

Tragedy and Wrath

(In the shadows of exile)

A selection of Short Stories



By

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Tragedy and Wrath

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THE RECEPTION

For a long time I did not want to think about the fifties. Even now the word “fifties” torments me. It takes my thoughts along a terrible path and brings back memories of terrifying moments. I wanted to forget that word, to drive it out of my mind because until then our mothers and women died of natural causes in bed, of various diseases and of old age. Many died during childbirth or wilted away in poverty. But after that more died from broken marriages. For most, their thoughts dried up on foreign shores thinking of their husbands and children.

For years now I have found peace in the Australian bush, cutting “Jerry” trees with a sharp ax, with rage, until exhaustion, because my mind gets flooded with memories of the reception, which pushes me to the brink of destruction, to get revenge, which does not subside but brings back more of the same memories.

And now I remember...

My father and I came to the reception. Both dressed in our best clothing, we made sure to arrive early to the crossing station which was secured by guards. The air was still, there was no breeze blowing.

It was dark. There was not a single star shining up in the sky and nothing was visible, not even what was growing from the ground. “Perhaps the stars have disappeared?” I muttered to myself. But soon enough dawn broke and a breeze began to blow from Lerin, wheeling clouds in our direction. At one point I began to count the clouds. I counted a fair number of them but then I was distracted. I began to see colours.

Not too far away from us we heard someone crying. It was a man, firmly wrapped up in his long coat. We slowly approached him as he watched us with a merciful look on his face.

“Over there is the dead zone... only up to here. I too am waiting... like a dog that has been driven away... They hound us like we are

vermin and are driving us away... and from where? From our own homes!” he said.

The man spoke, asked questions and then answered them himself. I kept looking at him and kept thinking that if only my father spoke to him, but my father was overwhelmed and kept squeezing my hand, tighter and tighter, as if wanting to tell me something... When the darkness began to disappear we saw a human figure appear in the distance. And as the image became clearer we noticed that it was a woman. She walked sternly and kept looking at us. We waited quietly looking confident as we received an official letter from the Lerin authorities declaring that my mother’s return was approved and that she was allowed to return immediately!

This is what the letter underscored in Greek “...after a personal request was made...”

After that my father took me out of the children’s evening camp where he had taken me a while earlier, bathed me in a portable tub and dressed me in my best clothes. He then combed and parted my thick hair. I had lived without parents for four years and I was not looking forward to this. I had forgotten my parents. All I remember was what I was told about my mother; that she was taken by the Greeks and punished on account of my father being a participant in the Macedonian army.

Now we came to the reception where the two of us waited for my mother to arrive; who my father kept describing all this time.

“There she is...” yelled my father excitedly when he saw a silhouette of a woman.

“She is Lena... Lena, I can tell from her walk... it is her... your mother...” he yelled. I felt chills run down my spine... I tried hard to remember her... but I could not remember her at all.

I was very young, a baby, when they took my mother away from our home and deported her to the island Leros. I was told that there was no one to breastfeed me.

All of a sudden my father stopped.

“No! That can’t be Lena?” he muttered with uncertainty in his voice.

The woman came closer. She walked reluctantly with small, painful and unsure steps. She was holding documents in her left hand and a bag in her right. The bag was stuffed with all her belongings; everything she owned in her life... and nothing else.

“Lena!!!” cried my father reluctantly, still unsure if it was her or not. She was coming towards us, closer and closer... She was silent... She did not answer... Her hair was cut and her clothes were frayed. She was wearing military boots tied with colourful laces.

I lifted my hand with a strong desire to greet her, but when I saw her expressionless look gazing at me I quickly dropped my arm back down like someone had hit it with a stick.

After seeing how she looked at me I wanted no part of her...

My father was expecting me to run to my birth mother and plunge into her embrace. He was expecting me to do that... with great desire... He wanted me to do that and probably died with great sorrow that I didn’t...

“Lena!!!” he again cried out. She suddenly stopped... She looked dazed.

She was closer now and my father was certain that it was her.

“This is Lena!” he said, this time with confidence.

At that very moment he let go of my hand and walked toward her. I was left all alone... Neither I nor my mother moved. We were both silent and still. My father and she were looking into each others eyes, just a few steps apart from one another. But when I thought that she would break the distance, run back into my father’s arms and speak to him, she looked away and stepped forward obeying the orders given by the Greek guards who were shouting, “Embros!

Embros!” (Forward! Forward!). She then reluctantly and apathetically moved away with suspicion.

My father was very upset... She was only steps away from him when she walked away.

The woman turned her head and gazed at my father. She stopped walking and looked back while firmly holding onto her papers. She stretched out her arm... as if wanting to give him the papers. The whole episode looked like a business transaction... This is how it was when a prisoner crossed from one prison camp to another.

She suddenly took a step back and stared at my father with her expressionless blue eyes. After that she began to weep. Tears rolled down her elongated face like a torrent. She was a tortured person and found it impossible to trust anyone no matter how kind they appeared. I don't know if at that very moment she said to herself: “How dare you abandon me and let me live in hell all these years...?”

But we will never know because she had no voice. She had lost her voice while being tortured... she had also lost her ability to bear children... she would never have children like her predecessors did, who multiplied and grew in numbers... She was going to die an unnatural death.

The man wearing the long black coat, who had drifted towards me, at that moment asked me if I wanted to be looked after. He said:

“And this is what is left of us...” but before he could finish what he was saying, the guard calling “Embros” began to clap his hands, as if he wanted everyone's attention. When he got our attention he waved us to go away, to leave Greece now; he kept yelling “Eksondosi! Eksondosi!” (Get lost! Get lost!).

“And to where should we get lost... eh dog?! Where are you chasing us from? From our own homes...?!” the man yelled back. The guard continued to clap his hands forcing us to clear out, letting us know that he was done with us.

The man's face had turned red. Clearly he was upset, furious, he was struggling with something that was bothering him, tormenting him, deep inside. He looked like a beaten up beast that was out for revenge.

On the way back to Skopje he told us a story about his children who were forcibly taken away from him by the Greek royal authorities, by Queen Frederica who turned them into janissaries. In the meantime he and his wife had been looking for them for many years.

Seeing how I was watching my mother and the worried look I had on my face, the man whispered to me saying: "They have tortured her a lot! She has survived the most terrible treatment under the poorest conditions imaginable!"

The next day I was taken back to the children's camp so that I could continue living my "happy" childhood. But my mother died on February 5th; I remember them carrying her in the snow.

My frail father, now feeling very emotional, embraced me, pressed my head against his black shirt and sorrowfully clutched my hand. That day, for the first time, he looked like an old man. He was crying at the funeral.

It was a cold foggy day. The children from the camp walked behind the coffin. Many of my parents' friends and co-fighters attended.

There were many flowers on top of the coffin and my mother looked very beautiful.

I cried when we started dropping handfuls of soil, one after another, on top of the casket as it was being lowered into the ground...

THE MEETING

Old officers, parents and close friends attended the ceremony after we completed our courses at the Military Academy. The visitors came in while the waiters were walking around arranging the crystal glasses, green, pink, yellow...

We stood in a circle.

“Yes, I know! You were happy and had some joy. Especially the attacks, for example! Oh, it must be great! It’s like a holiday for all armies that go to war! Is it true? You officers, shouting ‘Long Live the Motherland!’ and dying with a smile on your faces...” said Anestis’s sister with a smile on her face.

I squeezed the glass of wine and waited for a warm hand...

I had no parents and I did not know whether I had anyone close. I only knew and loved Doctor Papaianis. He took care of me. One time when I asked him if he knew my parents he gave me a dried “No”. Later, after thinking about it for a while, he said: “I knew your father when he was a soldier on the opposite side...” I never asked him again.

Years passed. When I reached adulthood I wanted to search the world and learn more about people... There were certain things that I could not erase from my mind... and that was that.

The ceremony ended... That day I also received a decoration that shone brightly on my chest. When Dr. Papaianis saw me he came to me and gave me a kiss.

He then took me by my arm and we both walked away in silence...

“You are a good man Odisei but...” Dr. Papaianis began to say and went silent as if listening to my heart beating. I felt good inside and was full of joy. We sat next to a table. He was silent. He took out and lit a cigarette from which he voraciously took a puff of smoke. The doctor sank into deep thought. Something was bothering him;

he looked at me and opened his mouth to speak but then he closed it again.

I noticed painful scars revealing on his face.

I could not restrain myself.

“Doctor, if you have something to tell me? Then tell me!” I said as I was looking into his eyes. Then I noticed a haze of a man’s tear.

“Your parents would have been very happy and proud to have seen you here today...” he said to me and went silent again. For a moment I felt empty in my chest. I felt like my joy and happiness were just pumped out... He never said a thing about my parents for twenty years. He pushed me only to learn, to finish school and now, now that that day has come, he tells me: “Odisei, now you have accomplished that...?”

He smiled, got up to toast me with a glass of cognac... which he drank down to the last drop.

The doctor then said: “The years are like cars strung on a moving train, if you stop and look at the edge of the tunnel of life you will only see how they disappear... I waited a long time for this. You are a good and educated young man and do you know how long we have been friends?”

The doctor paused, looked me in the eye and took a long puff of smoke from his cigarette.

But before I had a chance to respond he said: “Since the war... Since the war... Odisei... when you were just a small child.”

He paused for a moment, looked away and said: “I don’t know when you were born but I wrote down the date when I delivered you to the home. I believe you would want to know everything now... you have been asking me a long time. But forgive me if I can’t answer all your questions...”

I was restlessly adjusting my elbows on top of the white tablecloth. I felt petrified and every word that came out of the doctor's mouth felt like a blow to my heart as he began to slowly tell me things.

“It was a July night,” he said, “and the sky was shaking. Heavy smoke was mixing with dust making it impossible to see. The tangled paths were beaten down by exploding artillery shells and the scorched earth echoed like a flaming volcano.

There was no moon, or stars... The beauty that nature gave us that summer day was taken away by man. I found you in that black smoke. And when I put my hand down to pick you up, you let out a loud cry; that of a frightened child. But I picked you up and calmed you down. I was tired that night but I managed to feed you some tea while the soldiers were making fun of me. One of the soldiers named you Odisei. He had tears in his eyes when he caressed you and said: ‘If I am still alive, I will be the godfather at your wedding.’ But later I found out that he had been killed. When the shooting stopped you were sleeping curled up in my coat. Before I went to sleep I heard a loud burst of machine gun fire that also woke you up. The next day we learned that the guards had killed a distraught woman. She was running towards the village. Before she was shot she yelled out: ‘Oh! No! No! I am not a soldier...’

“The soldiers killed the woman... and I will be a soldier. Will I too be a killer...?” I thought to myself and asked: “Doctor, was this woman my mother?”

The doctor bit his lower lip and said: “I do not know Odisei... All I know is that she was a refugee. This is what the soldiers told me. She bit her lip from fear, closed her eyes and ran for cover on the ground seeking a place to hide.

The village was deserted, people had fled. Where they have fled in the world I do not know, the village today is deserted. You can inquire.

I had waited a long time for him to tell me this, when he said: “You were born from these people, Odisei. Look, Odisei, fate seems best to be played with people... I with you remember the war much

better. Yes, my child. But, Odisei, if your think you want to search for them, then go. It is only best that you start the trace back from the village...

We parted in tears.

“Goodbye, doctor!” I said.

“Have a pleasant journey, Odisei and don’t forget me...” he said.

We traveled a day and a half before we arrived at the village.

The roads were difficult to travel. They were eroded with huge channels running through them. They were littered with large stones everywhere. We had to walk through huge gaps and over barriers. Many of the buildings in the countryside were in ruins, burned down and leveled to the ground. The larger stones were bare and sticking out from the ground like joints through dried skin. The church was in the centre of the village. It was not burned down but its walls were swollen. When we went inside, Anastis took pictures of the icons. I stood in front of a wall icon on which the top part had peeled off and looked like a burned body. Under the upper layer the figure was still the same.

At the bottom of the icon, under the paint, there were visible letters of a different kind of alphabet. I called Anestis to have a look. I asked him: “What kind of letters are these?” He raised his shoulders letting me know that he did not know... but then there was this guilty look on his face. When we peeled off the layered paint we saw the entire row of letters.

Touching them, Anestis said: “Odisei, this is the Slavic alphabet...” He then pointed his camera to take a picture. He took a picture of the peeled part of the icon and said: “For keeps...”

The next day we crossed over the border and traveled along a wet asphalt road. One morning several days later Anestis said: “It’s been a few days that we have been strangers with one another”. I did not reply.

“Did you not hear me... Odisei?” he asked.

“I have been thinking of the icon, Anestis,” I said. “I have been thinking about the people who left this country... this soil. Anestis, did you notice how thick the top layer of paint was? Yet underneath it the original painting on the wall was clean. Is it not the same with man? The doctor told me that I am one of them. And who are they? ...he told me nothing...”

It was May 9th. Anestis and I were enjoying our excursion and the beauty of nature. That morning the rise of dawn was a lazy affair. It descended like a belt over the frothing Vardar, showering nature with its silvery rays.

We drove the car like a bat out of hell and we arrived in front of the city.

Anestis suddenly stopped and we both looked to the right side of the road at a monument of “Mother” standing there looking sad. There were a lot of people around and they were all laying flowers. I stared at the picture and did not know what to make of it. I was moved. I did not know whether this was love or sorrow for my mother, but it instinctively hit me hard in the heart. I went and collected some flowers and, like everyone else, passed in front of the “Mother” monument and placed them beside it.

The figure was leaning slightly forward, as if moving. Its silhouette was clearly outlined on the canopy...

The face did not express pain, had no bitter tears in the eyes, showed no despair, but was full of strict greatness and dignity. “Mother” stood proudly for her children for whom she dedicated her life, and in her hands she held a large braid of laurel and oak leaves, a symbol of eternal glory.

It was a sunny day that day and the figure on the monument was illuminated looking as if it was made of gold in my watery eyes. I wanted to pay tribute to my mother.

A middle-aged man came close to me and asked: “Are you a tourist?”

“Yes, Greek tourists!” answered Anestis. Then the man began to speak in Greek, pretty bad Greek. He said:

“It is rare that a traveler would stop beside her. It is even rarer that someone would stop and look at the “Mother” figure and think of their past, even for a moment, of the difficult times... of the war... My son and I come here once a year. I am originally from Lerin Region but war, like a broom, has swept us all... young and old.”

“These are the people...” I thought to myself.

The man smiled sadly and asked: “Have you gentlemen been traveling a long time?”

“Yes, yes sir!” answered Anestis.

I went closer to the man and in a friendly tone of voice asked him: “Where are you from?”

The man slowly and calmly turned towards me and said:

“Oh dear young man, my torment is long and I don’t want to bother you with it...”

“I gave him a cigarette and noticed that he was staring at me intently. I looked back into his mournful and restless eyes.

“What’s your name, young man?” he asked.

“Odisei...” I answered.

“It is nice to meet you... Odisei... Do you have parents?” he asked.

“No!” I replied sharply.

“No? Did they die of old age... or sickness?” he asked.

“No, no...” I replied.

“I too, Odisei, bear the same pain... please sit down, I will explain to you... Today is a holiday.... I don’t have to go to work,” he said.

The fair-haired young man who was with the middle aged man sat beside me. Anestis jumped up and took several pictures of us.

“I was a soldier when I left my wife at home with our two children, this one,” pointing to the boy, “was a young child. But now there is no trace of my wife or of my little Iovanche...”

“Does your son speak Greek?” asked Anestis.

“No he doesn’t. It’s better that he doesn’t... I don’t want him to know and feel guilty or of being at fault for what I am about to tell you,” the man replied.

“The people fleeing with him were telling him: ‘You are at fault for what happened to your mother and your brother’. He cried for what happened but mostly for his brother.

The refugees were fleeing like a flooded dry river which suddenly lost its trough... its course...” said the man as he suddenly became very emotional, rubbed his face and continued.

“They were running like a hungry herd looking for a pasture... His mother returned from the village square to look for food and said to this small one: ‘Go with the people, I will catch up with you...’ But then a shell fell and exploded and the people scattered in every direction leaving the children alone... and like children they all fled and got lost. They were expected to hold hands and remain together but their fear separated them... Little Iovanche hid somewhere but this one ran looking for him in the crowd.

His mother finally caught up with him and when she found out that the little one was not with him, she figured the boy was still somewhere in the village. She kissed this one and then ran back to look for the other one. The villagers were yelling at her telling her

not to go back but she could not ignore the mother's pain, so she ran back."

I broke into tears... I could not hold back any more... I grabbed both of them and squeezed them in my arms with all my might. I lost the ability to speak... I could say nothing...

I felt like an explosion took place inside of me and everything from my twenty years was about to spill out... But then I thought: "Do I obey destiny by being mute?"

I listened to his troubled words.

"It looks like you too are a tortured soul... you are not a blessed child..." he said.

"I untied the handkerchief in which I kept the ring, the ring which the doctor gave me when we parted and told me to 'keep it'..."

After seeing it I watched the man stretch out his arm and push it against his chest...

"Oh! My... Elena..." he yelled out, gathered his strength, stretched out his arms and yelled out: "Iovanche? Iovanche it is you! You are my son... You are my son..."

I was stunned, unable to control myself... My brother too was stunned and unable to control himself...

Anestis too began to weep.

My father, with all his pain looked at the figure of the "Mother" and painfully said:

"Thank you for bringing us together... for making this meeting possible..."

A SONG TO FIND MY MOTHER

As far as I remember, it was our meeting with a mute witness from the war that led us to find her. We were very happy when we found my aunt Filevitsa on the island Makronisos. She was there in the sixties, after the war. Even that late there were several women still roaming the island camps living off the fruit. She greeted us with special joy of course, but then everything changed in our lives...

After that my aunt became somewhat disgruntled. She had a sick look about her eyes, as if her pupils were filled with the dead, reflecting crowds of people passing in front of her that were not there.

After we brought her here from the camp she continued to talk to herself for an entire year, just like she had on the island. But even in moments like that the villagers still respected her and always greeted her calling her by her loving name "Filevitsa" after my uncle Filip or by her given name "Bisera"!

She was always lost in her own thoughts, always looking ahead, keeping her secrets to herself; looking for something not achieved, something lost in life, but it was obvious that hope was smouldering deep in her heart... she was going to find what she was looking for, she was going to speak to people again... but sometimes that hope only scratched the scabs of her physiological wounds...

It was the same thing every day. We watched her face getting noticeably paler. Her words spoken to herself sounded more like a prayer. Of course there was some secret in that prayer... there never is lamentation without a reason. And again she was silent like a lonely rock in a field. I followed her thoughts... I followed her pain. Why would you want such a life when the secret you are carrying has turned it into a black dot? There are three of us living with this misfortune. For years those thoughts have been a shadow across the old fractures. And through me my Uncle Filip's looks, sickly hammering away on what looks like a battered boulder, beaten by the bullets of the war... Not even from him do I get a friendly look. Both he and my aunt seem to fear the living, and carry the thought in

this house of ours that it is “better to be alone in this world, without hope, without longing and fervour and without the bitter truth...”

For years she thought she was a shadow. But now she has stopped walking barefoot and lately appears to be quieter. She has changed her chanting... she now sounds like she is trying to ask questions, looking with curiosity at Uncle Filip, at me, inside the house... She has been rearranging her wedding garments and her step has been increasingly upbeat. This is how she spends her time now and increasingly so by going out in solitude stepping over the worn out threshold of our home's entrance.

This damn house is slowly waking up and my aunt wants to watch Uncle Filip carve things with his axe. But still there remains something languishing in her soul which will not go away... day in and day out wilting her life away.

He too, day in and day out, has been wandering around the yard after he returned from Tashkent as a former soldier of the Greek Civil War. He was shot by a bullet in the spine in his lower back. Ever since then he has not been able to walk much or work, so all he does now is work with wood, smoothing the planks on the floor, carving objects, etc., just to pass his time. He does not want to talk about the past... he hates it and gets angry yelling: “The ruins of our life are like the dust that is settling on forgotten items.” But it is safe to say that my aunt's situation has deeply shaken him. Up to now he has not said a single word to me about her. He lives with a strong passion that some day we will return to life from this rubble but sometimes, from his unreliable expressions, he is exasperated and feels guilty. He was a participant in the worst parts of the struggle. Among the partisans he was a handsome and fearless hero, as our neighbours would say, and perhaps my aunt remembers him that way. My cousin Pavle and I were too small to remember him. I only remember my Uncle Filip from when he came to our house, after he returned from Tashkent.

He was wearing a Russian leather coat and a thick “Uzbek Forashka”. That's what he called it. He even sounded a little ridiculous when he hugged me and said: “Vnuchko! Dorogoi moi. Oh ti kakoi molodets. You have already grown up. Now you are

now my son.” He then squeezed me in his arms and whispered something like: “May God forgive your father and your mother...” and I felt hot tears drip on my head. When I looked at him, he turned away, wanting to hide his face from me but could not find the strength, so he hugged me again. I could see pain in his eyes... a pain he had for my father. For my father and mother, who I now found out had perished in the battles of Gramos. I grew up in the camps and lived with only one desire; to return home, I thought that when the war was over I would again see my mother and father. I felt Uncle Filip sigh through his leather coat. Perhaps he was thinking of my father again. This time he squeezed me even harder and gave me courage saying: “Now I will find your aunt and Pavle.”

I remember very little about Pavle. At that time my aunt was looking after us, the rest were partisans, but that only lasted a short time. With our aunt gone, they gathered us all in the camps by order of Queen Frederica. Pavle and I were very young and when we were separated we lost contact. He is probably still alive, but... I carry this guilt about him and only my aunt knows why... Perhaps that’s why she does not speak to me. I hope Pavle has forgiven me for the sinister game we played when I slammed the door on him and cut off two of the fingers on his right hand. He was running after me so I slammed the door to stop him from catching me. Aunt suffered the most but kept it a secret from Uncle Filip. To this day he does not know but still feels terrible about it.

Now there are only the three of us in this house, Uncle Filip, my aunt and I.

We live together now, maybe our luck will change, but we feel that way less and less. Uncle Filip often looks at my aunt when he is carving something; seeming like they are in love. She too sometimes looks at him with a shy look on her face. His many wrinkles run deep between his cheek bones making his anguished face look merciful.

His creased face has an incredible network of wrinkles as he studies us all with his gaze.

One day, after Uncle Filip smiled at her, my aunt spoke. Surprised Uncle Filip smiled back even more and spoke to her, asking her: “Tell me something, Bisera! Speak to me; I am not guilty of everything... I too long for Pavle as much as you do... all of us do...” At this point she mentioned me and that I was very happy about it. She even noticed my happiness.

With great sadness and astonishment Aunt Bisera, almost in awe, moved her head. At that very moment I saw Uncle Philip Kalinev light up. But Aunt Bisera quickly dropped her head back down and went silent again.

There was fear in her ash coloured face, covered by a few bunches of colourless strands of hair, as she mumbled on and on about her bitterness... about the sounds of the sea... about the smell of salt... about the strong winds that blew... about the prisoners... about Commander Tsirimokos with a bottle of beer, singing with his large lips covered with foam... about whose madness no one knew why. She remembered when he spoke to the prisoners, yelling: “You!” when he spoke to them and to her and would not take his eyes away from them... And they looked back with dull eyes. Perhaps she still fears the stare of his eyes.

