments, humiliation, deception, lost faith and the magnificence of their great aspirations.

Many years later, in Struga, when the Struga Poetry Evenings were taking place, sitting on a bench by the quay, I had a long conversation with Vlado Maleski, who was then the political commissar of the partisans who had red stars on their caps and were waving red flags. They waved a flag with a yellow star and sang songs that even we, the children, the village shepherds and cattlemen, were delighted with and sang loudly. From him I learned that the parties, the CPY and the CPG, had agreed to fight against the occupier on their own territory, which many years ago the kings had divided in Bucharest, even though the partisans on both sides of the border did not want such a border. That, Maleski said, was not a mistake, but a great betrayal. That way, evil would remain evil and in the following years it spread, became more and more terrible and turned into war.

War. A difficult word that everyone was afraid of.

What did it mean?

Later, many years later, in Struga, when the Struga Poetry Evenings were held, together with Vlado Maleski, we sat on a bench by the quay and I told him that I knew many Macedonian partisan songs that were sung in my village by soldiers who had arrived with red stars on their caps and a red flag with a yellow star, and that I still know those songs today.

From him I learned that the two communist parties had agreed that each would fight against the occupier on its own territory, which the kings had assigned to each other in Bucharest many years ago, even though the Macedonian partisans on both sides of the border did not want such a border. Thus, evil remained evil and in the following months and years it spread, became more and more terrible and turned into war. For us, from that part of Macedonia, new and most horrible...

Maleski lit a new cigarette (he smoked a lot) let out thick gray smoke through his nose, sighed deeply, glanced at Galichicha and said in a sad voice:

- Yes... then we didn't take the Kostur boys...

- So you were also with those who had caps with red stars on their heads and were flying a red flag with a yellow star?

- I was... - he said with a heavy sigh.

After a long silence, staring somewhere at the peaks of Galichicha, Maleski said:

- The Kostur boys, whom we did not collect, were gathered by the Greek communists into the ranks of ELAS with empty promises and died for Greece... The black cloud

overshadowed Macedonia again - Maleski sighed deeply and lit a new cigarette.

The conversation was cut short.

I understood.

Macedonia's fate is not measured by length and width, but by pain, humiliation, divisions, jealousy, betrayals and external turmoil, which together are its greatest ailments.

We sat silently on the bench and stared at the clear waters of the Drim, I felt that something was deep in our thoughts, both for him and for me.

He stubbed out the lit cigarette and lit a new one. After a short silence, he said:

- It was not our fault....

At that moment, Vlado Maleski's words over the Drim sounded like the words of Nikola Jonkov Vapcharov...

We sat silently on the bench and watched as the waters of the Drim calmly flowed and flowed.

22

The Great War (WW II) ended, but another war began in Kostur Region that returned the former order to my villagers. While in Athens ELAS was fighting for a new government against the supporters of the new government, which the British came to help, after that the so-called white terror began here in our places. Armed gangs of former police officers, teachers, officers and Greeks with the help of the Madjirs, as we called the Greeks, who, according to the agreement between Greece and Turkey, after Greece's catastrophic defeat in the war with Turkey, carried out a population exchange based on ethnic and religious

affiliation. The Greek government settled about six hundred thousand Christian Asia Minor settlers and colonists from Turkey in the new territories (Macedonia) in the houses of the expelled Turks and Muslim Macedonians, which changed the ethnic composition of the population in Aegean Macedonia. Many Kostur villages became binational and bilingual. Basically, the settlers were a large amorphous illiterate mass (did not speak or read Greek) with more of a Turkish than a Greek sense of self. They did not speak Greek, but a dialect that even the Greeks themselves did not understand, and in most cases their family language was Turkish, and over time, due to close contacts with the local Macedonian population, they gradually began to learn the Macedonian language. But in that turbulent and murky time after the occupation, a large number of them, fed up with Greek nationalism and hatred for the Endopians (Macedonians), took the opportunity to join the Greek police and the army, which had begun the hunt for fighters against fascism and opponents of the new order. They took advantage of this situation to attack the Macedonian villages and plunder them.

My people from Krchishta prepared for defense in time. They formed pairs on duty who, by ringing the bell and blowing the trumpet, called the villagers from the fields, gardens and other things to come home, to lock the gates or outside the village to guard the cattle.

One night, the Madjiris surrounded the village and, in order to scare the villagers, from time to time they shot at them. My villagers were already prepared for defense. Some who had hidden rifles, made use of them and held the Madjirs at gunpoint.

In the morning, my grandfather Giorgij did not take with him the old shotgun that was hung above the chimney and, leaning on the old crutch, went to talk to one of the Madjirs, with whom he had long been acquainted at the market in Kostur.

- Sit here and listen - he told him. - You started the job badly, Stamatidis. Sit down, don't stand like a priest over a dead man's head. Take a seat, light a cigarette, and tell me if you have forgotten our kindness. Have you forgotten when you, expelled from Turkey, were settled by the authorities with your family in the village Sveta Nedela? The authorities gave you foreign land and a foreign house, but they didn't give you bread. That's how it was, wasn't it? We gave you all the bread you needed. You came with entire families to Krchishta, which you now call Polyanemos, and you begged us Endopians, as you call us, for a piece of bread! That's how it was, wasn't it? And we gave you, not a piece, but whole loaves and full sacks of flour. It wasn't the state, but we who fed you, who with outstretched hands begged in front of the church and in front of our doors. And you, the poor people, expelled from your native homes in Turkey and Athens during the hungry years of the war, were saved from starvation by Macedonia, from which you want to expel us. Now you return our kindness to you with plunder and hatred. Cutting down our forests, you shout at us: "One, two, three, let the Polyanemites flee to Bulgaria."⁵ Have you forgotten our kindness? Aren't you ashamed?

With his head bowed, Kyrios Stamatidis stood up, bowed his head and went to his people, shouted something to them and they all took the return path.

23

I remember, before the Madjirs came to plunder, women with small children came to the village. They knocked on the doors and with outstretched hands and a plea in their eyes, they

⁵ One, two, three, let the Polyanemites flee to Bulgaria

begged for a piece of bread for which they offered gold rings, earrings, chains with the image of the Virgin Mary and Christ.

Dono Popov told the men who gathered in the village tavern in the evening not to accept any gifts from the poor people, but to give them what they need, which is why they came hungry and their children are hungry and they want to take a piece of bread to their own who are starving. Haven't you heard that there is a great famine in Athens and people on the streets are dying of hunger? They are ashamed and with bowed heads, humbly extend their hands for a piece of bread, and hunger has forced them to such humiliation. Don't commit a sin, give them something.

This is what Dono Popov said and without saying another word, went home from where he came out, holding in his bosom two loaves of bread and cheese on a plate.

And I still can't forget when a child came up to me and stretched out his hand in front of me. He was weak and crying and with his other hand he pointed to his open mouth. I understood that he wanted to eat. I ran home and without anyone seeing me, I took a large corn husk, hid it under my arm and went to the child who was waiting at the door. I gave him the bread, and he hugged me and kept saying - ephcharisto, ephcharisto, and I didn't understand what those words meant. Later I learned that ephcharisto means - thank you. The women and children with full bags disappeared the next day. They went away full and returned home with bags full of bread. At that bad time, Athens was starving, and Macedonia saved the Athenians from starvation.

24

A week after we fed the hungry who had come from Athens, a dozen policemen came to the village. They had a list of men's names whom they gathered at the church. They asked them

to hand over their rifles. The men said that they had handed over the rifles to the police in Kostur in accordance with the law. They did not believe them. They beat them all day. They also beat my cousin Tinka, because she had participated in the youth congress in Skopje in 1945. They locked them in the church at night, and the next day they tied them up and lined them up and announced that they would be taken to be shot. The villagers gathered in front of the church. Dono Popov came out of the crowd, wiped the blood from his son's face with his handkerchief, looked at the policemen in turn with a frown, and then asked:

- Who is in charge here?

A short, mustachioed man stood up in front of Dono Popov, pointing a gun at his chest, and shouted:

- I am, you bastard!

Dono took a step forward, straightened up in front of the mustached man and said:

- Kyrie (Sir in Greek), if you don't want blood to be shed here, then let the people go and leave. Come back tomorrow with an arrest warrant. There will be no raid here today. And one more thing. Send away those who came to rob us. We respect you as civil servants, but the robbers will have a hard time. If they don't leave, we know how to send them away.

The mustached man stepped back and said:

- We, Kyrie, in the name of the law, just wanted them to hand over their guns... But, you know that's what the law requires...

- The law or the fist? – Dono asked angrily. – Let the people go and go back where you came from. We know your laws.

That was the first push-back my villagers made against the Greek violence.

Meanwhile, armed groups appeared in the Kostur forests, defending the Kostur villagers from the arbitrariness of the authorities and the looting carried out by the Madjirs.

25

The Great War ended, but a new one began in Greece. Lazo explained to the villagers how and why that new war began in Athens.

- ELAS - he said - fought in Athens against Greek nationalists and armed bandits who collaborated with the Nazi Germans, and when the former Greek rulers took power, ELAS opposed it and the British came to the aid of the new Greek government. Fighting was waged all over Athens. The British brought a lot of troops, tanks, cannons and planes, they fought against ELAS so that the communists would not come to power. And in the end, they agreed that ELAS would hand over their weapons, and that five communist ministers would enter the government, who after a short time resigned. And here began the great quarrel and hatred between the Greeks, who hated each other so much that they started a fratricidal war.

At that moment, someone present, crossing himself and said:

- May God forbid it from coming to this...
- We don't know what is going to happen. The devil never sleeps - someone added.

Lazo didn't tell them that during those days in his house, ELAS commanders and famous Greek and Macedonian activists, who, persecuted by the authorities, sought salvation by fleeing

from Greece to Albania and from there returning to Yugoslavia, where they found refuge in Bulkes, a large and beautiful village where Germans used to live but were expelled by the Yugoslav authorities after World War II ended. That was what was said.

Toothless grandfather Ilio, who always chewed tobacco, spat on the side and asked:

- Is it true, brother Lazo, that people come to see you at night and left in the dark about whom it is said that...

- What are you trying to say, Ilio, they were the captains who were running away to hide...?

- They were not running away, but hiding so as not to be caught. It is said that the authorities have started setting up prisons and camps on the islands and there they will take those who do not like the new government and the king. That is why they, the great ones, are running away...

- Okay, they will be running away and hiding but what will we do, those of us who will stay at home? I can't say, but I am afraid that we, instead of them, will end up being persecuted and filling the prisons and camps because we helped them with everything we could. Is that true or not? - said grandfather Ilio.

- Uncle Ilio – Lazo replied – don't be afraid. Wherever they go, they will prepare well and then they will come back to liberate us.

- You say they will come back and then we will have to feed them again, right, we will have to make their beds for them and give them everything again. Is that right?

- No, Uncle Ilio. They will not be alone. The democratic states will help in the new liberation struggle. I have heard that

Stalin told those great men from the democratic countries to help with everything they have to win the revolution.

- And I tell you – Grandpa Ilio said - that we will be the ones being persecuted. And those who are already hiding there, God forbid, let them not fight and quarrel, as they did here. I hear that they are taking the wives and children of our great men there. Well Lazo, you've been forcing us to give everything for the struggle all this time, and I'm sure that those who are hiding now, if they come back, will also bet on you to again to force us to give. So we'll give, I say, if the stakes are ours, right? They'll come back, you say? And until they do, who who will be persecuted, eh?

- That's it, that's it, they'll hide, and we will pay the price. Is that right or not? – someone shouted from the corner.

The argument lasted until late at night about who and why was running away and hiding and who would pay the price.

26

The year 1946 passed with both joy and fear.

The sight will forever remain in my memory when I saw the girls in the middle of the village dressed in the folk costumes of their grandmothers. Woven and rolled dresses and gyurdias (vests), embroidered with red and black yarn, a belt with large silver buckles, a necklace embroidered with silver thread on which countless beads of various colours were strung, colourful headkerchiefs on their heads, shiny silk aprons around their waists, and colourful knitted woolen socks on their feet. Two by two or three by three, holding each other under their arms, they gathered in the yard in front of the church and, singing old songs, they unwound and spun the colourful chain of the dance that revolved in a circle to the playing of the kaval, the melody of the

zurla and the thunder of the drum, the echo of which, like thunder, was carried beyond the hills, filled the hollows and valleys and bounced from rock to rock.

It was cheerful. The song and dance from which our day and our time from which all dreams, aspirations and expectations sprang. When the kaval blew, when the zurla whistled, when the drum beat, then life in my village roared.

Only that day and never again have I seen those beautiful costumes and that beauty of the girls that radiated with all the colours, which were a mark left by older times.

The next day, the new rulers arrived, with anger and malice, wished to erase that mark forever, as if it were a thorn in their side. Everything that was different from theirs had to be covered by darkness.

And the following year, when the evil of the Greek Civil War raged, at sunset the same girls would pass through my village, and then I would not see colourful headkerchiefs on their heads, but only military caps with a sewn-on letter „Δ,, instead of grandmother's robes, I saw old soldier's blouses and patched soldier's overcoats and trousers. I did not see braids strung on silver thread, belts with buckles, but rows of bullets, I did not see a dance in the yard, but a long column with clattering military boots on the village cobblestones, I did not see water jugs on their shoulders, but patched backpacks and bags filled with cartridges and grenades.

Then I wondered where the beauty that adorned my entire village was? Something told me that many of the girls, who were fraudulently gathered at the end of August 1947, were kept in the trench, in the bunker, behind the rock, were getting dirty during the long night marches under the rain, in the high snowdrifts,

some remained in a shallow, narrow mound covered with a little overturned earth and more with a pile of branches.

I stood staring at their faces and at the mothers who stood in front of the doors with their arms crossed on their chests, hoping to see their offspring.

The girls were leaving, leaving behind their passions and dreams. The girls were going to battle. Who would stay on the battlefield? Who would pass through the village not as a girl, but as a soldier going to battle? Will a song or a wail cover the village?

I wondered about this and I really, really wanted to see the girls dressed in the old Macedonian folk costumes again, in which their beauty shone. I had a great desire to see them like that once and many more times.

I wanted to see them so much and I returned home very sad.

When I remember this, I feel something boiling inside me because in the mountains and hills, behind rocks, beaten by the earth and burned by the sky, in long night marches and in cold dugouts, our girls left their youth...

27

Past the thickly grown blackberry bushes, where there used to be houses, a narrow road now stretches, covered with dried grass. It used to be the longest cobblestone street in the village, which we called - the long alley.

In the evening, after the cattle, pigs, sheep and goats were collected from the pastures, the long alley became a promenade. The young people of the village, after their work was done, washed clean and dressed in what was the newest and most

beautiful, would go out for a walk every evening. The upper and lower neighbourhoods were connected by a lively colourful, intelligent and quietly singing chain. The girls, taken by the hand, dragged the village boys, combed like a duck and thickly smeared with brilliantine, two or three behind them or beside them, winking at them surreptitiously, twirling colourful rosaries or colourful chains around their index fingers.

The most visible were Micho and Lefka. Dressed in the newest city clothes, they caused envy and jealousy. They always held hands, and most often hugged, which the older villagers looked at with reproach.

On the village square and the promenade, Micho and Lefka brought out and revealed their youthful passion in the face of gossip, jealousy and shamelessness, and from there they transferred it to the meadows, walking between the rows of freshly cut grass and inhaling the intoxicating scent of young hay, resting under the shade of the willows, filling their open hands with water from the fountains or springs and cooling each other off. They walked holding hands both during the day and at night, scented with intoxicating scents bought from Solun or Kostur.

The promenade, instead of bread, smelled of brilliantine with which the boys thickly smeared their hair, thinking that the more greasy the smeared hair was, the more they would attract the attention of the girls. And so the youth replaced the shayak (folk vest) with city costumes and dresses and the opinci (pig skin slippers) with shoes. The young people on the village promenade walked their youth under the sky that was blazing with fire in the light of the countless stars and the full moon that bound their shadows. No one in the village had ever seen such shame before a wedding. The women crossed themselves and covered their eyes with their hands. And the old people, sitting in the church porch, watching how some walked nestled next to each other, with an

angry look did not approve of such a posture. Some looked with mockery, others with jealousy and still others with regret and sighs for the past years that had been filled with the plow, the hoe, the sickle, the shovel, the axe and herding cattle.

Something new was coming to the village. It came out of the darkness and into the light. Time changed the youth, changed both the people and the village.

Micho and Lefka, despite the gossip, did not stop spreading the warmth, light and fire of their passion. They spread it on the village promenade until the moon set and the sky was filled with stars. Theirs was the serenity of dawn and the first songs of the early birds. Theirs was the first ray of sunrise.

They, Micho and Lefka, were the first on the promenade to extract and discover youthful passion from the village darkness, gossip, shamelessness and jealousy and transfer it not only to the village square, but also to the meadows, to the green meadows, to the lush grass with blooming white daisies from which they wove colourful flower garlands, they walked along the paths on whose banks the blue sky caught their eye, they lay down under the shadows of the trees, under the silver light of the full moon and under a sky looking like it was beaded with stars, they walked hand in hand, smelling the scents of the gardens and orchards, inhaling the sweet scent of the daffodil, the thyme and the horebound (*Marrubium vulgare*), the blooming apple and cherry trees and the scent of the meadows, the mowed grass, the forests and the eared wheat on the promenade blown by the summer air. Nursing women and mothers-in-laws, and mostly those whose youth had already withered, looked on with mockery, others with jealousy and still others with dreams and sighs for their past freshness of youth.

Micho and Lefka walked their youth when the heavenly firmament was fiery with the light of the full moon. They, Micho

and Lefka, on the village promenade conveyed and discovered the youthful passion of attachment despite the voices that were a response to the village shame and anger.

Micho and Lefka openly walked their youth in the village and outside the village. In the evenings the light of the full moon bound their shadows.

Women crossed themselves when they saw them hugging each other. Something new came to the village, an unknown sight, which through curses and gossip came to light from the darkness.

Times are changing people. New winds blew from Kostur, brought from Solun, where life flowed along other waterways, unlike those that had been nested in the old customs and relationships between people for centuries. Such a sight was carried by the wind of the new time, which in the village was loved by some, cursed by others.

The bearer was Micho, who returned to the village after his education in Solun. Dressed in a city costume, combed like a duck, as the boys in Solun combed themselves, some aroused jealousy and envy, others approval. In the village, Micho carried himself as his father wanted and, for his appearance, he did not want the small change he received from the people of Solun who rode in his cart. The older villagers, especially the women, cursed and anathematized him because his city attire had a bad influence on the youth. Not everyone could be dressed like Micho. Solun was slowly entering Krchishta.

The girls also took off their thick folk dresses. They began to dress themselves in old, worn out American women's dresses distributed by UNRA. They started looking like city girls, although many of the dresses had no buttons. The three daughters

of the village serf would sew buttons at night, and old man Shkoklo would sell them at the markets in Rupishta and Kostur.

The long walks in the vicinity of the village were for Micho and Lefka. The intoxicating scent of meadow and forest flowers from which they wove wreaths, the freshly cut grass, the early morning and evening singing of birds, the pearly morning dew, the cold shadows of blooming lilacs, the ruddy sunsets of the sun, the evening gilding of the full moon, the distant winks of the stars, the long, passionate, heartfelt sincere kiss on the forehead, eyes, cheeks, warm embraces were theirs. Everything was theirs. As if on a loom, their dreams were woven.

And what was that?

28

I remember that throughout 1946, my villagers were dragged through police stations and courts, and for us, the children, the authorities opened a school in godmother Meljovitysa's abandoned house. They arranged the school desks in the large room. The school, which was built where the mosque used to be, was taken over by the army and housed soldiers.

At the same time, several men went to Kostur to buy textbooks with money they had collected from the children's parents.

The high snowdrifts prevented the textbooks from being delivered on time, and the teacher gathered the old men to teach them Greek. He taught them but he failed to teach anyone anything, and that is why he always called them chondrocephali - fat-heads.

The children were divided into classes according to their ages, and I, then a boy of almost ten, was put in the first grade

together with my friend Kiro at the same desk. The lesson began with the prayer **Pater imon - Our Father**, which we learned word for word all week. Then came the teaching of the alphabet.

During one of my clases the teacher called me over and, while facing all the students, told me to say the Greek alphabet. I was doing well at the beginning, but somewhere in the middle I lost a letter. That cost me a slap on the face. Then he called Kiro, who shouted the alphabet in a frightened voice, sweating, but somewhere near the end a letter escaped him. The teacher's fingers turned his left cheek red. No one managed to say the whole alphabet correctly. Then the teacher told us to each bring a stick of wood the next day. Kiro and Iane brought fragile willow sticks, and I brought a slightly thicker dogwood stick. The teacher ordered us in front of the students and called Kiro to say the alphabet first, but he somehow missed a letter. His right cheek was burning again. Iane, already scared, reached the letter delta and his voice cut off. He started from the beginning again, but somewhere he got lost again. The teacher slapped both of them again and made them stand on one leg in the donkey's corner. It was my turn again and I was losing letters again. The teacher took his dogwood stick and began to hit me:

- Left hand – fras, right hand – fras.

My hands started to turn red and feel hot.

He hit, and the dogwood stick didn't even bend, let alone break.

- Left hand - he shouted louder. I held out my left hand and I felt the hit burn like fire.

- Right hand - I held out my right hand and again I felt the hit burn like fire.

And so – left, right, left, right and my hands could barely stand the pain.

I didn't moan, but gritted my teeth and felt my hands burning and stinging, burning me, filling me with heat and the pain began to spread to my shoulders.

The clenching of my teeth and silence enraged the teacher. It seemed that he wanted to hear me begging, crying, moaning. I held out my left hand, then my right, and he hit and hit and stopped when blood started to flow from my cut hands.

I went home with bloody hands hanging down. My mother ground up some onions, applied it to a cloth and bandaged my hands with it. When my father returned from the café, he asked me why my hands were bandaged. I told him that the teacher had beaten me because I had made a mistake reciting the alphabet. I didn't finish telling him everything, because he slapped my mouth shut with a strong slap. Even now I can't say whether my hands or the slap hurt more.

Since then I still hate the teacher, the alphabet and my father.

29

In my private archive I keep a photograph in which almost half of the young people from my village are captured. Date: May 8, 1946. The photograph was taken in the meadows near the church of the Holy Theologian. The holiday was called Telok and the locality is called Telok. I don't know where and how it came from and what that name means. In the picture, everyone is dressed in the then fashionable city clothes, some bought in

Kostur and most received from UNRA. Smiling and from their faces you can see that they are well-fed and satisfied.

There is not a single sad face among them and, as was the fashion at the time, when they take pictures smiling, many of the men hold a cigarette in their hand or mouth.

The always smiling Kosta caught my eye. Next to Kosta I see the young people, boys and girls, and I know, but not by name, who died in the Greek Civil War. I know that some remained alive and were disabled. I hope that maybe the two little bare-headed children and the girl with whom I was baptized in the same water are also alive. In the picture I recognize Nove, a political prisoner from June 1946 to July 1974. A communist, faithful to his ideals. I recognize my first cousin, Tinka, who was beaten the most by the police because she participated in the First Congress of Macedonian Youth in Skopje. Next to her was my sister Tsilka, an artilleryperson in DAG, decorated for courage. I also recognized my relative Donka, AFZH activist, the first from the village to join the partisans in early 1947. Her voice was a voice calling for freedom. The road took her through all the Kostur villages and finally took her to distant Tashkent, and then returned her to Skopje, where she rests in peace. Here is Geljo, with a cigarette in his right hand. He spent ten years of his life in prison. A communist. He rests in Kostur. It was said that almost all of them were members of EPON. In the middle I see my first cousins Niko and Laki. The disheveled Niko, my first cousin, never picked up a hoe or a sickle. The money his father and brother sent from Detroit was enough for him. The labourers were sweating, and he, lying under the old almond trees, was setting up the only gramophone in the village and all his effort was in changing the records. His favorite record was the one on which two girls from the gramophone were laughing loudly. The laughter was so loud that it made all the villagers laugh contagiously. At the end of 1946, my first cousins Laki, Gorgi

and Niko went to Kostur to receive the “books” that their fathers had sent them from America so that they could join them in the labour camp. Thus, in June 1947, they were saved from the forced mobilization, but Laki and Gorgi’s mother, my aunt Kata, whom we called old mother, was not saved. Brought by the village dreamers for a lot of bread without work, she was arrested and sent to the Prespa camp. There they asked her to write to her sons to go to the mountains. She did not want to write such a letter. Instead of a letter, she dug trenches together with others like her, carried logs on her shoulder to build bunkers and dug tunnels to hide weapons. She was sent to the camp by the civil servant, and then she was working on a collective farm in Romania. Unfortunately, before she got off the plane in Toronto, Uncle Vane, her husband, on the way to the airport, had a car accident and did not get up again. Mama Stara came to Skopje in her old age, told us about her own and other people’s common pain. And then she went to Kingston in Canada where she now rests next to Uncle Vane.

In the picture next to her cousin Lucky, is the tall girl, tall and with long hair. I don’t know her name, just as I don’t know the names of most of those in the picture, I know that she is from the Nanovtsi family. There were three sisters who, in May 1946, left for America to be with their father. I remember that month and that year well and all the following years. In the spring of 1946, a large number of my villagers left for Australia, Canada and America, and most of the young boys and girls were forcibly mobilized into DAG in June and August 1947. Most of them did not return from the battlefields. With a cigarette in his raised hand is Naso Shkoklo. The only one who was a spy in the village. He escaped with his whole family to Kostur on the night of the forced mobilization. During the Greek Civil War, he served in the Greek government paramilitary units and actively participated in the battles against DAG. For his courage against his own people, the

state awarded him many decorations and for many years after the war he was the director of the sports football club and the stadium in Kostur. In 1987 I had the opportunity to meet him in Kostur. We spoke in our language and then, with tears in his eyes, he told me that he very much regretted taking the other side.

Above, in the middle, is Lefka Kirova, who was seriously wounded and died in Lake Prespa on August 14, 1949. And not only her. I know that most of them died in Gramos, Vicho, Mali-Madi, Voden, Lerin, and those who remained alive, most often the wounded were treated in Korcha, Elbasan, Katlanovo, Jasenov, and then they reached Tashkent, in distant Uzbekistan. None of them remained there. They moved to what was then Yugoslavia and are buried in Skopje, Kumanovo, Tetovo, Bitola, in Australia, Canada, America. The Skopje cemeteries were filled with pain and pride when they sent their comrades from the 18th, 102nd, 103rd, 105th, 107th brigades. Silently, with a heavy soul and many whispered words of remembrance. They walked in formation as if in battle, and their steps were quiet but sure, they walked with the steps of a military march. They left behind sons and daughters and grandchildren. Everything they experienced went with them. I feel a great void because I was unable to write down their memories, or even their names. If anything remains of them, those are the pictures that I often see. In them, they always seem alive to me...

Nove also seems alive to me.

In the picture, he lies in the first row, with his head leaning on the shoulder of my cousin Tinka. I remember how she was beaten to death because she participated in the first congress of Macedonian youth held in Skopje. She did not stay there. She returned and brought the Ratsin's book in her arms, from which we learned many hopeful poems. It now seems to me as if he was staring into some distance that filled his eyes. I remember that the

morning after the forced mobilization in June 1947, he, together with Geljo (in the picture, the one standing upright, dressed in a then fashionable suit and with a cigarette in his right hand leaning on his right hip) set off for Lobanitsa to return the livestock taken from the Shkoklovi by those who had mobilized them. It was early when they reached the Field above which the Stenite hill rises (called Faltsata on military maps). Government soldiers came down from there, led by Naso, the son of old Shkoklov. They tied them up and took them to Kostur. The military court sentenced Geljo to ten years in prison, and Nove to twelve. Geljo, charged without evidence, served his sentence in the Kostur prison, and Nove first in the same prison, where he was held in solitary confinement for three years, and then he was sent for re-education to the infamous Makronisos island. And as long as the Greek Civil War lasted, he was there sweeping sand, crushing stones, barefoot on sharp gravel, carrying heavy stones on his neck and his shoulders to one shore of the island and immediately returning them to the same place, carrying water in a sieve and being beaten every day. And during those same days of his re-education, his two brothers died on Gramos, and in the military hospital in Bucharest. A skilled surgeon shortened both of his sister's legs above the knees. She was a DAG fighter. After two years in the boarding school for the disabled, he met a kindred spirit with whom he had four children and named them all after the names of his deceased brothers and his mother, who sat on the threshold of the half-burnt house in the village every day, waiting, hoping her offspring would return. She did not see them again.

With the change of government in 1954, those who did not share his views were released from the island hell, but not Nove. He was transferred to the prison in Larissa. According to the law, he was supposed to serve the remainder of the sentence that the military court had sentenced him to, which had declared him a dangerous and incorrigible communist.

His Bible was Marx's Capital. He deeply believed in the communist idea and he always tried with great effort to convey that faith to those with whom he shared the damp cells in various prisons in Greece. In the long night conversations, full of arguments that sometimes led to quarrels and swearing, he struggled to explain the concepts of dictatorship and democracy even to the literate and semi-literate communist prisoners.

Those who remained alive passed on some of what Nove told them in the prison cell, and in the meetings and conversations with them I also remembered something.

This is what Nove told them:

- Dictatorship, my comrades, in my opinion is the power of an individual or a group or a social class, whose power is not limited by anything and does not rely on laws, but on obedience and physical force. We are experiencing its virtues today...

- The dictatorship of the proletariat, about which we are sitting here, how will you explain it? – someone from an invisible dark corner asked.

- The same – said Nove.

- The same, huh?! – the same voice protested. – And you should know that because of your opinion, our party organization in this prison expelled you from the party. How does the party teach us? What does the leader say? Have you forgotten? The word or the party's decision is stronger than prison. In prison you have company, and with the party's decision you are thrown out of the middle, you are alone with your conviction or foolishness. The party's decision is a trial without a lawyer.

Silence in the cell. Frozen silence. A dry, tuberculous cough, he whispered softly:

- Nove, now it is difficult to address you as a friend. We all voted democratically...

At that moment, Nove slowly got up, knelt in front of the bucket with the dirt and vomited for a long time.

When he finished vomiting, he returned to his rug and said:

- The word democracy was invented by the rulers. Those individuals or groups who want to come to power at any cost. That word is their religion. Democracy is not an idea, but a form in which supposedly the rule is in the hands of the people, that they rule in the name of the people, who are most often deceived by many promises. For rulers, democracy, I say, is like the plow in the hands of the plowman or the sickle in the hands of the reaper, who, if he holds it loosely, gathers the fruit of mental torment, as if he were holding a stick in his hands with which he beats his head. Democracy is a stick with which the plowman forces the oxen to keep a straight furrow. Democracy, my friends and gentlemen, is a form of government in which in various ways the rulers of the demos, I mean the poor citizen, recognize freedom of speech and opinion, political rights and ensuring participation in government, but only to those who think like them. The most successful weapon in their hands is the promise, which in practice is a big lie. And only then, for those who do not think like them, their power is applied. Here we are, here we are the consequence of their power. It was the same in the Athenian agora where the powerful deceived their slaves, and allowed them to say even something that tormented them. And then you know. The slave remains a slave. In the past, as now, rulers promise and at the same time build prisons and camps for those who do not share their views. Democracy is not an idea, but a great deception. In history and now, the word most used by rulers or those who want to come to power is democracy. Mussolini's fascists and Hitler's Nazis and Stalin's Bolsheviks said it, and those who later

learned from them and those who came or will come after them. Power, power, gentlemen - comrades, and the path to coming to power is a lie. The most important thing is to come to power. And even with someone else's help, without the delicious smell of the greenback, and even with betrayal. Is this democracy in a country that has had two civil wars, two or three military dictatorships, and hundreds of prisons and camps scattered across the Aegean islands, and which forbids some of its citizens from speaking their native language, from feeling who they are, from being the heirs of those who were and want to be who they are. For that, they are guilty, and the guilty one is to be punished. Do you remember? And we who are here, sitting or lying next to this bucket full of shit... dream and use the word democracy with our mouths full. The lie of hope...