One day my aunt abruptly, with a distressed tone in her voice and with tears in her eyes, began to tell her story... she began to unfold her fate... Before things began to take place in the spring of 1948 she was very religious and did not want to join any atheist organizations, but because of my Uncle Filip, she participated in the women’s organization as an illegal worker. Later she was personally invited by Naumka Kameniarski to join the AFZH. Unfortunately I found it hard to follow her narrative because as she was telling her story, she was constantly crying. She found it difficult to speak about her past without remembering the women crying as their children were taken away from them and then remembering that the same children were being dressed in military uniforms and sent to Markos’s army. She was very troubled by that especially since the people, their mothers, did not know about it.

One day in the spring of 1948 when she was in her garden she heard a voice saying:

“Bisera, listen to me very carefully and tell the people what I am about to tell you. Bisera stiffened and remained rigid as she listened. The voice began: “The children who you have taken from the arms of their mothers, is the greatest sin of mankind and of this fatherland. Bisera you must know that people will never voluntarily abandon their homeland, but that which you and the AFZH are doing will push them to leave their homeland. It has been written in the Scriptures, that no fatherland will ever abandon its people... but our people will abandon ours...”

She returned back inside the house and was unable to overcome her anguish. She told no one about this. She wasn't sure if she even believed it... was it possible that she had actually heard this? She wanted to tell Naumka Kameniarski with whom, the next day, she was expected to meet and deliver the next group of seized children to Markos's army in the free territory.

She stopped talking. Then later in a cold tone of voice she continued. “It was about midnight on the third day of Easter 1948, when there was a loud bang on the door which forced it open. A number of bearded gendarmes entered the house with their guns pointed at us. The children pushed against me and shook like leaves in a storm... not knowing what would happen. They did not give us time to realize what was happening before they pushed the children against the wall and began to hit me with their fists and rifle butts. I was hit on the head, on my back and on my entire body... then they pushed me out of my house to the yard and took me to the village square. There were many women there. Not much later they loaded us on a truck and in the morning took us to Lerin.”

She raised her eyebrows and continued:

“Oh my God, I saw things that I could not imagine possible. This was on the island Giura. This is where they tortured us women and tried to frighten us. They asked us to give up our husbands. To give you up Filip...” she said while looking at us as if seeking approval.

“I saw things which in my entire life I could not erase from my memory...” she said and continued. “And those who tortured us

called this place ‘Greek paradise’. I saw women being put in a flour bag and lowered into the sea. These women I later found out refused to carry the dead from the camp to the cemetery. I was afraid of dying tied in sack so I did not know what I would do if I were forced to carry dead bodies. One time Tsirimokos ordered me to carry a half-dead person, an almost dead woman, but I did not know what I was carrying...” she said.

My aunt at this point, instead of continuing to tell her story, swallowed hard and stopped talking. But then, as if having driven a terrifying evil out of her, continued:

“She was a white-haired woman. She had large curls in her hair. She was not too old or shabby. Her face was long and tired looking. She had a long nose. I took her to the ‘cemetery’ but then she regained consciousness on the way there... I dropped her on the ground and after that I don’t know what happened to her. That woman was Numeitsa Ristuichina...” she concluded. Uncle Filip, listening to my aunt telling the story, made a facial expression of aggressiveness and revenge. My aunt saw that and no longer wanted to speak about her past.

“It was war Filip...” she said, “but we were left alive. Your brother Alex and his wife Angelina unfortunately are rotting in Gramos.”

My aunt then came over to me, touched me on my face and began to tell me things about my youth and about my mother and father. Finally our lives were beginning to return to normal. She even wanted to talk to me about happy things and how much she loved me.

Many times she said to me: “You are now our only son! We only have you now...”

After the war ended all camps were closed. Those serving in them were anxious to return to their homes and join their relatives there. They were happy that their ordeal was over. These were children of horror who in time slowly began to return to normal life and erase the traces of war out of themselves. Even my aunt now wanted to attend prayer and made her wishes known that she wanted to attend

a wedding and watch a wedding ceremony take place... she was like an old apple tree blossoming again.

My Uncle Filip too, as if she gave him some sort of life spark, began to illuminate his dark spaces bringing his soul out of darkness.

“What a beautiful day this is...” exclaimed my aunt while listening to the noises on the street. It was Easter and, as she had done many times in the past, today too she baked bread. After that we went outside to the village square, together, and stayed there until it was dark. We watched children and young people sing familiar songs... a beautiful repertoire of folk songs. I particularly focused my eyes on the singer who was illuminated by a beam of light. I was stunned. My heart was beating hard and I stopped breathing when I heard the song he was singing. I wanted to call out encouraging words but the loud music kept drowning me out. He was magnificent in singing the song, my song: “A song to find my mother...”

The people were irresistibly applauding with much love... coming directly from their souls... some were even weeping. I then looked at his hand holding the microphone.

At that point my aunt looked at me and noticed the unnatural anxiety on my face but thought it was from the excitement of listening to the song... I then screamed as loud as I could:

“Pavle...!!! My brother...!”

He turned towards the spotlight; I could see him better now. “It is him,” I said to myself now convinced that it was him because after I yelled he took a step towards us. My aunt stood up straight and so did Uncle Filip. I could not help but notice my aunt’s green eyes open wide and light up. She lost her handkerchief as she ran behind me. I could hear my aunt’s trembling voice on top of the music yelling:

“Pavle...!!! My son...!!! I am here! Pavle my son...!”

The mother’s love in her was rising, emphasized by her calls for her long lost son.

There was wholesome joy on her face and tears running down her cheeks. She clenched Pavle to her bosom. I don't remember if Uncle Filip or I hugged Pavle. At that moment we wanted Aunt Bisera to have all the joy. But I do remember and I want to mention that it was the music, the song and the words "mother, your son is looking for you everywhere..." that led us to Pavle. Pavle stopped singing and left the stage. His song turned to joyful tears, staring at us and hugging Aunt Bisera.

She in turn grabbed his hand with the missing fingers and squeezed it and, without her handkerchief, smiled and stood upright proud like an old veteran. Of all the evil that had encompassed my aunt the only thing that was left on her face now were her burn scars.

FOREIGNERS IN OUR COUNTRY

He took his faded hat in his hand and sympathetically turned towards me as if wanting to say: “Look at me man and follow my thoughts, I want you to see the suffering of my compatriots, to reassure yourself when you hear the sound of suffering. We will go through what has breathed in the pits of life to test if there is a measure of suffering... Because this secret I will take to my grave. This will now torment me for the rest of the year...”

He waited a while; waited for me to say more and then asked:

“What did you see mister, on your journey?” He then blinked his faded blue eyes several times and continued talking without waiting for an answer.

“Did you notice that this country is tired, burned out and has picked up and gone? That the people have picked up and gone all over the world? And in the end when they all went away even the birds flew away? The only things that remained from man here are the naked rocks of the ages...”

What is left is silence and wild space... Only the tough and robust have remained to guard their country, they who have all the dignity and are unworthy of Hellenic feelings and consciousness...

And now, when I see this I crumble into the depths of eternity, feeling a sharp pain dealt by a skilful hand. When I say skilful hand, I mean the type of hand that haunts mankind. In general you don't need to kill a man to destroy him. All you have to do is cast him out of his home, his country and he will begin to slowly die.

After some time, as if being eaten by something, his family too will start to die. And if a person thinks a little and reflects on it he will feel a craving in this persecution, not appreciable but very cruel.

This is certainly much harder than killing a man with a verdict. That's being sentenced to death. But this, this is a kind of slow suffocation... It is being convicted to a longer and more painful nostalgia...

This is why I want to start a conversation with you... about these people... about this country..." he concluded.

I extended my hand out to him and said: "My name is Jim."

He then bowed his head down and said:

"Okay Jim, if you wish to peek through the cracks of our life then... you may discover that life is lost for all of them... Because no matter what the historians tell you about us, about our country, their stories are under represented, there is nothing they can say to me about our people who had been banished that can be undone... or that can ease my mind..."

I could feel his pain and I knew from my own father, that these people were swept by some fierce storm and, seemingly, were pushed like stones by flood water which now lie along the banks of a river, and every day some force pushes them aside where they remain powerless and unable to reenter their life.

This is who the Macedonians are, who some call "Slavo-Macedonians" who did not want to become Turks, who now received new names and a completely new toponymia, a completely new language... who served in the thousands for the exchange of a single stray Greek in that Pondia and Black seacoasts of theirs, and look what that Greek did later to prove his existence in this country...

And now, according to the logic of the law "this country can only remain Hellenic if and only if it is ethnically pure". Many of those who did not want to be "Hellenized" fled and took the road to suffering in the world. They took a path where nothing in life is recorded.

And if you look closely, every one of them has their own life story woven from their suffering... shabby, transparent, tattered...

They search for life like Tsar Samoil's blind soldiers and some, who have yet to begin that life, will ask why?

The law that pushed them to leave their country was strict. Strict enough to push them to become wanderers... a people separate from themselves where life, at every moment, can judge them as it wants...

Here is their life, far away from their country, from their roots, which are now running deep and wide, and here they are like old exhausted birds, returning here to die in their own country.

Mr. Chris Korin told me the same thing: "I came here to die in my own country." He told me this in English.

I wanted to ask him something but he turned away from me towards the counter to listen to another conversation.

"It is true, he liked his village but then he was gone!" said the man from the police in Lerin, in front of all of us who were waiting there to receive information.

"What will you be doing there? There is nothing there to be found except ruins and desolation! And besides, there is no such place!" the man from the police continued.

"No, no, you are wrong. There is... and it still exists!" insisted old Mr. Chris Korin.

"The village is called V'mbel. And it does exist! If it doesn't then it is because you changed its name. It had a Macedonian name like me..." piped up Mr. Chris Korin with a shaky tone in his voice. The man from the police continued to search through the reddish lines on the map.

Mr. Chris Korin's head was swarming with thoughts:

"Oh God, finally I am going to be in my own fatherland. I waited a long time for this... to find myself under these roofs... I remember a long time ago when I was a small child, we were outside and it began to pour rain... and lightning flashed bright like a thousand candles... and thunder beat very loud... we ran inside and my

mother put us to sleep on a thick straw mattress made of long and thick braids of interlaced strands of straw.

Oh, how much I, once more, want to go inside my yard... to see my birthplace... to see the old house... the old outdoor oven from which my mother pulled out blessed warm bread which fed us all.

Oh, how I want to sit on the old summer veranda and watch the branches of the old apple tree loaded with flowers, looking like they are covered with snow, spread all over the yard.

Oh, how nice it would be to wallow in those flowers and, even for a moment, to be able to deeply breathe their aroma, in my own yard, knowing that it's truly your own yard..."

I watched Mr. Chris Korin lose himself in his own thoughts and, from the expression on his face, I could tell that he was taking all this pretty hard; his arrival here was not easy.

He has spent his entire life waiting for the moment when he would be allowed to return, in anticipation, having all kinds of expectations, both positive and negative, and this has taken its toll on this poor man. He is the eagle with broken wings who wants to greet the sun again; he lives with the hope that one day soon he will be allowed to return home again.

Then, suddenly, the man from the desk called out: "No! Mr. Korin, there is no such place here, I looked everywhere. Are you sure it's not in Yugoslavia or Bulgaria or in Albania somewhere? There is no such place here! Why are you looking for it in Greece?"

"YES THERE IS!" old Mr. Chris Korin replied angrily.

"I was born there but you now call that place MOSHOHORI!" he angrily added.

"Okay old man! Why did you not tell me this before?" asked the man from the police.

I asked Mr. Chris Korin if I could accompany him. He left me with the impression that he had a happy childhood there. I wanted to know more about him because his whole posture reminded me of my father. When we arrived at the village V'mbel he said:

“I have deceased relatives here,” and then escorted me from the car to the cemetery where, after looking for a while, we found a grave and then placed a marble plate on it that read:

“Bozhin Korenov
1856 - 1952
Liuba Korenova
1860 – 1948”

“For a long time I wanted to pay my respects to my parents,” he said. He then turned to me and, while pointing his finger towards the sky, said:

“And tonight... tonight we are going to celebrate our arrival here... We will light a great big fire and let it burn all night... to take the darkness away... and as you know there are people where there are fires burning... if there is a fire people will come. We in this country have no flags to fly, no star to guide us, but we do have strong flames to replace all that...”

It is true; people in those days relished their fires. The flickering flames in the fireplace, flickering in the dark of night, brought people... brought families together. It was a joy for them, for the entire family... to sit together in front of a fire and to tell... or to listen to stories... And indeed these people felt joy being together... until tragedy struck and those with blond hair and velvet eyes were driven out... away to foreign shores to live in anguish. They are of a mature age now and what was done then weighs on them even more so now... on their souls...

We lit a big fire and stood by it watching the tall flames sway in the wind, sometimes left sometimes right. The fire penetrated the black night and in the dark people came, smiling and happy, watching the high flame scattering sparks across the dark, like a calling beacon. They all gathered around Mr. Chris Korin and were speaking to him,

calling him Risto Korenov. Dear old Mr. Chris Korin was a happy old man, especially deep down in his soul. He began to sing... He sang so beautifully he put us all under his spell...

When dawn broke we watched a couple of figures approaching from afar. It was the police chief Kirios Platanos Andonakis, followed by that anti-Macedonian Krlas Petrou, looking all crooked and wearing a black moustache... bent forward with a recessed head, grinning. He looked at us maliciously and coldly. He thought that by being cold and malicious his great Greek patriotism would improve.

“You Slavophones, don’t you know that you have no rights in this country? You Mr. Chris Korin... and you Mr. Johnny, why did you get mixed up with these guys and with all these fires?” asked Kirios Andonakis in an angry and sarcastic tone of voice.

“You... with what you did here... did you want to raise the dead to again challenge this old Hellas? I see that, even in exile, you have not forgotten your Slav ways. But by law I am obliged to tell you to put the fire out, bury the ashes and then remove that headstone and replace it with one that reads:

“Theophilos Rizopoulou and Agapi Rizopoulou”

“You can rename your parents but I am not renaming mine! No!” Mr. Chris Korin snapped back.

“I am going to tell you one more time... In the name of the law!” replied Kirios Andonakis in an angry tone of voice

“In honour of my deceased parents... I am telling you... I will protest in front of the entire world...!” said Mr. Chris Korin with a determined tone of voice.

“You broke the law!!” yelled Kirios Andonakis and continued. “If you were not a foreigner you would be going to prison right now... so I am going to ask you again to remove the headstone and replace it with one that has Greek and English writing. Also Petros Botsaris, Georgios Minopoulos and all those others guys who left the village and who accompanied you last tonight are ordered to report to the

police; to be judged by the law. And I can tell you in advance that your sentences will be severe. The Leros island prison camps were especially made for your kind of people.”

After listening to all this Petre Bochvarovski (renamed Petros Botsaris by the Greeks) got all excited and said:

“Did you say Leros...? Kirie Andonakis? It is better to live in Leros that to live in our own country like foreigners... It is shameful the way you treat us!”

“Mister, hey mister! My name is Risto Korenov. I have been condemned to exile... I sing because of my own pain. It has not been easy for me, Kirie Andonakis, so I picked one night, last night, in the seventy years of my life to feel free. But in order to be free, Kirie Andonakis, I had to become a foreigner... I had to have a foreign citizenship.... I had to become a stranger in my own country... And you... you, yourself, know very well how much you have condemned us...” said Mr. Chris Korin while pointing at the desolation, ruins and emptiness, and then continued. “You know very well how much evil you have put us through... and the pain and suffering you have caused us... And who will judge you for that...?” said Mr. Chris Korin, paused for a moment and continued. “I don’t know... but at the same time you call yourselves a democracy where all people are equal... you pride yourselves for being great protectors of humanity... and what about us...? We, the people who actually belong in this country... we, who actually own this country...? Are we foreigners here... on our lands? This is one of the greatest mornings in my life, Kirie Andonakis... Last night I witnessed my destiny and how it flowed through your strict cesspool, along these roads made by our alienated people... who were living somewhere over there... and now I see, they are all gone. They fled screaming from their difficulties... in this new time...” concluded Mr. Chris Korin and looking exasperated went silent.

I passionately wanted to jump in on the argument with those so-called masters of our destiny, but my limited knowledge of the language prevented me.

“You Mr. Korin... don’t harp at me about your problems... That is your problem,” said Kirios Andonakis quietly.

“And you, Mr. Johnny? What have you to say?” asked Kirios Andonakis.

“I just came here to see the people and my father’s land...” I quietly replied.

He looked me straight in the eyes and said: “I will not allow you to do that...”

“Okay then, Kirie Andonakis, you have indeed become the masters of our lands!” I replied.

REFUGEES

For many years I kept my soul completely closed.

I did not have the courage in my heart to face my past. But the harder I tried to protect myself the more isolated I became... until I was all alone. And now, without wanting to, I am starting to remember... and facing my demons all alone... my sorrows are pressing on my heart like a foot stepping on my chest, squeezing my soul and tormenting me to no end...

But what can I tell you my friend? I have always been unhappy, even now, at this very moment I am sad, especially when I see fire and smoke. When I look at the bluish smoke rising it reminds me of the day the houses were burned. I remember it was a grey morning and suddenly there were all kinds of noises, people yelling and screaming and running. An entire crowd of people appeared running with their cows, sheep, mules, donkeys, horses... running together, mixing with their domestic animals. As it got closer the crowd of people, dark figures, became larger and larger like a snowball rolling down a hill. Further in the distance the crowd looked like a wide river of people and animals... flowing between the two Prespa lakes. They were fleeing half-naked and barefoot as if being caught by a sudden storm, as if not having enough time to get dressed. They were running... children, women, old people, unsteady, uncertain of their step and unsure of where they were going. A thick smoke was floating above the ground and irritating their nostrils and lungs... making it difficult for them to breathe the air. Some stooped forward while others fell to their knees and crawled... running... attempting to outrun the evil that was following them. And behind them... on the bare hills, in the brooks... everything was in ruins... The grass, the hills, the trees... all were scorched... all were on fire... all were burning. And everywhere on the ground lay mutilated bodies of dead soldiers. The flames looked like long tongues wagging and like the headscarves of fairies at play. And as they ran through the thick smoke and scorched earth, the people were wondering; "Where to now?"

War persecutes people, drives them out of their homes leaving the soil steeped in their blood... like the soil that has just been

watered... like a warm spring wind had blown and had melted the snow over the black earth and soaked it with moisture. I heard noises... crows were cawing as death was slowly creeping along the ground, following the fleeing people. Wrapped in the dolmen of horror, indifferent and impersonal, a crude black hand reached out to the man and hardened his heart... hardened his soul... and guided him to start a war... to spill blood...

But no matter what, every man at some point in his life must want to know... must want to ask: "Why is man doing this to another man?" Why must these people be put in such an unfortunate situation to suffer the loss of their happiness forever... the happiness they get from living in their own homes... in their own lands... Why must they be forced to leave their homeland?

This is very important, right? Sooner or later, all of them, every one of them will remember to ask: "Where are you, where are you my beloved homeland?" None of them will bear to carry the pain without asking...

And what now that they ceased to be trees with deep roots, rooted in their own land? And what now that they have been uprooted from their fertile soil? Until now they were only interested in their piece of land, in their own deep roots. They loved the land immensely because it nourished them! But now, now that their roots have been ripped out, that they have been dismembered... and their leaves have been scattered by the wind everywhere...? The people suddenly disappeared like sand being splashed by water... the persecuted roam the world like clouds carried away by the bad winds.

It is enough for a man to have his thread of life unwind and each event slide by like a pearl on a string, white, black, heavy and light.

And each pearl has its own characteristics, no pearl exactly resembles another, but perhaps these pearls are similar in form, but not necessarily in weight and colour... just like events in life... it is difficult for man to build a nest in a foreign land.

I will never forget those days...

I walked alone behind everyone. The road smelled of blood and sweat and all sorts of things were scattered all over the place. People trampled over them barefoot, walking over sharp broken objects. Those who were hurt and unable to walk stood on the side and prayed... expecting an imminent death. Only the mothers looked composed, rushing their children and looking for a hideout. Here you watch man take painful steps, afflicted, insecure... until he reaches the next station of life. In front of man you see footprints that lead somewhere... you see the maimed and mutilated sitting in the reeds... looking dazed... as bombs fall from the sky and shells from the artillery... hitting the water like giant frogs leaping from the shore...

The refugees, by the thousands, like a flock of migrating birds in the spring stood at the edge of the Albanian lands, eyes focused on their homeland, watching the black smoke rise... listening to the cries and screams of their friends, neighbours, villagers and countrymen... listening to the distant sounds carried by the twisting winds of fate... and bidding farewell to what were their lives... uncertain of what was ahead and tired and worn out from running...

They stood there for days... among the stones on the rough terrain, lying in the sun, expecting the warmth to alleviate their pain... sleeping in the outdoors all dirty and sweaty... These were the people without a roof; old men, women, children, sick and among them a lonely soldier or two who lost their unit or were left behind because they were badly wounded or suffering from a number of ailments...

The days dragged on and hunger began to creep. The blowing wind carried with it the smell and taste of burning ashes. The people felt infinite sadness hearing the red wind howl and snarl.

And deep down in the distance they watched a shimmering light... it was light reflected by the still waters of Lake Prespa. Several rocks could be seen sticking out of the shimmering bright surface, seeming like they were the heads of giants looking out to see what was going on. Many fishing boats lay abandoned in the sand... being angrily splashed by the lake's waves. Watching all this brought great sadness over me and I felt sorrow deep in my heart. And for the first

time in my life I heard the bowels of my country call out to me:
“Farewell, my son, farewell my dear boy, know the time has come
for you to go... you need to go... walk away... go...!!!”

As I passed through a village I noticed torn up clothing tossed all
over the place. I then saw a boy on a threshing floor leaning against
the barn wall. I yelled out to him and said: “Young man! Come
here...!” He stood still. When I got close to him I was overwhelmed
with sadness. He had been stabbed. His toys were all around him on
the ground. I only had enough time to put him on the ground on his
back.

A very old man a few metres away heard my voice and my footsteps
and raised his head. His face was covered in blood.

“Are you a person?” he asked. I stooped down. He ran across the
yard very fast with open arms. He slammed into a wall. In pain he
began to shout: “People, brothers, all of you who are fighting for the
love of the people and want justice in this country, take a look at the
wicked men! Behold... they are silent! But I know one day they too
will die but their malice will remain alive forever... our honour too
will remain alive... we are men who love our country; our honour
will remain as the most beautiful ornament in our country... This is
not your country... this is the land of those who fled, who are in
pain... who are in deep silence now. This yard I leave to my
grandson. It belongs to my grandson now... One day he will return
to reclaim it... His father spilled his blood for it and now I will spill
mine...”

I felt terrible but I kept silent.

“You won’t talk, eh? What are you, a coward? I lost my eyesight... I
can’t see you but I am here... I exist... Are you happy and content to
see me hitting the walls...?” he yelled out.

I couldn’t stand it anymore. I began to yell back at him and I tore
out the symbols and everything I had on me... that had made me
into a soldier.

I had to reconcile the truth. Seeing the old man the way he was and the way he spoke to me touched me deeply and left a lasting impression in me.

Now the two of us were walking together. The old man, only living with the hope that he would find his grandson among the refugees...

There were many people along the way who were asking for help. Maybe they were looking for family members just like I was looking for mine. I could not remember then who they were.

But now I do remember. A blind woman was walking in the crowd clutching a one year-old male child in her arms... her grandson.

The old woman was led by a tongue wagging female dog tied to her belt. Then, in the dark of night, I heard the old blind woman begging the dog to find her grandson.

Then she cried out: "Oh, God! Who has cursed this country to be without people, without the kindness of people? Are there no more kind people on this earth!?"

"Please be quiet... mother," I said to her.

"Oh, my good man... Come over here my son..." she begged me with her head swinging from side to side.

When I told her I was there she said:

"Please stay with me a while... Everything I had back home was lost in the fire. I left with my grandchild and now I lost him too... I was sitting nearby but the dog that was leading me pulled me away... Now I don't know where I am. All I hear now is gunfire and the noise of people fleeing..."

Please stay with me a little, I beg you! Please. I have been begging people to help me but they all seem to be deaf to my pleas.

I can't blame them though... They are being pursued by those who are stronger... I wonder if they are even people, eh son. How do I

know if they are not some divine force that wants to turn this piece of land into a desolate place? That's what I have been saying to my dog all this time... but what can I say when the dog does not understand me."

The old woman was excited and delirious and a flood of tears flowed out of her blind eyes. She stretched out her hand and grabbed the bottom of my tattered coat. She very much wanted to tell me something, as if I was responsible for the war.

She turned towards me and said: "Exactly here, my son, my dog and I were right here, but my dog is now gone, and I... I am blind..."

I left the old woman and went to look for the baby. I found it close by. The baby was lying next to the dog hanging from the dog's breast and sucking vigorously, while the dog lay still.

I stood there for a long time and watched.

I then yelled at the dog and it gently stood up and moved away. I picked up the baby and he began to make baby sounds. When the old woman heard the baby she said:

"Bless you, my son... Thank you."

I then said: "Take him mother... he has been fed..."

The old woman began to look sad. Her wrinkles began to amass on her forehead.

Then, as I watched her eyelids close over her blind eyes, she let out a terrible scream which frightened me... she jumped up and ran back madly while cursing... A moment later her dog ran after her. They ran far, far away... in terror...

I was alone again. I only heard echoes coming from the mountains. The entire region was dotted with holes from exploding shells. The lake looked like it was in shock, rigid and silent, lying among the dark mountains, calling for me... saying: "Goodbye..."

There were traces of blood along the dusty road... In front of me was soldier. He was standing over a flat rock, his wounded arm was tied over his shoulder with a military belt... he was in pain... He was bleeding on the rock, waiting for enough droplets to pool so that he could write "Goodbye homeland," in blood.

TRAGEDY

(In the shadows of persecution)

They traveled barefoot to the parked train cars.

They were under the care of a “Mother”, appointed by the refugee committee, selected from the women who were incapable of fighting in the war.

The order of what children went to which car was not strict. The children boarded a car as they arrived until that car was full and then those who followed boarded the next car. The cars were boarded by both boys and girls of various ages up to age ten. The older ones traveled on a different train and under a different schedule.

The floors of the train cars were covered with straw and in the two opposite corners there were buckets. One set filled with drinking water on one side, and another set of empty buckets for other needs.

The first one to enter the train cars was Parashkeva Dabevski, who the children called “Mother”. They were all told to call her “Mother” because she was responsible for looking after them.

The slots that substituted for windows in these livestock cars were immediately taken over by the stronger and older children. The smaller and weaker ones remained in the centre and could not see outside... And here too the stronger reigned...

There was a lot of sobbing. The train cars were packed and all the slots were taken.

The siblings who entered different cars were separated. No one was told that the various train cars would be going to different destinations. Only the train tracks knew which cars would go in which direction. Small hands waved from the slots... unbeknown to them that they were about to be separated from each other... sibling from sibling... and that they were saying farewell... The smaller and younger children were not aware of what was happening... and

being so young... in time; would they remember who they are... or even their parents?

The cars began to roll. It was night and the children were afraid... They sat expressionless in confusion... Some looked bored. They felt like an iron wall stood between them and the outside world. It was cold inside the train cars...

The people outside watching the many cars rolling by suspected something was happening but had no idea that these livestock cars were full of children. The children were told to remain silent... and they did... so there were no voices to reach the ears of those outside and give the children away.

The trip lasted for days... the lives of those inside the cars were uncertain. The children were hungry and cold, every day stuck between the iron walls awaiting their evil fate... together with their common "Mother".

It was night. There was great need for the little passengers to know what was going on in the outside world... to remember it... to have it imprinted in their souls... in their genes... which could only be seen through the narrow slots located on the sides of the livestock train cars...

Those who were exhausted lay down on the hard and cold floor, on the straw "beds" especially prepared for them and tried very hard to remember the road that they had traveled... the images as seen from the narrow slots. Still unaware that they were separated... they lay down on the floor with much hope and with one thought in mind: "Maybe after we arrive at our destination our mothers and fathers... our grandmothers and grandfathers... our brothers and sisters... will also be arriving with us..." Thoughts that helped them fall asleep.

They traveled day and night in a daze, being brought back to reality by the hard shaking of the trains pulling in and out of train stations. Those in possession of a slot peeped outside trying to make sense of what was happening. Those inside watched the dots of light filtering through every crack and hole, moving along as the train continued on its journey. They also watched the dust dance in the beams of

light... dust that was shaken off the roof and walls of the cars... dust that had accumulated inside these cars over the many years of service moving animals and garbage.

The “Mother” held the heads of several of the weaker children... while vomiting... of those who had difficulties coping with the train’s motion...

The vomit and other spilled liquids sank under the straw on the car floor and dripped through the floor cracks and fell on the railway tracks below. “We were safe”... they sighed “the car kept us inside... for itself...”

The children were each clutching at a shabby bag full of rye bread crumbs, cooked meat and other foods especially prepared for them by the hands of their own mother, made from the foods grown in their own villages and country. Each child traveling in the cars suffered from something... some from something more serious and others from something less. And there was nothing... nothing... nothing was written down or recorded about all this... about the fate and destiny of each child. There was nothing written about the savagery and their persecution... and nothing was written about those dilapidated livestock train cars that were carrying them...

Without writing things down, could “Mother” Parashkeva Dabevski remember all this... all that was happening to every child... to tell the children’s story to their descendents? To tell them how life was for each one of them traveling on the train... in cars built to carry livestock? How much could one person remember? It seemed as though there was only one life and one “Mother” existing in each car...

The children kept looking through the cracks, watching the fierce wind blow shaking leaves, raising dust and taking it wherever it wanted. They did not want to look at one another for fear that they might start crying. Their game here was to hide in plain view... to be mute, invisible and distant...

It was night when the cathedral clocks chimed in Krakow...

It was a holiday for three days. The streets were lined with cheerful people.

The children, holding little flags and miniature carousels, were waving them as they followed their common “Mother” passing through the square like an exiled herd of little lambs... looking timid in their coarsely woven garments.

“Oh my God, where did these children come from?” voices in the crowd were heard asking.

“From Kostur Region, Lerin Region, Prespa Region... from Macedonia...” answered “Mother” Paraskeva Dabevski.

It was autumn and the rain seemed to have washed out their footprints...

Their eyes were scattered... looking here and there... as they walked in a tight column, holding hands... not knowing where they were going...

It was Sunday; the children were cold and constantly coughing. Parashkeva Dabevski was resting in the dormitory. Now that she had brought the children here and surrendered them to their educators and caregivers, she was no longer their “Mother”. But it was difficult for them to call her “Aunt” instead of “Mother”. It was hard for her too. She felt useless without them, here in a foreign country. She did not want to leave them because life was telling her to go to a factory and work there. She was not an educator and she could not be a teacher... She had no training in the field of education... her job was to bring them here... yet the children still gathered around her... they remembered how she cared for them when they were in need of their own mother... Parashkeva Dabevski could not do without them either; it seemed like her fate was tied to theirs. Soon afterwards she fell sick and died. All the children wept at her funeral like she was their own mother.

Several children stood at the window. They constantly wished for many things, great and small, and all kinds of thoughts filled their little heads.

They were watching the doves on the opposite side of the building constantly moving their little blue legs... The curious birds, with blurred vision from the splashing rain, were looking back... watching the windows on the other side of the building... they watched the rain drops splash against the glass in the outside... and the tears of the strange children, whose noses were pressed against the glass, splashing in the inside. One of the children then said: “My grandfather used to say; if you take the cubs from an animal, that animal will never return to the same den...” Perhaps it’s the same with people?! Who knows...?

From the windows the children watched the locomotives passing by, breathing hard as they pulled all those cars, leaving behind their foggy breath in the form of white smoke.

Some of the children argued with one another as they watched the trains pass by. Some saying: “That was our train... The train that brought us here...” and wished that the same train would bring their mothers, fathers, grandmothers... While others were saying: “No it was not the same train...” for reasons of their own.

Travelers were getting off the trains. Some were coming from far away, from other cities. Some were returning to their homes to be with their relatives and to celebrate with them.

And each child watching was asking: “And where am I in all this...?”

* Tragedy (In the shadows of persecution): I had three important reasons for writing this short story. However, I will let you, the reader, be the judge about the things that happened to us in the Greek Civil War (1945 – 1949). I would also like to ask you this: “What we did... did we do it as a result of our own accord or... were we led to do this by foreign ideological propaganda? In other words, what really compelled us to leave our Macedonian homes so that our wives and mothers would be freed to join DAG, fight at the

fronts, become casualties and victims of war... and experience a catastrophic national defeat...?”

What happened to us and what was done to us was confirmed after DAG's defeat, when we were forced to abandon our homes and lands and, as Greeks and Macedonians, flee to European countries and become permanent refugees... adults and children, deprived of our homes and lands... with one exception... years later, those of us who were “Greeks by birth” were allowed to return... the rest were left adrift... on foreign shores!

AFZH Attitude regarding the child exodus

AFZH newspaper “Nova Makedonka”.

“Today everyone is in tears. We were moving like never before. We sat in the shade under a poplar tree. Some of us were still sleeping. It was getting dark and we had to go to work (they worked at night). And here was comrade Tsveta from AFZH... she just arrived. We rejoiced at her arrival. I don't know why but we were not afraid when she was with us, not even from the cannons.

This time she brought letters from our children who were in the people's republics. We read the letters and shook our hands in the air. Our hearts were beating hard but our dear ones were away. Oh, how nice it would have been to kiss them a bit!

But the airplanes come here. Our villages are being bombed by artillery shells, how nice that our government sent our children to be saved.

Now our eyes are filled with tears. They are writing to tell us that they live well. They say: ‘We think of you, our mothers, in the war...’

Our poor children. When will we see them again?

We will see them again when we free ourselves. How nice that would be... But in order for that to happen we must defeat fascism.

And to make this happen sooner we need to fight harder, and fight we will...

Last night we built three bunkers, more than usual.

We do this so that our children can return home sooner... So that we and our husbands can return home sooner..."

"... No, not me! I will not leave my husband, my sister and my brother alone to fight here... I can't go with the children. I know they will be safe; I have full confidence in the caregivers and teachers you selected... I will stay here and contribute to the struggle."

CPG Attitude regarding the child exodus

Written by Vasilis Bardzhiotas, DAG Chief Commissar.

"... The Athens government in Greece characterized DAG's dignified attempt to save the children as a program for 'collecting children', of 'murdering children' and even for turning children into 'Janissaries'. But the real collection of children and turning them into Janissaries is done by the Athens government whose forces, in addition to committing unprecedented terror against the civilian population, have also forcibly taken children of partisan parents. Whoever fell into its hands the Athens government jailed in the various camps, or so-called 'Frederica's schools' on the island Leros, where children were truly turned into Janissaries. They were brainwashed to believe that their parents were traitors and that they should be condemned..."

Attitude of the government in Athens regarding the child exodus

On February 27, 1948 the Greek government submitted a formal complaint to the United Nations Special Committee on the Balkans (UNSCOB) claiming that:

"Greek children under partisan pressure were being forced to flee over the Albanian, Bulgarian and Yugoslav borders and from there

to be sent to other Eastern European countries and to remain in these countries...”

There were similar claims that “Traitors belonging to General Markos have begun to take inventory of about 28,000 children ages 3 to 14 in Northern Greece.”

The purpose of this action can be explained as follows:

1. To intimidate Greek families to help the partisans.
2. To brainwash the Greek children with communist ideology.
3. To destroy the Greek national sentiment and separate the children from their nation.
4. To force the families to leave their lands in order to care for their children.

DAY OF THE DEAD

Thick fog has covered the sharp rocks, twisting and turning in the valley, looking cold and murky.

The trees bow as if they are complaining about the weather... dozing... once in a while losing a sickly yellow leaf. They are secretly crying... one could barely distinguish their cries from the sounds of the dry wind that beats them.

The flocks of sheep are gone from the grazing hills and no longer bleat on the flat rocks where they used to lick salt from when they were lambs. The youthful, ringing and fresh voices are gone... The reeds extend over the eroded country road and are tangled with the grass. There are no footprints.

There is silence...

And life continues in complete absence of man... Much water will flow and many ages will pass... much will change but no one will be able to prevent the birds from flying high through the piles of pink clouds over the long, stretched out Vardar. And the people, whenever there is hope, will sing about their fate with the words of the new years.

Lost in her thoughts, wearing a homespun vest whose edges were bordered with three layers of braided wine-coloured woven yarn, all stitched together with gold thread, the old woman was walking alone. She paused and cast a glance toward the mountain; the burned down scorched tree trunks, looking like people stood there... looking back. She got a chill down her spine. The dried up water ditch seemed to reach out to her and grab her by her hand... When the woman reached the boundary of her property she straightened, composed her old figure, mustered enough strength and said:

“Good day garden...”

“Good day indeed. You came back... looking even older... much older. Your hair has turned white. You need a stick to support yourself walking...” the old woman replied to herself.

“Many years have passed... my garden. You too have aged and turned ugly. It’s been many years since you have produced anything. Today I came to see you... today is the day of the dead. I came to collect some flowers,” the old woman said.

“I know, Bozhana, I waited for you but as you can see I am all naked. The tame flower has long gone. It left with the young...” the old woman replied to herself.

“Then allow me to at least visit you again... see you all; the field, the meadow, the grove..., I have not seen you since I fled... go get you out of my dark and desolate thoughts. I left the silence and walked across the field. Everything was silent in my house. Only I spoke... I talked to things when I used them... I cursed them, swore at them, cried over them and sorted them and some I treasured like my own eyes...” said the old woman.

The soil in the fields looked compacted and the fields themselves looked naked... sprawled across the valley... separated only by boundaries indicating that they were shared pieces of land...

The old woman threw a glance at the wide valley. “The soil is now resting... It sustained us for a long, long time with its crops...” she whispered while standing still like a rock. She smiled... her secret smile stretched out her wrinkled cheeks.

“Sit down Bozhana... Don’t stand there! Your legs hurt. Sit down on the stone! You rarely come here... you only come here in those days you celebrate...” she said to herself.

“I came here because I was coming here since I was a young girl... you remember? You remember how mischievous I was then? What was I? A barefoot little girl! Was it my grandfather or my great grandfather that separated you from the other fields... that put those boundaries there... I have aged much and I don’t remember... but I do know... they told me that this tragedy and this piece of land are ours. I was a curious girl... I was 19 years old when I met Done. He was returning from shepherding. His mossy face was ruddy, his sickle was shining in his hand... he was gathering wheat stalks on

the side of the road... he looked at me sideways... And now, when I close my eyes, I see him like I saw him then. He was carrying his shirt over his shoulder and on it he rested his sickle... his chest was baked like a hard stone. His smile made me feel more striking...” said the old woman to herself and paused for a moment.

The old woman sat on the stone. Not far from her there was maple tree growing. Bozhana kept looking at it. The valley was lit with yellow and pink beams of light emanating through the clouds and evaporating the last vestiges of the morning fog.

The village, nestled on the sunny side of the hill, looked bright and alive, even though now there was no human life in it.

“Done was a hard worker... he reaped the rye masterfully. He was quiet when he worked. He cut the stalks of grain and piled them in small piles, one beside the other, like children lying side by side. He and I were always the first people to go to work. All the others were still sleeping when we left for the fields. One time we slept here, near that tree over there at the end of our field. We slept on top of Done’s homespun coat.

This was our first night sleeping in the outdoors. Done’s strong hand stroked my cheeks, forehead, hair... from inside of his palm I could hear his heart... it was happy listening to his loud heart hammering. I asked him: ‘Done, do you think we will live happily...?’ and he said:

‘Oh, I think so... I believe we will be happy...’

He then said: ‘If the land and the water are divided equally among the people, and if we have our own field, and if we plow and sow it, then we will reap our own rye... and yes, we will be happy...’

A person cannot ask for more joy than that. The plowman is happy to reap what he sows.

Look out there... there is land for everyone... the soil has opened its chest for everyone – for people to live! Do you see how much one grain of rye can give us...?’ asked Done.

I don't know why but I loved those words he spoke... they gave me great joy.

I held him in my arms and kissed his warm and sun-burned face. And now, every time I think of this I cry. I don't know why. One time he hugged me and rolled me over the rye, he then squeezed me and yelled at the sun:

'Hey, sun! Look... this is my wife... Look at her and pay me with your sun rays and with your bright light...'

I could not restrain myself with the joy that flooded my chest..." she said. The old woman then looked away and remained silent for a long time.

"Bozhana, when you used to come here... remember... you brought a cradle with you and made shade for it with stalks of grain... now you say nothing about that... where is your family Bozhana?" the old woman heard a voice in her head that shocked her. She then rose up from the stone, adjusted her vest, put on her head kerchief and said:

"Stop tormenting me... You can see I have no more tears... There were seven cradles... that's why I ran away from home. Their death was very hard for me... I am a mother who has experienced terrible blows of fate. Who will measure my bitterness? Many times I have asked the Lord to let me die... Lord, I have no more strength in me... let me die, please, I beg you dear Lord let me die..." she cried out.

The old woman then looked up... at the village... nestled on the sunny side of the hill and remembered... she remembered the houses burning... the wind blowing... tongues of flame sticking out... black smoke rising... swirling in the wind... and red sparks flying...

She feels unrest deep down in her soul. The village is very old... it remembers the green gardens and fields growing around it every year... except for now... now the fields are white fallow and the sunny side of the hill is in ruins...

Bozhana's heart began to beat irregular... it lost its rhythm... her hands began to shake.

"My dear field," she let out a loud scream, "you have been resting from the harvest. You know me well... you have known me all my life. Now we are here all alone... you and I... Today is the day of the dead. Tell me my dear field... tell me my dear birthplace... in which times and which mother has suffered as much... from seven to have none! I buried my husband... I lost Georgi, Petre, Vasil, Elena, Risto and Velika...

When Done was still alive he went looking for bones, following the blood trail... inquiring... he brought Georgi and Risto's bones home. He then died and left the rest of the bones uncollected," she said and then stopped moaning.

"I don't know, Bozhana... Only the most frightening tree stumps remember such bad times..." she heard a voice in her head saying.

"Oh, let it be me... let me be the last mother to wait for her sons like this. Please God don't let another mother suffer like this... Let no other mother wait like this... Every time I look at the top of the hill, with every dawn that passes, I cry... I cry for my children to quickly return home... I only have a little corner of my life left. When my home was burning that corner was saved by going abroad.

I went to see him... my youngest son... he now lives in a foreign country. He has been erased... he is no longer a son of this country, but he is my son... my son!" she said out loud while crying.

"I know, Bozhana, I know... don't cry, it's my fault for asking you..." said the voice inside the old woman's head.

The old woman then looked up and said: "I don't know if this is light or dark" and while looking at the sun she cried out: "Ah, sun... sun, you shine warmth as you look down on the earth... talk to the people!" then she looked down at the ground and said:

"And you mother earth, you who feed the people... who have settled all your parts... you, dear earth, talk to the people. I have another son

and he is a son of this country because he was born here, in this place...” said the old woman and closed her eyes.

“No, Bozhana, there are many voices like that... you, yourself, need to speak to the people...” said the voice inside the old woman’s head and continued:

“You are a person too. You are in your own country. You gave birth and cradled seven children here.”

The old woman slowly, step by step began to move...

She again began to feel the coldness in her soul... and in the valley!

“Go Bozhana, go...” said the voice in her head.

“I am going, the dead are calling me... if I am still alive, I will come back again. I am losing my strength with each passing day... Yesterday in my sleep they were all collected around me saying: ‘Why don’t you want to rest a while, mother, you are so worn out and tired... Let us warm your hands. Eh! Your hands... are so cold and wiry!

Why are you saying these things, why are you being so cruel...?

Go mother go... go and live with Borche, even though he is far away from us, he is the youngest... let him look after you...’ said the voice inside the old woman’s head.

“They left crying... I scolded them and told them: ‘I don’t want to leave... I want to be in this country where I was born’...” said the old woman.

SEARCHING FOR OUR MISSING ROOTS

We buried Aunt Pandoitsa on a day like today.

The only people present were the gravediggers, Uncle Pando and myself. A cold wind was blowing. I was chilled down to my bones. It was a bad wind blowing hard as if wanting to pick us all up, living and dead, and toss us in some desolate place. This is what one of the gravediggers said. The man looked like a giant, very strong, but his voice was a bit weak, like it had been taken away. He did most of the things at my aunt's funeral.

They began to lower the coffin into the grave rather early and in haste. Uncle Pando jumped up and opened the coffin lid and kissed my aunt on the hands, forehead and lips and said, "May the earth be light on you... you were a faithful partner..." and closed the lid. We all rushed to grab a handful of soil and threw it over the coffin. The gravediggers did the rest; noisily tossing soil on top of the casket until the grave was covered and all the excavated soil had disappeared. In the end the man, the giant man, took the cross and struck it hard into the ground. It was so hard everyone thought he had struck the coffin.

After that we all shook and rubbed our hands silently, seeming as if we were doing some secret work and repeated the old man's words: "May the earth be light on you..."

No one did what our customs require us to do for a funeral except for old Uncle Pando who pulled out a bottle and said: "Let us drink to her soul..." We all took a sip of his rakia and swallowed it hard. The giant man took a big mouthful and, as he handed the bottle back to the old man, he said: "It felt good to have a drink old man, especially in this cold wind..." Uncle Pando drank the rest of the rakia when we returned to the house.

Now when I look at the picture of my aunt I cry. I feel bad for sending her off in such a simple way. Before she died she used to laugh out loud when someone looked at her with pity and with a gentle gaze. She loved people very much. She enjoyed their pride. It seemed like their presence made her happy. But that was not how

my aunt had been in the past, in her youth. Long ago she did not want to see anyone but towards the end of her life her joy had returned. She became more and more proud as she aged. But Uncle Pando, lured by primordial feelings at a young age, widened his unfulfilled desires and rarely turned towards my aunt.

Perhaps she loved him too much. He was a favourite among the people, he knew how to explain what freedom, slavery and humiliation was... He read the newspapers to them and reminded them of our past. He gave them examples of what it was to be free minded and how it was to be absent of it.

Most people believed him, some were afraid that such knowledge would cause them harm... They would pay a heavy price if the bandit mercenaries of Stathis Hondrokoukis somehow found out.

In those days my aunt supported him but was also worried about him, warning him of the consequences... but he was brave...