And those who remained alive and sick or disabled and during or after the Greek Civil War took the path that took them to foreign countries, often heard the word democracy. No one returned to the ashes of their village, and those prisoners Nove mentioned often, who loved the word democracy so much, their bucket in the corner of their prison cell was the fullest.

He had just been released from prison in 1959. While traveling by bus to Kostur, he borrowed the newspaper "Eleftherotypia" from his companion on July 7, 1959, and leafing through it, the following article caught his eye:

"The residents of the beautiful Kostur village of Krija Nera,⁶ who until now have spoken a foreign dialect in addition to Greek, moved by the excellent initiative of the patriotic population of Karidja-Ptolemaida,⁷ spontaneously decided in the presence of the local authorities to swear that they would completely forget that language and that in the future they, as well

⁶ Macedonian name Ludovo

⁷ Macedonian name Krpeshina

as their sons, would speak exclusively in Greek. The villagers, repeating word for word the oath read by the blessed metropolitan, in an extremely moving atmosphere, swore, each raising his right hand.”

When he finished reading, he said out loud:

- Ντροπη! (Shame)

The companion turned to Nove and asked:

- Γιατη? (Why?)

Nove pointed to the article.

The companion opened his bag, took out the newspaper “Vima”, turned to the first page and said:

- Read this.

Nove read slowly in a low voice:

„ I promise before God, before the people and before the official authorities of our country, that from today on I will stop speaking in the Slavic idiom which is only a false pretext for the enemies of our country, the Bulgarians, and that I will always and everywhere speak only the Greek language in which the Holy Gospel of our Christ is written.”

Returning the newspaper, he said:

- This is a mirror of Greek democracy...

Nove went from Kostur to see his native Krchishta. He saw only ruins and a silent, deaf wilderness.

He returned to Athens, where in a rented room, he earned his daily bread by working whole days on an old sewing machine, mending the old, worn-out trousers of poor Athenians and telling them about what he had read in Greek newspapers years ago,

convincing them that it was a great shame to ban the mother tongue.

One morning in April 1967, two men in civilian clothing knocked on his door, tied him up and took him to the police station. There he learned that the colonels had come to power in Greece. And while they were convincing him that this was a new era of democracy in Greece, Nove heard the noise of tanks, loud shouts and curses. After an hour, they took him to prison, explaining to him that he was a danger to the new democratic order. In July 1974, the dictatorship of the colonels fell and Nove was free. A few years later, the new democrats from PASOK told him that if he wanted his passport back, he had to sign that he was Greek by birth.

Unlike the other people, in this book I have dedicated a wider space to Nove because the space in prisons and camps was very narrow for him.

I am returning the picture to the album. In it, while the light lasts, the stars and the moon shine in the sky, may everyone remain as they were – joyful, cheerful, smiling – hopeful. And those who are not in the picture, may they remain in peace where fate has taken them and in my memory I forever want to see them alive at least in the picture.

But let's get back to Kosta.

Kosta, after the clash with ELAS, together with the Macedonian partisan detachments, defected to Yugoslavia and after the disbandment of the Aegean Brigade, due to his good knowledge of the Greek and Albanian languages, was recruited into the special services in Belgrade. After some training, he was assigned, together with an Albanian lieutenant, to hunt down the remains of the Ballisti. When the Greek Civil War began, he joined the Democratic Army of Greece on assignment. The

information he collected in his own way was sent to Belgrade with a secret code personally for the head of the secret service.

After DAG's defeat, its remnants crossed into Albania, where members of the Albanian army and the secret services disarmed them, and in the process, Kosta's Albanian collaborator, now with the rank of major, recognized Kosta and, after a person from the CPG leadership claimed that he was Tito's agent, the former Albanian collaborator arrested him. The Albanian military court sentenced Kosta to twelve years in prison on charges of being a Yugoslav spy. Kosta spent time in prison, broke stones, worked in mines, starved, fell ill, and was often punished with starvation and beatings.

I learned about the fate of the always smiling and cheerful Kosta from my relatives to whom he confided. I often asked him to tell me what he had experienced in Albanian prisons, camps and mines and why he had returned to Yugoslavia and why, when he came from Belgrade to Skopje, he was arrested and imprisoned in Idrizovo.

And here is what I found out:

- I served my twelve years in prison in Albania with honour, says Kosta, laughing. They let me out of prison and somehow decently dressed and gave me shoes. I asked to be allowed to go to Yugoslavia. They told me that I could not go there, but to some other socialist country. While serving in prison and in camps I had befriended a Romanian man from whom I had learned the Romanian language, I asked to be sent to Romania. They put me on a plane and dropped me off at the airport in Bucharest. There I was met by a stranger, who put me in a car and we went straight to a two-story building. They told me that this was the headquarters of the CPG Central Committee. They called me, questioned me, and then the same man took me out of town where he put me in a shack where there were several thin and

withered men. Every day they brought us some slop to eat. One day I secretly went into town and asked where the Yugoslav embassy was. People looked at me in amazement and hurried to get away from me as quickly as possible, and from the other side of the street I saw two people watching me. I realized they were following me. I went back to the shack. The following days I snuck out again and set out to find the Yugoslav embassy. I finally succeeded. I found it, but the guard wouldn't let me in. I stood aside and waited. And those two people kept an eye on me. At one point I noticed that the iron entrance door to the embassy was opening and a limousine was slowly approaching, and at that moment I rushed in, passed by it, and ran as fast as I could to the door of the embassy. The guards ran to catch me but they didn't succeed. A middle-aged man got out of the limousine, signaled for them not to chase me, and asked me what I was looking for. I told him I was looking for the ambassador. The man said: - That's me, come with me. We went up to the first floor. A large office, thick carpets, wide soft armchairs, and a large portrait of Tito on the wall. The ambassador pointed to an armchair for me to sit and then I started telling him who I was. We talked for maybe two hours. The ambassador came up to me, handed me a glass of water, and asked me in Serbian:

- And who was your boss?

- I'm not allowed to tell, I said.

- He sat down next to me, looked at me for a long time, and said:

- Do you remember your code name and the code name of your boss? -I froze. After a long silence, I stood up, military-style I straightened up, raised my left fist - that's how in those days we saluted, and I said:

- Comrade Chief - I said and gave him my code name - reporting in.

The ambassador was my chief. We huddled together, he called a friend, and ordered her to bring drinks. I spent the night in the embassy where I stayed for a week. One day, in the morning, my chief came into the room and said:

- Get ready. Today you are flying to Belgrade where you will call this phone number. Remember the number. Then three men came and put me in a trunk. And so I arrived in Belgrade in a trunk and called the phone number I had memorized. A car arrived and went straight to the building where my office was. I was greeted by some very young people. A drink, coffee and then a friend came in and put a large envelope in front of me. She said this is your salary. I had been on the payroll the whole time I was away. I left for Skopje with a bunch of money in my pocket, and settled in a home for the disabled. After about ten days, two civilians came and told me to go with them. They put me in a blue van and took me to Idrizovo. They interrogated me all day and didn't believe me, because I didn't have any documents to prove who I was. You see, these were times when people trusted a piece of paper more than an honest word. I spent the night in a daze. In the morning, I remembered. I asked to see the investigators. They came. I told them to take me to Kriva Palanka. We went. I found my old girlfriend's house. I rang the bell. A woman about my age came out, already gray-haired. She stood there and looked at me for a long time. I looked at her too, and finally I said:

- Yes, it's me. She looked at me and looked at me. I again said - It's me, Kosta. With tears in her eyes, she hugged me and invited me in. We went in. After we had our coffee, I asked her: - Katerina, do you still have the suitcase I left with you when I left? She went out and returned with it in her hand. It was my suitcase.

She slowly and gently reached for it like she was reaching for a baby, she handed it to me crying, and said quietly:

- I waited for you for fifteen years and kept the suitcase, and you, you fool, where have you been wandering?

The suitcase contained all my documents and this photograph.

That was all that he said.

I then looked at him and said:

- It's the same photograph that shows the young men from Krchishta. They are all here in the photograph, but half of them were left on the battlefields in the Macedonian mountains.

We were silent. The silence was broken by Katerina's tears dripping onto the silver tray...

30

Recently, in the village of Nestram in Kostur, the Greek communist youth opened a museum of fallen DAG fighters from Kostur. While fiddling with the computer, I saw that on many boards the Greek name of the village is written at the top, and the Macedonian name in brackets, and below it the names of the fallen fighters are listed. Among them, I found the name of my brother, who died on Mount Kopanche on July 11, 1948, at the age of 18. A volunteer. He loved the singing of birds, the rustling of leaves, the scent of roadside flowers, the light of the full moon and the twinkling of stars, the ringing of bells and the bleating of lambs, the songs and the chants that were the sound of his kaval (flute).

Below that were three dozen more of my fallen fellow villagers. They were young. Their mothers did not mourn them at home, but in foreign lands.

I remember how often outside the village and in it one could hear the playing of the kaval, about which the old people said that the kaval, together with the folk song, strengthens the soul and great desires, and when it is accompanied by the zurla (a double reed wind instrument) and the drum, then it is immersed in our soul.

There was no one else in Krchishta who knew how to take away the songs of the birds with the kaval and stop the girls on the road who, with filled pitchers of spring water, would stop, leave the pitchers by the road and beg:

- Come, Tashe, play the Pushtenoto, Bajracheto. Play so that our soul will dance, so that our longing will be satisfied.

And he calmed the requests and nightly desires, the sorrows, the hopes and dreams for the loved ones of the girls who, playing the most beloved dances, were filled with thoughts of those whom they dreamed of most.

When Tashe's kaval played, the plowmen stopped plowing, the harvesters lowered their sickles and the grape pickers stopped picking grapes. Tashe knew how to cheer them up with his kaval, to ease the burden of their labour and wipe the sweat from their foreheads, to return them to their youth and silence the winds in the forests, on the hills, in the meadows, fields and pastures and to shake the blooming flowers by the roadside, to ease the suffering of their illnesses. No one except Tashe knew how to play for the soul and the heart and for joy and to ease the pain.

I sat on the White Stone and through the mist of tears in my imagination. I saw Tashe who in my memory was alive,

smiling, cheerful and with the kaval behind his belt. And I said to myself:

- Come on, Tashe, play, play and fill everything around you with the melody of your kaval.

Now the playing of Tashe's kaval is gone.

And Tashe too is gone...

A long machine gun burst filled him with hot bullets and silenced his kaval. Now Tashe lies in a shallow grave covered with earth stained with his blood. He only lived eighteen years during which he had a great gift, the ability to cheer up life with his kaval. Now Tashe's kaval does not play in the village. Tashe is gone, the maidens, the plowmen, the sowers, the harvesters and all the villagers are gone. Only the birds are left, waiting to hear Tashe's kaval being played. The old nightingale that used to compete with his playing is also waiting sadly. In the remains of the foundations, above the ashen ground and among the thick trunks of the oaks that grew around the abandoned churches, the northerner plays. There he plays to calm Tashe's soul and to heal my spiritual wounds.

Play, Tashe, play. I hear the playing of your kaval, I also hear the whistle of the north wind and the quiet, mournful singing of the young nightingales.

Play, Tashe, play, let the forests, the hills, the peaks of the mountains, the rocks and the bloody trenches and the bunkers of Gramos listen. Play, Tashe, play. Here together with the White Stone we will listen to your playing, we will remember the time and we will openly wipe away tears because in this wilderness only that and our memories are left to us. I am looking for you with my thoughts and I will look for you and if I do not find you, at least I will go to Nestram, to the museum of fighters to see your name written on the white board. I will come, brother, to see your

name and together with you, looking at each other with burning eyes, together we will remember the time when we were children.

Where a burst of bullets struck Tashe, resin flows like a tear from the crippled pines, and the wind weaves wreaths from the broken and burnt branches and lays them on the burning earth... The last whistle of your kaval raised the wind and scattered it across the gorge, smashed it from the rocks and carried it over the hills and ravines like crumbling sand between fingers... They threw burnt branches and black, bloody earth over you and weighed it down with rubble stones as an eternal record that in present and future times will be washed by rains and dried by the wind, warmed by sighs and in white dawns will ache like a pearl that aches on the breasts of maidens. And above all this, our swarm of desires – may the wind make the tops of all the hills bow and that on the hollowed graves the crosses of black pine and white birch may glow in purple. In time, a primrose will sprout between the rocks and a bluebell will mourn over them in the fresh dawn, young saplings will grow from white birches with branches hanging down like long braids with a glint of silver... in summer, dew from the fresh dawn will cool them, autumn will mourn them with golden leaves, and in spring, flocks of nightingales will sing at the top of their lungs, and the gentle rustle of the pine above them will rustle without ceasing like singing and remembering, and there will be an eternal record on the trees and rocks for those who were burned by napalm behind the rocks and about whom the oak, the pine, the maple, the rock, the hill, the piece of rusty iron and the broken peg will tell stories in time. Instead of flags, the mutilated branches will rustle and instead of solemn cannons, the lightning of the trenches will roar... Ravens, do not caw, do not mourn the black death, do not cut lightning and do not tie hill to hill, nightingales, quietly sing until the earth falls on the youth it received... In the eyes of boys and girls, the stars have not yet gone out and the youthful breath

has not yet dried up. Everyone has died... the water is gone... now the peak is lower by an inch or two... Kopanche, Sveti Ilija, Koteltse, Gupata and Gorusha, Bel Kamen and Krusha remained on guard.⁸ The mutilated pines, instead of resin, shed tears. The wind weaves wreaths from the burnt branches and dried leaves and lays them on the burning earth... And for this, Tashe, as long as the centuries go by, Tashe, let your kaval play... Play, Tashe, play. And in the azure of the sky, in the rustling of the leaves and the lamentation of mothers and in the darkness, let your kaval play...

Play, Tashe, play...in your melodies we accept with joy and love and great pain, play for the illnesses of our souls, for those who are not with you, play for our lasting and firm existence and resilience, play so that the hills and mountains, the rocks and valleys, the fields and meadows know that we are still alive...

Play, Tashe, play, and for losing our homes and for being uprooted... Play...

It was a clear dawn and the full moon was still shining in the sky, when a kaval stopped playing...

Many years later, when I graduated from high school in Wrocław, in the club of the Union of Political Refugees from Greece in Poland, which was a real hearth of socializing for Macedonians and Greeks, the president called me. During our conversation, he asked me what I was going to do next. I told him that I would go to the town Politse, where there is a Macedonian school, and I would work as a teacher.

After a short thought, he said:

⁸ Mountains in Gramos Region.

- No. You will go to Lodz and there you will study at the world-famous Academy of Film, Theater and Television. You are good at directing. I admired you when you prepared the two plays. You will go to Lodz to study to be a director.

- No - I said, I will go to Politse. There I will teach Macedonian children and, what is also important, my girlfriend is there.

He insisted, and I too insisted.

- Your will go - he repeated and then asked me:

- Which village are you from?

- From Krchishta or Polyanemos, according to your preference.

- From Polyanemos, you say? In my unit I had one Anastasis, whom we all called Tashe. Oh, how beautifully that man played the kaval. He was unsurpassed in playing the kaval. That Tashe was from Krchishta or Polyanemos. One day when we returned from a combat mission and lay down to rest under the shade of the dense trees, I asked him to play. Ah, that Tashe, in my unit he was unsurpassed in playing the kaval. The following days in a combat action we captured the bandmaster, you see, the government army also had an orchestra with them, in his suitcase we found a clarinet. Brand new. I gave it to Tashe. And then he said to me:

- That instrument is not our instrument. It is not for our songs and for our places. For our songs and places, he said, we use the kaval, the zurla and the drum. They are our spirit. We are in them.

He wanted to say something more, but at that moment a plane attacked us and severely wounded my leg. Tashe carried me

on his back to the partisan cave hospital, and from there they transferred me to Tirana, where they amputated my leg and then sent me by plane to Budapest where they shortened my leg above the knee. So you are from Krchishta or Polyanemos. And Anastasis, Tashe, was from that village.

- I know. He was my brother.

In his eyes sparkled surprise. Two tears slowly slid down his cheeks. He hugged me tightly and held me in his trembling embrace for a long time.

When he let me go, then in his tearful eyes my pain also shed tears.

31

My people from Krchishta, advised by the communists, did not go to vote in the parliamentary elections on March 30 (old calendar) 1946. This was a sign that they sided with the communists, especially the youth. The new government used the boycott to put all leftists, communists, and especially Macedonians on the list. Therefore, the greatest credit goes to Zahariadis, Secretary General of the Greek Communist Party, who declared a boycott and, through his followers, promised the Macedonian people national rights, and they conveyed such promises to my villagers, some of whom were dragged around the police stations for a whole year.

Thousands of Greeks and Macedonians found themselves on the lists of suspects. The new authorities opened new camps and prisons every day. People from my village served time in the Kostur prison, in a camp on one of the Aegean islands, and in the most notorious camp on the island Makronisos. They demanded that they sign statements renouncing communism, their national origin, and their native language. Some did not comply with their

demands and were therefore subjected to all methods of torture. The last ones left Makronisos in 1954 when that torture center was closed. But they and many other Kostur residents were not deleted from the police list of dissidents and were placed under the watchful eye of the police all the time.

One of my villagers was imprisoned again when in 1955 he loudly opposed the military, police, church and state administrators who organized mass gatherings demanding that Macedonians swear an oath never to speak Macedonian again. No one heard the Communist Party of Greece object and its Macedonian followers about this democratic act.

In fear and uncertainty, my villagers spent 1946 listening to the night shots in the surrounding mountains and hills, and in the late hours of the night they secretly gathered and listened to the promises of the communists.

This is how they welcomed 1947.

In June, 1947, when the cherries were ripening, when even at night the nightingales were singing, in the most beautiful time of the year, a partisan unit came to the village at night. From a list, they pulled all the young men aged 17 to 22 from their warm beds and, as DAG fighters, scattered them across the Macedonian mountains. That night, under the cover of darkness, seven families from the upper neighbourhood fled to Kostur, and with them the family of the serf. In revenge, the communists burned their houses and collected their livestock, and when they left, they burned the school and the books. From what I was told, I understood why they gathered the young men and why seven families secretly fled to Kostur, but I did not understand why they burned the school and all the books.

In August, again at night, on the twenty-eighth day of the month, the AFZH women lured the girls to a gathering. They

filled their heads with words of beauty, hope and freedom, of the most beloved leader and that somewhere up in Gramos there was a lot of wool that they needed the girls to process and knit warm flannel shirts, gloves, hats, scarves for the partisans, already called fighters of the Democratic Army of Greece and in that way they could help bring victory as soon as possible.

The girls from my village did not even have time to say goodbye to their mothers. With the tools for processing wool, for spinning and knitting, they set off towards the unknown, which soon became their most familiar place. There they gathered their tools, took off their dresses, put on moldy military trousers and blouses, took off their pig skin slippers and put on military boots. They taught them how to line up, how to stand in line, then they handed them rifles and began to teach them how to kill people and how to defend themselves from being killed. In the forests, hills, ravines, pits, behind the rocks, rain, snow, cold nights, long marches and hunger, the dreams and desires of the girls were shattered.

There was no longer any youth in my village.

The song was gone, the voice of youth was gone, the evening promenade was gone, the passionately in love Micho and Lefka were gone, the youthful night sighs and hopes were gone. Only the very old and the very young children remained in the village, and all who were capable, male and female, with shovels, picks and axes we sent, in the name of victory, to build bunkers, carry the wounded and listen to the calls - all to arms, all for victory. The loudest were the AFZH, who called for battle and the glorification of the leader, but never shouldered a rifle. They instilled in my villagers faith and trust in the leader that only with him at the head would they crush the enemy.

Two of my brothers and my oldest sister, later an artillerywoman were sent to Gramos Mountain from my family.

They were turned into DAG fighters. In my sisters hands there were no longer knitting needles, a rolling pin for making flat breads, a table for kneading bread, a sickle for reaping, a shovel for planting marigolds. In my sister's hands was an old Czech cannon from the First World War which she disassembled after each battle, loaded the parts onto mules and transported them to a new position. This went on until DAG's terrible defeat and then with the disappointed promised victory and faith she reached distant Tashkent with thousands of others. After years spent working in a Soviet factory, she moved with her family to Skopje and stayed here forever.

My brothers did not experience the defeat. Before DAG's defeat, they stayed behind the rocks of Gramos where they rested forever.

Under the flickering flame of the lamp hanging in front of the old and blackened icon of the Virgin Mary, we sat down to dinner in deaf silence. Mother placed three empty plates on the table next to the other plates. That's how many from our family didn't have dinner with us that night.

That year, 1947, my mother and I ran the entire household and farm. We gathered and stored the summer crops, and in the fall, we plowed and sowed all the fields, gathered wood for the winter, built barns for the cattle, filled the barns with hay and straw.

That year, the fall was very dark, fateful and sad.

That year, 1947, I grew up.

I grew up with the shovel, the hoe, the sickle, the ax, the goad (cattle prod), the sickle, the shepherd's staff. Plowman, sower, reaper, cattle herder, shepherd. That year, 1947, my childhood remained in the fields, gardens, meadows, hills, forests, grazing sheep and cattle, during the day with a piece of cheese

and rye bread in my bag. If there was anything extra at home, it went into the partisan cauldron. Days and nights they came and asked to give everything for the victory. My villagers gave even more than what was asked because they knew that it was going to their sons and daughters who were fighting and dying in the mountains of Macedonia.

In that dark time I grew up under the noise of airplanes, the long bursts of machine gun fire, and the thunder of mortar and cannon fire. I grew up barefoot and underdressed and often went to bed without dinner. Not only me. The winter was very cold, and there was warmth only in my mother's embrace. Her smile was gentle and warm, the hands with which she caressed my face were warm, her hand was gentle when she ruffled my hair, her tears were hot and bitter. My sweat was bitter too and I went to bed with several sore shoulders and back on which I carried home what the earth gave birth to, what the garden, the forest, the meadow produced. That's why I rarely laughed, I often cried.

During that time, my childhood passed in a stormy, bitter and miserable way.

32

I want, I really want, someone to hear me say that on a dark night in 1947 I was woken up by a very soft, repeated knock on the outer gate. I thought the wind had shaken it, but when I heard the knock again, I woke up my mother.

- Mom - I whispered - someone is knocking on the door.

- Lie down and sleep. The wind is shaking it – she said and hugged me gently. I lay down, but I couldn't fall asleep, because the knock came back again.

- Mother, can't you hear? I'm telling you that someone is knocking on the gate.

The knock was repeated again, softly, several times. I woke her up again. This time she got up, and when she heard the knock, she lit the lamp and went out into the yard. I followed her. Slowly, holding her hand, we approached the gate. There was no wind. The knock was repeated again quietly. Mother raised the lamp and in a frightened voice asked:

-Who is it?

- Mother, open it, please - said the stranger.

My mother lifted the kerosene lamp higher and we went to the gate. She handed me the lamp and raised the thick drop bar. She opened one wing of the gate, took the lamp from me and illuminated the stranger's face.

- Don't be afraid - a dry, trembling voice was heard saying.

A tall boy in a military overcoat stood in front of us.

- Don't be afraid - he said - I just need to warm up a little and give me something to eat, because I am very hungry.

- Come in - said my mother and walked ahead of him. The light from the lamp was fading because the kerosene was running out. All three of us entered the large room like shadows. Sparks were flying in the chimney from the still unburned logs. My mother threw in new logs, knelt down and blew until a flame broke out that slowly grew and illuminated the room. The stranger sat on the extended chair, stretched his legs and arms towards the fireplace. I noticed that the laces on his shoes were torn, and when he lifted his leg, I saw that his foot was bare. Mother handed him a large piece of yesterday's baked cornbread,

cheese and a glass of milk. He ate fast and looked at us with a look of immense gratitude. The crumbs of bread that fell into his lap, he collected in his hand. He took a dirty handkerchief from his pocket, placed it on his knees and collected the crumbs in it. My mother looked at him with tearful eyes and, sighing softly, almost tearfully, he stroked the crumbs and said:

- I'll take them to my friends...

He didn't finish eating the bread and cheese. He put them next to the crumbs and tied the handkerchief, which he slowly put in his pocket with a trembling hand. He opened his hands wide and warmed them on the fire and, having warmed them well, he began to rub his cheeks and forehead.

- Thank you mother, for the bread and the warmth. I've warmed myself and eaten - he said in a quiet, trembling voice. – Thank you, thank you, mother - he repeated and got up.

With tearful eyes my mother gave him half a loaf of bread and a large piece of cheese and asked him in a broken voice:

- Where are you from?

- From up there - he said and pointed to the hill with his hand.

I knew that there were partisans on the hill, who dug trenches at night and slept in them during the day.

He left in silence the way he came and disappeared into the dark, carrying under his coat the half loaf of bread and the dirty handkerchief in which he had collected the crumbs.

Mother sat by the fireplace, folded her arms in her lap, bowed her head and sobbed softly.

I asked her:

- Why are you crying, mother?

- I'm sad, son. I don't know if our people are hungry and freezing up there in the mountains today...

I had no words to comfort her. I sat down next to her, leaned my head on her shoulder, and we were silent for a long time together in the dim room watching the flames in the fireplace licking the logs. Looking at them, it seemed to me that we were burning along with them...

At noon, a shot was heard. A flock of frightened birds flew over the village and the village dogs barked for a long time. I understood where the sharp shot came from. I ran up the hill and quickly reached the first trenches. The guard stood up in front of me.

- Go back! Run! - he shouted - it is forbidden for you to be here!

I stopped and behind him I saw the boy that visited us last night. He lay motionless in the shallow and muddy trench, pale as a white cloth. A large stain of blood was curdling on his worn-out Czech overcoat, and the crumbs, bread and cheese had been spilled into the trench. Something was flowing from his right temple, like resin mixed with blood. The guard bent his head close to my ear and whispered to me that the commissar had shot a bullet into his temple with his pistol to make sure the boy was not alive.

The guard, who had collected some of the bread and cheese spilled in the muddy ditch, quickly broke a piece of bread and hid it in his pocket. He then put his finger to his mouth and whispered to me, pointing to the dead boy:

- They put him through a military court for going to look for bread. They sentenced him to death by shooting and, by order

of the commander and the political commissar, they shot him as a warning to other people not to look for bread...

And that boy was taken from his family, like my brothers and sister, torn from his mother's arms at night.

I stood there frozen and the question boiled inside me: who knows, maybe my brothers and sister too are knocking on someone's door, begging to warm up a little and for a piece of bread to eat?

My eyes filled with tears and I almost burst out crying, I returned home. With sobs I told my mother that the boy was lying motionless in the dirty ditch and was not breathing, not looking, not moving, silent.

My mother crossed herself and said mournfully in a low voice:

- May the Lord punish them with his mother's curses... - she did not finish her words. She stood before the icon, prayed, crossed herself and, while lighting a candle and sobbing, said:

- May the candle burn for the soul of the boy whom we warmed and fed last night.

We sat by the fireplace and, in silence, watched as the flame slid under the burning logs, became extinguished, separated from the logs for a moment and came back again. The flames did this over and over again as if resting for a moment and starting all over again. And at that moment I really wanted the boy to be here. I wanted to see him again stretching out his hands to warm them in the glowing hearth and slowly break a piece of bread with his finger and bring it to his mouth and slowly chew it, bend over and collect the crumbs in his dirty handkerchief.

The fireplace was going out. A tiny match was still burning. The coals were smouldering in the still warm ashes. The thought swirled in my head that behind the black clouds the stars were going out and someone's eyes were glued at the last glimmer of the full moon. Spiders were already weaving white webs in the cooled chimneys and in the corners of the empty rooms. The old icon of the Virgin Mary has been left above the fireplace to guard the house. At the exit, in front of the threshold, the last painful whispers of the bitter and painful separation from the native eaves were also dying out. The thick oak bar closed the thick gate and a padlock was fastened from the outside. Before the last breath of the sun died down, flocks of ravens flew in from the meadows with ominous cawing and landed on the bell tower. Someone pulled the rope from the bell and the last sound of the bell echoed and settled over the entire village, on the hills, fields, forests, meadows, gardens, orchards, vineyards and in the souls of my villagers.

Warmth spread through the room that made me fall into a restless sleep. I was not sleeping. I was shaken by the sight I saw up on the hill, where the boy lay curled up in the muddy ditch and how a large stain of blood was smeared on his tattered overcoat, on the left side.

At that moment, the lukewarm wind carried the smell of fried sausage and pork from the neighbouring house, which had been collected by the people the other day.

Lazo was put in charge by the people to collect food for the DAG fighters. In Lazo's house were the commander, the political commissar and the secretary of the AFZH and they were all feasting on fried sausage and pork and drinking wine taken from my aunt Evanitsa's barrel. That's what they called my aunt because of my uncle Vane, who at the time was working in Canada. We called her Mama Stara. She wasn't at home. They

arrested her and tied her up and locked her in a basement in a house in the village Kalevishta because her sons in Kostur were preparing to leave for Canada, instead of registering and fighting against Anglo-American imperialism, as the verdict said. And they took everything. The same fate befell Aunt Zoja, whose son surrendered, meaning deserted. They took her, her daughter-in-law and her two-year-old grandson from her house in Lobanitsa and imprisoned them in the Prespa village Drenovo, which was the main prison and camp for traitors to the struggle, as the decision stated.

Lazo's guests were being served by a young girl from the neighbouring house. When she placed the plate full with the fried sausage on the table, the AFZH secretary asked the girl somewhat sternly:

- What is your name!
- Lenche – the girl replied.
- How old are you?
- In another month I will be sixteen.
- The AFZH secretary then shouted – don't wait, grow up faster so that you can join the fighters and fight for freedom and democracy. This was the advice the AFZH secretary gave while gulping down her third glass of wine.

After filling themselves to capacity with sausages, pork and wine, they left Lazo's house in the dark very early the next morning, after our rooster crowed for the first time. We did not hear it crow again.

My mother lit a candle and went to the henhouse to see what was wrong with the rooster, which, unlike the other roosters in the neighbourhood, had the largest red crest on his head, the

most colourful wings and the loudest voice. He was the king of the entire dump, where he scratched the most. He wouldn't let any rooster from other clucks get close to his kingdom and his harem. Proudly and defiantly, with his head held high, he walked among the hens, often spreading his colourful wings, and crowing loudly, threatening the other roosters who intruded on his kingdom. His crowing could be heard even in the neighbourhood below. Like all roosters, he would announce the time three times a night with a loud crowing. By his loud crowing, you could tell which rooster was the loudest at night.

In the autumn of 1947, when more and more people were looking for clothes, and especially food for the partisans, there were fewer and fewer chickens in our chicken coop, and after a while the rooster was left alone in the coop and in the yard. There were no chickens left for the rooster to point out the worms or crumbs it found.

That dark morning no one heard our rooster crowing, and later that day no one saw him walking in the yard. The coop was empty and the yard and dump were empty; without our rooster crowing.

Our rooster which was the village clock, the harbinger of labour, the prophet of storms, and the voice that heralded hope at dawn, was gone.

The rooster's announcement of the night time disappeared from our chicken coop. When we left, the representative of the Anti-Fascist Front did not give us a note that after the victory the people's government would return our rooster to us.

A few weeks later, when the AFZH secretary came back to our village, she did not let Lenche turn sixteen. They gathered her up and sent her to the partisan cave hospital near the Prespa village Grazhdeno. There, Lenche quenched the thirst of wounded

DAG fighters during the day with water carried in a rusty bucket from the brook, bandaged their wounds, wiped the sweat from their foreheads and cheeks, rinsed their lips with cotton, consoled them, wiped the tears from their secretly crying eyes, and at night, in the small Prespa lake, she washed their bloody clothes and bandages for dressings. There, in the partisan cave hospital, Lenche became part of the pain of wounded boys and girls, and when she turned seventeen, they strapped a rifle to her shoulder and sent her into battle.

Not far from the Prespa village Grazhdeno, in the middle of an abandoned field covered with uncut grass scorched by the summer heat, stands a monument erected in memory of the partisans.

Who knows, when the Prespa sun overshadowed the smoke from napalm, on this wheat field, if Lenche lived to be eighteen?