There was no changing his mind. She knew that and understood him as “a man who served the people...” Perhaps with that thought in mind, my aunt now wanted her life to end proudly. When she was dying she asked Uncle Pando not to have a priest at her funeral... to be buried without a priest... My aunt believed in God but she loved her husband even more... she loved him all her life and remained a believer in him, even now... she did not want a priest so that the people would not see him as a hypocrite after his years of agitation against religion and everything that blinds people, including unnecessary rituals.

We are alone in this commemoration, just me and Uncle Pando. He drinks and hums while I recollect the bloody dawn when, along with the strong wind, armed thugs with long ugly beards emerged from the dark and invaded our home. They had done this many times but this time they were looking for Uncle Pando.

They beat my aunt, going at her like a pack of wolves on a carcass as the strong wind whirled around them. They took her away and we thought they would kill her. We were all expecting to hear a shot but a little later our breath stopped when we saw huge flames flying out

of my aunt's house. We were startled. Then we saw my aunt completely naked running to extinguish the fire. And they, the bearded ones, just sat there like guests at a wedding, rubbing their chins and eating lunch from their freshly opened meat cans. We were there watching as my aunt cried out: "Help, people, brothers... help!!" She yelled as hard as she could: "PEOPLE...!!!"

My grandmother Velika was the first to run to her but one of the bearded goons struck her on the head with the butt of his rifle and she fell to the ground... slowly dying in front of us.

When my aunt realized she could not put out the flames her tears dried up and, with unprecedented rage, she began to toss things out of her way. She tried very hard to reach the large door but was unable; the flames and smoke overwhelmed her.

Distraught she ran around the house shouting: "Iana...! Gotse...! My children...! Pando...!" She did this until she heard the wall crack and instantly created a huge dust cloud in front of her. After that she refused to speak... she remained mute until her death... she only laughed out loud.

She felt very anxious when a strong wind blew. She stared at the whirlwind and at the dust demons looking powerless. Sometimes she ran through the ruins pulling out beams of wood that had survived the fire.

My aunt made strings out of her clothes and tied them tightly. She did this day and night when it was windy.

In the beginning she hated the night. The fire made her cry. She was delighted by the water and constantly watered the debris in the yard. In time she increasingly became distant from all of us and only took food from my sister. My sister repeatedly spoke to her and repeatedly kept asking her: "My dear Aunt, who burned Iana, Gotse and killed grandmother... Dear Aunt where are they now? Where are they? Where are they... dear Aunt?"

My aunt would then take my sister in her arms and hug her against her soiled chest. My sister would then cry loudly.

She only took ripe plums from me. I would fill my deep and wide pockets and offer her a handful. She ate them with pleasure and then looked at me as if asking for more. She always wanted more than two handfuls.

She kept food in old, broken earthenware jugs which she picked up from the garbage and which are now regularly visited by roving mice. She smashed all cans that had labels on them with incredible rage. She put them on top of a stone and crushed them with another stone. After that she would take the depersonalized can and run down the valley and toss it in the thornbushes.

She would return tired, having no strength and then sleep on the ground.

One time soldiers, many soldiers, came to our village to occupy the hills above our house because it was an important strategic position. The villagers, being habitually mistreated, thought it was an invasion and feared they all would be burned in their homes like mice. Surprisingly my aunt was not afraid and lashed out at the soldiers and began to throw stones at them.

She threw everything at them including curses and insults. She kept yelling:

“Go ahead, shoot me... Nothing can penetrate my chest... It’s strong... I want to die for all the people that are afraid... I am part of them and I protect them... this here belongs to them...” Then pointing at the ruins she added: “Pando, my husband, taught me how to die for the people... for these people... for you... shoot me... why carry guns if you are not going to use them... piss on your guns. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha... piss on your manhood...”

Many of the soldiers pointed their guns at her but when their commander saw her he said: “No... leave her alone... Leave her... let her remember her children... It is difficult to kill those who want to die for their people... You want to kill someone? Kill those cowards over there...” he said and while pointing at us he added:

“She and those like her are examples in the world of things done during a war. Let her be...” The commander then turned to her and said: “You are brave, woman!”

After that the commander gathered his soldiers and left for the hill. Victorious, my aunt returned to her yard. She sat on a stone and tamely stared at me and my sister. Then she began to look for lice, crushing them between her thumbnails. Standing beyond us were our neighbours seemingly feeling guilty. We heard one of them say: “I will be damned... here we are being humane... feeling sorry for her, while brave Pandoitsa was ready to die for us... for our honour...”

But my aunt kept to herself and did not pay attention to them and what they were saying. When she caught a large louse in her hair she smiled, crushed it and continued looking. Later she went over to her earthenware jugs and rearranged the food she had kept in them; moving it from one jug to another. But most of all she loved to water the flowers growing in the debris. This is how my aunt lived, until one day we were all forcibly evicted from our own residence.

Now I am looking at my Uncle Pando finishing the remainder of his rakia.

He looked at me and I looked back at him... there was pain in his eyes. And as if something in him broke, he said: “I should not have sent her away in silence...”

After we buried Aunt Pandoitsa all that remained from our family was my Uncle Pando and me. He doesn't care about anyone anymore. He wears old and torn clothes that people give him. Old torn clothes, that for some reason people don't want to throw out, they give them to him... perhaps they feel sorry for him.

Everyone gave him food. He was a peaceful man. All the local people had a soft spot for him. They all had questions for him; some even wanted to know about his roots. Most were saying no one knew his origin. Some even asked him embarrassing things... The

only ones who asked him embarrassing things were children and widows...

Every day Uncle Pando was among the people. He left to go somewhere, seemingly looking for someone close to him. Bareheaded in the rain and cold, off he went looking, sometimes taking a curious peek at a rotund woman dragging her naughty children with her. He would stop, take out the yellowed photograph from his deep pocket, touch it to his bare skin and look at it. He would look at the woman then at the photograph, then at the woman again. The photograph was of him and Aunt Paindoitsa with the children in her lap.

Uncle Pando had all sorts of things in that deep pocket of his. He had collected everything that was left from the fire and that was dearest to him, everything that warmed his soul. He shoved everything into that pocket. But now when he looks at the photograph he closes his eyes seeming as if he is unable to shed a tear. No one seems to notice. Of course people are curious and some naturally want to know everything about him and especially what he has to say about our future. We want to know more, we are curious about our destiny; about which he seemed to know a great deal. When we hear him talk our feelings ripen as if they found a spiritual watering hole. In those moments we forget our pain and grief and want to bury everything that makes us unhappy. We want to live happily, to smile away our worries and feed our curiosity. The more we learn the more we want to learn... a great desire... we want to make fun of the old vintage models... we want to be reborn with new desires and to have lively debates amongst us...

It became unbearable for me when Uncle Pando began to constantly ask me about my grandmother Velika and what happened to her. I told him a hundred times but he kept asking me the same thing again and again and again.

I used to say: "I already told you, dear Uncle Pando...!" We buried her following all our customs that we knew about and had learned from the old people.

Then again he would ask: “Did you have a priest...?” and then I would angrily say: “And so what if we did... the funeral lasted over two days. We stayed with her at night and kept the candles burning all night long. My mother constantly poured oil and cursed the bandits who burned Iana and Gotse.”

I used to tell my aunt about this and she constantly cried. I would tell her how they chased us at night to drive us away from our grandmother, who Hondrokoukis’s bandits brutally killed, but we stayed with her body all night, calling for my Uncle Pando.

Uncle Pando too loved to hear all those details but I often angrily would say to him: “Why are you asking so much! You know that my grandmother was an ordinary grandmother. She wasn’t some famous woman...!” I was doing that, hoping that he would stop asking me. But often he would say: “You, my dear nephew... don’t get so angry... Your grandmother was my mother...”

Lately Uncle Pando has forgotten my grandmother Velika and has also lost the photograph of him, my aunt and the children. Now he looks at no one and asks nothing. I watch him roaming around mumbling to himself and distancing himself from everyone. It seems like his memory has been blown away by the wind. And people are right to say that he does not know his own roots...

He is now roaming around and creating new memories. He is deaf, banal and unfit to bear thinking of my aunt, my grandmother Velika, Iana or Gotse. He is running away from us... And I, when I think of my father I cry and because of that I will never be happy...

I just received news that my Uncle Pando passed away. I don’t know how it happened. But I am sure that he died. For many years I knew that he would die because he had lost so much more than any of us, which left him vulnerable... he became a recluse.

I wanted very much to listen to him when he spoke to people about his know-how, telling them things about everything. But then I felt guilty, but I don’t know if I was the only person from his entire family who felt guilty for not knowing more about Uncle Pando.

But when he did have his memory and was able to speak he would simply start like this:

“They caught me and your grandfather Risto far away from the village.

It would have taken you an hour if you went there on foot. It was the ninth of May, 1946. The place was called Kramolo. We were plowing there. Then around noon bearded men, armed to the teeth, looking like defrocked priests suddenly appeared out of nowhere. They jumped on us like wasps. While they were hitting us they were asking about my brothers. They were asking even more about my father Mano. ‘Where are they? Hand over them...!’ They first tied your grandfather and then me. From there they took us to Kostur. They beat us to near death and then shoved us in a dark cellar. Later they brought us to a court and the first question they asked was: ‘In what kind of organization are you members, Risto and you Pando? And who are your organizers?’

‘We, the people alone... by ourselves...’ said your grandfather, and I said: ‘We will fight...! What do you think...?! We will live like slaves...?’

The court sentenced us to twenty years hard labour and sent us to the prison in Giura Island. We had no idea they had trashed our house and turned it into a wasteland.”

When he paused a bit, seeming like he had finished telling everything, I asked:

“How was it there?”

“There? Hmm...” he replied and waved his hand.

“We the prisoners called it ‘the island of death..., Dachau’ on the Mediterranean Sea. Giura, my nephew, is something totally independent. Something entirely new... The island was the concentration camp of modern barbarism. It was a demonic island... seemingly cursed by nature itself. Every day they gave us salted fish to eat. The thirst melted a man’s body. It was so hot, the stones

cracked from the heat. They gave us water only in a certain place. When we went to drink they beat us with sticks. There were clouds of dust all the time, all throughout the island. We were constantly shoveling and swinging a pick... Whistles were heard blowing, beastly shouting, cursing, swearing, explosions, sticks banging, sticks breaking from hitting one body after another... Anyone who did not manage to drink water had to live with his burgeoning thirst. The water was bad, salty, bitter, disgusting. One time a man went mad from lack of water. His eyes looked like they were on fire and sticking out of their sockets. His tongue trembled between his lips. But at that very moment they struck him with a stick and did not give him any water at all. He died an hour later. His name was Iovan; he was from one of the Lerin Region villages. There was not a drop of water in Giura. The island was desolate... there was no water and not any life living on that stone. No life... just thousands of skeletons.

It has a rocky peak without access. One time, as punishment, they took me by helicopter to the top of the rock and left me there on a pile of rubble. I was there for seven days; all alone hungry and thirsty. For the first time I was afraid of the human form. I was left next to a dead body. Unable to withstand the dryness and heat, the man who was brought there before me had died. I lay there on top of the rubble and he hung over the edge of a sharp rock. His tongue dry and sticking out, his eyes swollen and arms hanging. The birds of prey had pecked at him and he was covered in blood.

I was there seven days. That was the harshest penalty I ever endured. Those who survived and returned alive were called 'immortals'. After that another one was sent to take my place. I endured well the first day but I felt anxious. Some inner strength made me proud. I was only afraid of the vultures. They flew around and watched me with their sharp eyes, waiting for me to die...

But I kept letting them know that I was still alive. I picked up stones and hurled them at the birds. The worst time was mid-day... in the hottest sun... I lay there with a blurred consciousness... semi-conscious... I was also afraid of the poisonous snakes which often proudly slithered through the rubble.

One day fear overwhelmed me and I surrendered to it like a coward... I wanted to gain my strength, climb to the highest peak and plunge myself over the cliff... I knew that Sourlas and Hondrokoukis hated the kind of courage I had. I also knew that they were back there watching me with their binoculars. They would have loved to see me slowly approach the precipice and gradually sink and fade away in front of their eyes. But I was not going to give them that pleasure because they were people with a cracked conscience... The very moment I reached the edge of the cliff, my desire to rob them of that pleasure won over my desire to jump... especially after I heard them laughing uncontrollably in the distance. My desire to get revenge on them, to rob them of their pleasure, made me stop and stand still. By stopping I cut their laughter short... I then leaned forward on the cliff edge to see what happened... and again they began laughing. I was unsteady on my feet and did not want to look in their direction leaning over the edge... I could lose my balance and fall... Standing there I felt like something grabbed my leg... I sat down... I stayed there for a long time. Their laughter stopped.

Sitting down motionless they thought I had died, my soul had left my body. I thought I had died too but I must have just passed out because later, at sunset, I opened my eyes. Everything seemed different now; the stones seemed to be tighter together. I felt every stone I could reach. They were all loose. I could hear them creaking as I twisted them. They rubbed against one another and made creaking sounds. I then grabbed one that looked like a buried ball joint. I tried to uproot it but I couldn't. I became fond of this one and held it with both hands. I lay there and hugged it with confidence that when I gained my strength it would help me stand up. It would support me when I leaned on it to get up. I returned back to the pile of rubble where I came from. I stayed there until the seventh day. Here too I felt death crawling beside me, trying to slither fear into my thoughts, trying to prevent me from having healthy thoughts... I thought that the vultures had attacked me but I was not sure... I could not prove it. Had I been attacked?

Your grandfather endured a lot too. But could no longer endure when they showed him a photograph of your father Mano who

looked like he had been beheaded and his head was held up by a pike, while being paraded all through the city Kostur.

One afternoon Hondrokoukis, standing in front of your grandfather's tent, said to him:

'Do you recognize him?' Your grandfather became very upset and reached out to grab the photograph but Sourlas hit him hard on the head with a stick and killed him. They refused to let me bury him. They said to me:

'He is going officially.' In other words they would take him where they took the dead... behind the rocks... and drop his body into the abyss.

I wish I didn't remember all this... But then everyday I think of them and wish that one day I will see them again..." concluded my Uncle Pando as he stared at me sympathetically in silence.

He then began to tell me more. He said:

"We slept in large tents. The tent became my favourite place where everyone was one of our people (Macedonian).

The canvas was thin but was our border and inside it were our people (Macedonians). The thin canvas protected us from the wind, the rain and the onlookers... We inside were born of thirty mothers. I was among the oldest there and everyone around me behaved with respect. My place was the corner. Next to me was Petre from Mala Prespa. Petre was good at catching flies. He had a hatred for them and was skilful at catching them with his rough hands. He was happy to open his hand and say: 'Look... a big fly...' and giggle with the words: "Everything that is weaker than me... gets it like this... Hondrokoukis and Sourlas... are enough for me..."

When he needed to delouse himself he undressed... completely naked.

He would catch the lice and put them in a beverage bottle he had found. The bottle had lice in it from a long time ago, a long

forgotten time, but each time he added a new one he would curiously watch it and see how it behaved over the dead lice and see if the hungry lice would attack and eat it.

He equated the lice with the people... ‘No one could be prosecuted for this kind of murder in the rocks and in this camp...’ Petre used to say. He did not want to kill the lice himself directly... and was embarrassed about it. He used to say that he did not want to get his hands dirty like Kapetanios Hondrokoukis who enjoyed watching blood flow.

These creatures here have more rights under us than we have under Hondrokoukis and Sourlas... These lice are personally mine...” Petre used to say... Petre the lice killer... By doing this Petre assured himself that he could take revenge on those who meant him harm... He could exact revenge on them by sentencing them to death.” concluded Uncle Pando.

Time after time my Uncle Pando used to tell me all kinds of stories from his life experience... He knew how to be articulate... Today my travels took me to this park where I heard laughter and voices. Someone said: “Pando is gone....” followed by laughter and then the person said: “Ha, ha, ha, ha, who knows where he went...”

I sat on a bench under the shade of a lush scented lime tree. Only a few of the sun’s rays penetrated through its dense leaves. I sat there and thought of my Uncle Pando, my aunt, my father and of all those I knew in our family who had died. I thought of my father’s head... where it might be... where his bones might be... I sat there searching for our missing roots...

DESCENDANTS OF A DEAD ARMY

We explored “Mother” Maria Vasileva’s legacy after we returned from her funeral. She had left behind one black handkerchief with opposite corners tied to each other. It looked like a vagrant’s sack. It was packed tight; we had difficulties untying it.

The head kerchief was packed with photographs, letters, orders, assignments and acknowledgments, written in the late 1940’s.

The room was silent. We passed each photograph around, from person to person, in silence. Each one of us looked at a photograph or read a letter.

Some of us held onto a photograph or a letter for a long time; clutching it, looking at it, feeling pain from it... no one said a word. There were people there from everywhere. John (Vane) Dimovski and I came all the way from Canada to attend our “Mother” Maria’s funeral.

There was a thin child in one of the photographs, skin and bones, a small child with a bandaged hand and a stunned look...

John passed me the photograph and said: “George, this is your brother Mite in front of pavilion No. 4 in Tulgash!”

And now I remembered...

I remember hiding in the valley under the thick canopy of the tall trees, scared out of our minds from the airplanes spreading death. At night the men came down to the houses in the village, stealthily crawling and carrying flour, salt and all the other things that they managed to acquire. The women kneaded bread and made zelniks. But this lasted only a short time. What lasted long was the cold, the hunger, the crying, the lack of sleep, the lack of children playing... Everything that made people unhappy lasted a long time.

When it was the coldest, everything that dripped froze. During one such evening my mother dressed me and my brother Mite in our

new clothes and gave us the eggs to eat, which she had kept for father in case he returned from the front.

Maybe everyone did the same thing then, I don't know, but I thought to myself this must be a holiday. After dinner my mother leaned over and whispered: "Son, tonight we are leaving..." Some time later people, partisans with guns came to our house and discussed things with the older people.

It was night. The column of sadness was off. It was hard to be separated from our mother. Our tears continued to blur our vision for a long time... We saw huge flames behind us. The village was burning and the houses were turning to ash. I was little then and I could not understand the great tragedy that befell us... what truly happened to our people...

The further away we went from our birthplace, the more I thought about what happened and I could not find an answer for it. What have we done to these people, how much have we sinned against them, for them to want to drive us out of our homes... to force us to leave our birthplace... to exile us from our warm fireplace... The small ones, most of them sleeping, were riding on horses resting inside bushels. The older ones followed on foot. We traveled at night very slowly. Our mothers, one by one, kept disappearing from the column, finding reasons, any reason, to leave... Only a few mothers remained... only those who were required to look after us. We walked a long way but my mother was nowhere to be found... It was a hard separation. When we climbed on the hill we looked behind us and saw huge plumes of smoke... Dawn was breaking when we arrived in Brailovo. They assured us that the airplanes, of which we were the most afraid, would not fly there. They divided us into two groups; the older ones were put in one group and the younger in the other, my brother in one group and me in the other. My brother cried a lot that morning. I watched him and thought: "Mother was never that bad, she will come... she will not leave us. You don't need to cry... she will catch up to us..." "Mother" Maria Vasileva was telling us the same thing.

We went back to the column wearing our new shoes and home spun vests and we, the older ones, carried our little bags over our shoulders.

We looked like a defeated army.

We saw a train for the first time. We boarded it one by one, one after another, until the car was full. The metal door then flung shut. The line then moved to the next car until that one was full and so on. In the opposite corners each car had large and small buckets with water and for other needs. My brother was in another car. I did not want to be separated from my brother but... Then I saw that the others too were separated. When the train stopped little heads crowded and pushed at the iron grates covering the windows, yelling: “Mother...! Mother...! Father...!”

By evening we were all tired and sleeping. We lay down side by side, like arranged earthenware pitchers on the car floor, on top of the straw.

The two “Mothers” Maria Vasileva and Paraskeva Ilioska cried the most when we were asleep. One time I listened to “Mother” Paraskeva, all in tears, telling “Mother” Maria all sorts of things... terrible things... that would bring you to tears. She said:

“One spring morning they came to my house and took my children with the intent of sending them to the islands and turning them into ‘Janissaries’, so that the partisans couldn’t have them... like these children here... I was left without a husband and now without my children. My husband Petre died in Gramos. I refused to give up my children but they forced me to the ground and threw them into a truck with the other children they had gathered. Lena, my youngest, I held in my arms and refused to let her go. Her little arms were locked behind my neck and she begged me: ‘Mommy, please don’t let them take me... Mommy, please...’ but then came two policemen. One hit me with the butt of his rifle and the other tore my child out of my arms. They then grabbed me by the braids of my hair dragged me like a rag on the dusty country road and tossed me out of my village... I defended myself as much as I could but I was in pain from my hair being pulled so hard. They both had wrapped my

braids of hair around their hands. When they threw me out they threatened me not to try and return or they would have me shot.

After they took the little children they closed down the school in Kostur. They took them down south to Greece, possibly to some island...”

After a short pause, sobbing, “Mother” Paraskeva then said: “Everyone is looking to rob Macedonia...”

I thought all night about what I had heard. With my head buried in the straw I thought about my mother, my grandparents but mostly about my father and kept asking myself: “Why has this woman come with us and left everything behind...?”

But these “Mothers” in this rusted and rundown car were everything to us. They looked after us and over us day and night. They never slept or complained. They gifted us with their motherly love and warmth.

The next day we were starving. Some who were poorly dressed woke up trembling. We were all cold and afraid. We crowded ourselves into “Mother” Paraskeva and “Mother” Maria’s laps. These two “Mothers” were now our only hope, comfort and companionship in this car... pulled by a noisy, whistling locomotive...

These “Mothers” shared our fate. They gave us courage, wiped our tears, helped us fall asleep, woke us up, held us in embrace, promised us that one day we would return home, told us we would find our mother and father, brother and sister... and they along with us believed that that’s the way things would be... cheating the bitterness out of our destinies...

In the blush of dawn the train puffed several times and stopped. The iron doors of the car unlocked and flung open. They offloaded us one by one; two men grasping each child under the arms.

That’s when my brother broke his arm. He did not want strangers to carry him off the car and jumped out on his own. He suffered a lot...

At the pavilion in Tulgesh we moved like a swollen river and gathered like jumbled up laundry on the pavement in the big yard. We looked for one another but the hardest thing was not to be able to find your own mother. There were many children at the home who did not even know their name or place of birth. We were hastily collected across the border and some of us, for years, existed as shadows constantly asking for our loved ones without knowing who they were...

To be equals, or who knows why else, they took our names away in Kalimaneshiti. They took away the last bit of individuality that identified us with our homeland and with our nationality. After that they tied large coin-like metal plates around our necks, which had on one side an engraved image of General Markos and on the other a number that replaced our name.

I was named number 521 and when they addressed me I was expected to respond in Romanian with the words “Cinch sute douzech shi uno” (521). My brother Mite was buried with the number 125. He died in pain missing our mother deep down in his soul. He was only three years old. We were not allowed to go to the funeral of deceased children. It was truly stupid because I was the one who found him dead.

In late 1948 we headed for Poland, again by train. At the border the Poles greeted us with professional attendants and medical staff. The doctors conducted a detailed examination of each child, while we were still on the train, to determine if treatment was needed and what kind of treatment. The Poles were very kind to us and at the same time they were terrified by how it was possible that these children of partisan parents, who were still fighting in Vicho and Gramos, had no names?

When we arrived at the “Barburka” home they took us to Novi Rubi and asked us to undress and remove every piece of clothing we wore. Every piece of clothing was then tossed in a big pile. We looked like we were in a newly liberated military camp. Life was often fraught with cruelty and fierce drama. We called the Poles good uncles and aunts. We loved pan Piotr Pshezhinski the most. He

loved us too and he called us “descendants of a dead army”. He was an experienced old Pole, a former businessman and philanthropist. He had served time, many years, in the prison camps. He felt sorry for us and told us that we shared a similar fate. He had served in a number of camps but without the character of a leader. “Your destiny is more difficult than mine,” he used to say, “because they hung General Markos around your necks that you must now wear...”

Many months went by, seemingly like centuries. I wondered: “Why have my mother and father not come?” Many of the children began to receive letters and corresponded with their families. But I, all I could do was grieve...

One day I was ecstatic. I trembled when “Mother” Paraskeva gave me a letter from my mother. She wrote: “My dear son Giorgi, I will come to take you and Mito and we will go to Russia to be with your father. Please look after my Mito...” I try hard not to remember that part. My mind from that time is empty... grey space...

A few years after the Greek Civil War ended, they began to close down the homes that housed refugee children. The pavilions became deserted and tall grass, weeds and shrubs began to take over the yards. It was sad and scary to look at them.

The weather was pleasant in August 1952 but our separation was very emotional. We were separated from our “Mothers”, from our friends and from our lives that we had lived up to this point. This was the final time we were going to be together. Those who developed good friendships held each other by their hands. Every one of us was thinking: when would we be seeing each other again...?

There was a rail line running near the home “Barburka”. It went to Shkiekin, Zgorzelets and Warsaw. We headed for the high end of the platform.

When the group arrived at the station “Mother” Paraskeva looked very sad, like her heart had been torn out. We all knew that the hour of parting was near.

We hugged each other and said our goodbyes in silence. Everyone turned their heads to hide their tears. She tried to hide her feelings for a long time, waving her black headkerchief, not knowing where to go, who to go to, because each one of us walked along with our parents. She was a strong and dependable woman with clear blue eyes. That's how I remember her. None of us offered to take her. Pity because she was not a stranger, she was our "Mother" for a long time. Perhaps she remained there for ever and ever... I don't know...

My mother and I went to Tashkent. The train was full of refugees, mostly women and children. It was very hot outside as we slowly approached Tashkent with an air of uncertainty in our souls. My mother hung over the window tightly clutching my arm. I had not seen my father for many years. The platform was packed with people. It was full of commotion, people yelling and calling names... then ghastly cries and strong hugs. I was drowning in desire to meet my father. My mother had told me: "Your father will appear with his arms spread out and you will give him a great big hug. This is how you two will get to know each other..."

I remember seeing three tall men standing on the platform.

I let go of my mother's hand and ran towards them. I stopped about half a metre away from them. I looked into their eyes. None of them spread their arms out. The men silently looked me. I turned around and slowly, weeping, I went back and grabbed my mother's hand.

I then said: "Why do you lie to me, mother? Father is not here!"

"Giorgi my son!" I heard a man's voice calling from behind me.

"Turn around, I am your father!" he said.

I slowly turned around. I was completely confused. I looked at the man who had come a few steps closer. I stood there in front of him, looking at his face. He looked old, wrinkled and had a huge scar on his cheek.

"You're not my father!" I said to him angrily. "My father will spread his arms wide open and hug me!" I added.

“I can’t my dear boy, my wonderful Giorgi, my child, my son... I can’t open my arms and lift you because they are not mine... They were not mine!” he said and then asked:

“Where is Mitko? I want to see how much he has grown...!”

When we left for the suburban camp “Ialangach” number 12, I grabbed my father’s cold prosthesis after years of longing to hold his warm hand.

WANDERERS

The van stopped, pushing a whirlwind of dust in front of the big gate. The gate was opened by a servant who only greeted the driver. The van pulled in and accelerated through a side street and stopped directly between two barracks.

There were dozens of men and women in the yard aimlessly walking about. They were wearing diverse outfits, Russian, Polish, Czech, Hungarian... When they saw the newcomers arrive, most of them ran towards the vehicle. Those who remained behind seemed to be arguing about something... they were sitting down on the pavement arguing about the Hungarian national development in the Carpathian Region under Romanian control. The caretaker of the shelter, with a bundle of keys in hand, stood at entrance number three and waited. The newcomers got off the van and picked up their suitcases and various bags. A man, skillfully holding a piece of paper in his teeth, wearing an Asiatic overcoat and a lush Russian “forashka”, led the way walking in military steps. He was followed by two women and a child. The driver turned the van around and left while winking at the child. The only sound made in the corridor was that of the caretaker’s footsteps. He wore heavy shoes. The caretaker handed them the key to room number thirteen; an asymmetric room with five beds, a sink and a mirror.

When the caretaker figured that Dobrin Suvogorski was the head of the family, he asked him to sign the register and take charge of the room. He also showed him the latrines and the dining room and informed him of the times meals were served according to the shelter schedule. When the caretaker left everyone sat wherever they wanted. The beds rattled and crackled. One bed was left empty.

Before sitting down Rumena Suvogorska examined the room, looking at the stained sheets on her bed, stained with oil drops. Every corner of the sheets and every pillow was stamped with the administration’s stamp. The floor boards were smeared with black burned oil. The faucet was dripping. A coat hanger hung on the door. There was a large speaker above the door, slightly tilted, through which soft music was playing. Rumena glanced at the

ceiling and stared at the light. It was a weak light. She cynically grinned and looked at Dobrin.

“The shelters are the same everywhere! For ten years we have been wandering from one shelter to another... someone else's sheets, abused beds, dirty pillows and shared latrines. How long do I have to smell the stench of someone else's urine?” she asked Dobrin.

“How much longer do I have to wait at the door of a collective toilet? How many more times do I have to crouch on a stinking toilet? How many more times do I have to listen to strange men urinating in the stall next to me...?” she added.

She then looked down and, with a sad look on her face, said: “My child stinks of disinfectant, chlorine and DDT...” she then angrily stormed off the bed and went to the mirror hanging over the sink and began to comb her hair:

“I feed him (her son) with common spoons that other people have eaten with... who knows what kind of diseases they had... who knows what kind of idiots they were... Look at him!” she said pointing at her son while looking at Dobrin. “He looks like an agitator... a propagandist. Even his limbs lost symmetry. He doesn't know how to play... all he does is hang around us... us, the good for nothing... He has learned to eavesdrop and confidentially whisper... ‘only to you...’ like he is some sort of illegal alien. And what can I say about the ten years I have been ogled by senile old men? Sometimes full of malice because they have become powerless...” she let out an ironic laugh then placed her long hair over Dobrin's shoulder and reminded him of how much she hated these shelters. She said: “Applications... stamps... statements... proof... I have ten different baptismal dates. Which one is the real one!?” she said and laughed out loud. “I used an alias at the first shelter they took us in. In the others I only provided wrong dates...”

Dobrin turned around and said: “Why do you want to upset me so much?”

I know there are two-faced people out there; one for the women and the other for other people. It is not my fault the revolution created

people like that. I know that women, even now, are not made to be understood but to be loved my dear dove...!”

Her mother Petra looked at Rumena, still combing her hair in front of the mirror, came closer, tenderly stroked her face and said:

“My dear Rumena, although you have gone through a lot of pain, you still have a beautiful character...”

Petra has lived with Rumena in five different shelters. Rumena, seeming like she was uplifted a little, turned to her mother and, in a childish like voice, said:

“Oh, mommy, mommy! If only Dobrin had such love for me, like he boasted when he married me, I would not have the time to comb my hair in front of this mirror.”

Rumena then turned, looked at herself in the mirror and said: “Hmm, where is my power... without a male revolutionary with self-importance? This is what happens when they come to power, they become refined egoists. Mother! When a woman is no longer desired she needs to do everything... except cry. Am I not the woman of a revolutionary...? He knows enough to convince me that any pomp will spoil a man. This is how revolutionaries are treated...” she said, shook her head and lost her comb which tumbled to the ground. Dobrin kept quiet and to himself. He did not listen to anyone let alone to his wife... and he did not participate in any conversation... the less people knew about him the better. But he did feel guilty for all the failures. Now, listening to Rumena ramble on, he felt he had to say something.

“May I say that you did have a choice; you had a choice to choose your husband...” he said. Rumena, seemingly eager, immediately responded: “Yes, I chose you because you were handsome and a noble man and occupied a good position in society. I wanted to be the wife of such a man. And now I have the right to be happy and respected for my position in society next to you. And as you say ‘The truth will win’. But please be reminded that lies and slander can revisit us here again, my good Dobrin! You my good Dobrin spent eight years in the camps.

You see, our lives have been one relentless struggle, wandering around and lost in space..." she said and then angrily turned the handle on the tap that was constantly dripping. Then, with an apparent grimace of desperation on her face, she shook her hand and said:

"Now we expect to spend our time and lives in shelters and camps... and there are many of them... Do you remember? Elbasan, Bureli, Warsaw, Wroclaw, Zgorzelets, Liublianka, Butirka, Lefortovo, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, Varkuta, Alma - Ata, Tashkent, Craiova and what next? For us justice is delayed... I just want to say I have this feeling..." she concluded.

Dobrin wanted to say something strong but decided not to. He turned to her and said: "It would appear that you were expecting to be liberated by some nobleman... But so what if I am a common man? I want to be free from everyone's mercy. Mercy for me is humiliation. A man should not be granted mercy. If he does he will feel like a prisoner..." he said.

"Do you think that you being welcomed depends on you exclusively, my dear Dobrin? No it does not depend on you... it depends on others... and you should very well know that," she said.

"I was a soldier and I served my people. And if now it is still too early to be recognized, then what...? But you, with your great pessimism, know once and for all that you cannot make me lose hope. But I really can't find any other way for you to love me more. You can see that I am nothing now... Were your expectations of me so unrealistic that you now lost faith in me...?" he said and went to bed. He then placed his hat over his eyes and, through his teeth, muttered: "Enough!"

"My dear daughter, I had performed my duties with your father. You are not like me... When I suffered for your father I was happy. Now, when I return to Lerin I will tell him that. Your father spent a long part of his life in the Greek island prison camps. What should I be demanding of him? And know that a man looks further down the road..." said her mother Petra Prstenarova.

“Mother, I did this for ten years... in these shelters. They put me on duty... it was demanded of me. Now I want to be a woman! It is no longer my duty to do what others demand of me!” she replied.

Rumena nervously settled down. She pulled items out of her suitcases, readjusted them and put them back again. Once in a while she looked up, casting a glance at the walls, looking at the various scratches, patterns, signatures left behind by others who came and went. She then began to mumble: “Oh, it doesn’t matter where I look; where I cast my eyes... my thoughts... nowhere do I find happiness... Everything stinks, everything is rotten, and everything is grey and old...

Something is suppressing my feelings. I feel like I am full of apathy, deep and dangerous apathy leading me to despair. I feel empty in my heart. I am a woman and need time to live in hope because I am the wife of a revolutionary... a worthless revolutionary...

Shelters! They are everywhere. They all look and smell the same... the caretaker... the clinking of dishes... the music... the marches... My son is always listening to all of it and has lost his right mind... He calls the marches the God of opus! Am I mad for speaking like this? My son was unfortunately born in all this. And this is what he wants now...”

Rumena went closer to the window, glanced over the bed and pulled out the notebook in which Dobrin had written various notes. She then began to read:

“The Slovenians left us on dead guard and we waited thrown into oblivion, even before Samoila, we lived in the crick of time which excretes malice...”

Vicho, 1947.

Rumena flipped over several pages and began to read again: “They say we look like mummies wrapped during the Bronze Age...”

“Well, what can I say Dobrin?!” she sighed and stared out the window somewhere far away. “That’s my poet!” she added and fell on her bed overcome by laughter. They all woke up listening to her laughing hysterically and yelling out loud: “Hey, poet of mine!”

She then kept looking at them lying in their beds and said: “Now we really look like mummies...”

Dobrin rubbed his eyes and humbly said: “I was having a strange dream. Do you want me to tell you about it?”

Rumena, looking at him indifferently, said:

“You still idealize some things, don’t you? You have the right to, we live in hope. So, there is still something to dream about eh... they say that hope is the second soul. Okay then, tell us about your latest dream...”

Dobrin felt uncomfortable in the silence that followed.

“You think I idealize things? Hmm...” he said with a guilty tone of voice.

“You should know that he who loves his homeland passionately is very sensitive about what belongs to him, is excitable by insults, but is elated and proud of what he supports!” he added.

Rumena looked down at him sideways and said: “Hey, my Dobrin... what can I say...” and waited for him to tell her about his dream. Dobrin in the meantime, red in the face, lowered his eyes and looked down at the ground. He looked angry and did not want to say anything. It seemed like his throat was constricted with anger. So instead of talking about his dream, Dobrin waited for a moment until he calmed down and, with a sad tone of voice, as much as he could make himself sound sad given the circumstances, asked her:

“Did I ever hate your mother? And why would I hate your mother? Yes, I happened to hate my own birth mother...” Everyone turned their eyes towards Dobrin and looked at him, waiting to hear what else he had to say.

“When I was a student I hated my mother for not being able to speak Greek. I hated her until I finished high school. This is how much my Greek teacher had brainwashed me. When he said ‘these natives here are of barbaric origin’, I felt humiliated because I was born of such parents. But at the completion of my studies, in Solun, I felt very guilty down to my soul, a guilt I carry with me to this day,” he said and paused for a moment.

Everyone watched him with interest.

“But I said I was going to tell you about my dream. I dreamt I was giving a lecture on the Macedonian National Question in Lerin. There were many people in the audience. I got much applause and all the older people ran up to me and kissed me. At that point I felt like I was reborn... but I felt ashamed in front of my mother and father. Within me I still carried the guilt from my high school days when that someone whom I respected and trusted poisoned my blood and wanted to uproot me from my bloodline... This is how my dream went. And now in the summer of 1949, in the glare of the great military fire, I, along with others, was accused of being a spy and a traitor to the revolution. This was done to me for the second time; this time by the Greek communist party leadership. The first time this was done to me, it was done by the Greek government regime; that time I was accused of awakening the Macedonian masses...”

Rumena looked at him strangely and said: “Well, you dreamt of something you shouldn’t have...” and began to laugh. Then suddenly there was a loud voice coming from the speaker:

“Attention! Attention! Dobrin Suvogorski please report to investigator Strogov in pavilion one, room number two.”

The announcement was repeated several times. Rumena, listening carefully, stopped laughing. Then when the announcement was over she waved her hand in front the mirror like it was no concern of hers. She then picked up a pencil and began to write things on the walls, different things including slogans she had heard during the

revolution and in the shelters. Her mother, in the meantime, repeated the announcement several times, whispering it to herself.

Everyone went silent. The only noise heard were the caretaker's footsteps outside in the hall coming towards them.

“They gave us lunch,” said Rumena excitedly to Dobrin. Dobrin had spent the entire day with Strogov. He looked pale.

“What’s wrong Dobrin? Here too they opened a file on you? What did he say?” she asked.

He said: “These are the rules... We can’t make claims because we have no evidence, but we think maybe you were re-educated ... we think that you came here as a Russian spy...” that’s what Strogov said, explained Dobrin looking at her with a heavy heart and then said: “Oh, God of mine, this sentence has no end... How ironic! For us, who they now call ‘Aegeans’, there is no end as to how long they will be judging us!”

Idrizovo Prison in the 1960’s.

MOTHER ADELA'S STORY

I was accompanied by Mrs. Rosemary on the train from Warsaw to Israel. She had no worries. Most of the time she wanted to nap, leaning against the folded up curtain that looked like a pillow. I kept looking at her dried up face and thinking of mother Adela who suffered over me. She only had me. One time she got enough courage to say: "Listen to me my dear Estella, (that's what she sometimes called me) it's time for us to separate. Perhaps you will feel better if you stay in Warsaw. I must leave for the homeland, Israel. My mother's grave is there. I don't want you to follow my Jewish suffering. Our homeland is calling us Jews."

She paused, looked at me with her sad eyes, and then said: "Israel, my dear Estella, Israel... You are now a Pole... you are educated..."

She then smiled slightly and said: "You have a beautiful face my dear. A beautiful face..."

I opened my passport and read: "Stella Ian Botvinska, born July 22, 1949, in Albania, daughter of Ian and Adela Botvinski."

I know, mother Adela's line had ended in Lviv (Lavov) but her suffering continued on day after day... to this day. Mother Adela was a tiny meek person. I have a picture of her being held in the arms of her mother Estella from the time they traveled to Siberia on a freight train destined for camp Varkuti. Her father Moyes was a soldier in the Austro - Hungarian army. She was in captivity because of my poor grandfather Moyes.

From that time on, since she was a child, there was a sickness in mother Adela's soul... her suffering was engraved in her... But now her modesty and benevolence had made her gentler.

When she became an adult she chose the nursing profession with the need to find fulfillment in her life. She wanted to be full of gratitude and emotion knowing that she was helping people. That is why she chose to help those who were suffering and who were oppressed. She spent her life wearing a white coat in harsh military conditions.

Unfortunately with her anxiety and restless spirit, she was unable to fulfill her dreams and comply with the norms that were required to withdraw to a quiet family life. This is how mother Adela was.

Her marriage failed; part of her family is in Israel. But mother Adela always spoke with pride about her past. She was a participant in the civil war in Spain where she responded to the call to help the disadvantaged and where she joined the ranks of the International Brigades. Mother Adela was a brave woman.

After that she spent time in the camps in France. When she was deported to Israel she joined the anti-fascist coalition forces. Still in uniform she served as a nurse in Israeli units within the British forces on the battlefields of Africa and Europe. And they say that the Israelis are cowards! I am proud of mother Adela.

In 1940 she returned to Poland, the country where she spent her youth. Again working as a nurse... to this day...

In the second photograph I have of her she is squeezing me with all her motherly love. There is a look of fulfillment in her face. Her fear is erased and her suffering has leaked out like a river. I often asked her about my father Ian. One time she said: "Your father was killed in the war. This is Ian, he was your father, he was my comrade... Ian was a handsome man, he was my first love but the war took him... my dear Estella... He was wounded on the head, I looked after him, I cried over him but in the end I was left at the crossroads of Europe. Yes my dear Estella..."

I wanted to know more about my father Ian Botvinski, especially when I was little and when I went to school. There, I watched the fathers of my friends.

They were strong and confident fathers. One of them once said: "Your father must be terrible... not once have I seen him pick you up from school. He must be a drunk, a scoundrel, or did he leave you...?" My mother Adela was everything to me...

As I tried to remember more things about my mother bright lights, hanging on the pillars outside, began to strike at my eyes causing me

discomfort. I looked at Mrs. Rosemary, still snoozing... once in a while showing dissatisfaction by making sour faces, unhappy I guess with what age had done to her corpulent body, now slumped and occupying almost the entire seat.

The next day we arrived at port Akka. Many people had come to the station. Jews were returning from Poland, Hungary, Russia... they were coming from everywhere.

There was no person in the crowd who was not crying. A similar fate had separated them for many years. Now they wept, perhaps out of joy, who knows? Mother Adela, holding a large bouquet of white roses, kept calling and shouting:

“Estella, Estella, I am here! Here I am my beloved, Estella!”

I lost Mrs. Rosemary but now I was with my beloved mother, whom I had not seen for two years, since she said to me: “Listen to me my dear Estella; it’s time for us to separate. Perhaps you will feel better if you stay in Warsaw. I must leave for the homeland, Israel. My mother’s grave is there. I don’t want you to follow my Jewish suffering. Our homeland is calling us Jews...and you Estella are from Warsaw... finish your studies... you are young, maybe you will marry someday...”

I spent the evening with my mother Adele but she was upset, her joy soon turned to pain. I thought she was exhausted from the long hours visiting with me. She said:

“Oh my dear Estella, it was 1949 in Durrës, Albania. It was night. We were waiting for the Polish ship “Mickiewicz” to load refugees from the Elbasan and Burreli camps. They arrived like a flooded river, helpless, frightened, holding a few insignificant things that they took hastily with them but did not want to give them up. They even brought various domestic animals with them... The youngest traveler in the group was an unnamed two month old baby. A bony old woman was clutching it in her arms, with barely a diaper on it. I seem to remember her name was Iana. She could not climb the makeshift ladder. A sailor took the baby and brought it to sickbay. When the ship’s doctor examined it he reprimanded the sailor. He

said: “Why did you take the baby? Could you not see that it was half dead? Leave it here now but know that two days from now we will have to throw it into the sea...”

Wondering what she was trying to tell me, I asked: “And you mother Adela, where were you?” She looked me in the eyes and continued: “I was there, on board. The ship was full of old and sick people and they resembled each other. We spoke to them in Polish and they spoke back to us in Macedonian... yelling for help. When I saw the little baby I was stunned. I took it in my arms... it was almost dead. I put my finger in its mouth... it had the strength to suckle. I happily yelled out ‘Doctor the baby will live! It will come to life!’ And then he said to me: ‘Then let this baby be your concern... You are now personally responsible for it Adela, and don’t forget that in this ship you are still a soldier’...”

She then, with tears in her eyes, looked at me and said: “That baby was you my dear Estella...”

After the doctor allowed me to look after you I was overjoyed. But you were on the verge of death. Your hair was messed up and in knots and your diaper was glued to your skin. I felt really sorry for you my dear Estella. I soaked you in fish oil; that’s all I had available. I then wrapped you in clean white sheets. I fed you with injections because you had no strength to suckle. I gave you many injections, one every hour... and everywhere on your little cold boby; on your legs, after that on your stomach, neck... everywhere where I could find a healthy place to stick a needle. My dear Estella, you brought out in me all my maternal instincts but I had no milk in me to feed you.

I cut a rubber glove, made a pacifier out of it and fed you to my maternal satisfaction. You responded with some babbling and then smiled. I felt waves of joy overtake me with the love I had for you... then I felt great pain... especially when the ship arrived at the port of Gdansk and the passengers began to disembark. I very much wanted to find the old woman but was unable to... she was gone. You were still sick and you needed to go with the sick to the health shelters. I later found out that old woman left with the group that went to Hungary.

It was war time my dear Estella. The harsh rules applied to everyone...

You were nameless, pale, and sick and you needed further treatment. I was worried about you so I took you to a hospital and spent a long time there with you. But I had no peace and poverty reigned everywhere...

So I took you from the hospital, brought you to my humble home where I was happy and looked forward to being with my dear Estella.

Then one day they called on me to go on a new journey.

‘And the child...?’ I asked.

‘What child?!’ asked the captain.

‘My child, which I found on the ship!’ I replied. ‘And who, Adela Botvinska, gave you permission to have a child?’ the captain sternly rebuked.

‘Do the other women working here need to have your approval to have children?’ I snapped back in the same tone of voice. ‘Is it a bad thing to be a mother...?’ I added.

Looking a bit perturbed the captain said: ‘There are many other children out there who are waiting for us, Adele!’

At that time I received a letter from Israel. They informed me that my mother Estella had died. I felt pain and sorrow because I could not go to her funeral... but I wanted to keep the memory of my mother alive. You, my dear Estella, now carry her name.

I brought you up, I gave you true love; I wanted to pay it forward to my mother. But my joy began to obscure my thoughts that one day I needed to tell you the truth. I was torn between reason and feelings.

I was afraid, my dear Estella, that something might happen and I would lose you...