And in the village, the villagers were increasingly asking themselves which hill, behind which rock, in which forest and in which dugout, in which hospital, under whose climate they had taken our youth? Where would they leave their own? And the youth? For whose homeland would they die, since ours was torn apart? And that, our youth, was a generation that carried itself with desires and dreams to rise high above evil and become the anthem of a new time.

From today's point of view, it is unforgivable that the Macedonians from this part of Macedonia, in order to be on their own, with their own language, script and customs, placed their loyalty and hope in foreign hands. They believed in the promises that led them to self-destruction. Since that suicide of theirs, especially the Macedonian leaders and the naively obedient semi-literate village activists, persuaded and convinced to give more Macedonian blood to the Greek Civil War. That was what the

Party ordered them to do. After all the disasters, failures and defeats, only they, the leaders, remained alive and unharmed and happy and always ready for their own comfortable life and to hunt glory in the misfortune and death of others.

33

In the thick darkness of the night, the partisans attacked the Stenite. Long bursts of automatic and machine gun fire could be heard from both sides. Occasionally, the army fired white rockets and the entire area was brightly lit.

All the men from the village were gathered and taken to the battlefield, from where they pulled out the wounded and the dead. The wounded were carried on stretchers and, after dressing their wounds, were sent to Albania. The killed were buried in the nearest forest thicket.

When the fighting stopped, the army pounded the village with mortar shells. The houses in the upper neighborhood were burning. Our house was also burning.

In the following days, we abandoned the damp pits and dug new ones far from the village, in the dense forest not far from the river that was also the border with Albania. There, in the flat field, as we called that abandoned Turkish field, on which young oaks were already growing thickly, the villagers built huts. Fear of the thunder of cannon and mortar shells and the light of the colourful rockets did not reach here. At night, the villagers went to the village to bring bedding, but mostly food they had hidden in the pits. Here, in this space, all seven flocks of sheep mingled, including mine. And I among them.

My bag was empty. A woman, whom I did not recognize in the dark, approached me and asked if I had anything to eat. I was ashamed to admit that I was very hungry. She grabbed me

under the arm and took me to her hut. In the pale light of the borinka (burning pine stick), her children and their grandfather were having dinner. The woman broke a large piece of rye bread and handed it to me with some cheese. I returned to the sheep and slept the night among them.

The next day, on the advice of Koljo the Vlah, who had been a shepherd from childhood to old age, we drove the sheep and goats across the river and up the steep hill, all the way to the meadows and fields that stretched along the border with Albania. We grazed them not only on our side, but often entered the Albanian side. On the plain, there was knee-deep grass but not a single source of water. We took the sheep to the brook on the Albanian side. There, the Albanian border guards chased us away with the threat of shooting us.

In the large flock of sheep, one of my lambs was lagging behind. I picked it up and carried it under my arm. It was weak. When we ran out of food, and we were already quite far from the village and the Turkish fields, the oldest shepherd, Koljo the Vlah, said that we should slaughter a goat at least once a week so that we would not starve. My weak lamb was the first to fall under his knife. Koljo the Vlah was not only a master of slaughter, but also a master of roasting. He slaughtered the lamb, wiped my tears with his dirty hand, roasted it, then divided it into seven parts, which made me turn around and say:

- Who is this for?

- For you! - he whispered.

At that moment, all the shepherds, who were salivating like vultures, waiting for their share, laughed loudly. Koljo the Vlah took the front thin shoulder of my lamb, which was only two or three bites for him. I got the back thigh, a large piece of meat that I shared with Koljo, who from then on loved me very much

and rarely made me gather the sheep that entered the Albanian side. And so every time we slaughtered a lamb, Koljo the Vlah cut off the marked ear of the slaughtered lamb and saved it in his bag as proof for its owner that the lamb was eaten by a wolf. We did this many times; eating unsalted roasted lamb while we were bitten by a multitude of lice each night.

One day, a man from the village inhabited by Madjiri came and asked to see the oldest shepherd. They went aside and talked for a long time. They agreed that we would let the sheep lie down in his fields and garden at night, and in return he would bring us a loaf of corn bread and a pot of jam every day. And so it was done, and from then on Koljo the Vlahs knife went on vacation. It hung on his belt in its sheath.

I was the youngest among the six shepherds, fathers of three or four children, and I was the one most often sent to get water in the old military canteens while they lay under the thick shadows at noon, where they farted loudly, breathed deeply and snored, while sleeping. I tied all seven canteens around my waist, and it often happened that one of them would come loose, causing the water to spill out, which was reason for anger to spill over my shoulders. The blow with the whip didn't hurt me as much as the laughter and mockery from the others. I didn't owe them anything for the beating. The one who hit me and made fun of me the most, when I went to get water, I secretly urinated in his canteen.

In the meantime, some of the villagers, together with my people, found a hidden and safe place in the meadow by the river, near our watermill. One day, a relative of one of the shepherds came from there to see his relative. He brought him clothes to change into, a bag full of bread, cheese and cottage cheese, and on his way back he took me with him.

I saw my family after two months. When my mother saw me, she cried loudly, hugged me and kissed me, then she bathed

me in the river and changed me into clean clothes. She then boiled the dirty clothes in a caldron for a long time to kill the lice. And while all this was going on, my father was scolding me and giving me a few slaps for slaughtering and roasting the poor lamb without his permission.

Cleaned of lice, dressed in clean clothes and severely scolded by my father, I returned to the shepherds and the sheep. In my bag I carried two loaves of rye bread, a large piece of cheese and two handfuls of cottage cheese. All this was very little for the hungry shepherds, who with every chewed and swallowed bite blessed my good mother from the bottom of their hearts.

The end of autumn was approaching. The days were shorter and the nights colder and the rains more frequent. The day before Mitrovdn, the villagers came to take their sheep and during the divisions, the comrades from the people's government also came. They took out notebooks and pencils from their leather bags and wrote down how many sheep and goats each had, and loudly, so that everyone could hear, they said that for every ten sheep they would take one for the war effort, and they wrote down the name, surname and village of the donor on a piece of paper. And on the piece of paper it was written: so and so voluntarily gave so and so many sheep for the war effort, which the people's government would return to them after the victory. My mother took the piece of paper and somewhere along the way, on the way back to the mill, she lost it, and my father became furious. He shouted:

- You blind and stupid, go back and find the piece of paper (in Greek it was called apodixi).

After he finished yelling he counted the sheep. He was ten short.

- Blind people! They stole three sheep right in front of you. What were you watching?

At that moment, a question came to mind but I didn't ask it out loud. My question was, "Where were you?"

He took a burning stick from the chimney, extinguished the flame and smeared the number ten on the wall. So, after the victory, that's how many sheep the people's government would return to him. At a time when the number of fighters was growing, the number of sheep and goats in our flocks was decreasing. Hunger among everyone was growing. Poverty and diseases were on the rise and increasingly entering the homes of my village. At the same time the people's government was taking more and more from the villagers, promising more and more and giving nothing back. At the people's gatherings, the activists and NOF and AFZH leaders were convincing my fellow villagers more and more loudly and confidently that victory was not far off, that the partisans were winning everywhere, and that the enemy would soon be defeated if they gave everything they had for victory. And victory more and more often brought bad news. The people naively believed what they were told. In the meantime, their houses were burning and their children dying. But with time they increasingly felt that they had been deceived. That, however, did not stop the people's government from trying to convince them that everything was working according to plan. Some people believed them, others left the people's gatherings with bowed heads, carrying with them the doubts and questions that were like a bone stuck in their throats, wondering to themselves - how far the evil that had come would reach, which soon forced them to leave the village.

In the foggy and rainy autumn, there was more and more talk that in the rocky mountains and hills of Gramos there would be great battles between the government army and the Democratic Army of Greece. All the men from the villages controlled by DAG were gathered to prepare the defense of the mountains. They brought with them axes, spades, mallets, saws - all kinds of tools for digging, breaking and cutting. They cut down pine trees and carried the logs on their shoulders to the hills, and there they built bunkers in rows of wood and stone. They could not dig trenches because almost all the hills lay on stones and rocks. Instead of trenches, they broke the rocks and collected pieces of stones and lined them up, behind which only a head could be hidden. There, the political and military command in one person ordered the great battle to be held in which DAG was going to crush the government army and Anglo-American imperialism. That was what all the leaflets read. There, at the beginning of the summer of the following year, the General Staff deployed eight thousand fighters behind the rocks and in the bunkers - mostly Macedonian boys and girls from our region - and waited for the battle to begin in the summer of the following year 1948.

In the autumn of 1947, the entire village, the meadows and the forests darkened with smoke. From the Vicho area, and especially from the sunny, green and tame Prespa, which was then a free territory, a training ground for fighters and the headquarters of the provisional government and the party communist leadership, DAG units made their way to Gramos at night, past my village. All night long, a battle was fought over who would hold the long hill Stenite, under whose foot the long line of DAG fighters passed. Some from the hill were pounding the road with mortars, while others defended it so that the column could pass.

As long as the shooting continued, we hid silently in deeply dug shelters and from there we listened to the long machine gun bursts and individual shots, and when a mortar shell

thundered nearby, we covered our bowed heads with our hands, convinced that in this way we would not be hit, thinking that this would save us. When the thunder of the shells stopped and disappeared into the valleys, we emerged from the darkness of the hiding places and breathed in the stinking air in which fear still lingered.

When the shooting stopped, small white balls appeared in the sky, illuminating the village and the surrounding hills, the meadows, and most of all the forests, through which the main road led, which was mostly illuminated by white rockets, which flickered in the air, slowly going out. Sometimes yellow, green and red burning balls appeared in the sky. Some of the villagers who knew something about war, said that these were rockets with which various units of the government army maintained contact with their help, gave each other a signal to which positions to turn the barrels of their cannons and mortars. And those rockets of theirs, they said, also gave them a signal as to where their enemy was. The night explosions of the mortar shells thundered for a long time in the valleys, carried from brook to brook, from hill to hill, and struck great fear into the souls and hearts of the villagers. When those little suns went out, the sky became even darker. The blackness of the sky did not last long. White, red, blue and yellow rockets appeared again. The colourful light illuminated the shallow trenches that the partisans had dug on the hill above the village for the longest time. If a shadow could be seen from where the rockets were fired, then the thunder of the mortars became more frequent, as if they were competing to see which shell would reach the hill faster where someone remained motionless. The men of the village were called to move aside the immobile ones and those who were screaming in pain, buried in the shallowly dug ground, and the crippled were taken out to the other side, and from there the women carried them on blankets and overcoats across the river, from where others took them over

and carried them to the nearest cave hospital. Along the way they were accompanied by the noise of the mortar shells and the sighs, wails, groans of the wounded, fear, tears and exhaustion of the women who were carrying the wounded and crippled boys and girls.

At the same time we returned to our hiding places and waited for the noise to end, which sometimes became so loud that even the village dogs looked for a place to hide. The ground shook from the explosions. We felt that shaking lying on the bare ground and then the fear became even greater.

At dawn, the shooting stopped. We came out of the hiding places scared and dirty. Some said that the enemies had gone to sleep. And we came out of the hiding places with our hearts in our throats. The pits were deep, some looked like freshly dug graves, some were narrow, just enough for one person, and others were wide enough for the whole family.

In the pits and in the dark dens, life went on in silence and fear. In those deep pits, in addition to being afraid we were unable to calm our hearts that kept beating like hammers at our chests. Fear was always present, and death too. There, in those deep and damp pits, fear and the great desire to stay alive hid. At dawn, when the fighting stopped, we would emerge from the damp dens, breathing in the air that smelled of gunpowder and curdled blood.

The villagers from the Prespa villages Grazhdeno, Orovo, Nivitsi, Drenovo, L'k, R'bi, German, Medovo, Shtrkovo, Popli, Orovnik and from the Kostur villages of Zhelevo, Oshchima, Trnaa, Rulja, Breznitsa, V'mbel, Smrdesh, Lobanitsa and Krchishta, my village, remembered the Faltsata the worst.

If the day, when they were transporting weapons to Gramos, caught them on the march, then they hid in the forest

thicket because airplanes would circle above them until sunset, reporting from the sky what was happening on the ground.

When the airplanes disappeared from the sky in the evening, then in the darkness the people would drive the horses and mules whose hooves were wrapped in cloths so that their clatter would not be heard. The government soldiers knew both the route and the night the column would pass. Someone, hidden in a dugout under a house, would signal them. When the main body of the column reached the Ninka area, which lies on the northern slopes of the Stenite Mountains, the sky and the earth would be illuminated by small suns and the thunder of mortars and the whistle of machine gun bullets and the onslaught of partisans, who were defending the road so that the column could pass as quickly as possible, would begin. And the column moved forward, kneading the mud that boiled under the hooves of the horses and horsemen. If a hit horse or mule fell, then the guide carried the trunk on his shoulder. Under the light of the white rockets, one of the guides would also fall. A crippled or dead person would be pushed aside so that the march of the column would not be interrupted. Quickly, quickly, drive, hold, strengthen, carry – quiet whispers and heavy sighs could be heard. The column, followed by the lights of the rockets and the thunder of the mortar shells, did not stop the march until the slope near the old church of St. George. From there the descent began and the step, the sighs and the fear became easier, because the shells and the machine gun bullets did not reach that far. They fell into the river, which was not a big obstacle, and in its murky waters they quenched their thirst, cooled their faces and foreheads, and then they took the gentle slope in which they found a little calm sigh, ease in the march uphill, and they found even greater ease and peace of mind when they took the road to the villages Kalevishta and Zelegrad, which lie below the slopes of Mount Aljavitsa. Here was the end of the march and the end of those who forever

remained in the shallowly dug graves in the roadside, low-stemmed thicket. And while the Prespa villagers, exhausted from the long journey, dozed under the shade of the beech trees, some others took over the horses and mules with all their loads and before sunset they unloaded them and returned them to the villagers and they returned to their homes by the same route at night, only to retrace the same path again every few days, enduring the same fear.

35

In that turbulent and very uncertain time, we the village children endured the same fear, restlessness and worries as our parents. We somehow forgot our children's games and played partisans and fascists more often. We usually divided ourselves into groups based on friendship and friendly relations. I was always in the group with Kire, who was my best friend. He was a little taller and fatter than me and he jumped the farthest when we played long donkey. In the classroom we sat at the same desk and we were never the best students, and therefore we received slaps on our cheeks and countless blows to our palms with a rod, which was always sitting on the teacher's table. For slapping and hitting us with a rod, we cursed the teacher after classes, with strong curses in our own language.

Kire and I often wrestled, but I never managed to beat him. We grew up together until the day when a large number of us children gathered behind the hill beyond the village. We went there to collect the unexploded mortar shells that had been fired by the army from Stenite. Before that, we collected dry branches, threw them one on top of the other in a pile and threw shells into them. One day we set the pile of shells on fire and ran away to hide from the explosions to avoid the hot pieces of iron hitting us. Kire didn't come running. He had tripped and fallen. I ran back to help him get up and then I saw that his stomach was cut open and

a lot of blood was flowing. He didn't cry or moan, he just looked at the blue sky with blurry eyes. Many villagers quickly arrived and carried Kire and several other wounded children home in their arms. Kire was the most severely injured. They wrapped him in a blanket and put him on a horse, which the partisans had not taken because the horse was very old. They took him to the partisan hospital. The children who were slightly injured returned home the next day. Only Kire did not return with them.

In the afternoon, the bell rang three times. A frightened flock of ravens flew over the village.

We no longer went to the hill where we collected shells and threw them into the fire, because death was very close there.

36

During a foggy autumn in 1947, on a long and foggy night, late at night, we heard a knock at our gate. Holding the lamp in both hands to avoid the wind from blowing out the flame, my mother went down to the yard, slowly approached the gate and asked who it was. A young girl's voice answered and asked her to open it. My mother put the lamp on the ground and slowly raised the lever and opened only one wing of the gate. In front of her stood a young girl, dressed in a military uniform with woven saddlebags slung over her shoulders. She stretched out her hand in front of her and asked:

- Can I come in?

My mother looked her up and down suspiciously and after noticing an expression of pleading on her face, she said:

- Come in and go straight up the stairs.

The girl untied the saddlebags and put them on the floor. She bent down and took books out of them, one by one, and

arranged them by the burning fireplace. When she was done she said:

- They are ours. Macedonian primers.

The next day, at night, the village council transferred the primers to the abandoned house of godmother Meljovitsa and seated the children at school desks.

I remember the first words of the girl dressed in an old Czech military uniform.

She said:

- I am now your teacher. I will not give you machine guns, but I will give you another weapon, much more powerful than a machine gun, than cannons and airplanes. That weapon is called writing. Macedonian writing. Cyrillic writing. I will teach you how to write not how to shoot. I will give you the gift of writing. Just as our Saints Cyril and Methodius gave others our writing, unfortunately our enslaved ancestors and some of our people of yesterday and today remained illiterate. With our writing you will be smarter and great. With our writing you will catch up to other literate peoples and forever you will be your own. And you should know that only the literate go forward, rise high above the darkness. But first you will need to learn our Cyrillic letters. When you learn the letters, then we will learn words and then we will connect the words into sentences that will speak the way we speak now.

I have never forgotten the words she spoke and now, in the years that have passed, in every free hour I hold on to those letters, the words and the sentences arranged in books. Those letters that she called the Cyrillic alphabet. I later, as she taught me, arranged into letters, the words into sentences and the sentences into books.

We studied only at night. The flames on the pine trees flickered and swayed the letters in all directions. We studied in the dark because during the day planes flew over the village and sowing fear and death. We returned home holding hands so that we would not get lost in the darkness. The study did not last long because when they gathered us and sent us to the (Eastern European) countries, they also took my teacher and sent her to the battlefield.

Years later we met in Skopje. Her health, crippled by her severe wounds, was slowly leaving her. In the mornings hours the phone rang. I picked it up. On the other end a quiet, sad whisper:

- Teacher...

A few of her students went to see her for the last time. Fate scattered us around the world. Before they lowered her to her eternal resting place, I knelt down and, lighting a candle, kissed her forehead and covered her face with tears. I leaned even lower to her ear and said quietly:

- Teacher, thank you for the first letters of our Cyrillic alphabet.

My first Macedonian teacher is now resting in the Butel cemetery. I sometimes visit her grave and place a bouquet of white roses and above it a copy of my books containing the first letters, the first syllables and sentences that she taught me in the night hours when long bursts of machine gun fire and the roar of cannon shells could be heard in the surrounding mountains...

It was during this time, that the learning of my native language began to mature...

When the autumn rains began, my village was a hive of soldiers. Even the birds flew away, frightened by the long bursts and the thunder of cannons. The armies fought for the bare and rocky hilly mountain. Youthful blood flowed in the trenches. They did not fight for who would take the city, but for who would take over the rock, behind which they most often died.

From the Stenite, day and night, the army fired cannonballs. Death hung over the village, but despite that life flowed. The villagers came out of their hiding places and worked all day. They plowed, sowed, gathered wood for the winter, carried hay from the meadows, gathered and stomped on grapes, poured the juice into oak barrels and the whole village smelled of must. They hid wheat, rye, corn, buckwheat, beans and other grains in dry pits that had been dug and arranged under the houses during Turkish rule.

On the day when they fought the longest at Stenite, my mother and I plowed the last field in which we sowed the last grains of wheat.

In the evening, the army pounded the village with mortar shells.

The next night we moved to the mill. There was only one room and short-cut oak logs burned in the chimney all day and night. The flame and embers spread pleasant warmth. Missing in our family, were my two brothers, my oldest sister and my grandfather. My brothers and sister were somewhere on the battlefields, as DAG fighters, and grandfather did not want to leave the village and stayed home alone in my Aunt Fima's half-burnt house. Aunt Fima was his youngest daughter, who had moved to America a year ago with her husband and two sons.

Despite my mother's pleas, my grandfather did not leave the village. He went to Aunt Fima's half-destroyed kitchen, which

was located near the shadows of the old almond trees, and spent his days and nights there. At night, when darkness fell, together with my mother, holding hands, we crossed the flooded river and walked up the steep hill to the village to bring grandfather water and food. At the moment when a rocket lit up in the sky, we lay down on the ground and waited for that damned little sun to go out. Holding hands, we made our way through the thick, impenetrable and fatal darkness in which everything had sunk. And when a rocket lit up again, we quickly hid in the thicket and waited for the white or blue light to disappear. We reached grandfather in darkness. My mother put the food on the small table, sat down to the side and, looking at the blazing fireplace, secretly wiped a tear with the edge of her black headkerchief. I sat down next to her, hugged her tightly and together we cried silently and for a long time in the darkness.

And outside the rain was pouring. And tears dripped from my mother's eyes, heavy tears like rain drops.

38

Towards the end of October, when the rains became more frequent and the weather turned colder, we moved from the mill to the village Lobanitsa, to my Aunt Zoya's house. It was completely empty and deserted. There was a large pile of ashes in the middle of the guest room. Here the DAG fighters rested by the fire, dried themselves, warmed themselves and slept. Everything was empty. Only thick cobwebs hung in the corners, and in the fireplace there were remains of unburned floorboards. On the front wall hung an old icon of the Virgin Mary with her eyes gouged out, and in her arms was a decapitated child. Mother picked up the lamp that had been thrown into the corner, cleaned it, melted some lard and lit the wick. In the large, dark room, the small, trembling flame swayed our shadows.

In the morning, the political commissar of the company came and told us to leave the house because it had been confiscated (I didn't understand that word at the time) and was the property of the people's government. Grandpa yelled and chased the man away. The political commissar threatened to arrest us but he didn't come back. The unit disappeared at night. That allowed us to stay in the house of the people's government in late autumn and all winter.

The people's government, however, severely punished Aunt Zoya, her daughter-in-law and her three-year-old grandson because her son Gligor surrendered to the government army. The house had plenty of things, because for years it was filled with the latest goods bought with the money sent from America by her uncle and from Istanbul, by her cousin Nume, who had a large bakery there and was making a good living.

Aunt Zoya, together with her daughter-in-law and grandson, were taken to the Prespa village Drenovo. There, in the houses, basements, barns and dugouts, were hundreds of people. Both old and young as well as babies. The people's government accused them of being enemies because their sons or daughters had escaped from the partisans or, as they said, deserted (and I didn't understand this word at the time). Some were declared enemies because they did not give their all for victory, as the slogan said, which was soon to bring freedom. The old, the sick and the weak, as well as small children, were not allowed to move from the places that the people's government had assigned to them. All the others, who were more firmly on their feet in the not yet dawn, with spades, shovels and axes on their shoulders, lined up in groups of three and under guard in a long column, went to the Pass and there at the foot of the mountains they dug hiding places, not for the people, but for the weapons that arrived at night from Yugoslavia. They carried the heavy crates on their shoulders and lined them up in the hiding places or loaded them

onto horses. Few knew where they would be unloaded. At night they disappeared in the darkness. They walked but were not told where they were going. They were just loudly told to go. And they walked all the way to the Stenite where the army was holding its ground in trenches and bunkers, firing flares and shooting. The wounded horses groaned under the heavy burden of the crates, which were then carried on their shoulders and then to the other side of the brook on their backs by the horsemen. There they took a short rest to catch their breath and wipe away their salty sweat, to swallow the muddy water from the swollen river, and then they set off. They reached their destination only at dawn. They were given a little cheese and a piece of dark bread without salt to eat, and in the evening they set off on the reverse and often deadly path.

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When spring came, we returned to my village. We salvaged part of the burnt and destroyed house, just enough to keep the wind from blowing and the rain from falling.

It was March 1948. The snowdrops were blooming. The meadows were turning green. The dogwood buds were swelling. The bees were buzzing in the flower cups. The nightingales were singing. Large flocks of white birds were flying over the village, heading north.

Delegations of young people from the Balkan countries gathered in Belgrade and held the first anti-fascist congress. Many speeches, slogans, songs and one voice silenced them all and pleaded with a loud cry:

- Save our children!

That was the voice of the Greek and Macedonian mothers, whose sons and daughters were bleeding and dying in the Greek Civil War.

- Save our children! - pleaded the same voice in the name of the children who were threatened every day by fear, hunger, disease and death.

The voice was heeded and NOF and AFZH activists, on the orders of the provisional government based in the Prespa village Vineni, set about persuading mothers (the fathers were on the battlefields) to give up their children from 2 to 14 years old to be taken to friendly countries, where they would remain until all the dangers that lurked over their lives ceased.

At night gatherings, they persuaded mothers to give up their children to be taken to friendly countries. They would stay there for maybe twenty, maybe thirty days, they were told, when the enemy would be driven far away, then they would return home. There, the AFZH women told and convinced them, in those fraternal countries they would have everything – shoes instead of boots, warm suits, white shirts, leather gloves and bread and milk and honey and candy and sweet cakes, warm beds, they would have everything, as much as their soul desired, at night women in white would keep watch over them so that no child would be discovered.

The assurances were heavy and painful that the children would be cared for, fed, clothed, protected from the war and that when the war that stalked them every day was over, the children would return. And they were also told that to be sure, they should choose a woman themselves who would be entrusted with twenty or twenty-five children, who would take care of them day and night.

And the AFZH women talked about many other good things until they convinced the mothers at gatherings and at home to give up their children. And they, the mothers, worried about the health and life of their children and believing in the people's government, agreed to give up their children, believing that the separation would last a short time.

The persuasions were long but the mothers' pain of separating their children from their arms and laps was harder and greater.

I remember how my mother took me to the woman who had been entrusted with 25 children to take care of. Among them, she was to look after me.

- Kostovitsa, my mother said, Petre is suffering from tonsillitis. Take care of him so he doesn't catch a cold...

Other mothers also came and begged. I remember old Mijalitsa pleading:

- Kostovitsa, my grandson is less than two years old.... And, as you can see, I am an old woman... I don't know how much longer I will be around... God has forgotten me... Let me give you my grandson, take him... he's an orphan, there's no one left to look after him. He has no father or mother... Kuze sent his parents to fight in Gramos... to their death... They're young - he said, they can fight. May God dry up his tongue Grandma Mijalitsa cursed – I let them go now they're gone... Then they told me, they were killed... I told Lazo and Kuze to put my grandson on the list to be taken with the children because his father and mother died in battle... But they said no, he is too young... What will this little boy do if I am gone? Tell me... maybe they'll listen to you?...

- Olga, I registered my boys to be with you. Both Pande and Genche... You know them. Genche is meek... He wants someone to stroke his head, to take him on the lap... He's two and a half years old. Don't leave my boys uncombed. Make sure you check them for lice. I implore you to please look after my children. I will pray for you every day. Before the Mother of God, I will light candles for you... Please keep them safe for me... What else can I say? Don't forget that their father is in prison... and in his torments I swear to you, Olga. You will be their mother and father and older sister. Please be gentle with Genche, gentle, kind, gentle, with goodness and warmth... Okay? I'll drop by to see you again tomorrow. We will have another chat...

- Kostovitsa, Riste is my youngest. You know, he's sickly and weak. And he doesn't eat much. It's not that the child is spoiled... he's not pampered. The woman then took a tied handkerchief from her bosom. It had a florin (gold coin) in it which she tried to give to Kostovitsa. Kostovitsa brushed her off. - For God's sake, don't brush me off, don't raise your hands, don't swear at me. Take it for the sake of the children, take it... maybe you'll need it... to feed and dress them better, warmer. Please don't let my son sweat... if he gets a little cold, he will get a sore throat... Cover him and keep him safe so his socks don't get wet. And please take the florin... What, you won't take it? No? Well, what will you use to buy the children something to eat, to wear? Who knows when you'll be back... who knows when we'll see our children again... Poor me I came here to give you, Kostovitsa, a florin, and you, Kostovitsa, are embarrassing me by not wanting to take it... Okay, I'll take it back, but you should know that I'll pray for you every day. Kostovitsa take care of yourself... be healthy and well so that you can look after and take care of our children... may your legs be strong so that you can walk after them and in front of them so that they don't get lost

somewhere... may your hands be gentle so that you can caress them, rock them if necessary, lift them in your arms, hug them and support them in your lap, cover them at night, wash them and hold their hands... if you get sick, then who will look after them and who will look after you?

- My little Tsana wakes up at night and is scared. Don't leave her alone. Before going to bed, she wants me to caress her, tell her stories, and sing to her. Will you be able to do that? - Kolevitsa asked worriedly. - My little Tsana follows me around and who knows if she'll get used to it there without me... She doesn't eat on her own. That's how her grandmother taught her, and she can't even hold a spoon by herself. Feed her and don't scold her. When she is scolded, she cries a lot. She can't even dress herself. You should help her dress and wash her... That's how we got her used to... Well, now, the whole burden will fall on you... It isn't just one thing? It's a lot of things... so please, don't leave my Tsana to suffer alone... help her until she gets used to it, teach her... and don't let her get angry and cry too much... She's just like that, tearful... She'll listen to you, she'll definitely listen to you... And when you write us a letter, please put a few more words in it about my little Tsana, put a few more words in it, my dear, at least one more word...

- You won't get any trouble from my children. As long as they have something to eat. They are obedient and hardworking. You know we are poor. A crust of bread and a piece of cheese is enough for the whole day. That's how they've been taught... Well, they're a little restless, there is little I can do about that, that's their nature. They are good workers... The eldest is a bit of a brawler... I can't do much about that, that's his blood, like his grandfather. Please don't separate them from each other and

sometimes give them a hug, also make sure they don't get lice... you can cut their hair short to bare skin. Better that way. I don't have many clothes to give them. One shirt and one pair of socks each. They don't have shoes. I'll pack some some sandals for them. What can I do? Their shoes are torn, so what should I do? They walk barefoot here... they can walk barefoot there? I tell them two or three times a day to listen to you... I told the older girl this: you're twelve years old, young lady. You should roll up your sleeves and help with everything Kostovitsa or the other women who will look after you tell you. If she tells you to wash, knit, mend, dress the little ones and, if necessary, do other tasks without saying a word, listen to them as you listen to me... Kostovitse, if you have to knead bread, my Linka knows how. She also knows how to sew and bake. I taught her, I taught her to work... She is hardworking and obedient, and silent, and shy... If she does something wrong, don't scold her in front of others. She won't tell you, but she will struggle... she's been like that since she was little, she won't tolerate anyone embarrassing her...

- All four of my children have been registered under your care... Please, especially take care of my Mare. She's two and a half years old. Her sister will look after her, feed her, wash her and dress her, but you also take care of her, teach her things... And please don't cut her hair... I want her to grow her hair. What a beautiful blonde braid she has now... a miracle. Let her wear it... I don't know if it's true, but Kuze the Lizard says they'll take pictures there. Please send me a big picture of my children, of all four of them. Mare should be in front and behind her Stavre and Vase and between them Ristanka. I have a bag ready for each of them and I've arranged all the little things in it. Stavre will carry the food. I'll also give them a bed cover... to cover themselves. My boys are good... You won't have any trouble. Just see that they are fed, that they are clean. And tell them stories. And

Ristanka loves to sing a lot. She knows a lot of songs... I will go now... Do you know when you're leaving? Tell me if you don't know. Please allow me some time to sit with them... hug them... make them happy... give them my warmth...

- Please be kind to our Lenka. That's how the girl is. She can't comb her hair... leave her alone to eat, she won't eat much. And when she sleeps, she wants someone to be by her side. If she wakes up at night, she cries out of fear... who knows, she has some sort of fear from bad dreams or who knows what... otherwise she's calm, talkative. She likes to listen to stories. That's what her Grandpa got her used to. What else can I tell you? That it's hard for me? What mother finds it easy to separate from her child? I registered both my children but this one, in my arms, will stay at home with me... Ugh, look, it has a wet diaper... I have to go home and change it.

That day, March 25, 1948 and the day before, the military planes from the airport in Rupishta (now Argos Orestikon) did not fly over my village, they did not fly low over the village Lobanitsa, which for those two days was a gathering place for several hundred children accompanied by their mothers. The sky was calm and clear. Never in Lobanitsa had there been such a deafening silence and never before had there been so many children and so many women covered with black headkerchiefs, who silently and anxiously prayed in the church. The sun hung over the Morava mountain and the last rays were sinking into the hills of Lobanitsa.

In the evening, according to the place of birth, the green expanse filled with children. Someone counted them and then, pointing to the cobblestone road that led to the border with Albania, said loudly:

-Let's go!

My mother gathered us in her arms, in which we felt like chicks, and after kissing us and covering our faces with tears, she handed us to the long line of children and mothers.

The mothers, crying, holding their children's hands in which they immersed their warmth, with the greatest pain in their souls, sent us to the border where the warmth, tears, pain and heavy uncertainty remained in the separation.

In the quiet and painful crying and whining, the songs of the night birds died away. They flew away somewhere, just as we were then flying away into the unknown.

And before leaving, my grandfather called me and we went to Sinadef Hill from where you can see the entire surrounding area. He sat me down on his knee and slowly, as if counting the words, said to me:

- Son, wherever you go, wherever you find yourself, keep your word (safeguard our language), keep your word... Keep your word, because life begins and ends with it. Wealth, son, is not for centuries, but a word lasts for centuries. It is a face, it is an image, a mark for yesterday and today, forever. If you don't preserve it, you will have no tomorrow. That's it. If you hear the word, you hear the fire. In the beginning is the word, and in the end is death.

That's what my grandfather told me, and I realized that what I had to keep was the language, the language of my mother, who inherited it from her mother, and she from her mother and from many others who kept it and taught it to their children, to keep the language of those who are no longer there, the language of those who should be there. And wherever fate took me, persistently, with the power of mind, soul and faith, I kept and

preserved the word with which I described the pain, tears, anguish, sadness and hope of my family and our people.⁹

Before the last breath of the sun died down, flocks of ravens flew from the meadows with ominous croaking and landed on the bell tower. Someone pulled the rope from the bell and over the entire village, on the hills, fields, forests, meadows, gardens, orchards, vineyards and in the souls of my villagers, the last sound of the bell and our children's voice echoed and settled.

At sunset we crossed the border. We walked under the caring eye of the women who were appointed by our mothers to guard us, we crossed the border in darkness in which part of the moon slowly, lazily appeared. Before we crossed the border, one of the DAG fighters who were guarding us took my sister's bag, which contained a large white loaf of bread, a roasted chicken, boiled eggs and some cheese.

We stopped in a large stubble field near the Albanian village Trstenik. The full moon shone above us and in its yellowish light we could see my village.

That evening we were left hungry.

The March night was clear and cold, the ground still smelled of winter and was very damp. The full moon was shining, and by its light the upper part of my village, the church, and Aunt Fima's almond orchards could be seen.

Cut off from my parents and the older villagers who knew a lot about the village and its inhabitants, when I grew up and became literate, I had no opportunity to ask them to tell me about the times, the weather and the village, the hills, the fields, the

⁹ Excerpt from the novel A STONE TOO IS SOIL

meadows, the springs, the holidays, the customs, the home language, the bad and good events, the joys and sorrows, the tears and illnesses in the bad times in which the turbulent, calm and tame river of life flowed.

Separated from my parents and the older villagers who knew a lot about the village and its inhabitants, when I grew up and began to understand more, I did not have the opportunity to ask them to tell me about the weather and the village, the hills, fields, meadows, springs, holidays, customs, the home language, the bad and good events, the joys and sorrows, the tears and illnesses in the bad times in which the turbulent, now calm and tame river of life flowed. I am wounded by the thought that behind the black clouds the stars are fading and someone's eyes are fading in the last glimmer of the full moon. In the cooled chimneys and in the corners of the empty rooms the spiders are already weaving white webs. Above the fireplace the old icon of the Virgin Mary has been left to guard the house. At the exit, in front of the threshold the last painful whispers of the bitter and painful separation from the native eaves have also faded. The thick oak bar closed the thick gate and a padlock was fastened from the outside.

That day my village and many other villages remained silent.

They fell silent.

There was no child's voice, no child's chatter, no child's laughter, no child's crying and no child's games. What remained was poverty and desolation, crying, cursing and hopeful waiting... It was cold. We gathered firewood and lit a fire. The flame took hold of the stubble and the wind carried it to the dry fern. Smoke and flames reached the sky. We were freezing and warming ourselves until morning. The sun warmed us as the day progressed. In the evening, trucks arrived and took us to Korcha.

There they distributed us to Albanian families in whose houses we stayed for fifteen days.

I never smiled once during those days. When the hostess saw me sad, she would sit me on her lap and speak to me in a sweet and gentle voice, but I did not understand her language. I felt the warmth of her hand with which she caressed me and I heard her quiet and gentle voice with which she comforted me and it seemed to me that she cared more about me than about her two sons and her older daughter. I have never forgotten her kindness and warmth.

In July 2008, when I was gathering materials for my novel ON THE ROAD OF TIME, I returned to Korcha and looked for that good woman's house to thank her - thank you in her language...

I found neither the house nor that good woman, but deep in my heart and soul I keep the warmth and gratitude for the kindness of that good and sweet Albanian mother.

Much has been written about that humane act of **saving the children**. Both literate and semi-literate people wrote, and those who, from hearsay, learned wisdom and those who were illiterate, and those who, born fifty or more years after the event, called them refugee children and described their tortured experiences, probably learned in school. They are the children, and even grandchildren of those who, after receiving the red passport, which had opened all the doors of the world, packed up their bags and set off for the world forever. They are precisely the refugees who escaped from Macedonia.

The humanity of the act was called violent persecution, expulsion, escape, and some called the children – refugee children. And so they remained in the consciousness of the Macedonian semi-literate and literate public, not as those who

were saved, as refugees, in whom some planted the seed of poisonous hatred.

The abduction of the children was a humane act, although it brought with it child and maternal trauma and pain, and after their departure, tragic well-prepared consequences.

It should be emphasized and strongly underlined that with the abduction of the children and the participation of the Macedonians in the Greek Civil War and their exodus, the Macedonian family, which is the pillar of every nation and state everywhere, ceased to exist.

Anyone who has written a little or a lot about the abduction of the children so far does not mention the cry – **save our children!** The name refugee children was invented by those who fled Macedonia forever, giving it a mark of national tragedy and awakening the nightmares of hatred.

It is true that the separations made people suffer, and the current divisions over who will open bigger wounds to the suffering ones. The ignorance and the desire to revive the spark of hatred that mindlessly digs into Macedonian diseases has reached such a point that even those who were born half a century after the children were taken away, called them refugee children, without mentioning what they experienced during the Greek Civil War and how their mothers and fathers grew up and were cared for, what they learned, what they achieved and what they contributed. Even those with professorial and even doctoral titles, even academicians, did not get rid of the gossip. Unfortunately, they turned ignorance into knowledge.

You do not get a wreath of two olive branches for ignorance.

For such people, the fact is zero.

It is also a historical fact that the followers of the communist leader did not forget who is the ruler of the native land of the Macedonian children taken away. They created their own system for their care, upbringing and education, which was unacceptable to the receiving countries, especially Poland.

The Pole Kopczynski, then general director and responsible for the acceptance, care, upbringing and education of the children, at a meeting with Greek communist activists, said the following:

- ... Do you know what kind of children we received? The children we received from Romania resembled a group of prisoners sent to captivity. We received a chaotic collection of children who looked with suspicion at the Polish doctors, nurses and educators. Closed in on themselves. They thought alike and had nervous, uncoordinated reactions, they were similar to automatons. They lasted in a mental numbness, from which only the noise of a tractor, the hum of an airplane or some other phenomenon distracted them. The civil war left its traces on our pupils. When the hum of an airplane was heard, the children's reaction was stereotypical. They gathered their things and, crying, squealing and whimpering, hid under their beds. When they noticed a tractor, they were first astonished, and then they ran away crying. At night, while they slept, the children were haunted by hallucinations. The content of these hallucinations was fascists with machine guns and knives in their teeth, climbing stairs and entering their bedrooms through the windows, trampling their things and themselves. Whole groups of children fled from the bedrooms, leaving their beds at night, preparing to escape and waiting for the order - when to leave. The entire group of children, together with the older Macedonian staff, was psychologically damaged. Phobias, collective hallucinations, general distrust, suspicions and the like told us that this group had suffered a lot, had been torn from the hands of death, had

been saved, but was afraid of the new, was not sure about tomorrow, the terrible past was leading them to an even more terrible future. They did not believe us, they doubted, but gradually, their distrust and suspicion turned into open sincerity, into expressing in various ways their pleasure and gratitude towards us. Their hearts opened. All the time, day and night, the entire Polish staff was in their company. They had games, songs, dances, walks in the city, in the forests and meadows, by the rivers and streams, in the parks. In this way, we managed to bring back their smiles, to calm them down, to sleep peacefully, not to dream of airplanes... They walked freely, cheerful, playful, singing. The shell of the post-war remnants in the children gradually began to crack. But, unfortunately, I must emphasize and point out the fact that since you came and brought your Greek teachers and educators to the State Educational Center, most of whom were military personnel, we cannot recognize our students. They no longer have a childish smile on their faces, they do not know how to walk with a childish step, but when going to school, in the cafeteria or anywhere else, they walk in a line, walk with a soldier's step and sing military, battle songs. In art classes, they only draw airplanes, guns, cannons, knives, burning houses, smoke and fumes. I have not seen a child draw trees, flowers, a stream, a meadow, a chicken, chicks, children in a dance, balloons, balls. I have not seen anyone draw a sun... After dinner, until late, even after midnight, the Greek educators gathered the children in a hall where they gave them lectures about the party, the leader, sang battle songs, shouted slogans calling for new battles. All this reminded them of their tragic childhood past... They went to bed late and often fell asleep during classes... We assessed that these were methods of one-way ideological education. We asked the comrades from your high leadership who we should educate, whether future builders of the destroyed homeland or prepare new partisan detachments. What attitude should we take towards the continuing tendencies to militarize the

*pupils. We often wondered whether your educators and teachers had forgotten that they were working with children... All this, according to the commission's conclusion, led to apathy, disappointment, hopelessness, immense sadness towards their parents... I would like to say a few words about another very unpleasant thing. Macedonian children were left without their teachers. We have no Macedonian teachers. Those who were, for reasons unknown to me, were removed from the children's educational center. Why?*¹⁰

Rigas then said - I will answer you clearly right away. The initial period of the educational work was very difficult due to the lack of supervision by the Communist Party of Free Greece over the Greek-Macedonian personnel. In the initial period, many positions were occupied by Tito's supporters who, by order of the fascists, were specially sent to carry out sabotage actions. We removed them for spreading foreign ideology... Now the party has accurate personal data, which is the main reason for the serious changes in the Macedonian personnel. Macedonians who are employed in separate areas will be selected and controlled by trusted people in order to avoid the mistakes that were made in the past...

- How? – asked Dzuban, the wife of the director of the children's center. - What ideology?

- Titos ideology. Those people are under Tito's influence. The children were taught the so-called Macedonian language that Tito artificially invented... Of course, soon we will bring new teachers and educators and new textbooks that will be prepared and printed in our printing house in Bucharest... The Slavo-Macedonian children will learn the real Slavo-Macedonian

¹⁰ A copy of the document can be found in the author's archival collection.

language from them, for which our party invests a lot of effort and knowledge...

- Excuse me, comrade, what is your name?

- Rigas.

- Comrade Rigas, we have accepted Macedonian children. Macedonians. And you are talking to me about some Slavo-Macedonian children. What does that mean? Are we mistaken?

- Exactly. You were mistaken. The Titoists misled you, comrade...

- Really? And what wrong did the women do to you, the ones who the children call mothers? The ones you removed from the center... You say that they are illiterate, you say they wear black, which spreads feelings of regret among children, and that is why they were removed. It is true that some are illiterate, and some have only a few grades of primary education. It is true. But it is also true that they, communicating with the children daily, perhaps more than the teachers, were the single strongest link in the chain: parents - language - customs, birthplace. They were the living transmitters of the original mother tongue and reminders of the unforgettable... to remember the names of their loved ones and the names of their villages, the names of the meadows, hills, mountains, fields, vineyards, forests, springs and all the places where they played... They were satisfied with the small salary, and if they asked for anything more, it was their desire to be as close as possible to the children whose parents entrusted them with unlimited trust. They wanted to have them as close to them as possible, to care for them, to cheer them up, to calm their anxiety, to wipe away their tears and kiss the eyes of the crying... They encouraged them so that the spark of hope would not die out in them, to get over the loss of their fathers, brothers, or sisters who remained on the battlefields... They left them and now there

is no one to cradle them, the youngest, on their knees, to warm them with the warmth of their embrace and bosom, to hold them on their lap... Who will whisper to them the names of their grandparents, mom and dad, what the name of the village is and where it is located?... And can you understand that by such an action you are taking away their homeland?... And something else. You collected their gold earrings, rings, chains with crosses and the image of the Virgin Mary that their mothers gave them when they were sent away... And in exchange, you hung a piece of tin with the image of that decrepit general of yours and an engraved number around their necks... You didn't write a name on them, but a number, and we Poles know what a number is...

Beata's voice cracked from the excitement... She then exposed her right arm on which was tattooed a five-digit number...

- That's right - Rigas interrupted her. - All the jewelry, like many other things, goes towards the campaign to collect aid for imprisoned communists in Greece...

- For the children, those jewels were sacred markers of remembrance. You killed God in the children's souls... - Beata paused for a moment and then said - I want to assure you that we will not allow the children to melt away. The Greek children will remain Greek, the Macedonians - Macedonian...

- Forgive me, comrade, not Macedonian, but glorious Macedonian - Rigas added sarcastically.

The meeting ended late. On leaving the hall, Kopchinjski said to Ptashevskaja – a representative of the Ministry of Education:

- We will educate and train the children, but no one will educate and train these who came before us...

- My dear – Dzhuban said quietly – they are already educated and trained. They don't need anything else except...

- I am surprised and amazed by their thinking and conviction – said Kopchinjski.

- You are only ruining your mood.

- What impudence – Kopchinjski was defiant – to claim that the language and script of the Macedonians were created by Tito... That's not what my professors at the university taught me...

- My dear, Vaclav, our comrade Rigas is the fruit of a poorly germinated seed and may I be forgiven, raised in a bad time... I don't see his place in the educational center... And not only here. And I do not see the need at all for a party organization of the Communist Party of Greece in Poland. In all the environments where refugees from Greece live, party cells have been formed in which special services operate, such as a kind of police, and even services that determine who will live where and what they will do, they submit defamatory statements to our special services against people who do not share their views and numerous other actions contrary to our legislation. Because of this, I am thinking of preparing material with which I will familiarize our state and party leadership and propose that such an organization be banned in Poland. Anyone who wants to be a member of the party can do so by joining our party. Refugees do not have to be organized in a party. The best way for their organization is through various associations, clubs, choirs, drama sections. And this way they can successfully preserve and nurture their spiritual national culture – songs, dances, literature and domestic customs and traditions and most importantly – their language.

In the report that Dzuban prepared and sent to the Ministry with the indication to be delivered to the Central Committee of the PORP,¹¹ among other things, as a final conclusion, he wrote:

*Rigas is an open enemy of children. He should be immediately removed from the State Educational Center and the Greek directorate should be abolished.*¹²

Rigas was not there at the next State Educational Center Council meeting.

By party order, he was sent to a new party assignment in Bucharest, and left behind his poison of evil in the State Educational Center.

And here, in Poland and in other friendly countries, the Greek communists live-streamed the regime of the dictator Metaxas, with the difference that in their offices in Bucharest there was no bottle of castor oil, horseradish, a whip and scissors for cutting a cross on top of the head, but they had other methods for denationalizing the Macedonians. Among them were Macedonian followers who, on their conscience, did carry the cross of sin towards their compatriots?

Is there anyone to judge them?

In Bucharest, Rigas wholeheartedly set about destroying the Macedonian language. He brought T. Pejkov from Sofia to help him. Pejkov wrote a “Grammar of the Macedonian Language” which was based on the Bulgarian and Russian grammar, which was published by the publishing house “Nea Elada” and immediately sent to Eastern European countries with the task of making it mandatory for Macedonian students. To

¹¹ Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party.

¹² Text in italics is a quote from documents.

make it clearer for the users, T. Pejkov (meaning the CPG) wrote a preface in which it said:

“The compilation of this first grammar for the Slavo-Macedonians of the Aegean is a legitimate result and fruit of the rapid progress of our people. In it, attempts are made to formulate the main grammatical rules of the Macedonian language, as it is being formulated in Aegean Macedonia. Especially after the introduction of the radio broadcast in the Macedonian language on the radio station “Free Greece”. The Macedonian department of the publishing house “Nea Elada” is confident that this first Macedonian grammar for the Slavo-Macedonians of the Aegean will greatly help our youth and teachers of the Macedonian language in the proper study of the new, literary language and in the formation of a common language for the Aegean.”¹³

Said from above, done from below.

And so it would be.

40

I have another photograph, which has become public property. It shows the children from my village. It was taken in May 1949 in the Polish town Solice Zdrój, now renamed Szczecin Zdrój. They took us there and put us in the holiday homes. There, in the city park, everyone from my village was gathered. We found joy jumping over the flowers and blooming roses, we hid in the fragrant lilacs and in the large park where spring was blooming. Mother Evgenija hired a photographer who gathered us all like chicks and lined us up in front of the camera, behind which the photographer covered his head and with his hand told us how the pigeons fly. All the children from my village are

¹³ "Grammar of the Macedonian Language" - T. Pejkov

photographed and I don't see anyone smiling. I only see sadness in their eyes.

For whom? For what?

I kept that photograph and published it in the Skopje newspaper VECHER for the first time. It has been republished in various newspapers and magazines in Skopje and abroad. I often show it to my friends. There are both small and big children in it, who over time have grown up, obtained diplomas as doctors, engineers, professors, and one of them as a writer and ambassador. The child sitting on the right in the front row achieved the position of respected professor Dr. Hab. at the University of Wrocław. Without a father, his father was shot in 1947 in Rupishta (Argos Oresticon in Greek), he obtained the highest education and honour in the scientific community. Those small children grew up and have families, gave birth to sons and daughters and many of them are no longer there, but the shadow of oblivion has not covered them. They are alive in the eyes of their grandchildren. In the photo they are children. They have grown up and are now grandparents, and the elderly with time are becoming fewer and fewer.

Looking at the old, yellowed photo, I often wonder how back then in Solice, in the homes, where our caregivers did not receive a salary for their work, where did mother Evgenija find the money to take pictures of us all and send photos to all our parents? Years later, I found out that she had sold her wedding ring and used that money to pay for the photos, in which we are all alive and joyful together with her. Now, as I write these words, my gaze is fixed on her. I look at her with tearful eyes and I really, really want to hug her, to hug her the way I hugged my own mother. I look at her sad face for a long time and I have a great desire to say goodbye to her, but I feel a lump forming in my throat. I feel tears running down my cheeks. The pain, as great

as her devotion, has not yet healed in me. She passed away in Skopje years ago. All of us in the photo were not present at her departure into eternity. Time has scattered us around the world, where we patiently preserve our gratitude, respect and memory.

Mother Evgenia, we love you very, very much, as we love our own mothers...

Rest, Mother Evgenia, in peace, in which you are accompanied by our love and respect...

Thanks to those we called mothers, we preserved our race and our native language.

And there, in a foreign land, those who promised so much did not use castor oil and all the other methods used by Metaxas, but other various procedures, all with the same goal: the disappearance of Macedonianness through a change of name and a change of language, equal to the goal: that there would be no Macedonians.

And did our faithful and blinded followers realize that the communists also changed not only our name, language and origin? The methods were different, but they led to the same goal: - denationalization and disfigurement of the successors of Cyril and Methodius, who, even under foreign yokes, survived with their language, faith and customs, with the fruit of their labour, with the joy, dreams, hopes, sorrow and pain that they whispered in their own language despite the fact that foreigners trampled on their honor and defiled them. Life was not just a lament for them, but also a heavenly spark, dawn, fire and ashes, bitter and bitter sweat, the beginning and end of life's path, the steepness and descent of happiness, beauty, joy and sweetness, the sunrise and sunset of life, a place where the path and the course of human existence opened and closed.

We survived despite the great evil in which some wished our survival to fade.

I often wonder: do our leaders feel guilty about their obedience and betrayal?

I remember that after defending my doctoral thesis on November 22, 1985 at the University of Wrocław, under the title “Macedonian Children in Poland 1948-1968”, my mentor, Prof. Dr. Hab. Karol Fyodor, with whom we talked for a long time about the fate of the Macedonians, comparing it with the fate of the Poles in the period from 1794 to 1918. We found many similarities. He looked at me questioningly and after a short pause the professor asked me:

- If you forbid a people their language, customs, history, literature, songs, dances, village names, toponyms, national origin, personal name and surname, by force of a legal provision you create mixed marriages, which introduce their own style of upbringing, education and the like, what is that act called?

And without waiting for my answer, he said:

- That is called cultural genocide.

I said:

- I know where it was applied and is applied now, and by whom.

41

The great battle for Northern Pindus, popularly called the battle for Gramos, began on June 14 and lasted until August 22, 1948. With eight thousand DAG fighters, the communist leadership opened a front against a hundred thousand strong government army, armed with the latest American weapons, tanks

and aircraft. Attacked from three sides, DAG withstood seventy days of beating and left behind a large number of killed and wounded who were sent to hospitals in Albania. The devastated partisans, primarily from the hilly Macedonian Kostur villages, and the villagers found refuge in Albania. Our word (the Macedonian language) was never again heard in the devastated villages.

The Greek government army raised the military victory flags on the bloodstained rocks, and on all the hills and peaks lit bonfires whose flames celebrated the victory. Long machine gun bursts from hill to hill all the way to Athens conveyed the good news. Gramos burned in high flames.

The rest of the DAG fighters crossed over to Vicho Region, and mostly to Prespa.

While the battle for Gramos was on going, the residents of many Kostur villages, who were within reach of the front, found salvation in Albania.

Prenjes is the name of the village - the camp of their indescribable torment.

My villagers, along with the rest of the households and livestock, wriggled and found salvation in Albania, in the abandoned village Prenjes, which was once an Italian military base. There, they found shelter in the rotten, moldy barracks and the stinking stables, and on the bare, dug-up and stinking floor they rested and slept.

People appointed by the party took care of their survival and fate. Everyone, from the oldest to the babies, were recorded in thick notebooks and their presence was checked every day. A piece of a cannon shell was hung on a telephone pole, and used as a bell to call the refugees to gather in the square, where, under the hot sun or rain, they lined up and waited in front of a cauldron to

be given a bowl of boiled beans or lentils whose grains could be counted, or most often macaroni and a piece of cornbread. Lined up like this, they listened to the radio, which informed them of DAG's successes and victories (all lies). Before the distribution of food began, someone from the camp leadership would repeat to them what they had heard on the radio so that they would better remember the successes and victories, and with the call **"All to arms, all for victory with Markos leading,"** they would call for them to give everything they had, down to the last thing they had brought from home. Then the distribution of food from the cauldron would begin.

Those who brought their cattle, sheep and goats with them while fleeing, had to report them to the camp administration. The animals were taken to the mountain pastures above Prenjes. They were told that the people's government that had been established in the camp would take care of them.

Over time, the corrupt comrades from the people's government sold many of my and other villagers' sheep and goats to local Albanians for gold and gave the owners the cut ears of the sheep and goats as proof that the wolves had eaten them up there, in the mountain pastures. The number of cattle kept decreasing every day because they were regularly slaughtered to feed the refugees. My naïve villagers were convinced that the people's government in Prenjes was very concerned about them, who, in addition to the moldy beans, lentils, peas and wormy macaroni, also gave them a piece of meat at least once a week, unbeknownst to them that the meat came from their own cattle.

In the evening, they gathered everyone and while the food was being distributed, they repeatedly told them about DAG's victories and that they would soon be returning to their homes (all lies). The people silently accepted the big lie. After eating something from the cauldron, the people stood by the road and

waited for the trucks that, without stopping, transported the wounded to the hospitals in Elbasan and Tirana. They ran behind the trucks and yelled out questions, but answers were rare. It was forbidden to report news from the battlefields. When the trucks disappeared around a sharp bend in the road, the people searched the ditches to find any leaflets dropped by the wounded carried on the trucks. From the leaflets they often found out who was alive, wounded, or killed. The crowd, weeping, would return to the barracks and stables, and wailing and crying could be heard until morning.

There in Prenjes, my villagers did not mourn the sheep and the cattle, but the sons and daughters who were dying in the Macedonian mountains occupied by Greece, defending bare hills and rocks, or lying crippled in hospitals in Korcha and Elbasan, Katlanovo and Jasenov. The seriously wounded were transported to Belgrade and Budapest, from where they would come out with a missing arm or with shortened legs.

And what was happening in that village – camp, called Prenjes, was drowned in the tears of the mothers, with the wailing and groaning of the refugees from Kostur.

And when I discovered what was happening in Prenjes in 1948 and 1949, I wrote it down so that it would not be forgotten. I tried to capture what happened in the novel “A BED FOR THE WRETCHED” published in Skopje in 1985, for which, before printing, a commission of five members, all originating from Aegean Macedonia, tasked by the SKM Central Committee to approve the texts for printing that referred to Aegean Macedonia, decided not to print the novel. The reason? The following sentence they found offensive: “I don’t need communism, I need Macedonia”. Similar pressure was exerted on the editor-in-chief of the publishing house KULTURA. I refused to delete the disputed sentence and asked him to return the manuscript to me.

During our discussion, Dimitar Solev, who was the first reviewer, joined us.¹⁴

In those days, a book did not go to print without a review. Solev went to see the SKM Central Committee and when he returned, he said that the novel could be printed. It soon appeared in bookstores and within a few weeks all one thousand copies were sold. About ten years later, I found out the name of one of the committee members and met him by chance. I asked him what was the reason why he, who was trained in the party courses, who was also a DAG deserter, decided that my novel was not worth printing?

- Well, you know - he muttered - so that the locals would not say that we Aegeans do not like communism.

42

As a student in the pedagogical high school, I regularly published my poems in the émigré press DEMOKRAT, which was published in Wrocław, in which I expressed my sadness and hope for the shattered homeland. In 1957, a large part of those poems were published in the Skopje magazines SOVREMENOST I RAZGLEDI, for which I received letters of praise and encouragement from professors Blazhe Koneski and Gane Todorovski. When my wife and I started working as teachers, she, in addition to poems by famous Macedonian poets, also read my poems to the students. In this way, we strengthened their sense of attachment to the old region.

One day, a student came up to me and said:

- Teacher, I found this notebook on the table in the principal's office when I went to take out the garbage.

¹⁴ The original of the review in the author's personal archive.

I took the notebook and started leafing through it. The names, surnames and places of birth of the Macedonian children were written with the Greek names and surnames. That is how my name and surname and the name of the place of birth were written there. In that notebook there was a note stating that Nakovski is a Macedonian nationalist, has a bad influence on the youth and should be expelled. Fortunately for me, I was saved from that intention by the unforgettable Mgr. Vaclav Kopczynski, who was the general director of the children's homes in which Macedonian and Greek children were placed together.¹⁵ Because of that and other things, I was on the black list of the Greek government for many years. When I reached adulthood in this distant country, where I was sent as a child along with thousands of children, I saw the world and life in a different light. Then, out of the many beautiful girls, I chose the most beautiful girl for myself, but not with ease. The fact that she was a centimeter or two taller than me didn't bother me at all, because even at that height I could look deep into her blue eyes, in which it seemed to me that the entire sky was sinking. She was tall, slender and strict. When we danced the tango, God forbid I wanted to pull her closer to me, so I told myself. So be it. I then thought the day would come when I would tame her. I again tried in tango to have her as close to me as possible. Her strictness attached her to me more and more and I to her.

It was autumn. The golden leaves in the park rustled but that rustling did not last long. At the end of August she left to work as a teacher. She went far north. During our goodbyes, when I looked at her, it seemed to me that the entire blue of the sky was nestled in her eyes. Since then, besides her, I loved the sky that sank in her eyes very much. A year later I followed in her footsteps as a teacher in the Macedonian school. When I went

¹⁵ The notebook is kept in the author's personal archive.

there, I no longer hid my love for her, but rather I hid my torn socks and shoes. I only had one pair of each. I always washed them, several times before I went to see her. When I went to visit her one time, a woman on the train, brushed and ripped my pants with her basket. I only had those pants. When we left the boarding house, we only took what we had with us. Covering the bare part of my buttocks with my jacket, I leaned against the wall of the train carriage that was taking me to my girlfriend. Unfortunately, my girlfriend had only one needle and one ball of thread, and with those pants I got married. Back then, in those youthful years, her smile, blue eyes, long black braid, warm hugs and long walks were more important to me than clothing.

The big forest and the wide green fields and meadows were too small and too narrow for us. Everything belonged to us. The sky, the stars, the moon, the wind, and in winter the cold and the snow. There was a small room in the attic, two by three meters, and in it were a potbelly stove, a military iron bed, one pillow, one sheet, two blankets, a small table and two rickety chairs, two plates, two knives, two forks, two spoons, two teaspoons, two glasses, a saucepan, and a hotplate which we kept to this day. That was all our wealth in our early life.

On the north side of the room was a small window through which sunlight never entered, and when the cold wind blew in the winter, it howled, and the glass was covered with all sorts of frosted shapes from the cold. We warmed it with candles to melt the frost so that we could look at part of the outside world. In the warmth of our sighs and hugs we did not freeze. We would start the night hugging each other and welcome the day hugging each other.

We were satisfied with everything, even though we barely made ends meet with our teachers' salaries. We lived in harmony with our colleagues, all Poles, and because we often sang for

them unfamiliar and attractive Macedonian folk songs, which we taught to our students, they did not call us by name, but said, here are the pigeons.

That was how it was and we were satisfied with the fate that bound us and that chain still holds us tightly for almost seventy years.

We spent two years furnishing our two-room apartment of 50 square meters, given to us as educators. There we sacrificed a lot but lived our happiest youthful years before we moved to Skopje. And everything we brought to Skopje, all our household goods, sank into the mud of the flood. We started a new beginning in which the crown of our seventy-year life together is our two daughters, Milenka and Tatyana.

43

I am back in my village.

The big alley is gone, the promenade is gone, the cobblestones are gone. The north wind is blowing non-stop. After the Greek Civil War, the stones were dug-up by the Madjirs to build new houses. Outside the village, where the strong wind blew in autumn and winter, they dug up the vineyards, chestnut trees, walnut trees and the fruit trees, built houses, but they did not take root. When it was heard that the Endopians, meaning us, would return on condition that they sign that they were Greeks by birth, the Madjirs abandoned the newly built houses and returned to where they came from and did not forget how the state had instilled in them the poison of hatred and the insatiable desire for our eradication. With help from the communists and some of our naïve and blind followers (Grkomani), they succeeded to some extent.

The village still reigns in desolation. None of the former inhabitants changed their nationality, as the state wished them. Alive or dead, they remained forever where fate had taken them. In the village, in the dried grass, only the white stone remained, the whiteness of its peak visible from afar.

The closest to the village is the small St. Tanas church, which has forever remained permanent in my memory because of the thick, many-branched oak tree and the protruding oak branch under which the village gathered on the second day of Easter. That day was the happiest and most cheerful day in my village.

Now the oak tree is bent, cut down with a chainsaw, and lies stretched out in all its grandeur in front of the old church. Next to it is the thick branch on which the youth on the second day of Easter would swing a rope, to which they would tie a swing in which the girls would swing until the last rays of the sun, who would attract the sighs and insatiable glances and desires of the boys with songs and shouts of joy.

I knelt by the old tree stump, blew the dust off and began to count the circles. I saw fog before my eyes. I stopped for a moment and after recovering from the nausea, I started counting again, noting each circle so as not to make a mistake in the count. Sweating, I reached the last circle and wrote down – three hundred and sixty. Three hundred and sixty years it adorned my village. Three hundred and sixty years every newly hatched bird had its own branch to sing on. Now the oak is gone and the birds are gone. Kneeling down, I turned to the thick cut branch of the old oak and began to count the circles. On the last circle I wrote: three hundred. Three hundred Easter days of joy, happiness, dreams and hope. That was how many years the old branch was. That was how many knees the swing rocked the hopes of the young in Krchishte.