You are not a Jew, nor a Pole. From the old woman I learned that you are Macedonian, somewhere from Kostur Region.”

She stopped talking for a moment, thinking of something, something important missing from her memory. She then said:

“The woman who gave birth to you was left in Albania because she suffered from typhoid and was near death. Your father was a soldier...”

Her face was pale and she looked sick. She stared at the white roses. Her soul trembled like a violin. Her words were unable to come out of her throat. She gathered her strength for a few moments then barely audibly murmured:

“I... I am not... I am not your mother Estella...”

“No!” I screamed. Mother Adela looked at me stunned and wept over the white roses. She only had the strength to hand me a letter from the Red Cross, which said that my parents in Skopje, Macedonia, were looking for me.

MY FATHER'S LAST DANCE

After we buried my father we were returning to the island of my mother's birthplace. It was April. The night was damp and cold. All passengers were sitting on deck. The sky was clear and the full moon was visible, looking reddish and rolling through the gentle waves like a dropped silver coin. The water was calm, there was no wind.

In the morning, when the spring sun was at full strength, the island's beauty was revealed, as if the night had awakened. It seemed like the Island had begun to breathe, taking wide and deep breaths. Perhaps that's what I perceived watching the blue-green water ripple under the morning sun, looking like someone had spilled it over the island. The dry rock had changed its face. Everything was green, the bees were hovering and the aroma of the wild apple tree flowers was spreading everywhere.

The high cliff attracted the approaching ship towards the tiny dock like a magnet. The ship's whistle blew signaling it was time to disembark.

Sitting in the sun on the supporting wall was my grandmother Kaliopa. My grandfather, who everyone knew by his nickname "God Bornei", was also there. The villagers called him "God of the northern wind". He was sitting on a huge rock, tired and exasperated, leaning slightly forward, with his fleshy nose sticking out of his sun-burned face. My grandmother Kaliopa, bony and fragile as glass, with her skinny body tightly wrapped in her coarse home-woven black vest, held her hand over her eyes, struggling to see if we were returning from my father's homeland. I felt sorrier for my grandmother than I did for my grandfather. Now, looking like he was part of the rock, with his thick grey hair and his wild moustache, my grandfather really looked like he was some kind of god. He just sat there with his long nose sticking out and with bags under his eyes and did not converse with anyone.

He was tense and silent, walking among the travelers trying to avoid their glances.

“Cleopatra! Hey, Cleopatra, they are here...” my grandfather called out to my grandmother, sounding like he had just awakened from some deep sleep. He then asked:

“Where is Bozhin?”

My mother and I kept silent as we continued to walk toward them.

He again asked, this time with a sterner voice directed at me:

“Simonche, where is your father?”

My mother, wearing a black head kerchief, broke into tears and barely audibly said:

“God bless his soul! We just buried Bozhin in his hometown...”

The ship, as if shaken by the strong whistle, left the dock. The passengers slowly ascended towards the village, located on a steep slope at the edge of the plateau, looking like a ruffled bird preparing to take flight into the blue.

My mother removed her shoes and began to walk barefoot the wrong way, the opposite way, climbing up the steep road. She walked over sharp stones oozing thick black blood from her feet. Pain was visible on her face but she continued to walk barefoot saying to herself: “Let it hurt, it eases my pain for Bozhin. He too walked like this on sharp stones. They forced him to. They wanted to break him... Let the blood flow... I want to forget my pain of him... the power of greed is pushing me to want to see him again...”

“Maybe I will see him in a dream, like I saw him for the first time...” she said.

She carries her sadness in her soul to this day.

My grandmother Kaliopa could barely walk and kept muttering words scolding my mother for going that way and begging her to come back. But my mother had already climbed up to the fortress, or as the villagers called it: “Home of the Gods”.

My grandmother suddenly became very upset and began to scream loudly: “Bozhin! Bozhin! Bozhin...! Kleopatra...! Kleopatra...! Come back here Kleopatra...!”

My grandfather looked at me and said: “This is our fate. Let it be the way God wants it to be...” he then removed a photograph of my mother and father he had hidden in a chest pocket and began to weep. When he saw that I saw him crying he wiped his tears, opened his arms and hugged me tightly.

“You don’t know anything, but you need to know that they were your relatives too,” my grandfather on my mother’s side said to me and continued. “It was in the 1930’s when the Metaxas dictatorship struck the most against the Macedonian population. The reactionary regime in Greece at that time jumped on the Macedonian people in that part of partitioned Macedonia with great vigour, violently and mindlessly oppressing and suffocating them, robbing them of their most elementary human rights.

Their mother tongue, the language they spoke for centuries, was barred by law, not only in the schools but also on the street and at home. All the Macedonian villages were forced to open evening schools so that the people could learn to speak Greek. All adults were forced to attend these schools. None of the Macedonian people, in that part of partitioned Macedonia that was given to Greece, spoke Greek.

It was mandatory for all adults to attend classes, even those elders who were unable to walk. They depended on their younger relatives to carry them, in their arms if necessary, to school and back. Your father had to carry both your Macedonian grandparents Iankula and Lina because neither could walk on their own. Your father told me that. One time the President of Lerin and Kostur Regions, a man called Tsaktsiras, came to the village.

It was spring 1937. He was a known terrorist who worked against the Macedonian population. He caused terror for every Macedonian.

As private secretary he had a Macedonian from Kosinets named Markopoulos, a well-known Grekophile. Markopoulos always lingered with him. He had bloodshot eyes, red as plums, a sign of drunkenness. Markopoulos was asked to summon the villagers. When Tsaksiras climbed the stairs at the entrance of the church, the assembled villagers began to clap and he in his fury addressed them with the following words: "I am not impressed by your applause. You don't need to applaud my work because I know your past very well, I know about your grandfathers (he was thinking of the Ilinden era) and about the current activity of your youth. Just remember this; that the day will come when I will personally burn you from all four corners and will not allow anyone to escape alive!" Those who opposed him, even in the slightest, were forced to drink castor oil. After that speech it was very clear to everyone what awaited them... diarrhea and more diarrhea.

"This is what was happening! I wanted you to know this Simonche..." said my grandfather with a bitter tone of voice and continued, "But, like your father, these people had their pride. I am sure they loved their freedom and wanted to stay as independent as possible and most opposed the regime but the regime was stonger and used the police to pick them out and send them by warships to the island internment camps. There they were forced to do labour intensive tasks in the scorching sun including climbing the fortress. This was the habitat especially selected for them. They were left there without any care..."

My grandmother Kaliopa did not even open her mouth, she made no sound... she stood there stunned. The only movement she made was to wipe her face.

Suddenly she looked up and said to my grandfather: "Why are you bothering the child with that old story... you want him to worry?!" My grandfather then stubbornly said:

"We here on this island found out from them that a war was waged and that most of the fighters came from the land of the famous Macedonian kingdom. Have you never heard of Philip II and his son Alexander the Great? And you know that this island is cursed. It is a

dry island, completely devoid of vegetation. That is why it was named 'Island of the Winds'.

They say god Ailos lived here and commanded the strong winds from right here. In mythology the island Anafi was called Aiolia, named after this god. The whole world knows about the great storms that appear like mountains. Odysseus passed by here when he was returning to his homeland from Troy. Even now the older residents know that Odysseus rested on those stones over there while seeking the blessing of the god of the wind. The god then stopped the strong winds and allowed Odysseus to sail and return to his beloved Penelope. Perhaps he had pity for Odysseus for being so much in love with his Penelope. You don't know this but even the gods bowed before beautiful women. Legend has it that our ancestors were brought here with the intent to die but as you can see we are still alive, centuries later. Unfortunately we don't know our roots and where we come from. The stronger ones take you wherever they want... But these people who were brought here during the 1940's were from a tame and peaceful stock. They too were brought here to die. It is well-known that people like that will quickly feel their isolation from the world. Among them was your father Bozhin, a handsome and strong man. The strong don't die that easily. It seemed like he was born under the sign of the 'Oak'. Like all mighty oaks these people too were strong and powerful... but peaceful. That in itself is a great force that protects everyone. They do not submit to blood and disease. They are a proud and durable people.

Naturally they loved and appreciated their freedom, but also the freedom of others.

I remember it was summer. The hot wind blowing on the island was coming from Africa. It was unbearable for them and deadly for some of the people from that region. This is what this island of ours is like; dry and mangy, loaded with flies, mosquitoes and other bugs that love to bite people. But the worst thing was the winter; strong winds and storms on the sea. That's when one should be careful and sure-footed, take short steps because these winds can carry a person like a leaf. Here even the tiny shrubs that grow slyly are subject to the winds. The little shrubs learn to bend very young in life, not to be rigid, this is the only way they can survive. Man too must do the

same. If man does not know what to do then he will find it difficult to survive. Among these people, the new arrivals, a strange disease began to appear; they dried up like trees without roots. They became skin and bones, with sunken eyes and puffy cheeks. They walked alone in the long winter evenings waiting year after year to see snow, which never falls here. They suffered from terrifying dizzy spells and their legs, arms and faces were filled with yellowish blisters full of thick pus. It was always oozing. They lived like that and spent their time lying under the walls, even in the winter with the cold wind blowing, biting them like a venomous snake.

They began to die. Nedelko died first. He was one of your father's relatives. He died from anguish when he found out that their village had been burned down and the people who survived had fled abroad. Your father too was sick from the same thing, mourning the lost lives, but they were also meant to die here.

One day when Nedelko was out collecting herbs his hunger drove him to eat green figs and live snails. He immediately got sick and walked around with a swollen belly. His legs shook like broken branches. When he lay in bed he was in great pain and moaned a lot. It was torturous for him. His moans were loud and scary. They were heard all over the island. Even the gods themselves were afraid of them. Rambling on about his wife and child, Nedelko died three days later. Many others died on the stony ground collecting snails, crabs, mice and frogs. Initially they were fed putrid soup made from boiled internal organs from dead animals. They spent a lot of time vomiting. The regime that was set up in this camp was a cruel and intolerable regime. It was located on that huge rock over there above the sea. The camp had a certain lieutenant named Bougas. He saw himself as a great man with great responsibility, even greater than that of the then Minister Maniadakis. Bougas constantly taunted the prisoners with harsh provocations, blackmail and unworthy actions. He and his guards were very cruel and always reacted violently with armed action, even for the slightest infraction. Maybe your father too would have been dead, but... Nedelko's tomb is in the stony ground. Look there, do you see the large pass? And maybe there are people still alive. They say that sometimes something comes out from the deep cave. But to get there, to the throne of the gods, I know from when I was a child that it is impossible. There were

many prisoners here; perhaps the gods took some of them. Perhaps they felt sorry for them. Among the prisoners there were many who were religious and who hated violence and wanted no harm to be done to others...

There is a spring of water there. That's where we get our drinking water. Did you know that this is the only source of water on the entire island? Your mother and the other girls from our village brought water to our home from there. She met your father there... Maybe it was those memories that drove your mother to go up there now..."

Silence. As if the winds had subsided. From time to time I listened but in front of my eyes was the dance that my father was still dancing. I felt like crying but occasionally I tried to navigate my feet, pulling back, lifting my left leg to my toes, pulling back, kneeling slightly... after that I was disappointed.

I can still see Lerin Pole before me from the time when we traveled to my father's village. It was very wide and loaded with greens and cereals. It was like an enormous sea of green stretching as far as the eyes can see.

"This land is like a paradise! We on the island live like convicts. Oh my dear, my dear, what injustice!" said my mother when she first lay eyes on my father's homeland. My father smiled and was happy to be here thirty years later, after the war had ended.

It was as if nature was holding you by the hand and you shivered with joy at its beauty...

When we arrived in Lerin my father, with all his heart, bought my mother a new native Macedonian white dress. The vest was embroidered with colourful sterling silver and the hem of the dress was bordered with colourful lace of various shapes.

“You now look like a mountain flower picked from Mount Vicho. Oh, my dear Kleopatra...” said my father looking at her, like he had fallen in love with her all over again.

My father chose a linen shirt with colourful embroidery on the front and home-woven belts for his sleeves and for his waist. He was so excited, he looked as if he had found something that had been lost for a long time.

“It made you think of when you were young...” said the shopkeeper jokingly with a benevolent smile on her face. “The market does not revolve around love? It revolves around lost youth...” she added. My mother and father both smiled without saying a word.

Happy and relaxed we continued our trip to my father’s native village. We were lured by the aroma of spring and dazzled by the motion of the rye and wild grasses waving in the gentle wind. The sights and smells soothed our souls and made us very happy and relaxed during the entire walk. My father stayed a long time in the ruins of his house, telling us all about his family and about his life. We could hear music in the distance which attracted our attention.

“Here is where we had our wedding celebrations before the summer harvests, on Perovden (Peter’s day)...” said my father as we slowly headed for the church that was built on top of the flat part of the hill. A lot of people came to this beautiful church to attend a wedding celebration and to witness the moment the bride and groom come out of the church during their wedding. Everyone was captivated when they saw the smiling bride come out. She was a perfect and radiant beauty. Everything about her was beautiful; the gentle smile on her crimson lips, her radiance, her strange dress... everything made beautiful... her extraordinary shape, her harmonious balance, one could hardly believe that it was possible for such beauty to exist before one’s eyes. For as long as she was in sight she had a magnificent and royal look about her. And later, when she shyly held hands with her eternal partner, she looked quite small, loving and kind.

Every move she made was filled with love and grace.

She walked with the zeal and maturity of a future wife. When she endowed her relatives she spoke in a low and gentle voice. Her head was adorned with a beautiful, colourful crown made of gilded silver thread, making her look like a proud mountain flower. I accidentally looked over at my mother and saw tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Were you a bride like that?” I asked her. My father turned towards her and put his arm over her shoulders.

“No, our wedding...” said my mother and swallowed hard. At that very moment the music took away our attention. Now the bride walked with tiny steps, barely touching the ground with her toes, and with her filigree swinging she led the bridal dance. After that all the relatives lined up and danced the dances “Starskoto”, “Zhenskoto”, “Sitnoto”, “Mashkoto” shoulder to shoulder and “Bairacheto”. My father led the next dance. He specifically ordered the “Pushteno”.

My mother and I clapped our hands. Many then joined us. After the musicians began to play my mother began to give them money, sticking the bills on their foreheads and still clapping. My father was overwhelmed with joy.

When the dance was over my mother hugged and kissed my father. With undisguised pleasure I too hugged my father and said:

“Old man, teach me one of these Macedonian dances!” He smiled with pleasure. After that we heard voices calling. One of them said: “People, people isn’t that Bozhin?”

“It is Bozhin!” another one yelled. “Galib and Nedelko are here, they are alive. They are alive, people! And they have returned...” another one yelled out.

At that very moment the bride and groom passed right by us. They were going from person to person in some order. The bride leaned forward and kissed my mother and father’s hand. My mother rushed to find some money to give the bride as a gift. The bride in return thanked and blessed her with kind words. The groom turned towards my father and said:

“I am Nedelko’s son...”

My mother was shocked. She grabbed and embraced the young couple remembering Uncle Nedelko from the island. After that my father did the same.

“And you, who are you?” my father asked the little boy whom the newlyweds held by the hand. The boy was beautifully dressed in a Macedonian folk dress and had tousled hair and playful eyes.

“I am Grandma Trendafilka’s king!” he replied handing Bozhin the jug of wine he was carrying.

“Oh, you carry the wine? What is your name?” my father asked.

“Bozhin!” the little boy replied.

“Ah, Bozhin? The same as me!” said my father with a stunned look on his face.

“This is your son Simon’s little boy. Simon is my sworn brother,” said the groom. “It is like you were with my father. They are over there!” he added and pointed to the wedding guests assembling and celebrating.” At this point my father picked up little Bozhin and hugged him.

“Oh my God! He is so handsome!” said my mother. There was silence.

All the people turned their attention to us.

The little boy then ran off and yelled: “Grandma Trendafilka! Dad, Mom, I found my grandfather!” My father turned to us with eyes full of tears. The child happily ran and continued to yell:

“Grandma! Grandma Trendafilka! We found my grandfather!”

At that very moment I saw my father stumble and fall to the ground.

The funeral was magnificent.

They all stood there looking awkward, one beside the other trying to get closer to the coffin. With proud steps the child with a royal figure holding the jewelled clay plate came closer. He bowed and put the plate near the hands of the dead person. Large tears were rolling out of the boy's beautiful blue playful eyes.

There was silence and tears. And when the gravediggers lowered the coffin into the grave, the musicians began to play my father's favourite music he danced to.

PENELOPE'S SAD ROSES

Stupefied, I walked through the alley towards the cemetery “Butel” with a big bouquet of flowers in my hands. I was looking for Filip Dolinski’s grave. He was my commissioner during the war. I was wandering around sluggishly remembering the three continuous days and nights of fighting we endured. How the Burandari (Greek royal government soldiers) occasionally climbed on top of Vicho and left behind death and destruction.

The moment they stepped out we were right back in our old positions and resuming our attacks.

Then the attacks would subside and it would be quiet again... but only for a short time. Day after day we endured this for three days and nights. The sad part about this could be pictured on the road to the top.

In fact, there was no road to the top. The entire area looked something like a plowed field. The soil was scorched and drenched in blood... littered with broken metal and corpses of murdered young people. It was hard to distinguish who was ours and who was theirs...

This was the last time I saw Dolinski. He was badly wounded and could not say a word...

The next day the weather was beautiful. It was a kind of day during which one would just want to lie in the sun and sleep. The previous night was difficult and sleepless. Our bodies felt good in the sun, giving us a renewed desire to want to live a long, long time...

In moments like these all Dolinski wanted to do was sing...

Many of his comrades and friends were no longer among the living.

It was sad when you looked for him in the squad and realized that he was not there. Sometimes you meet a friend whom you have not seen for a long time and suddenly you are happy to see them, then you will say something good or bad, things that you experienced and

survived together. And then each will go their way. And then you often wondered: “Will we ever meet again?”

And here I was preoccupied by my own thoughts, looking for Filip Dolinski’s grave, one of those misfortunate soldiers.

As I approached the cemetery I saw a good looking woman dressed in a light blue dress with a white collar. She had a bit of grey in her hair, raised and curled in a bun with a few locks sticking out on the sides and bound with an Indian silk scarf tied around her neck, giving her special charm and character.

I was impressed by her looks and felt stunned and guilty in her presence. There were candles burning on top of the grave and their flame was turned towards the beautiful roses that lay beside them. I came closer to the grave and recognized Filip Dolinski’s photograph. I was overcome with excitement. In his picture he was wearing his partisan uniform. I swallowed hard and silently shook hands with the women.

“Penelope...” she said and pointed a stern look at me.

“Are you Mrs. Dolinski?” I asked.

“I am ‘Despinis’ (Miss in Greek) Penelope, dear sir...” she replied.

“I was Filip’s comrade in arms. And you?” I asked and politely smiled with my beautiful white teeth.

The woman looked about forty years old but I thought anything was possible...

“He was my comrade and a good friend during the most difficult years...” I said excitedly, while looking for the most convenient place to leave my flowers.

Once again I discreetly looked and noticed how perfectly her dress sat on her beautiful body, clearly highlighting her chest and hips. I felt my heart pounding.

“This is my first time here Despina Penelope. I live in Canada. Now I am ready to go back... We were an innocent army and still we find ourselves...” I said and abruptly stopped talking searching for words to finish my sentence.

“I come here often. I live in Athens. I feel some guilt and I can’t seem to find forgiveness. I experience his destiny in secret but his destiny has become my destiny. Girls always seem to trust those they love more than they trust their own mothers. That’s what my grandmother Demetra used to say. My courage, perhaps bad luck, will always remain a secret and will never be disclosed. Oh the fiery and fierce elusive disease, the youthful sweetness... That’s touching evidence of respect for Filip. He gleamed of youth and beauty. He had a noble heart, strong muscles, big arms, broad shoulders, lush curly hair and green eyes... things that make the male body beautiful and appealing. He was humble, reliable, generous... a man with a gentle spirit. He flattered me and that constantly made me think of love. He excited my soul, I could not resist him. But from all that... all I have left now is suffering. I have no strength to reveal the history of our love. The days in May, when the war was raging on in Gramos, were terrifying for me. Those mornings Gramos was covered with a thick layer of fog, you could not see the opposite side of the hill.

Life in our trenches began at night. The quartermasters came and handed out bread, cans of meat and water. The nurses smelled of medicine. Some coughed and complained they did not get enough cigarettes. Then suddenly there would be a flare flash and everyone would scurry into the thick pine grove, interrupting the gathering. When the flare went out again, like ants we would come out and gather together... During the day we stayed in our trenches enjoying the sun and waging war on the lice on our bodies. Some of us contemplated shaving our heads, just to get rid of those annoying lice. I was worried that Filip might do that... he had beautiful blond hair. He always raised my spirits and filled my heart with his faith in our victory. The man had a habit of being fair and honest, of believing and forgiving, like he was following some kind of law of war... No one, to this day, can stifle my passion, even now I remember what Filip said to me: ‘My dear princess, save yourself for the happiest moment in our lives...’ He encouraged me... Love is

a wonderful flower. My soul has become tired and exhausted from so many bitter feelings. His presence warmed my heart and blurred my mind... It is very interesting to live and tremble. Courage is a necessary thing when growing flowers on the brink of a terrible abyss.

People were killed in those days... One day I went towards him before he parted. My feelings took me to him... I think I may have embarrassed him in front of the fighters... But deep inside he wanted me to be there... he loved me..." said Penelope.

She then adjusted the dress on her beautiful rounded body, untied the Indian silk scarf which gave her her peculiar elegance and femininity, and knelt by the grave. Now I could see and cherish her beautiful neck. She then turned to me and offered me a lokum (Turkish delight) which she had brought with her from Athens. I too knelt down before the grave.

She then said: "Then you must know that after that Dolinski was sent to Poland with the wounded and I was sent to Tashkent. I quickly found him through letters.

His letters made me feel secure, warmed my soul... this was emotional proof... Years later he visited me in Tashkent.

I had already completed my studies in music and played the violin... beautifully. I embarked on music... Filip too was gifted, poetically, and wrote me love lyrics.

That inspired me.

I met him at the platform; I thought I would squash him in my arms. I felt like no one could stifle my passion, at least not now, after the war had ended..."

The woman turned to me with innate caution in her poise and with tears hidden behind her smile said:

"My grandmother used to say: 'Love can only be broken in inception... After that, if you want to enjoy happiness you should

completely abandon yourself...’ I wanted to be closer to him and to draw him in from the long loneliness. After dinner Filip always isolated himself, took a book out and read. I thought to myself, how can my Filip still live under such military discipline and morals?

One night I hugged him and we began to talk about the war and about our friends. He was very polite and since that night our discussions became a habit. We talked about everything, mostly about his homeland, but I still felt his manhood reserved. He had a peculiar shyness about it. It was sometimes difficult for me to understand. It felt like there was a deliberate border between me and him, which was left over from the war and neither he nor I could now cross it.

I liked Filip and I was interested in learning more about his upbringing and culture. He was a historian. His physical slenderness attracted me and his manners and virtuoso dancing conquered me.

I cannot forget; I was very happy once when I had a solo concert at the Bolshoi Theatre. I played my violin and the audience loved me with their applause. My Filip touched me the most. He climbed on the stage with a bouquet of white roses and kissed me. The applause thundered in the theater. I envy all those days. Filip left the impression of a king; so masculine, so powerful, that many times I wished...