Amazed, I said to myself:

- Who can count, let them count the many generations of girls from Krchishta who rocked on that branch on the second day of Easter and tied themselves to the same bed with their beloved all their lives?

I sat down next to the tree stump and tried to hug it. Two more people my size were needed to hug the entire tree stump. I looked and wondered:

And it, the Oak tree that for centuries strengthened our joy, was a bother to someone because it was part and a mark of our existence?

44

The name partisans came to our places from Prespa and Vardar Region, and from the fascists from Athens. There, some still had the desires of General Metaxas, who dreamed of a greater Greece to the extent that Alexander the Great had reached. He dressed the youth in black uniforms and his greeting looked like those of Hitler and Mussolini.

There were no fascists in my village. A small detachment of Italians settled in the old watchtower, who did not forbid my villagers to speak their language, did not force them to drink castor oil, eat radishes, be beaten and dragged to court. Although there was no longer any Greek government, the madness against the Endopians (locals or indigenous, that's what the Greeks called the Macedonians) remained. In that madness, the craziest were the Greek teachers, the Greek priests, the remnants of the Greek policemen and officers who did not go home, and the Greek people. The conviction still remained that the Endopians, as the Madjirs (Christian Turk settlers brought there from Asia Minor) who Greece settled in our places called us, called themselves Macedonians, and the CPG leaders, in order to have the Madjirs

and the rest of the police, military and educational services on their side, called us Slavo-Macedonians. The rest of the state administration continued to persecute the foreign-speaking people. There was no more patience. The hopes of the people of Kostur were blown by different winds. What they wanted and hoped for, was mostly promised to them by the Greek communists, in whose ranks there were Madjirs. They did not tolerate and hated the Macedonians. The fertile land and the houses that they took over from the deported Turks and Muslim Macedonians were not enough for them. The plundering of Macedonian villages somehow became their daily occupation and with the help of parapolice squads they robbed many villages. Both during the time of the so-called white terror and during the Greek Civil War, the hatred towards the local Macedonian population tasted like poison. They defended what had been plundered during the Great War and during the Greek Civil War and after it in the refugee cities in Eastern European countries. There, for them, Macedonians were not Macedonians, but Slavo-Macedonians, a name that was also accepted by domestic sycophants in the spirit of communist party loyalty. The evil Informburo divided the Macedonians. Teachers and party activists spread hatred even in children's homes. They were pioneers, on the leader's orders, in abolishing the Macedonian Cyrillic alphabet, expelling Macedonian teachers, and engaging in the creation of a new Macedonian Aegean language, in which even faithful Macedonian disciples participated. They claimed that everything Macedonian was created by Tito and therefore must be eradicated.

Tito was to blame for the great deceptions, failures and tragic defeat of the leader.

For a while, many of my Kostur, Lerin and Voden people, followers and supporters of the leader, wallowed in that

madhouse. After the Greek Civil War, only some of them had remorse as an excuse.

45

And that year, the branches of Aunt Fima's almond trees were bent from the heavy fruit. The ripe ones were dripping in the dry grass.

The green meadow behind me and all the meadows to the right and below, and those under the church and further up to the house that was built by the state in honour of the slaughtered major, were once full of houses, some connected by a single wall, others separated from each other by narrow alleys along which all the dirt flowed, with high courtyards and large wooden gates studded with thick nails through which livestock entered the cobblestoned yards, in which they had left everything they didn't leave in the pastures. With oxen and chickens, sheep and goats and horses and donkeys – the yards were full. Now everything is overgrown with thorns and blackberry bushes in which blackberries hang in unripe clusters. A hundred meters from me, on the slopes of the low hill called Sinadev Rid, whose name has not been changed, still, although burned, grow the almond trees of Aunt Fima, my grandfather's youngest daughter. Barefoot we the children climbed, shook the branches, knocked the almonds off the trees with sticks and cracked their shells with stones to extract the seeds. Now one of the trunks is black, charred halfway. Did someone set fire to it to erase the last green mark that has been growing and giving birth for years and is now a sign of life? Did someone pour out the poison of hatred and burn the almonds with fire like they burned the village with the phosphorus Canadian mortar shells that the army fired from the Rocks? The shells that reduced the village to ashes were Canadian. They were Canadian and that's why I don't like Canada.

Now even the stones from the cobblestones are gone. The Madjirs tore them up to build new houses. Uprooted from their old homeland in Turkey, they were now building new additions to the old Turkish houses here, and were taking the stones from my village. They didn't leave a single stone. They covered the foundations with waste and dry grass to look like they were not looted. They even used tombstones from the cemetery to build their houses. When strong winds blew, it seemed to them that the souls of my ancestors were calling, who even when dead didn't leave them in peace. They created new cemeteries and they plowed the old ones and planted potatoes on them. But there was something in common between us. The sadness for the birthplace of both them and us has been rooted in the souls and memories. Here we were similar and at the same time very different.

A small number of them settled in my village. The southern side of the village had vineyards. They dug up the vines, chestnuts and walnuts to build houses, but due to some curse the land did not accept them and therefore they did not take root. When it was heard that the Endopians, that is we Macedonians, would return on condition that we accept that we are Greeks by race, they abandoned the newly built houses and returned to the old Turkish houses that the Greek state had given them. The village was once again inhabited by deserters because none of the Macedonians and former inhabitants of the village returned because they refused to be Greeks by race, because they were not, they were Macedonians. Alive or dead, they remained forever with their memory where fate had taken them.

46

The bad winds have scattered us around the world from where no one has returned home. This is exactly what torments my soul and thoughts. My hand trembles, holding the pencil under which I want to bring them all to life with a written word or

to carve their names on the white stone so that even the random visitor will know that there was life here.

Sitting on the white stone, living with it and absorbed by it, I remember my childhood and all my ancestors who crossed the threshold with the white stone in hope of better times...

After seventy days and nights, the battles in Gramos fell silent and a great cry could be heard in Prespa where the rest of the living had gathered. There, in the Albanian village Prenjes, news reached us from Gramos.

That is where my mother learned that our Tashko had also remained there forever.

The bad news did not stop arriving after the battles for Negush, and then, in the most severe cold winter, from Voden and then from Lerin.

Then?

Then on August 10, a hundred and fifty thousand government troops attacked Vicho and the surrounding mountains and hills, and on the August 15th great holiday the villagers and DAG fighters in Prespa were hit with napalm bombs. The living, with all their livestock fled to Albania, forced by those who promised them freedom.

47

One day in the 1970s, at the Green Market in Skopje, I met the commander of the DAG artillery for Vicho Region, who had recently moved to Skopje from Tashkent.

He was my cousin's brother-in-law, so I had the courage to ask him why DAG's artillery did not open fire on the government army that was gathering in the Koreshtan valley on

the night of August 9-10? Well, on the surrounding hills in the Vicho Region, more specifically on the northern part of the Bela Voda-Bigla-Lundzer-Kulkuturiya front, there were 8 hill, 5 field and 5 anti-tank guns, on the central front Polenata-Plati-Kula-Roto there were 12 hill, 4 field and 10 anti-tank guns. On the second defensive line Baro-Jamata- Lisets- Moro-Chuka there were 6 hill and 6 anti-tank guns, and on the southern front Mali-Madi, there were 6 hill, 3 field and 6 anti-tank guns. What do you think would have happened if we had opened fire on that huge mass of soldiers and military equipment? Would the enemy have arrived at Vicho?

- You ask me what would happen? Destruction of the enemy's manpower and military equipment. A pile of meat, bones and a river of blood.

- So why didn't you order your troops to fire the weapons?

- Because I had received a strict order not to...

- What does that mean? - I asked, looking him in the eye.

- That, my dear friend, means betrayal. The whole struggle, as was proven at the CPG Central Committee Seventh Plenum held in Tashkent in 1957, was a mistake of the military and political leadership headed by Zahariadis. At that meeting, which was attended by almost all the commanders and political commissars, it was stated that Zahariadis was a double agent – English and Soviet and secretly collaborated with the Greek government. It is no coincidence that he opened a front on Gramos. What were we defending there? Rocks. A war is fought for territory, not for mountain rocks. We were losing manpower everywhere. It is no coincidence that in very bad winter conditions we attacked cities in which the enemy had organized an excellent defense and was sleeping well in warm barracks. And at that time we were counting victims and telling the

displaced people that we were winning everywhere. Let me tell you one more thing, since we got into this discussion. In the summer of 1948, the Athenian government sent its representative to Gramos to meet with Markos and Zahariadis with the task of proposing a ceasefire and starting peace negotiations. Zahariadis did not agree to meet, he assigned that task to Markos, who was a total amateur in such matters. What do you get when you make a general out of a tobacco worker without even a primary education? He wanted partisanship, and Zachariadis wanted an army and a front. Their ignorance was paid for with thousands of young lives. Well, the bad happened. Zachariadis, instead of accepting a meeting and negotiations, said - fine, but what if the entire Athenian government is arrested? In that case, who would you negotiate with? Now let me ask you. Have you heard of any other greater folly? What do you think?

- I think that everything went downhill from the very beginning. Not only the West being interested in that catastrophe, but also the USSR. Greece was a training ground, where the road to the Middle East is, and everyone knows what's there, and we Macedonians, and all of Greece, were the sacrificial calf. The big ones caress the little ones and, proceeding from their own interests, slap them in the face to make them obedient. If they are not like that, then they will change their government, carry out a coup d'état, introduce a dictatorship and call all of that democracy.

- And let me tell you something else - the old artilleryman interrupted me. - When Zahariadis threw the slogan "The enemy will not pass Vicho", Bardzotas asked him: what about the people of that region? And he told him that before the battle began, all the villagers should move out and settle on the left and right of the Zhelevo-Rulja-Breznica-Smrdeshtina road. In case the enemy breaks through the front, then they should move to Albania, as discussed with the Albanian leadership, and the fighters who

manage to escape from the encirclement should move through Albania to Gramos and continue the fight there. Some of us realized that we were heading towards the complete destruction of DAG, but due to military and party discipline, we were speechless...

I have not experienced those horrors directly, but I feel them spiritually and deep in my soul and experience them as my own unhealed wound and incessant pain.

48

I was sitting on the white stone with the feeling that I was drowning in memories. It was quiet. Peaceful. Occasionally the silence was disturbed by the singing of birds, a warm summer wind stirred the leaves, the hills, the mountains were silent, the fields were covered with weeds and scorched tall grass, there were no sheaves on the threshing floor. Many years ago there was no such silence. It was broken by the singing of my villagers, who sang most of all at harvest, at grape picking, at weddings, at holidays, at midnight gatherings and stripping the corn from the cob. And now somewhere over there on the hill a cuckoo is cuckoo-ing, the birds are calling out at the top of their lungs with their songs. Only for a moment in this silence does their song disappear and then I hear only the rustling of the leaves on the branches of the new growth whose trunks still bear wounds from cannon and mortar shells. I hear the birdsong, I hear the whistle and the thunder of the shells and the long bursts of machine guns. The earth is dry but it still smells of smoke.

And inside me something is constantly screaming, gurgling in my soul, buzzing in my head. I collect noises, voices and terrible screams of fear. It is the voice, the cry, the pain, the sadness, the anguish and the hopelessness of those who are no longer there.

Now it is quiet in my village. No one is shouting, begging, pleading, cursing. Emptiness. And the church is empty and not a candle lit in it before the image of the Virgin Mary and before the tearful eyes of the angels, so that there is little light for the souls. And the bell is solemnly silent. Only the wind rustles in the branches of the burnt trees, tearing and playing with the leaves, blowing them away and laying them where there used to be eaves and smoke rose high from the burning fireplaces.

And yet I feel a silent and painful cry and call.

The pain, the sadness and the loneliness of the devastated land are crying out.

I feel that I am becoming more and more attached to the White Stone, which is the only remnant of what it was. I am completely immersed in memories and I strain to hear a voice or at least just a quiet sigh of a human soul. Silence in which only memory has a voice that calls out quietly from the past. I am crying too and I want very much to believe that someone is listening to me. Silence. No one is listening, no one is crying. The silence has sunk into my soul.

49

I am upset by the realization that the voice of obedience, submission and humiliation does not cloud the conscience of some. The deceived, themselves deceived their own people and, as if on a church platter, placed them in the service of other people's interests. NOF and AFZH, led by the CPG, tirelessly spread the merits of Zahariadis in every village and every house and combat unit, proclaiming him as the greatest protector of the Macedonians. It was all his merit that poisoned the Greek communist movement, and most of all the Macedonians. He was the alpha and omega, but as was established at the CPG Seventh

Plenum, he was the greatest culprit for all the downfalls and humiliations. There were few who did not believe him and secretly claimed that with deceptions and promises he had confirmed himself as the greatest criminal, especially in relation to the Macedonians. He blamed his slanderers for the defeat, and after the terrible fall he arrested them and sent them bound to Moscow. And there the court sentenced them and sent them to Siberia. I do not know if they had enough time there to count their sins and repent for having destroyed their own people with their obedience. Did their conscience bother them in Siberia? I don't believe so because after Khrushchev's de-Stalinization, the liberated people gathered in the Kazakh capital and fought as quickly as possible to return to Skopje. The question still lingers in my mind: why didn't they disperse to the Eastern European countries where they were, who betrayed them and through their fault are living the cruel forced eviction, who killed many of their loved ones, and all of their property and home. They, the NOF and AFZH leaders, the most loyal guard of the leader, never raised their voice against him. Old obedience does not rust - said the deceived. Before the Soviet authorities, they pretended to be Yugoslav communists and were the first to move to Skopje. They were not forced to go to those who persuaded them to flee. They destroyed the Kostur, Lerin and Voden villagers and were rewarded with soft armchairs in Skopje.

Is there anyone who loves deserters?

50

Their teacher and judge (Zahariadis) did not fare any better. At the Party Plenum held in 1957, he was expelled from the Communist Party of Greece and, by decision of the Soviet authorities, was sent into exile in the Siberian village of Surgut, where he hung himself in 1973, personally judging himself for the crimes he had committed. He judged himself.

His successors did not change their attitude towards the Macedonians. Koligianis, the next general secretary of the CPG, and Todor Zhivkov, agreed that all Macedonians from Eastern European countries and Uzbekistan (Tashkent) would move to Bulgaria. In this way, they believed that they would resolve the issue with the Macedonians from Aegean Macedonia, who, upon moving to Bulgaria, would receive documents stating that they were Bulgarians. They partially succeeded, but a large number of Macedonians moved to the Vardar part of Macedonia (Republic of Macedonia) and some to Greece.

After the fall of the colonel dictatorship in Greece, the PASOK government announced an amnesty, on the basis of which the CPG was legalized. Refugees of Greek origin and some of the Macedonians, who declared that they were Greek by birth, returned to Greece. The PASOK government, after long debates in the Greek parliament, passed a law that Macedonians who want to return to their birthplaces must sign a declaration that they are Greek by birth. In a modified form, but within the same framework, what was practiced with regard to the Macedonian minority by all previous Greek governments, joined by the then Secretary General of the CPG, Florakis, who told the Greek press that for the CPG there is no Macedonian minority in Greece, has been repeated and is being practiced.

Unfortunately, the Macedonians themselves are most often to blame for their defeats, misfortunes and downfalls. To believe a stranger for everything he promises you, and to place the fate of your people like a coin on a church platter in deceptive promises and lies, is the height of foolishness, a lack of national consciousness, dignity, pride and betrayal.

It is impossible to forget the end of the letter that Argir Kovachev, a DAG major, sent to Zahariadis four years after DAG's defeat, in which he emphasized:

“I ask comrade Zahariadis, that we protect the rest of the Slavo-Macedonian people whom we uprooted and sent into emigration.”

After reading these words, I often ask myself with pain:

- Who destroyed our joy?
- Who brought immense pain into our souls?
- Who destroyed our families?
- Who reduced our houses to ashes?
- Who uprooted us?
- Who sent us into exile?

Zachariadis did not listen to that voice. In April 1952, in the Polish village Kroszchenko, which he named KOLKHOZ NEA ZOI - KOLKHOZ NEW LIFE, he gathered his followers and organized a Slavo-Macedonian revolutionary organization for them, which he called ILINDEN.

Was it for their protection or for some new murderous adventure?

Were those murderous promises and lies not the intended goal of eradicating the Macedonians from the occupied part of Macedonia, who paid for their naïve faith in the leader and his Macedonian followers with the lives of their children, their property and the martyrdom of walking the path that led them to their ruin?

51

While I was sitting on the White Stone, my wife came up to me, leaned on my shoulder and sighed heavily. Thus,

embraced, we sat for a long time on the White Stone and reminisced about our childhood.

I looked around and asked myself:

- Where is the path of hope?

The thought also burdens me - did everything that happened here and in all the hills and mountains of Macedonia have to happen and who decided that it had to happen? I found part of the answer in my novel THE GREAT DECEPTION and, in it, I included only as a reminder as a lichen of time, which increases my pain and disappointment from the great deception that was spread in Nivitsi by the leader and accepted with admiration by his, or rather our followers, only a few months before the Greek Civil War ended. There, in that holy place, in the church, Zahariadis promised the Macedonians a lot and lied to them even more. He did not spare his voice when he shouted:

In Northern Greece, the Macedonian (Slavo-Macedonian) people gave everything for the fight and are fighting with universal heroism and self-sacrifice, which arouses admiration. There should be no doubt that as a result of the victory of the Democratic Army of Greece and the people's revolution, the Macedonian people will fully gain national renewal, as they themselves want it and to obtain it, they are sacrificing their blood today...

Zahariadis and his followers needed a lot more Macedonian and Greek blood. That big lie that the CPG Secretary General told was not accepted even by his closest associates, and a large number of Greeks and Macedonians, prisoners and camp inmates, who, due to party discipline, if they had accepted that crazy idea, were shot without a court verdict as high traitors.

All seven hundred delegates to the Second NOF Congress, military and civilian personnel, and especially the NOF and

AFZH leadership, who were sitting in the front row, were on their feet. It seemed that the roof of the church would fly off from the applause and the voices of enthusiasm and unlimited faith in the leader. Only one voice did not join in the celebration of the leader. When the shouts and songs in praise of the leader died down, a woman slowly stood up and with small steps approached the podium and in her Kostur dialect she said:

“Ladies and gentlemen, comrades, dear commanders and fighters of DAG, Party nobles. Greetings, my name is Evgenia, greetings to all of you here, to the fighters in the mountains, to those in the hospitals recovering from serious wounds and from every kind of ailment and to the women dedicated to the service... I bring you greetings, I am Evgenia the woman who they say has cared for many, many wounded, carried many heavy logs and stones and dug many trenches... They told me..., this is what they told me, in the name of all those like myself, to give a speech at this Congress. I told them, ‘I am a simple village woman, how can I give a speech in front of so many important people, in front of the heroes of DAG...? I know how to till soil, collect crops, bake bread and look after the house... Here... I gave birth to children... they have grown healthy... They have grown big, my dears and may they be safe and healthy and may God protect them...’”

Evgenia paused for a moment, looked up at the church ceiling and felt Almighty Christ looking down on her with his wide-open eyes. She felt like crossing herself, like praying, but remembered what Vera had told her the day before: “Don’t do it, you will insult all the communists...” So, in place of prayer, Evgenia swallowed the lump stuck in her throat and continued with her speech:

“They grew big and healthy, they grew up, up there and joined the struggle, and the younger ones, the younger ones... I am saying are now in the [Eastern European] countries, they...”

how do you say...? Oh, they are in the republics of the people's democracies... The truth is... I have been carrying wounded, logs, stones, digging bunkers for two years now, but I am not alone. There are many with me, but like me they are very tired with sore shoulders, blisters on our hands and feet, lacking sleep and hungry. The women, the wounded and all those left behind in Bela Voda, Mali-Madi, Lundser, Bukovik and the other war zones, and many from outside of Lerin and from inside Lerin are very tired, hungry and suffering... Thank God and the Virgin Mary for keeping me alive and well and here I am before you, speaking to you. And what should I speak to you about? It would be best for me to once again wish you good health and not speak any more. There are others here who can speak. They know how to speak better than they know how to carry logs and wounded, dig bunkers under fire while bombs are dropped on them. They know how to speak better than they know how to endure the thunder of cannon and mortar fire and to avoid being cut down by machine gun fire..."

Vera jumped up and signaled Evgenia to get to the important point. Evgenia noticed and resumed her speech:

"It is best that you ask me some questions or would it be better if I asked you some? But first let me tell you something. For two days now, Vera, our comrade sitting there in the first row, two days, she has simply been teaching me how to give a speech. She told me first and last to greet our great, smartest and most..." here Evgenia forgot what the third most was... She paused for a moment, thought hard but could not recall what it was... What was it? Vera gave her a signal and quietly said, "son, son..."

"Ah, I remember now... and the greatest son, yes, son, the greatest son who leads us from battle to battle... so we may fight..." Vera from below was counting on her fingers, "and led

us from victory to victory and for that may he be clever and well to lead us from battle to battle, to battle, to..."

Evgenia was interrupted by a lone loud voice calling out from somewhere in the centre of the church: "Long live Comrade Zahariadis!"

"Zahariadis, Zahariadis, Zahariadis!" roared the entire assembly in the church. Everyone stood up and clapped loudly and shouted out the name of the greatest son.

This was the first time Evgenia had heard such loud shouting. When she recovered and the hand clapping and shouting subsided, she continued:

"Long live he and the others. I can see him well from here. He is sitting quietly in the first row... and he is looking directly into my eyes. I too from here am looking directly into his eyes... and... I want to continue to look directly into comrade Zahariadis's eyes. I want to ask him about many things that come to mind when I carry wounded young men and women on stretchers, in blankets or in overcoats, when they die in my hands, when they beg me to help them, when they are thirsty and hungry, when they can't move because their legs are frozen or badly wounded. At those times I tell myself 'when will the day come when I get the chance to meet and see, how do you say, our dear and beloved Zahariadis, so that I can ask this celebrated, clever and brave great son of ours, not only for myself, but for the many mothers out there, outside of our borders, in the mountains and on the battlefields who, before everything else brave the war to bring water, bread, ammunition and bombs high up the mountains and then to bring the wounded and dying back.' I often thought of asking our great son Zahariadis, on behalf of all the mothers out there, who cried while burying the dead, especially the barely grown young men and women consumed by this war, the mothers who while burying someone else's child receive bad news from whispers that 'her child was just lost'. I would like to ask our

esteemed guest: ‘Zahariadis, why must we carry such great fear, day and night, for our children, for our homes, for our crops, for our livestock, for our closest and most beloved?’ In front of us and behind us, dear Zahariadis, we see only mourning, only fear, only trembling and tightening of our hearts, only evil all around us.

Did I say something bad, something incorrect?

They told me to give a speech. But I don’t know how to give a speech. I speak directly from my soul, dear Zahariadis... And now you tell us that victory is near? Near for whom? Who is going to remove the darkness from us? You say victory is near, but when it comes will there be anyone left to give birth, to make a home, to light a fire? Our fires have been put out, my dear Zahariadis... We are not what we used to be and what we want is no longer there for us, it is all gone...”

Evgenia clasped her hands and placed them on the podium, then placed her temple on them and began to cry loudly. There was silence in the church. It seemed that even the angels and saints, silent for centuries, were astonished and humbled before her...

“What more can I say, dear Zahariadis?... We did everything you asked and now we want to know, why did such evil befall us? Darkness, dear Zahariadis has fallen upon us as we anxiously wait for the victory that you, every day, promise us, but that bleak and so close victory you speak of we pay for with more and more of our children, with our homes and villages being burned to the ground and pushes us further into the dark abyss...

You say victory is near? ... But for whom is it near? For us? Even the walls of our homes are now gone, they have been leveled to the ground by our enemies... You say victory is near, but will there be anyone to greet it, to be happy, to rebuild, to

plough, to sow, to give birth, to sing...? I ask you, eh????! I ask you... I can't help but cry... cry not only for myself but for all the mothers, for all the widows, for all the wounded and maimed... I want to cry because of this, this," Evgenia touched her chest, "where it hurts... where it squeezes, where it chokes... What else can I say? Let me speak to the commanders and say to them to look after our children up there in the front and let them know that we, their mothers, care for them a lot, love them and beg them to 'be very careful... please be very careful... may God and the Virgin Mary protect you...' That is all from me; that is all I want to say..." concluded Evgenia.

Silence hovered over her as Evgenia felt sad and choked in emotion. Then at that moment someone in the crowd called out a slogan in respect of the leader and the entire church thundered and came alive again.

Evgenia covered her face with her hands and placed her elbows on the podium looking as if she was praying. She was sobbing and sobbing and while sobbing her shoulders trembled and the podium creaked under her great pain... Then carefully she left the stage and walked down the steps, which visibly bent under the weight of her tired feet.¹⁶

52

August 1949 was approaching and in the fields, under the hot August sun, the wheat kernel was baking. Bread was ripening in it. The harvesters were not reaping, but were digging trenches on the hills and building bunkers. A general mobilization in the spirit of the slogan *On Vicho the enemy will not pass*.

Trained messengers, on foot and on horseback, ran through the villages, scattered along the alleys, knocked on all the courtyard gates and with shouts and calls - they began the harvest

¹⁶ Excerpt from the novel THE GREAT LIE.

sown by the great fear of revenge and roused the people, showing them the path that led beyond the mountains, near the border with Albania.

In the entire village and surrounding villages, the villagers gathered the most necessary things in sacks and saddlebags.

How much could they gather from all the property that in times gone by was gathered from generation to generation? What would they rather take from everything that was brought into the house with pains and labour, was the most valuable? With trembling hands they selected and collected. Only the most necessary things that they managed to select in a hurry - blankets, veils, plates, portraits of the dead and soldiers in foreign armies and wars, of the crippled in prisons and camps, letters and addresses of migrant workers in costumes and hats, with gold rings on their hands and carefree smiles on their faces... Everything was tied up in bundles, bags, sacks and saddlebags. They threw so much on their backs and shoulders from all the property that they had earned themselves and from what had been left to them by previous generations.

- Mitre, you open the pit, and I will carry everything that we can hide from the household. Don't wait - insisted Mara and collected and carried blankets, pillows, rugs, basins, tools and many other household items. She did not forget the already old cradle that she kept for new offspring of her offspring. She put the large drum and the kettle aside, next to the full bags, sacks and saddlebags in which the most valuable and most necessary things were collected.

First of all, what should they take from what was collected in the past in the closets, in the cellars, in the attic, in the large chests, in the barns, vats and barrels? There will be a lot left, although much is hidden in the pit that our great-grandfathers dug. The pit was old. It had been dug deep under the foundations

since my great-grandfather, and in it they hid their property from the Turks and Arnauts, from the Greeks andarti¹⁷ and Greek soldiers during the Balkan Wars, from the French and Englishmen in the First World War, and from the Madjiri¹⁸ who plundered Macedonian villages after the Second World War.

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

And it began!

From dawn to dusk, the planes did not leave the sky. The cannon thunder did not stop. Below them, the mountains and hills were on fire and burning.

And above, under the smoky sky, the hills and peaks were also burning. The mountains were covered in smoke and flame, and above them the thunder roared without ceasing. In the trenches it roared, it thundered at every moment the sound connecting hill with hill and peak with peak, in the flames and embers the earth trembled and lost its breath...

The enemy, about which it had been thundered all year long that it will not pass Vicho, was reducing the bunkers into ashes at dawn, in the darkness the enemy trampled over the trenches and brooks and climbed the bloodied hills, stepping on the corpses of its victims, while the DAG fighters, bloodied and maimed, defended the mountains...

¹⁷ Andarti - Greek armed gangs, so-called Macedonian warriors (Macedonomachi) attacked Macedonian villages, committed massacres and looting.

¹⁸ Madjiri - Greek refugees from Turkey, who after the defeat of Greece in the war with Turkey (1918-1922), about 600,000 were settled in the Aegean part of Macedonia.

On Lisets, on a lonely peak, in a large bunker was the headquarters of the XI Division, whose commander was Pando Vojna, on the night of August 11, the order was given - retreat.

The enemy passed over Vicho...

The front broke.

53

And then they told the villagers from Kostur, Lerin and Prespa to flee - they told them salvation can be found on the other side of the border, pointing them towards the forests, the brooks and the hills behind which was the border with Albania. There they ordered their children (fighters) to flee too, who did not finish the battle and in a panic took the road to the border.

A dark patch of people and cattle took to the road. Above them, shouts and clouds of gray dust. The crowds were coming and going, thickening, roaring, babbling, tumbling and swarming, filling all the roads and paths, making their way through the forest thickets where new waves of women and men were pouring in, loaded with boxes and bags in which they carried what was most necessary and most precious to them.

They drove cattle in front of them. The crowd was chaotic, vast and angry, pushing, rolling, growing, gathering and dragging others behind it, crushing, undulating, writhing and thickening, thickening and roaring, then cursing. Both people and cattle huddled together, the evil one chose them and drove them before it, pushing them closer and closer to the border. Someone shouted at the top of his voice and with a shout drove the crowd away, which ran even faster towards the hill - screaming, crying. The crowd trampled, crushed, rolled and no one could rein it in. The screams and cries of women and children who were convulsively holding on to their mothers' skirts. A horse whistled and, tore

from its bridle - free and unbridled, it flashed high and wagged its legs, striking and trampling. Roaring herds of cattle, scattered flocks of sheep and a hoarse cry was heard yelling:

- Run! – that was the only word heard on the road from Zhelevo to Smrdesh...

The people of Prespa rushed with all their livestock and trampled the road leading to Markova Noga, towards the border with Yugoslavia. From the nearest hills above their heads machine-gun bursts thundered, and then loud throaty voices yelled:

- Back! Back, go back and take the road to the Tower and the bridge and further to Vineni and from there run to Albania. Back! It is forbidden here! – those horrible voices shouted and threatened with machine guns and automatic rifles.

Elderly women, from the crowd, went to the fence and begged:

- Let us pass... There - they pointed with outstretched hands - in Dolno Dupeni, in Ljubojno, in Brajchino live our relatives... They will open the gates for us, they will take us in and when the bad is over, we will return home to our houses... Let us pass...

- No, we can't go to Tito's territory! - the detachment commander stepped forward and yelled.

A woman with a baby in her arms knelt before the commander and begged in a tearful voice:

- Let me go, son. I have a daughter in Dupeni. She is married there. The child is from my younger daughter. She is now with the wounded...

- It is not possible, people, this is the order of the people. You can't go to Tito's territory...

- Well - said the woman - I will go to my daughter in Dupeni, not to Tito. Oh, get out of my way, I'm going to my daughter's...

A burst in which the woman's voice and the crowd, which was getting bigger and louder, were lost.

- Get out of our way, we are going to our people in Dupeni, Ljubojno and Brajchino. We have our own people there. They'll take us and when the bad things are over, we'll go home...

They didn't move. With the force of the automatic and machine-gun bursts, they forced the people of Prespa to return to the road leading to Vineni, and as they ran along that dusty road, planes flew over them, shooting and dropping some terrible bombs that melted the stones, burned the trees, crushed the rocks, the people on the ground and the water in the lake evaporated. Flames and smoke were high up, below there was only ash.

Thunder, roars, lightning. A high flame and above it rose black smoke and wailing. The sky above Prespa was low to receive the flame and smoke.

Their rush into the whirlwind, their faith and trust in the leader and the party that the Macedonian followers had spread without far-reaching thought, paid dearly. From top to bottom, the conviction spread that only one was smart and only in his name did they sacrifice for that desired wonderful future that had been deeply instilled in them by ignorant party secretaries, and now, with despair in their eyes, they looked at the dead end. Where had that impeccable and unconditional, unwavering, blind, hard, immense and unbreakable faith gone now? Who had they listened to?

They felt not only lost, but most of all deceived. What should they believe in now and what should they hope for? Had they made a mistake? Had they taken the wrong side? Did they take the wrong path? Now these questions would not leave their consciousness; they feel them like an open wound, like blow after blow, and the pain, the torment and the anguish are layered.

They were exhausted, exhausted, exhausted, everything was bitter and they had understood that from the evil that had already been done - there was no escape...