One time I said to him: ‘Unbutton me...’ He hugged me and wept like a child... when he told me why I was shocked...

I felt like someone had hit me on the head. I felt sad that very moment and was overcome with grief and sorrow. My thoughts took me back to the war, because of him and because of myself... because what we had done was a sin for both of us. I waited for him for years. I spent most of my beautiful youth suffering because I was unable to experience the real feelings of a living woman who had desires to have a family... Now I carry a different pain because that day, with his gentle and warm voice, he said to me: ‘My dear princess, my faithful Penelope, sweetheart of mine... I am sorry to tell you this but my manhood was taken away from me by a bullet during a battle in Vicho. The other wounds I received don’t hurt as

much but this one has burned my soul for years because of you... my princess. I want to tell you the truth and ask you to find happiness with someone else.'

Those words suffocate me even today because I know if a person is worthy of love, then you will love them forever... He died of despair in the flower of his youth and I decided to trust myself, to dream of happiness as I spend my time near my Filip's grave..."

I felt like I was committing a sin thinking of this woman wearing a long white dress. All I can say about this dark-skinned, tall, cool and patient woman called Penelope is that:

She is a proud princess who enjoyed showing her excessive pride and loyalty. I watched and listened to her petrified. One could learn from her that happiness is collected little by little, day by day... This perfectly embittered woman, an angel of purity, made my soul grieve. I was unable to express the simplicity of movement with deep seriousness when she looked at me with such fairness and simplicity... I was silent because I knew that saying anything to this woman would be an insult and would open wounds the size of an abyss, and so in silence I asked myself: "Could my Elena possibly have that much love for me...?"

The candles kept smouldering as Penelope's beautiful eyes shed crystal tears over the sad roses.

NEW YEAR IN THE TRENCHES OF GRAMOS

It was early morning and light outside but it was still dark inside the trench. The tiny rays of light that filtered through the roof could be seen as dots shining inside on the trench walls.

One more time I looked at the military objects in the trench.

It was like being among a number of nameless objects; alone, without words, without defense... they sat there motionless... all around me asking for nothing. The trench was like a place that deprived you of life. It was war time and I was involved in it... not knowing why. It was man's work... I was included in it by those who violently ripped me away from home... from my mom. I know that a woman is not born to kill. But now I am with these people who gave me a rifle but I don't know how to handle it. They all submitted to fate courageously. Everyone wants to avoid death; everything is done on the orders of the commissar and everyone is loyal. The commissar is the person who portions everything equally and fairly; food, rest, sleep, water and even the sun.

Everyone in the trench was turning their sight away from me, so that the commissar would not notice them looking at me. He was a harsh man, even more than the military code required. One time I noticed that Partena became golden brown from the large fireplace and when her hips gracefully swung the Vlach Vioreli's eyes hung onto her. He was beaten on the shoulders like a village pillow but he was always with a cheerful protracted Vlach song on his lips which, more often than not, ended unfinished. They said that the Vlach songs lacked endings. Who knows, maybe I was left with such an impression. Kolakidis also sang similar songs. His family played the fiddle with a single string. "This is how we used to sing in Pondia (Turkey)..." Partena used to say.

God, we have all kinds of people here in this trench. A variety of people...

Through the shaft I could see the whiteness of the hanging branches laden with snow. We patiently waited for spring and for the sun to strike the white load. We could hear the crackle of the trees in the

silence as the snow weighed them down. But as much as the trees wanted to resist, once in a while there was a loud crack caused by the weight of the snow and by the bitter cold. I spent my nights looking up through the shaft. My grandmother introduced me to the stars and ever since then I had been looking at them and following their paths. I was certainly not afraid of the stupid fantasies that surfaced in my head. And maybe my grandmother was guilty of leaving me the legacy: “Do this and when you are in trouble, and when you are still not tied to a man... but a woman must be bound to a man, that is why she was created...” she used to say. “And when you are tied to a man that you want, then you must stick to the oath of allegiance...”

In my dreams I often pass out from bad luck. I feel overwhelmed being witness to all the pain in the world. I don't want to believe that I will one day be bound by the oath of allegiance to one of these men. My rifle was beside me and it was as cold as a snake.

I touch it but I am afraid to aim it at a person. I know that in such moments only a dog will look you in the eyes... when you are pointing a rifle barrel at its head... a human cannot... The commissar said: “You should know that your opponent is doing the same thing to you...”

The shaft towards the exit of the machine gun barrel is narrower. This is how all shafts are made... designed and perfected during the major wars. Sometimes we call our trench a “Russian house”. The Bolshevik Red Army lived in trenches like this.

The only place light came into the trench was through the shaft. But this was not ordinary light like the kind that enters through a window in the morning. This light entered cautiously through the shaft and abruptly lost its intensity as it hit the rough earthen walls, looking like thick, reddish meat. The dampness and humidity was lifted by the heat of the burning logs and deposited as a thin layer of ice on the cold picks and shovels. There were cut pine tree roots sticking out of the walls excreting sap, like tears flowing from the eyes of a tired person, seeming like the wounded trees were weeping. I spend almost the entire day lying down on the dry fern bed with my body boiling in lice. It varied how the lice behaved

from time to time. They become most aggressive when it was time for them to lay their eggs in the hairy parts on a person. After that they were hungry and sucked our blood. They loved to attack a clean body. They made me very angry to a point of going mad. I don't know why but Partena lacked basic sensitivity. When we were alone close to the fire she would sometimes do inappropriate things. She would place her hand on her crotch between her thighs, grab at her hairy part, pull out her clenched fist and angrily mumble: "It's a louse... a male louse!" It has been biting me for a long time, looking for a place to make a nest..." She then would toss the louse and the hairs she had pulled out into the fire. When the lice wanted to lay eggs they rushed around angrily climbing on a person's hairs. Every one of us knew that. Partena was an intelligent woman and sometimes wanted fulfillment out of her life. She often combed and washed herself. She wanted to spray herself with some frankincense or pine oil, which she did not have so most of the time she used scented soap, the kind they gave the women here... only the women.

There was no draft of air in the trench because there were no windows or doors with cracks. There was only a single hole serving as a door. This hole was well covered with thick layers of fern, which did not allow the cold air to snake into our trench. And oh, my God, in no time at all I began to call it "my" or "our" trench. Sometimes I thought that all of us here were sick with some kind of madness but I have not been able, among all these people here, to spot any kind of threat, malice or twitching of eyes or lips, or any desire in the people to want to kill. Man is inherently good or evil. Oh, it's best I keep quiet. Our female mystery is indeed strange. I noticed a long time ago that when Aleksandar entered the trench he smiled at me but would not look at me for fear of being discovered.

I am weak and lonely. My dream will not leave me. I think about it, I try to get into the psychology of war and of man who eventually becomes a silent warrior, but I can't. One day I looked in the distance and watched the troops on the other side. Both sides used big megaphones to curse and swear at one another in the name of our convictions. Partena's voice reverberated through the tall pine trees. One of them from the other side responded to her and said:

“You are a whore, that’s why you are with partisans. Real and decent armies have no women soldiers...” There was silence. I wanted to jump in and defend her but then I thought about it and said to myself, “Let the men do it.”

It was cold even in bed. I lay there and thought about the various embarrassing things that could happen to me. I saw a new civilization. I slowly thought of all my troubles lying there in twilight and the cold. I had not a single document with me.

No one asked for a birth certificate, I simply had only my name Melina. In the Commissar’s book I was Melina Papadimou from Patra. Six months had passed and I had not died, on the contrary I began to live in the war... with the war... and this war like every other war had its own most beautiful unsung song.

This is how I greeted 1949. For the New Year’s reception we received food consisting of powdered milk and baked potatoes. We were all filled with the most peculiar will to live life in our trench underground, under the winds of Gramos. We all celebrated the New Year cheering for a comfortable victory. It was war and perhaps we may never see each other together like this again.

Lying there in the cold, dark and damp trench night after night I learned some things...

Those who snore the most sleep the best... One night I decided to wait for Aleksandar. He was out with the scouts from another trench. I wanted to congratulate him for the New Year.

His portion of food was intact. Partena was clinging to me, the cold kept her awake.

I kept quiet and listened to Aleksandar’s footsteps as he approached the trench. He then carefully lifted the rain screen from the door. I felt a sharp gust of wind enter the trench. The first thing he did was stretch his long arms in front of the fireplace as if he wanted to hug the fire. He then gracefully removed his long overcoat from his tall body, warmed it on the fire and sat it on the beech wood stump.

He moved around looking at the sleeping bodies. When he came towards me he lingered for a moment and stared at my fragile but prominent hips. I kept the same rhythm of breathing and kept peeking under the sleeve of my long overcoat.

He had shiny buttons on his officer's uniform, which shone like the eyes of a hungry cat in the dark. I don't know what came over me, over my female lunatic mind, but at that very moment I wanted to get up and, like a good housekeeper, stoke the fire so that he could warm up faster, but then I thought: What am I, a half-wit? When he finished eating his portion of food he stretched out his body like a typical male. Maybe it was the pleasure of the heat that made him do that? I continued to secretly watch him. He lifted his knee slightly... I admired his thick, lush and slightly messed up hair with strands hanging loose over his forehead. His looked very attractive to me. He attracted me like a magnet, pulling on me with some kind of magic erotica.

Gently and calmly Aleksandar prepared to go to bed. I watched him, following his every move. I then continued to watch him through a secret peep hole that allowed me to see through the screen of stacked ferns separating the women's sleeping quarters from those of the men's. But I could not stand there for more than a few seconds before being noticed. When I saw that he had closed his eyes, I slowly slipped my hand over the barrier and I touched his warm lips; a "Happy New Year" gift from me to him.

He looked timid but startled. My touch must have startled him. I leaned over the barrier and put my hand over his mouth and held it there. He opened his eyes and looked at me. I saw excitement on his face. His eyes were glued to mine.

"God, what's happening?" he whispered through my hand. When he saw that I was calm he hesitantly lifted his arm, shook my hand and whispered:

"Happy New Year to you too, Melina..."

I extended my arm out and he too excitedly did the same. He flourished with pride. He looked at me with wide open eyes and

tight lips, looking like a petrified figure. But this was not enough for me. I wanted him to hug me, squeeze me and make my bones creak. I think men like to do that. With a smile on my face and with an open heart I wanted him to say: “I like you, Melina!” to which I would reply, “I know,” and wait for him to say: “You know?”

But, looking like an eternally sad boy, he handed me a needle. I touched it and stabbed myself... It felt like I had been stabbed in my heart with a sharp dagger. Did he want to honour me as his future wife? I wanted to make my pledge with a kiss but the fern barrier was between us left me standing there with puckered lips. One of those sleeping made a noise. They probably wanted to turn over. I looked and saw a face with a sharp nose and pale cheeks without a smile.

It was Vasil Klechovski – Pobratimot. This is what Aleksandar calls him. I now call him that too. Sometimes Vasil and Aleksandar sat in front of the fireplace and sang beautiful Macedonian songs. I learned some of their songs and still remember them now.

“A beautiful girl with two needles, one with silver thread and the other with silk. She is knitting socks for me... I don’t know if I should wear them or love them...”

They also used to sing the Russian song “Volga, Volga, Russian River, wide and deep...”

This is what they sang in the trench during the windy nights on Gramos. Pobratimot Vasil cleared his throat and went back to sleep.

There was only silence now.

Aleksandar was shaking like a young pine tree in the wind. He then sighed a strange sigh. The commissar began to snore loudly. I cautiously slid my view away, thinking that we had been exposed... perhaps it was court-martial for us...

Military laws are strange. I freed myself of my muscle stiffness. I just realized how tired I was... I too sighed a strange sigh and at the same time felt my body sliding over the layers of dry fern.

I stared at the fire a long time. “God, will I forget who brought me into this world?” I thought to myself. I miss my mother. If she was here she would say: “I see you have found yourself a young man! Do you love him?” My mother would have been very happy for me and would have told our entire family.

I finally retreated to my cold bed, peering through the peep hole at Aleksandar, who still stirred like a tormented tired bull. But as time passed he increasingly became part of my shattered shell of a life. That night I became an inaccessible wild flower for Aleksandar.

When I was trying to sleep all I saw were wonderful flowers opening before my closed eyes. Sometimes, while looking at my hands, I thought that day and night were mixed together. The trench walls were slimy and dingy and no one wanted to touch them. I existed for more than six months in that trench; trench number two, or as everyone else called it “Commissar Likourgos’s trench”. In the evening we all sat around the fire until we felt sleepy. The men were sprawled all over the place, they were used to doing that and one could see their manhood become noticeable from the heat of the fire...

My life became one strange heavy bracelet grasping at my neck, constricting my breathing. Perhaps that’s what drove me to want to be protected. These people here lived simple lives doing the same thing day after day. They, in fact, were simple people and now I have become one of them. God, life will teach you to do anything including be all alone with your own bad thoughts. My dreams torture me the most; both good and bad dreams. They strip naked and tighten my soul inside this trench. During the long nights, probably because of my fear without reason that someone heard us, I take my canteen and drink it down my dry throat to the last drop. Drinking the water made me feel better and allowed me to melt away in the silence of the night.

It was January 6th, Christmas Eve by the old calendar. It was early morning. The darkness outside was replaced by daylight and the airplanes were flying overhead in a cloudless sky.

They were majestic and calm. The sun reflected on their wings. The sky was filled with their noise, and the last burning coals in our trench were smouldering. The airplanes dropped a cluster of bombs and the snow rose up like ash from an erupting volcano. Everybody ran for the trees like hunted wild animals. I felt blood trickling down my body. I was afraid of my blood being spilled out. My fear petrified me and I fell down in the snow.

I awoke and felt like I was being lured by some kind of dream. I was wearing a long nightgown. By habit I extended my hand to my collar but I could not find the needle. "It was not there..." I began to sweat.

The strong excitement woke me up. I could smell blood and medicine. I looked around, to my left, then to my right but I could not understand what was happening.

How could I have forgotten so many things? Oh my God, have I been captured by the enemy? And where did all these other women lying here come from? I lifted my head and turned slightly to look for my needle. My military clothes were gone. While I was struggling with the many messy thoughts that entered my mind, Partena appeared in front of me. She was standing there being supported by two roughly carved crutches. She looked beautiful, flamboyant, lustful and full of life. She smiled.

"Melina!" she screamed and fell on top of me, hugging me. But still I felt funny like I was in some desolate place in a field hospital located somewhere in a deep forest in the back of the front line, on the rugged slopes of Gramos.

When she told me that Aleksandar had carried me in his arms all the way to the shelter at headquarters I regained my composure. The nurses quickly returned my blood-soaked clothing and uniform. I only took the needle out and sent everything else back. Partena smiled and said: "You will get well soon."

Almost every day I pushed Partena to tell me more about what happened to us, how we were wounded and about our way to headquarters. God, sometimes I get some crazy thoughts in my head.

I even thought of rearranging the trench for family life... When I thought of the words “I want us to have a son...” that Aleksandar had said to me, perhaps he was saying this to make me happy, I realized that women are not for war. “Oh my God,” I said to myself, “I hope I am not crazy, why am I so preoccupied with having a child while the war is raging on...”

I tried to fall asleep but I couldn't. I then tested the tip of my needle on my finger and stabbed myself. It was a good but painful feeling which made me scream. Ah, those tiny stabs of hope; they occasionally poke me in my heart... This was how I spent more than four months. Spring was everywhere and I began to feel swelling in my chest, God how I wished for Aleksandar...

I remember one time... It was a windy and cold day and the clouds were moving fast. The tall trees were groaning and creaking under the strain of the wind as if they were trying to tell me something. Most of the trenches were damaged and filled with water from the spring rains and, while walking through the trees, I met new people and often wondered what happened to our unit. Then from far away I saw Vasil Klechovski's face, or as we often called him “Pobratimot”.

“Pobratime!” I screamed out loudly. Then I said to myself “Oh, thank God I found them”.

I became slightly anxious and red in the face because I was thinking of Aleksandar and whether he was going to give me a kiss in front of all of them. Will we step out of our military discipline and do something crazy? I am a woman, what else should I be thinking about if not about my Aleksandar?

And so I adjusted my military uniform and ran towards Pobratimot. I noticed he was avoiding looking at me. He had grown old, his hair was grey and he walked with his head down. He put down his backpack and machine gun. There was silence... all the new soldiers were looking at me intensely.

I was boiling with pride and suspicion... then, suddenly I felt like I was hit by a machine gun burst. He was not looking at anyone, his

eyes were full of tears and he let out a few painful sighs. He then turned his face towards me and with great sadness, unable even to muster the strength to utter the name Aleksandar, said to me: “Melina... Melina, take these binoculars and I will point you to see his grave...”

“Aleksandar,” he said, “was badly wounded. He lost both legs and his left arm. His face was deformed and he was in terrible pain. I carried him on my shoulders for a long time. He never stopped begging me to shoot him... his pain was too great to endure. He kept cursing me and begging me to kill him because, as he said: ‘I don’t want Melina to see me this way... Please shoot me!’...”

Being unable to control my emotions I yelled out very loud: “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! It is not true... It can’t be true... because I carry the truth about him in my womb...” with a voice that echoed through the rugged slopes of Gramos.

LENA

Meglana Vasilevna's eyes were now clear and cautious. Only desolation lay behind her bright and empty world. The only hope this gentle woman now had was with us, the young people of Tsrnchishta. She lived in the gymnasium without children and here our beloved professor Meglana Vasilevna taught us and nestled her love with us, which persisted and lasted. She stepped between the lines, stopping beside each one of us, but longer beside me, as if she loved me more. I felt her gentle hand caress my hair, a love more than motherly love. Perhaps that is why I felt guilty each time I didn't do my school work properly. I want to tell her story, the story of partisan Lena, which I had heard from the constantly coughing Vasilko Iovanovski, a grey bony man who was a courier at the headquarters. I also want to empathize more of Lena's character, as if I was part of it.

Uncle Vasilko Iovanovski told me many stories as if wanting to tell as many as possible knowing that the illness he was carrying was slowly extinguishing him. His body was riddled with the scars of war as if he had been branded forever. Hotly involved in the revolution he began:

“It was in the 1940's some time ago.

In those days the young people sang Russian romance songs. They were beautiful songs... Katiusha, Vast place my native land, Soldati idut, the lyrics of Iesenin... Lena knew all those songs by heart, like Boris did when he recited Maiakovski and Pushkin, and so with that reverie Bistritsa seemed more like a small Moscow. They even greeted each other with a fist in the old Bolshevik manner, which was passed on to us by the old revolutionaries.

Lena sang the song 'Russia my beloved mother' beautifully with Russian words as if she spoke Russian, just like a Russian woman would. But when everyone sang the song 'A young partisan I want to become' Lena was in everyone's heart.

Boris was in love with Lena. He was a nice and stout young man with lush hair who came from the village German, Mala Prespa.

Lena was a tall and thin young woman with a solid and lush chest, long blonde hair and a simple mouth and eyes in which one could see constant anxiety but sincere feelings. But her nature was more than just that. She was a beautiful person and everything about her was beautiful. They said she resembled her grandmother Maria Gerova, voivoda (leader) Naum's sister. Voivoda Naum was the Commissar of Dolna Prespa (this is what he was called during Turkish times). Lena was proud of her family heritage and that is why she became a young female freedom fighter, following in her family's tradition. The fact that both her grandparents died for Macedonia was a motivating factor for Lena...

Like a cloud, Bolshevism embraced all the young people in the 1940's. The young men danced to 'kozachok' and young women to 'mazurka' but everyone wildly danced to 'Eleno mome'... That's how it was in those days...

And that's how they joined the partisans, in love and singing... That's how they arrived at Headquarters. From there they were deployed in various detachments.

In partisan life only your rifle is closest to you... It rests near your pillow, it serves you... it protects you... it props you up when you need support... it saves you... And you burn with desire to see your loved ones. A soldier, a volunteer soldier without pay, you walk wherever you are sent, day in and day out you are tormented by evil, thirst, hunger... but your spirit feeds you, makes you sing in the most difficult times, even when you have lost a loved one. But most desired of all for you is to be with a loved one.

One day, Boris's detachment met up with Lena's detachment. It was dark and the fighters were looking for each other, calling out names, embracing each other. These were memorable encounters and everyone was expecting to receive at least some news about family and loved ones...

A voice was heard in the night calling out: 'Lena! Lena!' It was Boris.

Lena jumped like a frightened deer, yelling: ‘Boris! Boris!’

They were both excited and happy to have found each other...

‘I love days like this...’ said Lena.

Boris showed his affection and tried to get closer to her body.

‘I don’t think we should do that Boris...’ she said.

‘Why not?’ asked Boris.

‘I didn’t expect something like this from you. Have we not made promises...?’ she said and prevented her body from touching his... separated between a promise and love... Boris, silent and disappointed, caressed his rifle.

‘You are really pushing me away...’ declared Boris.

‘No I am not. I am doing what is reasonable for both of us. I don’t want us to be immoral... Boris...’ she replied.

Lena leaned her entire weight on her automatic rifle and said:

‘Are you trying to cause me pain...?’

‘I am sorry, but I am your fiancé...’ replied Boris.

‘Boris, don’t be angry, it’s better for us this way...

Victory is ours. There will be a time for everything. We will have children but now we are in a revolution. Isn’t this what we learned... about the moral character of the fighter...?’ Isn’t this what Steve and Bogoaia, the real Bolsheviks, have told us...? Isn’t it enough that we saw each other?’ said Lena with a serious look on her face.

‘But I love you...’ replied Boris.

‘Would you die for me?’ she asked, opening her eyes wide and smiling.

‘Only if it’s really necessary...’ he said firmly, hugging her and laughing.

‘I have never kissed you with a beard like this. It looks good on you... don’t worry; we have a lifetime ahead of us. Let’s go to the detachment. Meglena’s Vasil, Avram, Tale and Iakim are there and will sing a Russian song or one of ours... hey Boris?’ Lena said.

He kissed her and she slightly opened her mouth. His tongue squirmed but could only touch white teeth... He lacked courage to meet her look, so he closed his eyes and buried his face into the pit of her neck, remembering the lectures about the moral character of the fighter.

‘Oh my God, how much I love you!’ said Boris.

‘Boris, be a strong revolutionary, that’s the only way to be proud... As you can see everyone respects us. It is nice that we met...’ she said.

They firmly shook hands and parted. Lena was ordered to remain at headquarters where she was assigned to work in the partisan agitation and propaganda section translating documents and writing about the women in the revolution, about their character, about equality, about the code of conduct expected from a Bolshevik revolutionary, about faith and respect for the revolution cadres who were gifted with humility. Her main feature was going to be the leather coat. This is the kind of coat the political commissars of the October Revolution wore. Perhaps this is why we wear the same kind of coat here.

After she had a chance to look over the printed material, she noticed how silent the trench was. As she was about to leave the political commissar asked her to stay a bit longer and have a private dinner and drinks with him in a romantic candlelit atmosphere in honour of her successful work. But Lena sensed his intentions and suddenly rose to go. The political commissar then approached her and kindly asked her to calm down.

‘I know what you are up to...’ she said, ‘but you will not succeed... Open the door and let me go,’ she demanded.

The trench was filled with cigarette smoke. At that very moment he turned and walked towards her.

‘God, my heart never pounded so hard before...!’ she thought to herself as he approached her looking very stern. Lena moved away, her eyes were fixed on him and her body shook like that of a frightened doe.