The lost hope also hurt.

The crowd was turning black in the sunset and could only hear voices:

Run!

- Run! - one voice yelled, then others took over and the fear turned into panic.

- Run! - someone else yelled.

They started running.

Crowd after crowd.

A swarm of people and livestock...

Shouts, screams and cries...

Darkness...

54

That day, planes flew low over Prespa. In their noise and in the thunder of cannons and falling napalm, the cries, wails, screams and curses were lost. The day poured fire, and the night breathed with open bloody wounds.

The unclean forces of hell opened the paths of fear, suffering, misfortunes and unhealed diseases.

The bells did not ring and instead of the faithful being gathered in the courtyards of churches and at large fairs, they ran breathless over the narrow forest paths and the mountain rubble, battered by cannonballs and airplane machine gun bursts...

- Run!!! - shouted those who until yesterday had loudly promised and preached freedom and were the first to cross the border.

- Run! - shouted those who took a toll in lives, property and goods for the fight.

- Run! - shouted those who first gathered their older children. Then they gathered their younger ones too. The older ones in the mountains, in battle, the younger ones across the border and no one had ever told them where they were or how they were. They only told them that soon we would drive out the enemy and return your children. And they collected their livestock one flock at a time with the promise of returning.

- Run! - the front broke - run!!!..

- Run! - the messengers shouted.

- Run! - the voice of fear was transmitted.

Strong, powerful was that same voice that had made many promises at village gatherings.

What was left of the promises?

They believed. And where had that impeccable and unconditional, unwavering, blind, hard, huge and unbreakable faith gone now? And those who were now leading them looked with a hazy look at the shouting and crying refugee crowd. And

again and again it seemed to them that some mysterious voice of reason, conscience and judgment was reaching them somewhere from the heart of the thick and centuries-old oaks standing above the altar on the opposite side and it seemed to them that they were asking: WHERE? WHY? Whose voice did they listen to and obey that they were now driving this people, disheveled, naked, ragged and angry, before them? They felt empty, lost and deceived. What to believe in and what to hope for? That faith had crumbled and they felt desolation. Had they made a mistake? Had they taken the wrong side? Had they taken the wrong path? Now these difficult questions could not be removed from their consciousness, they felt them like an open wound, like blow after blow, and the pain, the torment, the anguish layered and layered in the search for an answer. Confused, bewildered, crushed, everything became bitter and more bitter.

They fled...

They fled disfigured, naked, discouraged, and they understood that there was no longer any escape. Before them, deserters, and behind them desolation. They walked dumbfounded before the view that, burdened with uncertainty, shouted and screamed, blackened in the sun's setting.

Until yesterday, that voice decorated their lives with great promises that they did not even manage to count and remember, and they listened to it and believed in it. At every gathering, they were strengthened, they were inspired with faith in the promises made at party plenums and consultations.

In that storm of shouts, Vera's voice was the most recognizable.

That voice was often heard at village gatherings, at which she told them about the happy days when they would arrive together with the victory for which they should, she said, not

regret the lives of their husbands, sons and daughters, who heroically sacrificed themselves for the victory, and she reminded them several times that for it, for the victory, everything should be given - from people, household goods to crops and livestock. And lives! And with the slogan *Death to fascism - freedom to the people* - and long live the most beloved leader, she would leave and give the same speech in some other village. They often saw her wearing a military belt, a leather bag on her shoulder with pencils strung on it, and dirty clogs. They also remembered her for the fact that at village gatherings she most zealously convinced parents to send their children to the Eastern European countries, and only a year later she visited the boarding homes in those countries where they were settled and, with a voice that contained only victories, convinced fifteen and sixteen-year-old boys and girls that they were still needed in the battles for the final victory.

- We are ready, lead us! - they shouted, already convinced that there would be no victory without them.

So - all for victory, both young and old, both male and female... Everyone to arms, not a single Macedonian man or woman must be left without a rifle, she shouted at the AFZH and NOF congresses... only, lo and behold, due to the great preoccupation among the people, she did not carry a rifle on her shoulder. And now she is among them and they hear that hoarse voice of hers, until a few days ago a powerful, determined voice that called, excited, encouraged and promised... She and the others around her, before the front broke, were remembered by the people of Kostur, Lerin and Prespa. They entertained them, made them a warm bed when they came to stay. They came at night, left at dawn. They filled their bags with what was left after the calls at the village gatherings - *Everything for the struggle - everything for victory*... They gave everything they had and sent them away with the hope that what they were talking about and

calling for at the village gatherings would come quickly and they believed it. Everyone's mouths were full of words about the good that victory would bring, but only if everyone rose up to fight. Well, who doesn't want good? The villagers said and whispered to themselves - they speak well of us, may they be alive and well, the poor ones, may God give them good health and long lives. That was their wish until yesterday, and now?

Now they cursed them.

Until just the other day, that voice had been a voice of hope, now it was a voice that sowed fear, a voice of despair. A memorable voice, which at gatherings in the middle of the village sowed not only faith, but also hatred that turned into fear. Not individually, but in general. With wide waves of his hands and with malice on his face, with long speeches, he (Zahariadis) darkened minds with hatred for the enemy, he brought uncertainty day and night.

And he promised a lot.

And now was that voice a voice of salvation or a voice of despair?!

And those fiery eyes, from which it seemed that lightning and thunder was erupting, those wide waving hands that threatened to defeat the enemy, subsided, as if they were broken and only showed them where to run. And among them, she (Vera), who a few days ago was building pillars of hope, now looked like the shadow of a frightened fox...

Run!

The crowd shouted!

The women cursed, the men swore. From their curses and swears poured out all the accumulated bile, anger and lost hope now sunk in great deceptions and promises...

They ran frantically, scared, lost and with voices crying, wailing and with fear in their faces and eyes, they called out to each other, looking for each other...

- Run! – the voice of despair shouted loudly.

They were running, as fast as they could towards the border, running up the steep hill, to get to the top as quickly as possible, and then down the other side, because that's where they were told they would be saved from fear, from revenge, from evil... Quickly down, down the slope, there they would stay alive... They ran up the slope. They hit a slope. Steep, hard, rocky, lumpy, dusty, thorny. They were running, and nowhere in that slope did they see a lighthouse that would show them and light their way back.

In that desperate flight, did they have a moment to think about where the road would take them and where their nightmare would end?

What kind of step was that in flight?

Where was it taking them?

How and where would they end up?

Where would they catch their breath?

That beautiful, long-promised time has now become an open, bloody wound for them and a time of despair, a time of seeking salvation in flight...

The beacon of great hope, with which they promised an enthusiastic light that would dispel the darkness of martyrdom

and bring new radiance into the darkest corners of suffering existence, has gone out.

With great promises, invented at party plenums and consultations, strengthened them, inspired them with faith – will that damned enemy crush those, seemingly large and terrible wooden and stone bunkers strung on the mountain and hilltops? Will the enemy succeed in breaking the people's will dug into the mountains? From above, from the party leadership, promises written on leaflets, on rocks and bare stones, on the walls of village houses and churches poured down. Great were the promises in which hopes were entwined to the point of ecstasy, which, unfortunately, turned out to be written with a dirty finger on murky water.

They did not see a path to salvation before them, but only an unknown space that they had to cross, run through and plunge into the nothingness that someone had created for them.

- Run! – an anxious voice poured out and shouted and shouted.

They fled, and behind them remained the deprived light and peace of the soul.

- Run! - the voice that until yesterday promised light and sun did not fall silent...

They fled along the unknown paths of their eradication, which someone with a well-thought-out intention had deliberately stamped on them the permanent seal of eradication and exile...

Will there be anyone who will give a name to that bad fate that is dragging them along the unknown paths of despair?

Where and with whom will they find support, under which sky will they find a little place to cry, to count themselves, to find peace, rest and a sigh of relief from their suffering?

Those who, with passion and unlimited perseverance, for years desired their eradication, their greatest wish was that there would never be a way back for them, and those who promised, they have directed on wrong paths both before and now.

And the refugees, for both of them, now, on the road to the unknown, had only words of contempt and many curses...

Will that river of refugees ever renew its source?

The cruelty of flight brought much pain...

The forests, meadows, paths, passages between the cracked rocks were swarmed by a large, not numerous, sprawling crowd. Men, women, crying children, old men and women, who were bewildered, gathered in heaps, squeezed, pushed, crushed and trampled in the mad rush that, like a stormy river, together with the cattle, pushed them in a heap before it. Here they gathered in a heap, there and there they scattered, calling out to each other, in the crowds they searched for women with men, children with mothers, relatives, friends, neighbours, fellow villagers. They asked about the living, the lost and the dead. Shouts, cries, prayers and curses. Beside them, between them and in front of them - cattle. Mixed. Blurred. Roaring. Scattered on all sides.

There, to the side, in the wide meadow - those, thrown out of the trenches and bunkers, who wanted so much to defend Vicho, but did not defend it through no fault of their own, helplessness and fear; some with bandages on their heads and hands, lined up under command, shouldered weapons and with a quick step set off along some other roads, on a new task for further sacrifice.

Long lines and crowds poured onto the pathless and broken roads. Frightened, saddened, regretful, filled with curses and contempt, overwhelmed by the weight of what they had managed to gather from the house in sacks, saddlebags and bundles and throw on their backs and shoulders, they walked, burned by their enemies and by the great heat of thirst, to save their bare lives, carrying on their necks and deep in their souls the inexpressibly great pain of flight.

They walked...

Weakened, they stopped at the end of the road, just enough to catch their breath, to draw a little water from a muddy puddle with their palms to moisten their parched lips, to put out the fire in their feet, to shift some weight from their burning and aching backs and from their burning shoulders.

They walked...

Women, men, children, babies in their arms and in cradles carried under their arms, old men and old women, the sick and the crippled dragged their steps, hungry and thirsty and eager for a little shade to hide from the hot sun, which was drying their bodies, drinking their sweat and tears of martyrdom. They supported each other, gave each other strength, shared the piece of bread and the drops of water.

- Come on, just a little longer - the leaders shouted - just a little longer - and they did not tell them whether they would go further and further from there.

Behind the large line of people and livestock, not everyone had time to keep up. Some of the silent, exhausted, lagged behind the great blackness. Ristana was also lagging behind. Her bare feet were swollen. She walked the difficult path barefoot, as she had spent her entire life barefoot.

Next to her, on the dusty path, grandmother Ilina was also lagging behind. Grandpa Tode's tiny wife. Behind her walked grandmother Dochka. All her life alone. When she was young, her beloved went to work and disappeared. In the time that passed, she often dreamed of him and waited for him. The bread she ate was from cleaning the church where she argued loudly with the swallows which constantly soiled the floor. There was a large house in which there was only her and poverty. She did not remarry. She made her life her own. This time she was not lonely. She was a small part of the large crowd behind which her shadow trailed. All those who lagged behind were pushed forward by the new wave of refugees who mixed them up, gathered them in front of them and carried them with them...

Grandma Ilina walked with a limp and in the large crowd she became separated from Grandpa Tode, as if she had drowned in a river of strangers.

They walked....

The walk was shaky, tottering and heavy. Deep pain was visible on their faces, not so much from the difficult walk, but from the bitter and terrible disappointment and the seething of anger, rage and malice.

They walked, and with each step they took, the great hopeless, bitter, and terrible doubt weighed down their path: were they just victims of some great deception and a deliberate step to eradicate them?

They walked silently - they only wondered and for a long time as if there was no end, they said and repeated to themselves - who and why did this to us?

Everyone knew the murderer, everyone knew the victim, but no one wanted to say his name out loud.

They walked...

In the sky that burns purple before dusk, the vultures did not stop circling. Beyond the mountain the red disk of the sun disappeared. On the meadow, beyond the border, under the clear and starry sky, the raven quietly cried, cursed, swore, wailed, painfully uttered a word of remembrance. A full moon warmed from behind the hill. Krstovitsa saw a patch of unoccupied grass and headed there. She put down her bed cover, put down her bag and saddlebags next to her. She leaned her shoulders on the stone from which warmth still radiated. A cloud overshadowed the moon and darkness fell. Beside her, in the dungeon, in which she is almost nothing as if she does not exist, strangers pass by, burdened, slouched, silent, mute. People are rushing, rushing, driving cattle before them, calling out to each other, infants are crying, old men are clinging. A woman has broken into a fit of sobs, tearing her clothes apart in the black dungeon and drowning in a spasm of sobs...

Krstovitsa stretched out her hands in front of her, touched her feet, and then the ground. Now it is easier for her to breathe. She took a breath, wiped the sweat from her forehead, then from her face, and again covered her head with her black headkerchief. She looked up. High, there in the unreachable, stars twinkle. From time to time there was a brief silence and then one heard muffled rumbles and barely perceptible vibrations in the air. She leaned back on the blanket she has placed as a pillow and pretended that she was at home in the dead of night, by her fireplace in which the embers she had covered with ashes were probably still smoldering; and she pretended that she was in the colourful guest room in which she had spread out the worn blanket and thought of her children and the children of her children who had grown up on this blanket. And now, where was she going? She knew that the oldest one lay under a rock on Ivan Mountain. She knew about her second son that he worked in a mine in Canada, about

her daughter Kotsa who was sent to prison on one of the dry islands in the Aegean Sea, because her boyfriend left with the Aegean Brigade. She knows about her two grandsons that they were left in pieces on Gramos last year, and about her granddaughter she heard that something hot bit her on the shoulders when she was retreating from Negush and was left lying in the bloody snow. That's what they told her, and she still believed, that her granddaughter managed to straighten up and that she was still holding the path that leads to Vicho. And with her thoughts she returned to the beginning, she went through everything she had gone through, and what hurts her most is the unhealed pain, the incurable pain from which her heart was torn when she learned about Pavle who remained on Ivan Mountain. In those days they sent her a letter with a seal and the imperial seal that her son had heroically died in the Albanian mountains, heroically defending Greece against the Italians. But Krstovitsa did not dare to ask the man who read the letter that bore the imperial seal why in the thirty-sixth year he, now the hero of Ivan Mountain, lay for six months in one of the stony and dry island prisons in the Aegean Sea just because he uttered "good morning" in that broken Macedonian language? And why then did they give him castor oil and humiliate him? And when they read her a letter in Greek about her two grandchildren who had remained among the rocks of Kleftis in Gramos last year, that they too had heroically stood up for the glory of Greece, then her heart knew no pride, did not feel dignity, but rather writhed in pain and insult because they, having their own land, their roots soaked in the blood of so many other heroes, wrote to her in their letters that they had died as Greeks for Greece, and she was despised because she did not know the Greek language and did not understand the Greek the priest who spoke in church and did not know how to pray to God in Greek. And when Krsto did not return from the war in Asia Minor, they even then read that he, Stavros, had gloriously fallen at Ali Veran for the glory, for the fame and

honour of the great mother Greece. And when they had put his uniform on him before that, they called him the “*I do not know*” soldier, because to every question asked in Greek, not knowing Greek, he would answer - I do not know. The “*I do not know*” soldier died in a foreign land, and they sent her a letter with a seal and the imperial sign. And so the most beloved husbands, sons and grandsons died for the glory of Greece and were valuable to Greece only when they knew how to shoot, to kill others, to stand up, to glorify Greece with their blood. It was always like that with them, with the “*I do not know*” who were loved and glorified only when the war trumpet blew loudly and the war drums beat the loudest. And then they took their word for it. And that was a time when they were forbidden to express their pain and sorrow for the dead in their own language and to write their family names on the cross. And the Lord, by force of law, did not recognize other prayers than those uttered in Greek. And the one omnipotent Lord, through the mouth of the patriarch of all Greece, told some to rejoice, and others to suffer in silence and to feed not on the goodness and love of God, but on the bitterness of humiliation. Thus in those times a Christian was glorified and God, but not everyone was allowed to send prayers to Him in their own language and to glorify His name. And where every Sunday and every holiday the church bells rang loudly - the prayers were silent, only the eyes spoke, the foreheads, cheeks, prostrations were prayed low, low to the very ground touched by the forehead, the barely noticeable movements of the lips. They knew how to say loudly - Amen, and quietly, inaudibly “Christ is risen” and for “many years”. And when they received letters from the battlefields with bad news, then they stopped being afraid of the castor oil, the whip, the dry island of the Aegean; They let out cries and wails in their own language because only in this way could they express their pain most deeply, most painfully, most movingly, to ease the pain and for a long memory of the deceased. Thus three times Krstovitsa was overcome by fear and

many times, on holidays, weekdays, at celebrations, at funerals, and at wakes, she would recite them aloud. Before the battle with the Italians, in those evening schools, they had managed with difficulty to teach her the first lines of the “Our Father” in Greek, but soon after, the bad news arrived and even that prayer did not help her, although the priest and the teacher convinced her that the Lord God only wants prayers whispered in Greek. In her memory there is no place for forgetting, neither for the good nor for the bad.

Krstovitsa sat leaning on a cold stone and through tears struggled to penetrate the distance in which her house appeared through the haze of tears. The eternal warmth and light, the kindness and sad gaze of the Mother of God, before whom oil burned without ceasing every day and night, have already disappeared. Now that too has gone out. The eternal and silent beauty that could be seen from the high porch has died. The vine entwined in it has dried up. The grapes hang dried from the heat. The old apple tree in the yard has burned. Swallows flew from under her eaves every now and then, and the wind, saturated with smoke, carried far away the scent of the yarrow and basil that there was so much of in the yard. All deserted... All abandoned... She raised her hands and touched her cheeks with her palms. And wiped away, and wiped away tears... In an instant she felt herself weakening and that something inside her began to break. She cried... quietly, without trembling, without loud sobs, but from her heart. After she had cried, she felt a kind of relief enter her, as if a long-awaited calm had come. She tried to get up, but despite all the effort she remained kneeling. She looked around and tried to make out the night woods. And it seemed that there was no one next to her. A step or two away, a cricket chirped in the grass, at first quietly, intermittently, shyly. It stopped, as if listening; it chirped again, briefly and seemed frightened by the firefly that had been beating its wings by the roadside for several seconds –

the cricket stopped. It then echoed a step further - piercing, shrill, filling the darkness with its sound. She turned her head and then felt the night air tremble with distant, insidious rumbles. She listened. The trees rustled in the vast wilderness that spread around her. In the hot August night, a wind blew quietly. How gently it touched her cheeks. Something in her seemed to come to life and awaken, something buried in the ruins of life. - Lord, why am I dying or going mad? - she asked herself calmly and without fear, and only now did she feel that her knees ached from kneeling. - Kneeling? Before whom? Why? - she asked herself and slowly got up.

Under the cover of darkness, people and cattle lined up in columns. And when both the forest and the hills merged into one, a thunderous voice led them from behind and they all set off into the darkness. Above them, in the vast sky, in the impenetrable depths of night, the stars seemed to stir and slowly, step by step, they began to move in columns...

It was dawn. A frowning, pale pink dawn descended from Bela Voda and lazily spread itself beyond Lake Prespa. Krstovitsa adjusted her veil, threw it over her shoulder, hung her bag and saddlebags around her neck, bent down as if walking against strong winds and set off across the desolate dusty road. She walked straight ahead, treading on the traces of those who went before her. Now she did not look back. In the night she spent on the meadow at the edge of the dusty road, death, it seems, passed her by, stared at her tears and returned there, behind the hills, by the lake, in the reeds, in the wide field of Mala Prespa.

Exhausted, they stopped at the end of the road, just enough to catch their breath, to draw a little water from a muddy puddle with their palms to moisten their parched lips, to put out the fire in their feet, to shift some weight from their burning and aching backs and their burning shoulders.

Mitre stopped to shift his weight from shoulder to shoulder. His step was small and matched the slow step of Mara, his wife. She also carried saddlebags on her shoulders. On her left shoulder weighed a bed cover and a blanket, on her right a barrel filled with plates, spoons, forks, glasses, a cauldron, on her right - a large copper jug half filled with water. Mara dragged her small and shaky steps and felt a sharp burning pain in her shoulders and often begged them to stop so she could shift her weight. No one slowed down.

- I told you, - Mitre scolded her when he saw that she was bending over more and more from the weight. - What's wrong with that copper jug you took, and you insisted - jug, jug...

- We'll need it, Mitre... we'll need it and don't ask, I won't throw it away...

- Mara did not give up and after she started walking beside him again, she reminded him.

- And do you remember what your grandfather, may God forgive him, said about this copper jug? Listen, so I can tell you. He said, poor thing, that the copper jug was older than him and older than his grandfather. Yes. He said that when they were building the house, he, as a child, used to carry water to the master builders with this copper jug. Have you forgotten that you said that?

Mitre did not deny it. He stopped and asked:

- Come on, Mara, stop and bend down so I can pour some water. My throat is dry, my throat is parched with thirst... Bend down, and lower the copper jug...

Mara leaned forward, the water gurgled in the throat of the copper jug and Mitre's cupped hand was filled with water. He drank a little and moistened his face, forehead and parched lips

with the rest and moistened the ends of Mara's headkerchief with the rest and with light and gentle movements wiped the sweat and dust from her face.

They walked...

Women, men, children, babies in their arms and in cradles carried under their arms, old men and old women, the sick and the crippled dragged their steps, hungry and thirsty and eager for a little shade to hide from the hot sun, which was drying their bodies, drinking their sweat and tears of martyrdom. They supported each other, gave each other strength, shared the piece of bread and the drops of water.

- Come on, just a little longer - the leaders shouted - just a little longer - and they did not tell them whether they would go further and further from there.

Behind the large line of people and livestock, not everyone had time to keep up. Some of the silent, exhausted, lagged behind the great blackness. Ristana was also lagging behind. Her bare feet were swollen. She walked the difficult path barefoot, as she had spent her entire life barefoot. From a poor house they gave her a poorer one. Her husband, about ten years older, was the first to play cards in the village tavern. He was the first to enter, the last to leave. He won, but he also lost. His last loss was his only field. He lost it at cards and then he persistently played and got more and more into debt. Some forgave his debts, and some in return asked Ristana to work for them. A labourer. Most often for those whose houses were without men. The Pechalbars. More than once, Ristana, weeping, lying next to her husband, without regretting her young years, in the dark, wetting the straw pillow with bitter tears she begged and pleaded with him to go to work abroad, to make a living, like so many others have gone... Go abroad and work like the others. Look at the Pandov family. They were poor, and now I work for them...

Ristana was the first to get up at dawn, the last to go to bed. For as long as she could remember - she labored in the village. From morning until night on someone else's property. She worked for a handful or two of beans, lentils, a piece of cheese and a little cottage cheese, a couple of ounces of flour. With that she always fed her poor little sons, who often went to bed hungry. On one shoulder she carried a bag with one or two pieces of bread, a little cheese or just bread and salt. On the other shoulder - the hoe. With it she fed her two children and her husband. She did not regret much when she sent them away along with the other children from the village. The thought crossed her mind that wherever they were taken, they would certainly have enough food and maybe some clothes and that they would not go barefoot... From that day on, Ristana remained alone. They collected her husband, like hundreds of others, gave him a horse loaded with chests full of cartridges and hand grenades. Somewhere on the way to the place where they were to take the load, an airplane attacked the column at dawn. Ristan's husband did not return from that trip and so Ristana was left all alone.

Lagging behind her on the dusty road was grandma Ilina, Grandpa Tode's tiny wife. Grandma Dochka walked behind her. Alone all her life. When she was young, her husband went to work and disappeared. In the time that passed, she often dreamed of him and waited for him. The bread she ate came from cleaning the church where she argued loudly with the swallows which constantly soiled the floor. She had a big house in which there was only her and poverty. She did not remarry. She made her life her own. This time she was not lonely. She was a small part of the large crowd behind which her shadow dragged. All those who lagged behind were being pushed forward like martyrs by the new wave of refugees who mixed with them, gathered them in front of them and carried them...

Grandma Ilina walked with a limp and in the large crowd she separated herself from Grandpa Tode, like she drowned in a river of strangers.

They walked...

The walk was shaky, tottering and heavy. Deep pain was visible on their faces, not so much from the martyr's walk, but from the bitter and terrible disappointment and the seething of anger, rage and malice.

They walked and with each step they took, their walk was made more difficult by the great hopeless, bitter and terrible doubt: were they just the victims of some great deception and a deliberate step to eradicate them?

They walked and silently - they only wondered and for a long time as if there was no end, they said and repeated to themselves - who did this to us and why?

Everyone knew the murderer, everyone knew the victim, but no one wanted to say his name out loud.

They walked...

The narrow and dusty paths did not hold the large crowd - people and cattle were pushing each other, trampling each other, falling, getting up and walking along the steep uphill and downhill.

- Keep going! Don't stop! - a male voice was heard yelling.
- Follow me! - he shouted and pointed with his hands at the road that was spreading out before him.

They were following a path and did not know where it was leading them. No one told them where they were being led. The people listened dumbly to the hoarse voice and followed it step by step, dragging themselves along. Heaps of people, cattle,

sheep, goats - all together on the dusty road. They trampled the sun-baked and dusty ground and walked without stopping to catch their breath, begging just to sit down for a moment, to spit out the bitterness, to moisten their parched lips with a drop of water drawn from a hole or some muddy puddle, and to sit down for just a moment longer to gather strength, to unload a heavy burden from their aching shoulders, backs, and battered souls, to find each other, to see each other, to inquire about their own family, about the seen and unseen, about the healthy and the sick, about the living and the dead, to exchange a word or two, to exhale a sigh to ease their living suffering and soothe the pain in their souls.

Frantic and dazed, bent over under the weight of the barrels, saddlebags, sacks and bags in which they carried the most necessary things, driving livestock ahead of them, they tramped over the steep pass with a staggering and heavy step and without hesitation descended and spilled out into the wide plain.

It was hot. The sun was baking. Harvest time. In the fields they passed through, the Albanian peasants were reaping. They were gathering the grain in large sheaves.

Grandpa Tode and Boris, a year younger than him, rubbing their knees and feet and, spitting out the accumulated bitterness, stared at the field and struck up a quiet conversation.

- Look - said Grandpa Tode - they are reaping, their people are working, they are gathering their bread in the barns... And at home, with us - who will reap the fields? There on the stalk – the grain is already falling from the stalks. Who will harvest the wheat? Huh? Who? What are you saying, huh?

Boris did not say who will harvest the fields and who will harvest the wheat. Some other pain tormented him, so he said:

- When those from the leadership came here to tell us that the battle would pass through our village, also told us to take what we needed and hide the rest, and not leave anything lying around. They said, set fire to everything, let everything be turned to ashes and nothing left for the enemy. Here the enemy should find only ashes. Let the enemy find a burnt land... That's what we, the obedient, not to say the fools, told ourselves, we set fire to our crops, to our corn with our own hands. We set fire to our sweat and nothing, neither of the field, nor of the garden and orchard, nothing was left standing... That's exactly what the enemy needed... we were told.

- And do you think we - grandfather Tode interrupted him - did we have anything left that was standing before we left that wasn't burned? Our fields were fertile with wheat, the corn - on, high above our heads, a long cob, as wide as our elbow - grandfather Tode raised his hand above his head and let out a deep breath. - And we set fire to the fields ourselves... we watched them burn and cried... Let me tell you, when I think about this, I don't know if my soul will ever find relief and forgiveness for such a sin. It is a bad, great sin to set fire to your field with your own hands, instead of gathering the harvest. We watched the bread burn with tears in our eyes. That's what they told us - burn everything, leave only ashes for the enemy... And the wheat, I tell you, tall, the corn, I tell you, long as a braid and in it the kernel of the grain. Living bread, I tell you, we burned it all with our own hands... We committed a great and terrible sin...

- And you, did you set out alone? - asked Boris.

- With my wife, Boris, but she got lost somewhere. I was looking for her, but in this mess, she got lost and must have gone some other way. I hope we will find each other somewhere. If only she is still alive and well...

- Get up! Let's go!!! - a strong and hoarse voice rang out.

The conversation was cut short. The word stuck in Grandpa Tode's lips and faded away. They rested on the wide plain for as long as they managed to gather their breath, to wipe the sweat and dust from their foreheads, to straighten their backs, and to rub their feet.

- Get up! Let's go! - the voice called again.

They got up. They called out to each other. They gathered themselves. They picked up their bags, bags, saddlebags, gathered themselves and set off, they were going somewhere, where the sun was setting, which shone for a moment more and only after a few breaths, the light disappeared. The high hill above them cast a thick shadow. The darkness soullessly darkened the wide plain and the crowds of people and the cattle. Only there, high above the hills, the day still breathed and slowly died away, and the sky burned in a purple flame.

- Sometime later the leader yelled "Stop and rest here!!!"
See you tomorrow!

They took the weight off their shoulders and backs. They exhaled nausea and bitterness from their souls, they spat out bitterness. In the darkness they found some peace and gentle repose in that short time that was allotted to them to rest just enough to catch their breath, to spit out their vomit, to collect their belongings, to snatch a little time from the short rest to regain their thoughts, to ease their pain, to sort themselves out, to find themselves, to see themselves, to count themselves, to cry and in their crying to find a little peace and relief. Grandpa Tode lay down at the edge of the shadow under which others, who had come before him, were already lying. He lay under the thinned shadow and with his mouth wide open, he inhaled deeply the image of what had remained behind him forever, which was constantly before his eyes – the alley that led from home to the church, the road to the fields, vineyards and gardens, to the

fountain and the spring near the church of St. Athanas, which had flowed from under the roots of the old thick and highly branched oaks since time immemorial. Before his eyes stood what was a living picture and in it was his whole soul along with the great pain. He was burning with fire, when he took the path behind the others along which with every step he took he dragged his memories. The last thing he saw before leaving was the black cloud that overshadowed the sun. Behind him and inside him was ruin. The great pain for what was lost was not just pain, but a heavy blow with a sharp knife stuck right in the heart, where it hurt the most and died the fastest. Now he carries that pain and the sharp blow within himself. He was also one of the many who believed the lies of the leadership. Now he spit out the bitterness of the much promised goodness and the great evil. He walked slowly on the path of the great danger. And behind the crowd with untangled hair, with his arms outstretched, Grozda cried inconsolably and desperately and begged:

- People, my children, my children are gone... where are my children!!!

The great crowd swallowed them and like a flooded river dragged them with it. There he found them...

Night fell on the refugees, covering them with the black blanket of darkness. The first long, fateful and restless night in a foreign land, which brought no relief to either their bodies or their souls. Many of them were found awake by the stifling and foggy dawn.

Their cattle disappeared during the night. Unguarded, they scattered across the gardens, meadows and stubble fields, and word spread that the Albanian peasants had taken them. They did not go looking for them.

Those who were leading them did not stop to see what had happened to the cattle, but ordered them to move on.

The cloud of people continued to trample the dusty road...

They moved on.

When the large crowd reached the entrance to Pegin, they were not allowed to enter the city. They scattered them in the stubble field where old, rotten and smelly tents had already been pitched. In them they found a bare bed and shade under the hot sun. They looked at the sky through the bullet holes and their thoughts returned to where they had been torn from. Only Grandpa Tode did not lie down. He continued to make his way from one crowd to another, from one tent to another, searching for his Ilina and asking in a pitiful voice if anyone had seen her. In the silence that reigned, only his voice could be heard:

- Ilina! – Grandpa Tode cried pleadingly. Every day until sunset he searched for his Ilina. Every passerby would ask him – if he had seen a short woman dressed in black raspberry. Her name was Ilina. Silence. And Grandpa Tode continued to search for Ilina, but Ilina was not among the people or in the tents.

- Ilina! Ilina! – his voice could be heard and he kept asking – have you seen a short woman dressed in black raspberry? Her name was Ilina. And he kept shouting: Ilina, Ilina, why did you leave me alone?

Who knows how many Illini remained on the roads that led to no return?

- Illina! Illina! Oh, Illina! - Grandpa Tode shouted and called.¹⁹

¹⁹ Excerpt from the novel ON THE ROAD OF NO RETURN.

His voice was lost in the voices of those who shouted run. In that mad escape, one voice shouted - run, but did not say where, and when the crowd dispersed on the Korchansko Pole, another voice shouted - we are going, but did not say where.

The dusty road took them towards THE ROAD OF NO RETURN.

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That day in the waters of Lake Prespa, wanting to escape to the forbidden side, Lefka, the one who had scattered her love with Micho in Krchishta, now a DAG fighter, was drowning, beaten by the murky lake waves, and along with her was drowning the faith that they had instilled in her in the muddy and cold dugouts, she was drowning, calling for her Micho for help. The flame of life burned brightly within her, supported by the strength she had seized from the power of the rocks and the feeling that she had freed herself from fear, her faith was strengthened in the hope that she would once again, with her Micho, walk through the green meadows under the light of the full moon, count the stars and snuggle up to the warm shoulder of her beloved. From that great desire, she gathered strength to resist the danger that lurked. She fought with the waves that splashed her and did not let her breathe. In the wildly turbulent water, her dreams and un-lived youthful maiden love drowned. The bloody waves splashed her harder and harder. Blood was seeping from her wounds and mixing with the murky water. She did not give up. She kicked with her legs, and did not let go of the schmeisser in her hand. Even though she was lost in the murky water, she managed to raise her head out of the water, to breathe in as much air as was possible, and then she was lost in the murky water again. In an instant, she cut off the thought that this was the end, but she was still fighting the waves. Her shoulder burned feeling like something strong, like a nail, had been driven into her back.

Severely shot, she was drowning in the maddening waters and in her own blood. When she hit the bottom, she felt a strong pull on her hair. Her head was already above the water and she could barely breathe the air. With her eyes half-open, she saw two soldiers standing above her, a soft smile appeared on their cheeks, which encouraged her and she felt them pulling her, now caught under the arms. She coughed loudly, spat out muddy water mixed with sand, and then for a moment the light of life flashed in her eyes. In her hazy gaze, she imagined she was seeing meadows, forests, green fresh grass, the scent of meadow flowers, and the face of her Micho. When they pulled her out of the muddy water, they slowly dragged her along the sand. Behind her was a thick bloody trail. Her life remained in the hands of the soldiers who begged her to hold on a little longer, just a few more steps.

She swallowed the sand stained with her still warm blood.

Since that day, the days have turned into years, and every year, on the same day that Lefka died in Prespa, Micho brings with him a large bundle of blue flowers, bluebells. He collects them from the roadside and from the meadows. With a loose step, he approaches the lake shore, kneels, bows his head low, and in the silence that is occasionally disturbed by the gentle wave and the rustling of the reeds, with his thoughts he slowly unwinds the coil in which for many years his love and pain for the girl he loves so much have been embedded. He whispers. His whisper is quiet, muffled by the gentle silvery wave of the lake. That mournful and ecstatic silent speech resembles a soulful prayer. He crosses himself three times, kneels on his right knee, fills his palm with water, kisses it and returns it drop by drop to the lake, like the kisses he used to return under the thick shade of the oak. He stands up, does not take his eyes off the water and cannot suppress his sobs. Along with his tears, he gently throws the blue flowers strand by strand into the blue lake water above which hangs the scythe of the blue sky. The wave takes him and gently

and sweetly rocks him, like the one that rocked Lefka on the second day of Easter. He turns away from the shore and step by step leads his way along the Prespa field above which the sky and the water and the roadside blue flowers are the bluest. It seems to him that everything is blue, like Lefka's eyes in which all the blueness of the sky was gathered. Now Micho searches for that blue in the Prespa sand and sadly adorns it with a roadside blueberry. Every year on this day, Micho comes, with a handful of blueberry branches under his arm, scatters them in the lake and sows them in the field. For Lefka and for all whose dreams and aspirations which ended in the blue water and under the blue Prespa sky. Here, the blueberry does not wither quickly. It lasts in Lefka's unfulfilled dream and in Micho's pain.

Step by step, Micho walks across the Prespa field, and with his strides he resembles a sower. Micho sows his pain. Today, there is no memory of him. There is only an unhealed wound, pain and sadness. With every step he takes in the sandy field, he leaves a blueberry branch. For the souls of those who melted into the sand, just as his Lefka melted. So every year, among other beautiful flowers, Micho only collects the blue ones because Lefka's eyes were as blue as the blueberry, the lake and the sky.

For two years, Lefka lived the war, always having the image of Micho before her. From the fiery and unquenchable desire to be with him, she drew echoes of what she had experienced in her imagination. His smile, the gentle look in his eyes, his warm and quiet caressing voice, the hugs in which she felt safest, encouraged her to endure the long night marches, the thunder of cannon and mortar shells, the whistle of bullets, the hunger and cold in the damp dugouts and shallow trenches. She tied them to the golden chain that Micho gave her during their last meeting. Her eyes were always full of Micho. He was her only joy and hope in the darkness of evil. Everywhere and always she

saw his face, which inflamed her desire to be with her beloved as soon as possible.

For two years, Lefka lived the war always in front of her, with the image of Micho before her, and Micho has lived the pain and sadness all his life, with the image of Lefka before him.

There is no cure for such pain. There is only an indelibly dear, sad and living memory, the guardian of the unquenchable flame and the embers of the unfulfilled passionate youthful happiness.

Micho, without Lefka, lived the pain and sadness all his life, with Lefka's face before him, which forever remained his illness. With her image in his eyes, he survived that inhuman time in which youthful beauty faded and went downhill.

There was never again room for another in his heart.

56

Many years later, there again in Nivitsi, some other Macedonians, from the other side of the border, taught by foreigners how to destroy what they inherited from their ancestors, and did not feel it with their heart and soul, betrayed not only the flag and the name, but also a part of their people.

I will not stop writing, because before my eyes, like a huge rock, appeared Jonche Hristovski's song which reads: "We have one name in our souls, we carry it, for it we give our lives, oh Macedonia...". While singing the song Jonche took off his jacket and threw it in front of the audience like a waving flag. Since then, no one has sung like Jonche. Will anyone else appear like Jonche? Will anyone's jacket wave like Jonche's again? That day in Nivici there was no orchestra, no anthems were sung, but nevertheless there was a lot of joyful laughter, hugging,

handshakes and foreigners who were most concerned about the signing of the agreement called the Prespa Agreement as soon as possible. They stood a little to the side and with pleasure in their eyes and lukewarm applause confirmed their success, which they achieved by soiling the red carpets that their hosts humbly laid out for them, and with attention and applause they listened to their deceptive promises spat out from the rostrum of the Parliament.

Television cameras directly and closely broadcast the circus, which we watched with amazement from the balcony of our villa.

Today is August 14, 2023. It is dawn. The gray morning is fanned by the sun's rays that grow from behind the peak of Mount Tsutse, part of the lofty Pelister mountain range. From the balcony I see the first rays that awaken Galitsa and the hills beyond the border. The sunlight slowly descends below, illuminates the elongated cliff of Nivitsi and settles on the blue glass of Lake Prespa.

Much has been said and written about that day and the days before and after it, mostly depending on current, tomorrow's and more distant needs and goals. The truth is rarely spoken and written about in a way that should not be forgotten. However, amateur writers have written tons of papers with unverified events from one story to the next. Most of them contain hatred, threats and calls for revenge. Heavy words that even the dirtiest paper can easily withstand.

Seventy-five years ago, like tomorrow, August 15, the bells rang in Prespa for the last time. The great Christian holiday, the Great Virgin Mary, was celebrated. Today the bells ring only in Nivitsi. And once the people of Nivitsi and the rest of Prespa celebrated the great holiday together and the bells rang festively throughout Prespa.

The Great Virgin Mary is the protector of Nivitsi and all of Prespa. And of my village. That day, guests from Kosinets, Lobanitsa, D'mbeni, Smrdesh, V'mbel, Dolno Papratsko came to my village. Everyone joyfully, after the service in the church, dressed in formal attire, celebrated the great holiday to the sound of all the bells from the surrounding villages.

Then?

57

There is no one today in my village to ring the bell, no one to light a candle for the Holy Mother of God, for Christ the Saviour, for all the saints, to pray and bow, to light a candle for the souls of those who died in the mountains of Macedonia and for those who will never return.

Today, since this morning, I have been burdened by this memory and I am very sad...

This morning, looking from the balcony at the blue of the lake and the sky, the greenery of the forests spread over the surrounding hills and mountains in whose wreath lie the two Prespa lakes, I look back with pain on the last days of the Greek Civil War. As if tomorrow, seventy-five years ago, on the morning of August 10, 1949, before the sun rose well, fighter planes from the airports in Ioannina, Kozheni, Kostur, Lerin and Solun reduced the trenches and bunkers of the promise and hope to ashes. They said "The enemy will not pass through Vicho". It passed and the government army, supported by tanks, combat vehicles, hundreds of cannons and mortars, went on the attack. Defenders and attackers one against ten. The most dangerous positions were defended by disabled fighters, who forever remained in the fire and ashes of the bunkers and trenches.

I have not myself experienced those horrors, but spiritually and with all my consciousness I feel and experience them as my own unhealed wound and unceasing pain.

Years have passed, but the memory has not faded, which is an integral part of our great human, national and Macedonian suffering. My knowledge of those days has also been enriched by the book, "History of the Civil War", which my Lerin acquaintance gave me about ten years ago.

In it, with knowledge and painstaking work, the author takes you into the whirlwind of horror and does not leave you indifferent, even to spend the night with a peaceful sleep. The horror will follow you until dawn and the day will be a reflection of hell for you.

On page 533 it is written that on the flat area of the Small Prespa Lake and on the entire road from Preval to R'bi and Peroo-Kulata, all the way to the village Nivitsi, on August 13 and 14, 1949, the Greek Air Force dropped 34 bombs weighing 250 kg, 530 bombs weighing 125 kg, 1,900 bombs weighing 10 kg, 620 rockets, 26,000 grenades, 43,000 machine gun bullets and 70 napalm bombs, at that time the most terrible and deadly weapon. They were dropped by American and English planes on the poorly armed, but unusually brave fighters of the Democratic Army of Greece, in whose ranks, out of a total of 25,000, 14,000 Macedonians fought, boys and girls aged 16 to 25, a small part volunteers, and the majority forcibly mobilized. Together with their fellow Greeks, they were also, in the majority, like the Macedonians, village boys and girls. The hell of Gramos lasted 70 days and nights. An epic of endurance, heroism, courage, fighting spirit and faith and deception. What did they defend against the hundred-thousand-strong government army well-armed by the United States of America and accompanied by American and English military advisors? They defended hills, mountains and

rocks and died on the rocks and behind the rocks. A year after the bloody battle for Gramos and after the bloody and unsuccessful battles for Negush, Voden and Lerin, the troops were captured in the hills and mountains of the region called Vicho, where, by order of the CPG Politburo and DAG General Staff, the slogan **“The enemy will not pass through Vicho”** was coined and the entire civilian population, from all the villages of Vicho Region and from Prespa, regardless of age, was mobilized to dig trenches and build bunkers. Only at night. Those tens of thousands were supposed to fight over a hundred thousand government soldiers, dozens of tanks and ninety aircraft at the head and they were convinced that the enemy would not pass through Vicho. They waited for him in the trenches and bunkers and met him with defeat... That madness was later taken somewhere in distant Uzbekistan, it was called madness, but those responsible were punished only by being removed from the ranks of the party.

That iron and napalm were first used on Gramos in the battle that lasted seventy days and nights behind deserted hills, hills and rocks over which, in addition to thousands of cannon and mortar shells, aircraft bombs dropped and countless machine gun and automatic bullets fired, Royal Air Force planes dropped barrels filled with a flammable mixture in which both people and land burned. Thus, from June 14 to August 20, 1948, Gramos burned and was defended, where the bloom of Macedonian and Greek youth died. Here, in rocky Gramos, the sick leader, as he said, would destroy Anglo-American imperialism.

In the book, the author does not state how many shells and bullets the cannons, mortars, tanks, rifles and machine guns fired. The space in that area is no larger than 10 square kilometers. Did a little or a lot of iron fall in that area on the crippled DAG units and the large number of civilians who, in an unprecedented panic, rushed towards Peroo-Kulata to find salvation on the peninsula they called Africa? The author notes that 80 percent of those who

retreated across this open space were killed. No, it was not a battlefield. It was a slaughterhouse. Was the amount of iron and lead thrown small or large, were the dead few or many whose bones lie in mass graves in the area between Rabi and the Peroo-Kulata bridge, in the sands and reeds between the Big and Small Prespa Lakes? Aegeans were not dying there, Macedonians were dying there, and those who managed to stay alive were doomed to a terrible exile.

With faith in the leader, the Macedonian people sacrificed their lives, sacrificed their loved ones, sacrificed their property. Sacrificed themselves. Unfortunately, the heirs of that beloved leader, after years for the entire Greek public, just to be rehabilitated, will declare:

- For our party in Greece there is no Macedonian minority.

Those who were in power asked the Macedonians to sign a statement that they were Greeks by birth, and they, the communists, who wanted to come to power, publicly declared that Macedonians do not exist.

What created this difference?

The same, as a refrain, is repeated by others.

That loudly expressed - national renewal - was nothing more than a promise, a big lie, that in Greece, the Macedonians would gain their autonomy. What the NOF and AFZH leaders promised in their speeches was unquestioningly accepted, praised, and then spread among the DAG fighters and the suffering Macedonian peasantry, who mobilized even more and sacrificed their blood and lives with the lofty slogans shouted by NOF activists and propagandists. Not a single Macedonian man or woman should be left without a rifle and should fully go into battle for DAG's victory and the people's revolution, which became the most beloved slogan among the NOF activities.

During the last five months before DAG's defeat, in the spirit of that deception, Macedonians already represented half of DAG's fighting force. That restoration of something that did not exist, and had yet to be realized, meant nothing more than the mobilization of the entire Macedonian population and the introduction of division, hatred, discord and strife among the Macedonians in Greece and in the People's Republic of Macedonia. The architect was not naïve. He knew where that path could lead. Beria's pupil and Stalin's favourite (Zahariadis) followed the path that led to destruction. The Macedonians who participated in the Greek Civil War realized this too late.

Almost the entire population of the villages under DAG's control was relocated by the communists to the forests near the Greek-Albanian border. In this way, they said, we will leave the enemy a desolate, scorched land where he will not have the opportunity to feed himself. This is exactly what the enemy needed, for whom food was constantly and abundantly arriving by ship from America, and in the villages controlled by DAG many villagers were dying of hunger and disease.

Time, with the help of original documents, will slowly reveal all those who caused the war and the who uprooted the Macedonians from their homes.

Prespa was its center for the entire duration of the Greek Civil War. On the other side of the border, in the village of Asamati, in the villa of the Russian White Guard, Colonel Gritsenko, on December 23, 1947, a temporary and government until June 28, 1948, when the Inform Bureau was proclaimed, it was the night headquarters of the CPG General Secretary, some of his closest associates accompanied by high-ranking figures of the then Communist Party of Macedonia. Here, the entire group, in the light of kerosene lamps (electricity was introduced in Prespa in 1957), feasted on the most delicious dishes of Prespa

carp and drank the best Macedonian wines. At dawn, the jeep returned to Vineni or Nivitsi or Orovo or Grazhdeno.

The villa of the Russian White Guard Colonel Gritsenko still exists in Asamati. After the proclamation of the Inform Bureau, Zahariadis sided with Stalin. The road to Asamati was already closed to him and he found a place to hide in the mountain cave above the village of Vineni.

Back then, a steep goat path led to the cave, and today there are concrete stairs to the hill itself, where a large plain covered in the shadows of a low and dense oak forest spreads out. There were workshops for sewing uniforms and shirts, for repairing clogs and boots, a dairy for processing sheep, goat and cow milk, which the people of Prespa had to donate for the fight and for victory.

Now, to the forest above the village Vineni, in the place of the former steep narrow gravel goat path that ends before the wide plain, concrete stables lead that end under the shadows of low-stemmed oak trees. At the beginning of the plain, a narrow path leads to the left, at the end of which rises a thick old oak tree and next to it a large stone under which a dark cave lies. On the oak trunk is nailed a board with the inscription: „Σπλινια Ζαχαριαδης” - „Zahariadis Cave” and an arrow pointing towards the large stone rock under which a dark opening lies, through which steps lead into a large dark den, which in the last year and a half of the Civil War was the most guarded secret place. Here, in the comfortable and warm rooms of Gritsenko’s villa in Asmati, Zahariadis rested, wrote and made party and military decisions, which later turned out to be as dark as the den, in which he held secret consultations with his closest associates.

Today, that bear’s den has become a tourist attraction and a place of remembrance and respect. In front of the entrance to the cave, children and grandchildren of Zahariadis’s current like-

minded people, supporters and admirers, installed his large portrait carved on a marble slab. The portrait, on the left and right sides, is adorned with two olive branches. In the eyes and face of the leader (Zahariadis), a hidden smile under which, as ever, are hidden the false promises, the great deceptions and the secret collaboration with the Germans in the Dachau camp and with the Greek government which was proven at the secret party conference held in 1957 and at which a decision was made to expel him from the party, and the Soviet authorities, probably for his protection, sent him to the village Surgut, in distant Siberia, where he hanged himself in 1973. The minutes of that conference were published in a book marked "Top Secret".

And now, looking at his image placed in front of the entrance to that bear's den, it seems to the intended audience as if he were saying:

- Come in, enter paradise...

Located a kilometer away from the cave, is the village Orovnik. It was a partisan base destroyed by bomber raids. Now it is deserted. Only the old church, the broken tiles and the excavated foundations remain. A distant sign that there were once people living here now scattered around the world by the war. From there, a cobblestone road leads to the village Grazhdeno. Plain, fields, meadows and surrounding forests. During the Greek Civil War the entire village was a partisan hospital. After heavy bombing, the hospital was moved to the large cave where, on three-story wooden beds covered with hay and fern, the fighters from the battlefields of Vicho and Mali-Madi were treated for their wounds.

On the far shore of the Small Prespa Lake, not far from the border with Albania, is the village Drenovo - now gone. It was a notorious communist prison camp. Those whose sons and daughters did not share the forced mobilization or defected to the

other side were imprisoned and tortured there. After whole days, to the point of extreme exhaustion, they dug tunnels in the foothills of the nearby mountains to store weapons. They wanted to re-educate them with hard, slave labour. Years ago, somewhere far to the north, millions of people were sent to their freedom in gas chambers all through the war. The partisan general, whom the high leadership blamed for the failure of the battles to capture Voden, was also shot there. His name was Georgiadis, and he paid with his life for someone else's crimes. Above are the villages L'k, Orovnik, Popli, and further north - Shtrkovo, Medovo, and to the northeast R'bi and above was German. On the other side of the Small Prespa Lake - Nivitsi. This circle of villages, together with the houses, yards, cellars, livestock, meadows, gardens, mountains and caves, throughout the entire Greek Civil War, all together were one large military-political base of the Democratic Army of Greece.

Prespa was the headquarters of the CPG, DAG military and political leadership and the headquarters of NOF until the end of the war. Weapons were brought to Prespa from Yugoslavia and other communist countries, and from Prespa at night, loaded on horses and mules, the people of Prespa transported them to Gramos. There was a printing house in Prespa that printed Macedonian newspapers; the first courses for Macedonian teachers and the first Macedonian schools were opened in Prespa. Prespa was a free territory and a thorn in the side of Athens.

Seventy years later from Preval, on the winding asphalt road, down and then a little further on to the village R bi and immediately to the left, dozens of black Mercedes were driving. They were not in a hurry. They crossed the bridge and turned right, uphill, a short stop at the bend – something like a parking lot from which you can see the entire eastern shore of the Great Prespa Lake and above the village Dolno Dupeni, where our villa with the Sun of Kutlesh is located. I am not sure if they saw me,

but I could see them from my balcony with my binoculars. I saw someone waving a red flag and the column of black Mercedes disappeared around the bend near the church of St. George. I don't see them now, but I know that they are already descending and arriving in front of the church where many years ago the dear leader lied to the Macedonians. Will these people in the Mercedes also lie to the Macedonians on this side of the border? The road took them to the western side of Nivitsi, which after many years saw so many flags and so many famous faces, whom they recognized from watching them on television screens. They thought they were tourists. They were not carrying bombs, but diplomatic jacketsbags with a pre-written agreement called the Prespa Agreement. They were driving along the same road where hundreds of fighters of the Democratic Army of Greece and residents of the Prespa and distant villages died on August 13 and 14, 1949. They were driving along the road where the defeat and exodus began. Smiling faces in the cars. Among them were the signatories, the prime ministers and those who had been promising, persuading and exerting pressure for years, those, the representatives of the Western world from which there was no president, prime minister or minister left who had not soiled the Macedonian red carpets and shamelessly lied from the rostrum of the Parliament. And the representatives of the people, as they called themselves, had grown fatter asses in the parliamentary seats, they believed them in everything. Not a single one was found to open their mouths or raise a finger and ask. Their silence was their consent to every deception. Greek and Macedonian television broadcast live. On the television screen, images of the surroundings surrounding rocks were shown. On the TV screen, a new image. Next to a rock, once bloody, hanging over the lake - a solemnly decorated table, state flags and they - the signatories and the advisors. Cameras were buzzing, televisions were broadcasting. A short wait, the signatories, foreign ministers signed something that legal scholars, experts and specialists have

assessed as the text of the agreement written by others, and signed by those who have been heard of, that they have not even read it. In any case, legal science and time will show both the benefits and harms that will result. The signing was marked by loud applause, from which the cormorants, the white beauties of Lake Prespa, were taken aback, and the hugs, slobbery kisses and cold handshakes were recorded by dozens of TV cameras and private photographers. Perhaps as a memory of the great shame and betrayal. With a slow and sure step, the Italian woman approaches the signatories, on whose sour face there is an ugly mockery, behind her the Austrian, with hidden pleasure on his frowning cheeks, who knows whose descendant he is, and to one side the old man, silent, who for twenty years, as he claimed, had been designing the game for only one cent. What Jew loses part of his life for only one cent a day's reward? Now the cooks of the bitter dish walk slowly, not like before. The question seems to be drawn on their faces: is there any other fool in the world who sells the name of his country as if it were a pumpkin, pepper, cucumber, or French onion on the stalls of the Serbian markets? Smiling the most and certainly the happiest was the prime minister of **our country**.

And for what he has done, he happily thinks about what to give to his Greek colleague. It occurred to him. He untied his red tie and with a broad smile handed it to his brother, as he has often called him. And he, the poor thing, did not accept it, retreating, defending himself. The comrade knew what a noose was.

And the color of the prime minister's tie reminded me of the spilled and absorbed blood and extinguished lives that were lost in Prespa; it also reminded me of the forgotten red stars of the Vardar Macedonian partisans, who waved a red flag in the attack. The partisans in Aegean Macedonia also wore a red star on their partisan caps. On the partisan cap, above the Greek letter DELTA, the symbol of DAG, on the partisan cap of Tina

Andreeva, a young officer and DAG hero, a red star shone. Everyone called her Tsveta after the role of Tsveta in the drama **Macedonian Blood Wedding**.

Prolonged applause and voices of joy and smiles of triumph flooded Nivitsi and scared away the big white birds. That day, none of those present heard the painful groans of the wounded being treated in the cave partisan hospital near Grazhdeno; no one heard the terrible screams and wails of those who died in the flames and fire of napalm, no one mentioned that the water of Lake Prespa was red.

Years after that triumphant performance, the two friends were left without the promised Nobel Prize and without the government chair. The great always want that – glorification, but only for one use, and the advisors, who often soiled the red carpets, no longer appeared in the government corridors and on the parliament rostrum.

Not the end, but the question and search for an answer will last a long time why exactly did they sign the agreement in that remote Nivitsi?

Is it to remind us of the forbidden language, for the use of which there was a trial, a fine, castor oil and horseradish, public beatings, jailing, pulling out nails, putting hot eggs under the armpits, tightening a hoop on the head, and placing a live cat under the shirt, beatings on the feet, hot pepper, shearing a cross on the head, prison time on the dry island camps and to let us know that it was here, in Prespa, that they crushed us during the Greek Civil War!

Did those, on this side of the border(Macedonians) who enthusiastically signed the Prespa Agreement, know about the above-mentioned deeds?

It is well known that State Agreements are always signed in solemnly decorated halls, and not in a once deserted hilly and lakeside village where almost seventy years ago it was drenched with mostly Macedonian and some Greek blood in the name of freedom. Was it only because of the beauty of Prespa and now because of the beautifully arranged Nivitsi, once one of the poorest villages in Prespa, that they decided to sign the agreement there, or was it as a warning and reminder that it was precisely here, in Prespa, that the Athenians should remind us that it was precisely here that they killed our compatriots. And those who managed to escape the napalm, by order of the communist leadership and with the help of domestic sycophants, henchmen and deceivers, were dragged under foreign skies without the right of return. Did anyone on our side know or care that with this agreement we gave up on our dead and living?

In the years after the end of the Greek Civil War, the authorities ordered the collection of mines, bullets, shell casings, fragments of airplane bombs, cannon and mortar shells, the razing of trenches and bunkers, searching under every bush and stone, picking, gathering, taking out what they had gathered and transferring it somewhere so that no trace of the evil that had happened here would remain. In the heart of the green mountain range, Prespa was silent for a long time without its people, speechless with weakness, rage and pain. Silence. Silence occasionally broken by the cries of lake birds. This was until the authorities of this tame land settled Vlach shepherds from Epirus and Greek refugee herders from Albania. Prespa was lively but without its own people. Other customs, other songs and language prevailed in their houses.

Now Nivitsi, once the poorest village in Prespa whose people made a living from fishing and and selling smelts, is a famous tourist village. It is arranged and rich with the sweat of Nivitsi's people.

Hundreds of tourists from all over Greece leave a lot of money there. They are attracted by the greenery and beauty of the Macedonian mountains, unlike their rocky terrain that fills the eyes, and the rich table with delicious Macedonian dishes and Macedonian wines. And when its name is pronounced, then some of them and some of us are horrified, and others of them and others of us are happy and proud. The Greeks named the village PCARADES (Fishermen), and some of our people named our country NORTH...

The monstrosity was not thrown only over Nivitsi, but over all of Macedonia

The signatories, in order to erase their dirty image, publicly said that they did it in the name of the people.

Did they forget in the name of the people, and I still hear the terrible suffering and wails of the killed and wounded, the mutilation and burning with napalm and see their escape through the wilderness and forests where they sought salvation?

From what?

From whom?

Why?

58

Years ago, I was collecting materials for my book, "On the Road of Time." While searching the shore of the small lake, I saw a cradle in the reeds that grow in the water. It was old, rotten and empty.

Who was left in this cradle without a mother, and which mother was left without the child she raised in this cradle with a lullaby?

The lake waves gently rocked the cradle, and above it the reeds rustled as if they were singing lullabies. Of the many songs sung, which song was more cheerful, and which was sadder and more painful?

I looked at the empty cradle and pain gripped my chest. From the depths of my soul the question sprang up - whose cradle was this? I knelt down beside it and had a great desire to pick it up, hold it in my arms and rock it, as the lake waves were rocking it now. I did not pick it up. I left it for the waves to rock and the reeds to rustle a lullaby... - oh, the cradles, the cradles...

There, in those places of ours, many cradles remained empty and deserted, rocked day and night by the lake waves and the tall reeds rustle their lullabies.

Oh, the cradles, the cradles, oh, the cradles, our desolate destiny...

59

Years later, after the worst of times, a few foreigners moved to Prespa, but they didn't bring back its beauty and peace. After the worst of times, Prespa without its native people is not Prespa.

As if for consolation or repentance, years later, one of the signatories of the agreement will publicly and loudly shout – shame on you people! Shame!

The man shouted, he stayed alive and started to form a party to save what he had destroyed.

Did he ask himself who it was a shame for?

Well, it was precisely the one who signed, whose hand his father had publicly blessed in writing, whether from a pang of conscience or something else, who would loudly shout:

- Shame on you people! Shame!

For whom, is it a shame?

For the people who defended the name in a referendum or for those who sold it?

Who are those people who, through agreements, gave up parts of their people, their race and their language?

Others wanted it, forced it and got it, and ours, let's call them that, without thinking and not yet mature enough to protect a state, first gave away the name and the flag, then divided the country into districts, handed out thousands of citizenships and brought the state to its brink. These are they, the spoiled ones, who, still immature, took power.

And not only that, but much more. And that reminded me of Prlichev's poem "Summer 1762" in which he said:

"... they will strangle you, they will shear you, they will milk you until you bleed, among the people they will sow disagreements and discord, so that son will hate father and brother will hate brother. Hey! And with brother, brother."

I got the impression that these prophetic words were written today. What is happening to us and being done to us today does not resemble any other colour, but only black, because our people, according to the measure of foreigners, are marking and shaping our future in black.

May the intelligent Venko Andonovski, who reminded us of Gane, be alive and well. (May Venko forgive me for copying his text without his permission):

“Ah, that Gane is not alive, to tell you who you are, from A to Z (so accuse his poetry of hate speech): thieves, abdals, akmaks, boligazovtsi, shameless, indecent, vitosniks, whoopers, reptiles, nits, bastards, grabbers, davajgazovtsi, dragaykolchishpta, dibeks, gurultajjii, gnobrozas, gozbojajii, eunuchs, cheap, esapchii, jugglers, zhganovi, zhanovi, zaheti-zachii-zabrishi, izpochuturi, izroz, ismelezeni, yavashlii, yagmadjii, janissaries, kilavs, kurtsaks, kesejii, nezajeoni, naakani, neranimaykovtsi, passionate, orospikefli, dehumanized, arsonists, simpletons, sycophants (farts with pretensions to thunder), housebreakers, mind-losers, unbelted, seirjis, know-it-alls, seneshtars, tomkas, tepaymakamajkovtsi and tepaytakovtsi, karlii, keleshi and kelepuri, ujdurmadjis, utki, ukur-kostumlii, facebook phanarioti, djojoshtapleri, slanderers, censors, scumbags, shalabajers, charlatans, scoundrels!”

They are all ours and among them there is a large handful of evildoers. Only those with yatagans, with white fesofs and partisans are not there.

So, well, they are all ours and parts of other nations and tribes and some from the friendly west and in order to be friendlier to us, someone moved the sunrise there. Everything according to the patched constitution and the much-awaited changes and dictated changes.

At the moment I write this, I feel like praying loudly and strongly:

- Our Father, Who art in heaven, come down from heaven to the land called Macedonia, forgive us our sins, give us understanding and show those who have come to evil the way home...

AMEN!

I pray and I just dream and in my dream I say to myself:

- Come, come, wake up, be reborn as a Macedonian partisan!

For all those listed above without names and surnames, but know who they are, some say there is no cure for them. Others, however, disagree and persistently claim that there is a cure for them in the pharmacies of Shutka and Idrizovo (prisons). We will welcome them when they get there, after the thunder of the dreamed-of third Ilinden that academician Ljupcho Kocarev advocated for in many speeches, articles and columns. God grant that his thought, speech, word, hand, pen, paper be gilded and that his wish and dream be fulfilled. Mine too!

Recalling the Prespa Agreement and its consequences that are already following, tragically, the warning words of the ingenious Misirkov ring in my ears to tears:

- What have we done?

Well, this is what we have done: we changed the flag, we territorially tore the country apart, we changed our country's name, we signed agreements and let foreigners into the country to sow our seeds. We found foreign strategic partners, and we let the most important and powerful strategic partner, our own people, go down the drain. And some forgot or did not learn or others taught them that for every individual and every people, patriotism is a fundamental concept in which history is embedded. If you do not know the history of your own people, do not seek and do not strive to be the president of the state, prime minister and minister and do not sign harmful agreements. And you who have already reached those positions, and you who want to come, be smart and do not forget that someone reminded that he did not throw his boots in the trash, but hung them on the ceiling and for mockery or warning that right now is the time for one or more demands. That threat or warning passed as if it were a joke, as if it were a joke to play ball in state premises by newly minted state-builders,

as if it were a joke to mock that by joining the defensive-aggressive alliance, the sun will rise in the West for Macedonia, as if it were a joke to wave the flag of some future great state. The new astronomer, who replaced the scalpel he learned about with chalk and on a school board convinces what is good for the North, gave Copernicus a chance to turn in his grave after centuries. And more. Don't close your eyes when someone opens clubs in front of you, does not recognize your past, identity and language, and some of your circle, seek fraternization in the Constitution with those who once wore Nazi symbols on their chests and burned Macedonian villages.

And the Deputy Minister, to teach that a part of the fragmented Macedonian people is not a minority and shamelessly seeks to include it as a minority in the preamble of the Constitution. Did she learn that at home, in a classroom or did someone from outside tell her?

And I will say it again, patriotism is not just a fundamental concept, but the knowledge that they, some so-called Aegeans, are not a minority in the state in which, with their knowledge, diligence and honesty, with a highly developed national feeling, adhering to the long tradition that springs from Cyril and Methodius, Gotse Delchev, Blagoev from Zagorichani, Misirkov, Vlahov and a whole host of smart and wise individuals, regardless of their place of residence and education, held high and hold the torch of Macedonianness, and hence they have a deep-rooted stake in the creation of the Macedonian state.

Undoubtedly, the Prespa Agreement has historical significance. Time will tell whether the small ones in the Balkans or the big ones across the ocean and the European descendants of the former colonists will benefit the most.

Today, a huge outcry is raised in the West if a grave of just one or a few murdered people is found. Today, no one has come forward to discover and open the mass graves in Prespa, in Vicho Region and in Lerin. Today, Prespa is a forgotten mass grave. Today, there are few living Prespans in Prespa. Few living Prespans come to Prespa. There are many graves and tombs in Prespa, not of Aegeans, but of Macedonians.

When you look from the hill called Prevalot, the entire Small and Large Prespa Lakes and their surroundings and the memory of the great evil will lie before your eyes. Maybe then you will bow your head and bow down to the Macedonian diseases of Prespa...

That's all from me, because other, much stronger pens have described all its beauty, suffering, pain, despair, horror, dreams and hopes. I have only undertaken to recall a few events from recent times in which the fate of Prespa was woven, mostly beyond the border line, and now all of Macedonia.

Great is the pain when you remember that in that divine beauty, now abandoned and mournful, all the diseases of the Macedonians from ancient and present times have accumulated.

The years of betrayal are not counted. And the traitors too. Behind them remain the damages and demands and pleasures of foreigners. There is no forgetting about them.

They will be remembered for a long time, like the kiss of Judas.

Do not forget!

61

If the stone on which I sit could speak, then it would speak in the forbidden language about how my villagers lived in the

darkness. It would also speak about what was left in my village. Perhaps it would also speak about whether the new generations, descendants of the cruel rulers, now educated, enlightened and nourished with the values of freedom and the wealth of diversity, freed from the darkness of hatred, will repent for what their ancestors did to us and will extend a hand of reconciliation? Such desires I want to emerge from the silence of my WHITE STONE.

Now, when on this desolate piece of God's land, where there is no one and in the silence that is interrupted by some sad and solemn singing of birds, I am looking for a remnant of the foundation step by step. Wherever I look, I find pain, grief, sorrow, crying, curse, lamentation, sadness, worry, misfortune, silence, ashes, hopelessness and loneliness. Along with them, the White Stone is lonely.

And me.

62

It seemed like some distant and quiet voice was asking me:

- Is this the end?

In a deep sigh I answered:

- There is still much to say until the end, which leads to infinity.

From what I know, the letter written by partisan Major A. Kovachi sent to Zahariadis will be remembered, in which he wrote:

“Comrade Zahariadis, did we exile these people and are we obligated to protect them?”²⁰

Kovachi did not receive an answer, but the question still remains:

- Who carried out the flight of the Macedonians from Greece?

And one more line about the attitude of the Communist Party party of Greece in relation to the Macedonians:

CPG Central Committee General Secretary Florakis, in 1982, when asked if there was a Macedonian minority in Greece, replied:

- For our party, such a minority does not exist in Greece.

Has he forgotten that precisely that minority from his party was very much sought after and massively involved in the Greek Civil War?

It existed, gentlemen, and still exists despite all efforts to denationalize it. But more on this elsewhere.

With the ideological and political connection with the Greek communists, a certain number of Macedonians, with their ideological attachment to the Greek communists and with their activities during the Greek Civil War and after it, committed national betrayal and suicide of their own people.

In those times and later, the embers of the flame passed down from generation to generation never ceased to burn in the consciousness of my villagers, despite the fact that the new government wanted to cover everything with the darkness of

²⁰ Copy of the letter in the author's personal archive.

oblivion and with strong winds of evil to darken the centuries-old existence and destroy the native sound of the word (language).

63

What is there in my village now?

Only silence that covers the meadows, the unplowed fields, the black burnt and ash-covered earth, the thick oaks around the churches of St. Tanas, St. Petka, St. George, the empty pastures, Aunt Fima's burnt almonds and the autumn and winter crazy wind, the blue sky that at night is embroidered with stars, the whitewashed light of the full moon, the White Stone on which I sit and try to calm my soul, the unrest that has taken possession of my heart, to calm the pain and to indulge in the exuberance of memories.

I turned around and saw that everything was crushed except the white stone that endured and lasted and I who still endure together with the stone that strengthens me.

I sat on the white stone – the threshold through which I passed with my first steps as a child and a few years later, I crossed it again with longer steps, carrying with me all my grandfather's stories and when the bad winds took me to the outside world in which I have not forgotten anything of what was, how it was, and how it is. Everything is wrapped in the ball of oblivion.

I stood up from the Stone and looking at its whiteness, I was reminded that my ancestors invented writing, which we gave to others, and we remained illiterate and tied to the plow, hoe and sickle. We dragged on like this for centuries, our ancestors bled, after them their descendants... It seems that for some it was not desirable, so we slipped here, there we stepped on the insidiously placed trap that caught our feet and captured our minds. Our voice

dried up, we did not raise our voice-cry and we sought strategic partners through, and the most powerful, domestic partner, the people, we let down the water. We spat out everything that is most sacred, everything that our ancestors left us as if by a vow. We stained our ancestral heritage and stained our own image. Watching the colourful revolutionaries and the caricatures of gnawed bones of human arms and legs on television screens, we laughed then, and now we cry and wonder who is that fool who entrusted our country to such people?

The world laughed when we announced that we were changing the flag and name because someone else wanted it that way. And again, the question arises in my mind, what kind of people are those who allow scoundrels, without a shred of national feeling, with dirty cheeks and sticky palms, who do not know the letters of the Cyrillic alphabet, to change the flag and rename the state with a different name?

Stone, is it worth talking about such people, who speak dirty words and have done many dirty deeds?

64

White Stone, now that we are together again, I want to tell you something about a trip of mine. That way, we will be together longer and together we will try to tie the thread that bound us and to wipe away the dust that covered us even in separation.

We set off on our journey through scorching heat and rain. At the Medzitlia border crossing, on the other side of the border, I hand the policeman my diplomatic passport and greet him in his own language. He stared at me for a moment, then flipped through the passport and his eyes were glued on the computer. He did some searches and did the same thing again. Neither on the second nor on the third time could he find what I have known for

a long time, because it is not the first time a policeman on duty has looked for me in the computer, so I said to him:

- Sir, don't bother. I will tell you what you are looking for. You are looking for my first and last name, my father's name, my mother's name and the name of the village and the note about how dangerous I am to the security of Greece. What do you need to search for so much in the computer? Just open the drawer of your desk and you will find everything about me there.

The policeman frowned at me and, returning my passport, said:

- That is what I have been ordered to do. All those born in the Greek part of Macedonia must be controlled. That is what is written in the order. If I do not do this, then I will be demoted. Have a good journey. And let me ask you – where are you going?

- To Halkidiki...

- Today everyone is going there. There is practically no room for us (Greeks) there anymore... Only for your people (Macedonians)...

We did not go to Halkidiki. The Kostur sun was warmer to us than the Halkidiki sun. We turned right and took the road to Ser. I drove slowly and looked for a road sign with the inscription Καρυες (Καρίες), formerly Banitsa. I drove further and there on the right, on a tin plate, written in Greek and Latin letters, the inscription Καρυες-Karies. I continued along an old cracked, narrow asphalt road. There was not a living soul around. In front of us was a large plain, unmowed meadows and around them undulating hills. On one of them we saw an old bell tower with a crooked cross. There used to be a village here, there were people, there was a large church. Now there is no village, there are no people, the large church is gone. The old bell tower stands alone on the hill, which is blown by winds and rains from all sides, and

it stands, as the only witness to the time when there was a village there, in the village people and a church in which for centuries people prayed in their own language and the Orthodox faith survived in prayers. The village was called Banitsa during the centuries of Turkish rule and was called that until the last breath of the great empire, in which until a hundred or so years ago only Macedonians lived. Both the people, the village and the church suffered and were destroyed in the Second Balkan War by the new rulers. Only the bell tower remained, now a silent witness to the evil done. The new rulers called the foundation stones, overgrown with weeds, thorns and thorns, Karies, where there is no life and no traces of time that life once reigned here, that here people plowed, sowed, reaped, wove, celebrated, got married, were born, worked, grieved, dreamed and died...

I stopped the car, turn off the engine and opened my laptop.

On Wikipedia I read:

- Banitsa (Greek Καρυιες, Karies until 1922 Μπαναιτσα – Banitsa – a former village in Sersko, Aegean Macedonia, on the territory of the present-day municipality of Ser in the district of the same name in the Central Greece region. Until its destruction in the Second Balkan War, it was inhabited exclusively by Macedonians.

That is what is written in the books and memories left by the old people.

The remains of the village are located 20 kilometers north of the city Ser, on the slope of Mount Sharlia and the course of the Serovitsa River, which is called Fratska Reka, named after the neighbouring village Frashatani.

That is all.

And not a single word about the evil committed a hundred and something years ago. How much do I know about that? I call on time for help.

I turn the page of the past and slowly and carefully delve into it. It knows and keeps the truth about good and evil, about lies and kindness, about bad fate, about friends and enemies, about villains and the criminals, the thieves and the traitors. I call upon the past and the present time that are separated by a great divide and bad fate. I call upon the time in which someone persistently hides the truth, another mutilates it, a third destroys it. Banitsa is also in it. Now only the stone in the grassy foundation, the ruined old church and the crooked cross on the bell tower live on, the rest of Banitsa and the memory of the bloody act.

When I studied in elementary and high school, and even at university, about Banitsa and what happened in Banitsa, I did not learn anything, and those who taught me did not teach me at that time either. Not that they did not know. They certainly knew, but then some said that one should not know much about it. That is why I did not know either. And when I found out, the question did not fail to arise:

- Why was there no indication in Banitsa from 1941 to 1944 when the Bulgarian Empire ruled Thrace and Eastern Macedonia, that Gotse Delchev was killed there. Why a hundred and something years later did Bulgaria ask the Greek president if Bulgaria could erect a monument of Gotse Delchev in Banitsa? At that time, the Bulgarians did not care about Delchev because he was not Bulgarian, but the moment the Republic of Macedonia surfaced Delchev became a Bulgarian hero and is mentioned during every celebration of Bulgarian holiday and festivity. Out of stupidity and ignorance or out of flattery, even the president of North (Macedonia) loudly said that Gotse was Bulgarian. The empty-headed president said that and unfortunately has remained

alive. The Greeks do not have horns on their heads, but are smarter than to fall into such a trap. Unfortunately, both the Bulgarians and Greeks still harbour desires to possess more of Macedonia.

On the way, I was reminded of the Bible where it is written:

WHEN THE TREE IS CUT FROM THE ROOTS, NEW SHOOTS BRING OUT LEAVES...

May God grant us that...

The road took us to another place, where the remains of Pella lay before us and it seemed to us that someone, who was born there, was asking us: what have we done so far?

- A lot. We forgot ASNOM, everything we built over the course of 45 years. And we stole, sold out, changed the flag with the sun of Kutlesh, we divided our country into districts, we also have foreign advisors as much as your heart desires, who have made our Macedonia a mess, that now instead of Macedonia we call our country, “our state”, and “North...” who knows what we will call it a little later. Soon the foreigners will call us Northerners. We, Krste, have a colour revolution whose revolutionaries spat on their own face and on ours with the most stinking saliva. They left nothing unstained and in that filth they have soiled Macedonia too. We, Krste, have traitors, mercenaries, robbers, spies and agents, who have multiplied and soiled Macedonian affairs for the worse... we also have many parties quarreling to no end, who have brought unrest and discord not only to our country, but also to our homes and many, many other humiliations and endless nonsense. We have publishers who fill bookstores with junk literature. We have everything, Krste, we just don't have the brains. It's not like you wanted us to teach. Some other teachers, domestic but mostly foreign, are very busy

and worried about Macedonian affairs, but not like you wanted! They are busy, Krste, they are dirtying and forcing the worthless to prevail over the valuable...

- We know your thoughts, advice and recommendations by heart, and we read your book "On Macedonian Matters" and keep it in our home library - I said out loud, as if I were talking to Krste Misirkov.

- We put the book - I said out loud - next to the Bible because it teaches us and protects our language, traditions and reminds us of the colourful ones who, by dirtying your image, have dirtied their own.

Two holy scriptures stand side by side in a row of books that someone has now begun to not recognize the language in which they are written.

That book entitled, "On Macedonian Matters" is sacred, despite the fact that some people value someone else's coin more than domestic sanctities.

While we are looking around, it seems to us that someone else, born in that same Pella, is watching us from far away from centuries ago. From Babylon, from Egypt or from nowhere, from some dark underground chamber.

Look, I whispered to myself and know that after you, someone has destroyed your endless empire.

We bowed before the eternal Pella and took the road that led us upstream to Voden and from afar we heard the noise of the waterfalls and the screams of the drowned, killed and wounded in the battle to capture Voden. Then, on December 25, 1948, the winter was harsh, cold and angry, the water of the Voden River, wildly swollen and very cold, in which DAG fighters, dragged by the terribly cold river, drowned in an attempt to reach the other

side. They did not spare the fighters who died for Negush and Sabotsko. The culprits blamed the partisan general and shot him in Prespa and continued to prepare a new winter massacre in Lerin. The culprits remained alive and reached Tashkent alive, then they built their nests in Bucharest and returned to Athens alive and well. Now they rest there covered with the hatred of their victims.

We stopped under the shade of the sycamore trees and our memory became filled with the wails of the fighters who died in the battle for Voden. We threw a bouquet of colourful flowers into the Voden waters and with heavy tears in our eyes we set off for Western Macedonia.

A low bow before Gornichevo and an eternal curse uttered in front of the monument of Karavangelis. Then we breathed Kostur air as we found ourselves in Kostur Region. Here and in the entire surrounding area, the pain of an unhealed wound deepened in our souls and hearts. The memory hurt. The surrounding mountains slumber in the greenery grown on the blood and bones of the victims of the Greek Civil War, and some hills are still bare from the napalm. There, grass does not grow, flowers do not bloom, nightingales do not sing.

Along the roads of exile and despair, at noon we arrived in Lerin, which is horribly disfigured by the face of Kote from Rulia. The lichen of betrayal grew on its lawn. Under its opinons lies the spy and those who paid well for the bribes became proud. Lerin disfigures the shame of betrayal.

We arrived at the border crossing and here there was a short stop for inspection.

- What do you have to declare? - the customs officer asked sleepily and ordered the passengers in front of us to open the trunk.

- Well... - said the man in shorts - a bottle of olive oil, three olives, halva, a bottle of OUZOU and that's all...

- Next! - the customs officer waved.

We were next.

- Passports and open your trunk. What do you have to declare - he said angrily after examining my passport page by page.

- Earth and stone - I pointed to the bag and the stone.

- What kind of earth and what kind of stone? - the customs officer asked in amazement. - Whose earth and whose stone?

- Our earth and our stone! - I said loudly.

The customs officer touched the bag with the earth, turned the stone over, after a short thought one of the policemen shouted.

- Look - he pointed with his outstretched hand.

The policeman looked at the bag with the earth and the stone for a long time. He was silent. His cheeks were trembling. I understood that trembling well and winked at him. The policeman bowed his head, saluted in a military manner and left.

We understood each other. We have the same roots.

65

My dear stone, you have through the centuries endured and silently listened to the voices of my people, I have something more to tell you. Not that you don't know it. You do, but I just want to remind you.

In the heart of the green mountain range, Prespa was silent for a long time without its people, speechless with weakness, rage

and pain. Silent. Silence occasionally broken by the cries of lake birds. That was until the authorities of this tame land settled Vlach shepherds from Epirus and Greek refugee cattle herders from Albania. Prespa was lively but without its people. Other customs and a language that the people of Prespa never spoke prevailed in their houses.

Now Nivitsi, once the poorest village in Prespa that lived from fishing and selling smelts, is now a famous tourist village. It is tidy and rich.

Hundreds of tourists from all over Greece leave a lot of money there. They are attracted by the nature and the rich table with delicious Macedonian dishes and Macedonian wines. And when its name is pronounced, then some of them and some of us are horrified, and others of them and others of us are happy and proud. The Greeks named the village PTSARADES (Fishermen), and our people renamed our country NORTH... Both names are ugly.

At the moment when I wrote this, I felt like praying strongly and loudly:

- Our Father, Who art in heaven, come down from heaven to the land called Macedonia, forgive us our sins, give us understanding and show the evil newcomers the way home...

AMEN!

I pray and I just dream and in my dream I say to myself:

- Come, come, wake up, be reborn, partisan Macedonia!

For all those listed above without names and surnames, but who they are, some say that there is no cure for them. Others, however, oppose and persistently claim that there is a cure for

them in the Shutka and Idrizovo prisons. We will meet the white ones when they get there, after the thunder of the dreamed-of third Ilinden that academician Ljupcho Kotsarev advocates in many speeches, articles and columns. May God grant that his thought, speech, word, hand, pen, paper be gilded and that his wish and dream be fulfilled.

And mine!

Recalling the Prespa Agreement and its consequences that are already following, tragically, the warning words of the ingenious Misirkov ring lously in my ears:

- What have we done?

For every individual and nation, patriotism is a fundamental concept in which history is embedded. If you do not know the history of your own people, do not seek and do not strive to be the president of the state, prime minister of the government and minister and do not sign harmful agreements. And you who have already reached those positions, and you who want to reach them, be smart and don't forget that someone reminded you that he didn't throw his boots in the trash, but hung them on the ceiling and as a mockery or warning that right now is the time for him to make one or more demands. That threat or warning passed as if it were a joke, as if it were a joke, as if it were a joke to play ball in state premises by newly minted state-builders, as if it were a joke to mock that by joining the defensive-aggressive alliance, the sun will rise in the West for Macedonia, that it is a joke to wave the flag of some future great state. The new astronomer, who replaced the scalpel he learned about with chalk and convinces on a school board what is good for the North, gave Copernicus a chance to turn over in his grave after centuries. And more. Don't close your eyes when someone opens clubs right in front of you, doesn't recognize your past, identity and language, and some of your circle are demanding fraternization in

the Constitution with those who once wore Nazi symbols on their chests and burned Macedonian villages.

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When you look from the hill called Prevalot, the entire Small and Big Prespa Lakes and their surroundings and the memory of the great evil will lie before your eyes. Perhaps then

you will bow your head and bow down to the Macedonian diseases of Prespa...

That's all from me, because other, much stronger pens have described all its beauty, suffering, pain, despair, horror, dreams and hopes. I have only undertaken to recall a few events from the recent and present time in which the fate of Prespa was woven, mostly beyond the border line, and now of all of Macedonia.

The pain is great when you remember that in that divine beauty, now abandoned and mournful, all the illnesses of the Macedonians from ancient and present times are piled up.

Don't forget!

66

My wife and I are sitting on the balcony of our villa and we don't take our eyes off the southern part of the lake.

To the south of the lake, the mountain called Vrba grows green. As the bird's eye view shows, the border of Macedonia (Republic of Macedonia) with Macedonia (Greek occupied Macedonia) is about two kilometers away, and from there, very close and very, very far away, beyond it, are our villages, our shattered houses, our foundations under the ruins covered with weeds and thorns, our churches, our cemeteries, where our ancestors rest, the hills, the fountains and springs, our roots. We are there with our thoughts, with our spirit, with our memory and the sorrow that hurts...

There also lies the WHITE STONE...

Although far away, but always close and with our spirit and thoughts, we will be there as long as we are alive.

Our native soil is calling us, our memories are calling us...

And after that?

After that just one message:

You who will come after us, do not forget the hearth of your ancestors...

In the Holy Scriptures it is written that the Lord God, in order to establish order among the people, called on Moses and with his finger wrote ten commandments on a stone, which with his hand on his heart, now, and perhaps even before, almost no one respects. And on the stone the Lord God clearly wrote with his finger that only he should be trusted, but instead of him, now most people trust party leaders whom they swore by and did not think as they thought. And the Lord further wrote with his finger: on the seventh day of the week there should be no work, but some do not work either the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth or seventh day and live well and carefree. Below, the Lord God wrote with his finger that fathers and mothers should be respected, but now instead of protecting the old, they place them in nursing homes where they live lonely lives in old age. The Lord God also wrote that believers should not kill, but they kill millions in wars and not commit adultery, but they are not very discouraged by that and not to steal, but the rich and powerful steal the most, and if it comes to lying and coveting others, there is no limit here.

Lord, God, who now loves and respects Your Ten Commandments?

No one has written commandments on my White Stone with his finger, however someone tried to carve prohibitions with a chisel but the steel chisel broke from the stone's hardness.

In this darkness, if the White Stone were to speak, then it would tell me about everything my family had gone through, and I would only remind it that we paid for our faith in the promises with many lives, property and eternal exile. I wish very much that the stone had the power of speech and I wish very much that it remained so and that there would be a memory of it. May it remain so in the centuries to come and, as the earth holds it, may it powerfully strengthen our hopes.

Faith inspires me that the stone will remain forever to brighten our faces and keep us awake and remind us of the great thought uttered by the wise Finnish president, Kekkonen, who taught the nations when they were awakening from colonist slavery, whose descendants were now gathered in one society:

DO NOT SEEK FRIENDS FAR AWAY,
AND ENEMIES NEARBY.

Is it worth believing him?

The devastated village is covered with ashy dust, which the wind blows away in gusts, the rain washes and at night is covered by the celestial gilding of the stars and the moon.

In all the evil and bloody times, Stone, you have remained a mark of our existence and perseverance, burned with attempts to be crushed, beaten and durable by the trenches, but powerful and enduring like the light of the sun, the heat of fire and the terrible force of storms, durable under the weight of tribal armies, from the suffering and the blades of knives and swords, powerful, hard, long-lived and although silent, you are not mute, but you are a living witness to our past, a guardian of memory and remembrance, of wisdom, strength, perseverance, hardness, powerful against malice, anger, pain, painful memory and desires for tomorrow. The evil ones did not break you. They did not succeed in casting the shadow of death over you, the vile desire

and the effort to eradicate, they did not tear you away from Mother Earth. In the centuries that have blackened the times, you have remained like an altar in a ruined church that listened to the cry and scream of the disenfranchised. Some wished that not a stone would remain upon a stone, but you, hard and unyielding, remained on guard of our existence. No one managed to move you from your bed, in which you have forever remained a living witness and monument to our existence.

My stone, you are my measure between darkness and light. On your whiteness, no one has written commandments with a finger and no hand has carved laws with a chisel. And if sometimes the wind will cover you with ashen dust, we will pray to God to wash you with our tears, sorrows and spiritual pain. We are not broken, although from ancient times we have been covered with the curse of discord that has cast a thick, impenetrable and fatal darkness of evil, sown divisions, intolerance, ignorance, betrayals and servility. They have covered us with hope and charged the new generations with a vow that with the power of reason they will cleanse the country from the insidious cunning and greed of the untrustworthy rulers, who without a sense of statehood, unacquainted with the Cyrillic alphabet and with national consciousness, dignity and pride, believers of various churches, a collection of foreign clans, faceless thieves and fraudsters greedy for power and money, who bowed their heads and twisted their spines and, hidden under the cloak of betrayal, placed the fate of our country in the hands of others like a coin on a church platter, and let the people, the most reliable strategic partner (our people) in whom they shamelessly swear, go down the drain. The desire and concern of others is a worm that mercilessly gnaws at the pillar of our country.

With your power, strengthen us, O White Stone.

I remember that before sunset, the old people would gather under the porch of the church and their conversation would sometimes drag on until the stars appeared. Everything that happened that day in the village and beyond was on the tip of their tongues, and each one gave meaning to the event in their own way. First, the oldest ones would take the floor, telling the old people, sons or close relatives, neighbours and friends, about what had happened before them and in their time and about the time they knew from their grandparents. Thus, word by word, the past came to life and was connected to the present. The living word passed from generation to generation. The ball of yarn in which the past was wound became thicker and thicker. What the oldest passed on to the younger ones, they passed on to their grandchildren, was the long thread that connected the generations and created the knot in which, not only with words, but with chants, songs and dances and persistence without kneeling, the long thread of the past was wrapped. The living word, prayer, traditions, even in the darkest times, awakened hope and strengthened the spirit.

Among the old, the wisest and richest in memories inherited from his grandfather, was grandfather Trpo, who advised the young: do not do anything that is beyond the mind and do not listen to strangers who will drive you into confusion. Listen and obey - the fate of the people, like a coin on a church platter, do not put it in someone else's hands. Think for yourself. With your heart, he said, love, and with your mind think and do. The kingdom, he said, is not a baker's shovel.

Some did not listen to him and naïvely deceived the fate of the people, they put in the hands of others.

Time has confirmed that Grandpa Trpo was right.

The road took me to the church of St. Tanas to pray, light a candle and see the old oak tree under whose shade the whole village gathered on the second day of Easter, and the young people on the thickest branch would throw a rope to tie a swing and rock their youth, their dreams and fantasies all day long.

The oak tree is down.

The thick branch of joy lies cut off.

Who did this?

All the bridges of desires and hopes that heralded happiness have collapsed, all the roads have been flooded by those vengeful storms.

A voice shouted and judged: ignorant and submissive minds, which have led my young villagers into storms under other people's orders and aspirations, will they ever find peace of conscience, carrying the curses of their mothers on their necks?

Who cut the oak tree?

Who cut off the branch of dreams?

Who cut off the path of life and turned the earth upside down?

What vile hand slaughtered the oak?

Which dirty soul extinguished the hope and love and soul of all who gathered once a year to sing their joy, to raise the flame of the embers to warm their love even more, to weave their destiny, to mark the time in which they would create life.

Who, whose malicious soul with dirty hands, with a darkened and sick mind, heartlessly reached for the life of the oak?

What vulture wished for the oak and the thick branch on which every second day of Easter the youth would swing, who in the swinging saw their destiny before them and nourished themselves with the nectar of dreams and hope?

Around the tilted trunk I saw new, young, fragile shoots growing.

Grant, God, that they may grow strong, grow tall and thick, rise and branch out.

The slain oak lay on the ground, and the slain branch lay next to it.

I would very much like to count the young growths, which grow into saplings, and those into oaks, instead of counting the circles of the slain oak.

In the heart of the oak is the first circle and around it circles, each of which marks a year of growth and all the circles a century of duration.

In the heart of the oak boils our being, our self, our songs and desires, the dance and playing of the kaval, the voice of the zurla and the thunderous beating of the drum.

The oak with its branch was not only joy, but also waiting gathered in the ball of hope.

Now the oak is gone, the song, the dance, the swing on which the girls swung, and the boys sighed, thinking which one to choose. The girls that swung are gone, and the ones who chose them are gone, like the song that now does not exist. The kaval and the zurla and the drum are gone.

In that wilderness, every pebble, every charred stump, every unmowed meadow, unplowed field, unplanted garden, every source of goodness and inspiration, happiness and illness,

joy and waiting, the silence of the bell, awaken and reveal memories in which our awakened consciousness is now.

There is only the sky above my village, at night filled with stars and everything is bathed in the gilding of the moon, during the day flooded with sunlight and warmth and in it, although far away, we are always there with our thoughts. There are we who have remained and those who are yet to come. Looking at the lonely stump, I try to separate white from black, weeds from wheat, serenity from darkness, inhumanity from humanity and good from evil.

With pain in my soul I look at the stumps and count the circles again and again.

With thought, soul and desire I am firmly and deeply tied to this piece of land, to this oak whose roots, deep and deeper to the underground waters from which the oak's sinewy roots are watered.

The heat mercilessly burns it, the rain washes and rinses it, the wind blows on it, winter freezes it and crushes spring and warms summer, and it lasts in the sad solitude.

The rings have the colour of an unhealed wound.

And again, many times I will ask who slaughtered the oak?

Who took the beauty and peace from this place?

Who defiled the land of my childhood?

I sat on the WHITE STONE and I strained to tame the bitterness because me sitting on the WHITE STONE is undesirable for some.

This white stone is now the only legacy that has remained from the centuries and I wish that with its strength and power it will also defend our hope.

They will tear me apart with their bodies, but they will harden my love for the WHITE STONE.

If I leave with a goodbye, then the darkness will last even longer.

My WHITE STONE, rock and hope of my soul, a dry, solid and unyielding piece of the shattered homeland. With love, pride and sadness I see you as a monument raised to the sky, from whose light the curse and betrayals may disappear and the spirit of the past may rise and give us hope.

My WHITE STONE, I am leaving, because in my country, I am not wanted by those who came by force. I will carry with me my gratitude because you guard the threshold of the house in which I was born and the land on which I have set foot. And I want you to rise upright like a white burning lamp so that there may be light for the souls of those scattered throughout the world and for this silent desolation. And I will pray for everyone, just as my mother taught me as we stood before the old, smoky icon of the Mother of God. I have not forgotten the prayers there, in that distant northern land, where someone took care to throw them into the rot of oblivion.

Now there is no farewell, but only a desire for a new vision and hope.

The pain and hatred of the arena are present.

Will someone be found to cleanse the arena of hatred?

Will someone be found to temper hatred into love?

The white stone endured in the silence that the great storm brought and defied the criminal time. It waited and encouraged me to believe that only intelligent, literate, educated and cultured individuals, with a glorious name in their homeland and beyond, freed from hatred and imbued with the values of the new time, will be able to gather the strength to understand the need to bind kindness to those whose ancestors, their foreign-speaking neighbours, do not recognize the right to origin, lineage, customs, name and language.

Sitting on the White Stone, another childhood memory from a distant time touched me. I remember how the horn of the moon hung at the end of the black cloud. In the darkness, the crickets called out with a song. The fireflies, flying from bush to bush, intermittently lit the lamp they carried with them. Back then, when we were children, we caught them and stuck those small, grainy lamps to our foreheads, cheeks, and beards, and we glowed brightly in the darkness. Now, on this ashen land, there are no bushes, and therefore fireflies do not fly among them and do not shine with those small lamps they carry with them.

The old people said that fireflies are the souls of the dead. When there is a warm night, they are like stars in the sky on earth. All of that is hammered into my memory like a wedge, which is slowly withering in my old age.

I feel the old intoxicating scent of young hay, of forests, meadows and newly blossomed flowers, of the beehive and thyme, of the yarrow and rose in the yard, of the sedge and the buzzing of bees. I see the burnt trees on which each bird had its own branch to sing.

What is there now in my Krchishta?

Now there is only the smell of ash-covered earth.

I am leaving and I am carrying with me a great request:

Passer-by, if the road ever takes you to Krchishta, greet the **WHITE STONE** for me.

Skopje, 2023-2026

I finished the text on June 15, 2026 at 4:00 PM in Dolno Dupeni – Prespa.

In the church books, that day, 15th of July 1936, is recorded as the day of my birth.

Petre Nakovski's books

- Analysis of Petre Nakovski's books, by Tatjana Pelivanova
<https://www.pollitecon.com/Assets/Ebooks/Literature-of-Fact-in-Petre-Nakovski%27s-Novels.pdf>
- A Bed for the Wretched, by Petre Nakovski
<https://www.pollitecon.com/Assets/Ebooks/A-Bed-for-the-Wretched.pdf>
- A Stone too is soil, by Petre Nakovski
<https://www.pollitecon.com/Assets/Ebooks/A-Stone-too-is-Soil.pdf>
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- .Night Notes, by Petre Nakovski
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- On the Road of no Return, by Petre Nakovski
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