That night the political commissar did not sleep at all. He was up to something... concocting various plans. He had a strange feeling that Lena showed allegiance only to the Party and that her head, body and every movement could be conquered easily... and she would be willing to put on the ideological wedding dress... Because he could promise her that tomorrow she could become a Minister’s wife...

So his plan was to go with her on reconnaissance, but he would have to take Vangel the adjutant (warrant officer) with them. They left and went with a particular purpose in mind but Lena already suspected the political commissar’s real intentions. Unfortunately she was afraid to express her feelings in front of Vangel... Vangel on the other hand was sent ahead but when he heard gunfire in the lush fern he immediately ran back and dropped to his stomach petrified. He raised his rifle but in front of him stood the political commissar riding his horse, sitting upright like a roaring wild lion. Vangel did not know what to do so he just lay there looking ahead and remembering Boris, Meglena, the Russian songs, the lyrics of the revolution, the agitators, his dead friends... He was promptly petrified and remained an eternal witness...

The political commissar, fearing the punishment he was going to receive for the violence he had committed, suddenly showed great affection for Lena. He wanted to give her a strong embrace, to earn her affection, to have her love him with all her heart and to forgive him for everything he had done and to agree to be his wife. All this time Lena struggled with him and refused to give in. She stood up and tried to escape but he quickly overtook her. Tired and exhausted Lena fell to the ground in the fern patch. He jumped on her and

while she was under his full weight she promised to be his eternal companion and to be the wife of a minister because that's what he wanted. She then gathered enough strength and grabbed him by the throat. She continued to resist while calling for Vangel to help her. But then when she saw Vangel looking at her in horror, it seemed to her like she was looking through Boris's eyes and surrendered. And Vangel, feeling guilty, remained there silent and stunned.

Days, weeks, months had passed while working in the print shop. Lena felt depressed and exhausted... she no longer sang songs and constantly hid from Vangel's view. She looked pale and ate almost nothing.

'I am not hungry,' she used to say.

'What should that mean?' the political commissar asked her.

'I am testing you to see if you are faithful...' she replied.

He only invited her for night visits. One time she entered the trench and addressed him with special emphasis. She said:

'Congratulations, Comrade Political Commissar. I am pregnant!'

'Are you kidding me!?' he asked.

'I don't joke about such serious things!' she said.

'Leave me alone!' he replied.

Lena got very upset and yelled out: 'Kill me then! My life means nothing to me without you. But this child I am carrying is yours and you can be sure I will bear it!'

'Silence whore! Silence! You will cloud my career...' he replied sternly.

A few days later, under orders from the political commissar who thought this move would be for the best, Lena was sent to work at a makeshift hospital. The political commissar personally took care of

the move to make sure this incident remained a tight secret and buried in accordance with revolutionary regulations.

Lena screamed and yelled insisting that this case be disclosed because she no longer belonged to Boris, through no fault of her own... But only Vangel knew about this and he was no longer at the headquarters because he had been redeployed soon after the incident took place.

Lena continued to work at the hospital taking care of the sick and wounded, waiting for the day of her delivery. She often thought of how it would be to give birth and was afraid because she was alone and inexperienced as a mother.

Her patients were happy for her and could not wait for her to have the baby. They all proposed different names for it and while some felt sorry for her, others joked around about it because this was a really surprising situation; for a single woman and a fighter to be pregnant.

One day a courier arrived and said:

‘I have orders to take you to the village. There are midwives there. Being here you are lowering the morale of the soldiers...’

Lena quickly gathered her belongings and fulfilled the order. She said nothing all the way to the village.

The courier had instructions to surrender her to the village local board and nothing more.

Three days later Lena gave birth to a girl. She was very happy and looked after the baby well, feeding her and changing her diapers which were provided by the women of the village.

A few days after that Lena was summoned to appear before a partisan court. The verdict was read the moment she stepped in front of a firing squad. She stood there at attention to hear the verdict, which read as follows:

‘Lena Metodieva, you have been found guilty of performing acts of immorality and betrayal. Your acts have been hostile towards our holy revolution and therefore you have been sentenced to death without right of appeal. This will strengthen the morality in our ranks.

The same verdict and sentence were pronounced against Kovkalovski who was executed a few days before.’

Lena cried out in a loud voice: ‘Mother our protector, Mother of God!’

The officer who read the verdict then replied: ‘There is no God or Mother of God... only honest and true revolutionaries! Death to Fascism, freedom to the people...! Fire!’

Only three bullets pierced her and she fell from the third. She opened her mouth with a desire to say something about Vangel her witness, but her words became drowned in her own blood.”

When I finished reading the story my Uncle Vasilko Iovanovski had told me, I lifted my head up. The entire classroom was silent. The silence startled me. I looked at my teacher Meglena and noticed her face was gloomy and pale.

She immediately grabbed me in her arms and put a firm grip on me. I felt her tears dripping at the back of my neck. Finally she let go of me, gave me a kiss on the cheek and, in a painful tone of voice, said:

“My dear, Lena was your mother, and Vangel is my fiancé! Dear girl...”

I too began to cry and we both sobbed, clutching one another as my friends and classmates gathered together around us like bees around a queen.

Crowded together like this, one beautiful day in May, we left for Orlova Mountain. Our teacher was ahead of us when she suddenly stopped in front of a tree that had fallen over a small recess overgrown with grass and tiny multicolored mountain flowers.

Our bouquets only complemented the natural decor. This was my mother Lena's grave.

Our teacher Meglena stood there in silence with her head bowed down. When she mustered enough courage she looked at me and, with a trembling voice, said:

“Lena! I brought your beautiful daughter Lena here... She carries your name.”

The night ended but the fun did not subside. We had invited many guests to the wedding but one chair remained empty. My father's chair was empty. I invited him to my wedding but I got no answer. He did not come to see me as a bride, and I still have not met him.

It was early dawn the next day as the sky began to shine with the first rays of the sun. Suddenly my teacher Meglena came over and asked me to dance the dance “Eleno mome”.

I led the dance with Meglena firmly gripping my hand and following after her was a large number of comrades. They were fighters who fought with my mother Lena. They were all burning with the fires of the revolution... they danced and cried... In fact they were the only wedding guests from my side. I heard one among them with a muffled voice say: “Look how she dances... Like Lena the partisan...”

Also missing from my wedding and from the dancing was my Uncle Vasilko Iovanovski, who died in the 1950's. They said he had a heart attack when he heard what they said about Lena in the news. They said: “The Association of Veterans proposed that a Memorial be awarded to Lena Metodieva, who in the call for struggle against the fascist occupier and against its domestic servants gave her life for freedom and for independence, for brotherhood and unity, for the government of the working people and for the victory of the popular revolution. Eternal glory to the fallen fighter!”

This is how Vasilko Iovanosvski died... with his mouth open... uttering the words: “Oh, poor Vasilko, what future can possibly await you with such a dirty past...?!”

IN THE VALLEY OF OBLIVION

(The Hospital in Katlanovo)

It was a spring day, May 2nd.

Kostadin Vasilevski arrived in the valley. He dreamed of coming here for a long time.

The moment Kostadin Vasilevski disembarked from the bus he became confused, looking here and there, not knowing which way to go while clutching a bouquet of flowers in his hand.

His unusual behaviour attracted the attention of onlookers. But then he noticed a crowd of cheerful people moving towards the river which attracted his attention. He stood there watching the people moving and felt a sense of satisfaction. He said to himself: "I knew that one day I would come here..." and then began to walk. He walked slowly towards the river following the people and greeting them... elegant people coming out of their luxury limousines... The water rustled rhythmically making him walk with dignity...

"There isn't..." said Kostadin Vasilevski after he searched from end to end and then climbed over a pile of rocks scattered like dried joints. He looked down the valley carefully. He had a clear view. The sky was blue and the sun was shining. He noticed a flock of wild pigeons flying overhead. He watched their carefree flight with admiration. Kostadin Vasilevski suddenly stood up straight and slowly shook his head. His face was pale and elongated. He had the look of a sufferer. He looked like something was calling him... summoning him... to somewhere he did not want to go.

Kostadin Vasilevski switched hands and put the bouquet of flowers in his right hand. He looked at the flowers. He brought the bouquet to his nose and drew a long breath. There was still aroma left in them but they were starting to wither. The water in their stems was evaporating and so was their life. "They are so much like us..." he said looking at their slowly withering petals deprived of moisture... "Blood makes a person strong and ruddy and here, the flowers, when their moisture evaporates they slowly..." he said without

finishing his sentence. He pulled out a photograph that he kept in a folded white piece of paper in his pocket and looked at it with a soft penetrating gaze, seeming like he was looking at a pair of big blue eyes looking back at him... looking for something...

“I feel a lot of pain...” he said. “Yes, I now clearly see your dear beautiful eyes...” he said and put the photograph back in his pocket. “Where should I look for you? I know you are here but where? Something is whispering in my soul... But where are you? Something is saying ‘hold on Kostadin’...” he said to himself, giving himself courage.

“Maybe fate wants to torment me. Or does not want to destroy you...?” Kostadin Vasilevski said to himself while navigating his way towards the valley. He walked and looked around. He noticed a sunken shape in the soil.

He sat on a bench next to it and again shifted the flowers from one hand to the other. He looked at them. They were drooping and bowing like the heads of sleeping children. “Will these flowers hold out? On what can I place my hope...” he said looking tired from his pain of not being able to get what he wanted in life.

“Why did I come here? To suffer more, eh?” he asked himself.

“Hello there...” he heard a voice say.

Kostadin Vasilevski threw a merciful look at the man sitting opposite to him. He thought the man wanted to talk. But when Kostadin Vasilevski saw a limousine coming he ran off and picked a place on the ground, a big enough place to accommodate a person after they had died.

“Move away old man, move! You are in the way! I will run you over!” said the man with sideburns and long hair, sticking his head out the limo window.

“You can’t drive here! My son is resting here... and his friends over there. I have been fighting all day and I am not giving up... step by step everyone is trying to push me away. And now I am here and I

will not move! You can run me over if you want!” insisted Kostadin.

“Back up!” screamed Kostadin.

“What is wrong with you old man? This is for limousines; go up there in the woods to the spring of healing water.

“He is crazy... lying there...” said one of the limo passengers while pushing the old man out of the way. Kostadin Vasilevski’s dentures were shaking in his mouth and he was unable to speak properly.

“If you want to say something, say it loud! I can’t understand your mumbling,” said the man pushing him out of the way.

“Nice flowers, give me one,” said a blonde around whose neck hung a heavy necklace supporting a gem of polished Russian amber.

“Did your date abandon you Uncle? Look at him... he is in love...” said the other woman in the limo who provoked loud laughter from everyone.

Kostadin Vasilevski stood up, tightened his hand around the bouquet of flowers, looked at them with offended eyes and said:

“This is a cemetery people! Here rest the bones of my son! Underneath this soil are the remains of my destiny! My blood...” he said resolutely with wide open eyes looking at each person individually... Then shivering, Kostadin Vasilevski continued: “Maybe further down, but... now this place is enough for a single grave and I am not giving it up!”

But when Kostadin Vasilevski understood that he did not have the power of persuasion to explain himself to them, he lay down again and wept like a beaten beast. He felt like a strong hand had tossed him to his past when his wounded soul craved for a deep grave for himself. He continued to stare at the wheels of the limo.

“Bones, bones, bones... let’s get out of here!” yelled one of the women attempting to return to the limo while her high heels kept getting stuck into the soft soil.

“You are crazy, Maia! You fell under the suggestion of this blabbering fool,” said the man who earlier had dragged Kostadin out of the way.

“Run him over, Mile! You will see how quickly he will jump out of the way,” said the same man as the driver put the limo in reverse.

After much engine revving and posturing, the limo left. Kostadin Vasilevski calmed down and was satisfied that he had preserved the small piece of land from being run over.

“Oh, I felt something massive over me. Did they run me over?” Kostadin asked himself.

“It felt like something flattened me to the ground, but what was it? I don’t know...” he said and stood motionless, looking at the picture he held in his hand. Kostadin Vasilevski thought it was going to be quiet here. People would be silent, or at least talk silently, completely giving into their deep feelings and thoughts. There will be visitors: fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, widows, children and grandchildren, and respected friends. He expected that a minute of silence would be offered, silence that would spread its wings over the valley. And people will go on and on not hiding their tears, not hiding their pain. It seemed to him that there would be wreaths and bouquets of fresh flowers... Flowers, flowers... He expected to hear the exciting words of the past, words that came from the heart... He wanted to ask about everything... tell about everything... He wanted to tell about the avalanche of foreign troops who expelled the people from their homes. To tell about those bitter days... To tell them that in those days trucks came here every day carrying a terrible load... People died here... many people.

But there was no lowering of spears, no salvo, no wreaths and no words on the tombstones... And now bent forward, he closed his eyes over the picture and tried to understand what was with these

people... He stared at the sunken soil and felt the bones underneath it...

He got up, collected his flowers and gave a few stems to the younger people seated there. He then slowly went to sit on a bench.

Nobody spoke to him, he looked disturbed to them. Instead of asking him why he was upset and comforting him, they walked away leaving him to soak his flowers with his tears. In the beginning some people thought he was bowing to the luxury limousines passing by, carrying bearded men, men with sideburns, bald headed men with their well ornamented women hanging onto them. They had no idea the past was calling him... beckoning him to come here. Kostadin Vasilevski came here, all the way from Australia, to lay flowers... to shed several tears... to be relieved of his bitterness... He is shedding tears now but instead of subsiding, his bitterness grew... as he now bitterly bows before these forgotten graves. How wonderful it would have been if Kostadin Vasilevski had his own grave here with an epitaph. But it was war then. Now it is not war, so why is there no tombstone?

What was Kostadin Vasilevski's desire? Which would have been more painful? To see these abandoned graves or to see parts of death tossed and scattered here and there in the river? All the old man wanted was a little place for him to stop and speak to his dead son: "My dear son, I brought you what you wanted when you were a young man." But that which he promised to him remained in the old man's hands because he did not know where to lay it... he couldn't lay it just anywhere. He promised his son he would lay it on his grave. His son made sure he promised him that.

"Yes, pain is as inevitable as death..." said the man who sat across from Kostadin and watched him all this time. Kostadin looked at the wilted flowers and felt like he was hearing voices from the past. He did not want to get into the depth of his story; he only wanted to talk about what caused the flowers to wilt. Watching these people and how they behaved irritated him.

"Cursed be, I can't forget them. How much longer must I live with these painful thoughts..." Kostadin thought to himself.

“Why did you stay with me...? Are you one of us?” Kostadin asked the man sitting across from him.

The man was silent, listening to Kostadin Vasilevski speak made him think of his own past, bringing him back to the old cursed days.

“Old man, if I had no strength to hold onto my own past... how can I talk to you? What can I now hope for? A repeat in the name of the ‘Aegeans’ to carry me over seas like it did you?” replied the man.

Kostadin realized that the man had his own problems and from the way he spoke he had his own pains. He was beaten down by his pain and seeing the wilted flowers brought on more painful memories... The man got up and left.

“Perhaps he does not want to talk?” thought Kostadin.

“I came all the way from Australia for this grave! I now understand what it means; if the storm knocks down a strong tree it will never rise up again...” Kostadin realized that and that: “his son’s bones were a prize for the soil, in the country where he was born... and nothing more...”

Kostadin Vasilevski was left alone, the day was almost over and the heat was not so intense. The bright and shiny sun did not make it past the horizon before a huge dark cloud covered the sky, growling and rumbling with powerful thunder. One after another lightning bolts cut the air and smashed the valley below.

The people began to flee. The man who was afraid of his own thoughts moved slowly. His desire to speak to Kostadin overpowered his fear of the storm. He looked back and said:

“What’s ours is damned... we are anathematized!”

The weather was now bad and gloomy. The only thing one could hear was the sound of the rushing water pushing its way south. The man turned back and saw Kostadin Vasilevski enveloped in darkness...

Katlanovo Bath, 1968.

COLLECTOR OF CRABS

Krsto Bilchurovski couldn't care less where he was from dawn to dusk. One morning, at the crack of dawn, he was patrolling the river turning cold stones looking for crabs. He was a master at catching crabs.

That day he had caught a lot of crabs. He filled his entire basket with those creatures. Krste was happy with his rich hunt that day.

His legs were blue, filled with blood, seeming like all his blood had gone below his knees.

Of course he was catching those crabs because that was important to him...

"That's enough for today," he said to himself while glancing down the coast looking for the travelers who had already arrived and were taking their place under the thick shadows of the trees. It was getting hot in the city. The newspapers said it was going to be a hot summer and the sun was going to emit a lot of ultraviolet rays, harmful to humans, so the people were fleeing the city and looking for shade... But Krste Bilchurovski knew nothing about this because for him it was the same thing everyday... simply hunt crabs...

When he returned to the tall willow where he had left his things, he noticed a family had taken his spot in the shade without knowing that this spot was already occupied. But the things Krsto left gave no indication that this particular spot was taken. He had only left his shoes and a bag in which he carried his everyday cutlery.

When Krste Bilchurovski came out of the river and headed for his things he ran into a woman wearing a fashionable bathing suit and said to himself: "My luck having to run into her..." Her husband Trpo heard this and sat up on his elbows to have a better look at the man approaching his wife.

Krste Bilchurovski kept going towards them, giving the impression that he was brazenly invading their privacy.

The woman cried out: “Do I need to be upset here too...?”

Trpo got up and took a defensive position in an attempt to stop Krste from entering the shade because this particular spot, according to Trpo, today belonged to him and his wife. But Krste Bilchurovski freely kept walking towards them like he owned the place. According to Krste it was on a first come first served basis and he was here first. This was his place and he was aiming to grill his crabs right here...

Krste kept walking silently and when he arrived near Trpo he suddenly greeted him with a melancholic tone of voice and said:

“This is where I sit...”

“Just here?” asked Trpo.

“Yes. I have my things here...” replied Krste as he looked around the old willow tree trunk.

Trpo’s wife kept staring at Trpo with a measured stare. Trpo flinched.

“Are you looking for a shirt and shoes?” asked Trpo.

“Yes!” said Krste, “Yes I am!”

“Here, here they are, I have them,” said Trpo pointing at the blackberry bush where they were tossed. Trpo then went to get them, apologizing that his wife had tossed them there.

“I thought they were discarded items, left here by someone who did not want them...” explained the wife while covering her comfortably smooth and plump body with a towel.

“Here you go...” said Trpo holding onto the items with two fingers as if he was holding something that was very disgusting.

Trpo’s wife winked at Trpo as if to say: “Get rid of him!”

Krste Bilchurovski sat down and calmly began to tighten the shoe laces on his shoes and then tossed his shirt over his sweaty body.

Krsto then glanced toward the basket and noted that several of his crabs had come out and were angrily running away.

Krsto instinctively yelled out: “I will kill you!” One crab was running towards Trpo’s wife and approaching a spot where the sun doesn’t shine. She jumped startled. Angry, Trpo wanted to toss both Krsto and his crabs out of there because he had come here to rest and not to be upset by some homeless person, or by a crab!

“I eat these creatures madam but I see you are afraid of them!” said Krsto to Trpo’s wife.

One by one Krsto killed all the crabs by gently tapping them with a not very thick rod.

“Trpo, we should move...” said Trpo’s wife with an angry tone of voice as she stared at Krsto Bilchurovski.

“No, please stay madam! I will go. I will go to prepare the crabs...” said Krsto apologetically and then turned to Trpo and asked: “Are you Trpo Dunimaglovski?”

Trpo stood there and, as his anger began to melt away from the incident with the crab, he smiled and showed his scarce teeth. At that moment Krste knew it was him.

“And who are you?” asked Trpo.

“I? Hmm, as you can see... I am a collector of crabs...” said Krste.

“Don’t joke around with me... Who are you?” asked Trpo with a serious tone of voice, not paying attention to his wife who was snarling like a horned viper.

“Try and remember Comrade Trpo!” replied Krste.

“I can’t...” replied Trpo.

“I am Bilchurot...” replied Krsto.

“Is that you Krsto!?” asked Trpo staring at him in silence, thinking to himself:

“No, it can’t be! This man must be joking with me. Krsto, would not allow himself to become like this. He never would allow himself... He, he was a handsome man... a neat man. It is impossible for him to have just earned and to own only this basket and the torn clothes on his back. Bilchurovski was a brave and dignified man... He would not allow himself to become like this...”

Krsto kept watching the man struggling, trying to make sense of the situation but was unable to answer: “Yes” or “no” to Trpo’s question.

Finally Krsto spoke up and proudly said: “Yes I am! I am Krsto Bilchurovski!”

Trpo looked confused. He looked at his wife. Krsto lifted up his trouser leg and showed him the deep scar. Trpo again looked confused and stunned. Krsto’s blue leg looked like it was gushing blood.

Finally Trpo said: “Yes, you are Krsto! Indeed you are! Corporal Bilchurovski – Bilchurot. Please sit down... sit down Krsto”. He then turned to his wife and said: “Magda come and meet the man, he is my comrade. He was a brave and good fighter.”

Magda greeted Krsto, then glanced at Trpo with a cold clandestine look and said: “And you my husband, you must be half crossed like Krsto. Now, after so many years... a comrade...?”

Trpo sat down first, then Krsto. They looked at each other, both looking sheepish. Trpo was experiencing hot and cold chills up and down his back.

“You Trpo, you saved yourself. You did not come back to our lands... And you did okay, right? Because, well... look at me. A

man sometimes has no value... Nobody needs me... I am worth shit. You need to choose a path in life to follow that will not bother people. But here I am, today I accidentally ran into you... and took your shade. Now you can't rest. I disturbed you, forgive me..." said Krsto looking like he wanted to stand up.

"Forgive me... I must go... Please rest..." said Krsto, but before he was finished speaking Trpo interrupted him and said:

"Here, have a drink! Stay a while!" and handed him a shot glass full with rakia (alcoholic drink).

Krsto, holding the glass looked a bit confused. He had almost forgotten the tradition of toasting. After a short pause he raised his glass and said: "To the past!"

Trpo raised his glass and said: "Nazdravie!" (To good health.)

"So, where have you been spending your time?" asked Trpo and continued. "What have you done with your life? Do you have a family? I see you have been hunting crabs. Preparing crabs is a specialty. They are nutritious food... they give you strength and big muscles..."

Krsto kept looking at Trpo while swallowing the last drops of his rakia. In the last few years Krsto wanted to be alone. He did not want anyone to remind him of his past... of his suffering... because his feelings had long ago abandoned him.

But in front of him now stood a comrade and, as much as he wanted to hide his past, he had to answer him.

"I stumbled through life..." he said. "When a person spreads his life all over the place he cannot put it back together again. His past will hang over him like a used rag and follow him around... there is nothing he can do... and no one will trust him or believe him that this piece of life is his or not..."

Trpo could feel his sorrow but he did not say anything, he only topped his glass with rakia.

“You are lucky,” said Krsto. “I am happy Trpo that you are doing okay and that you look good. Are you some kind of nobleman?” asked Krsto.

“Something like that...” replied Trpo.

“That’s very good! You get that way when someone recognizes you in life,” said Krsto and continued:

“You don’t know how much I don’t want to look back to those... to those cursed years... But it seems you, Trpo, you want to know, right? Let me say that I am all alone and don’t know why I am being punished in life so much.

Maybe I should have followed the path you took, but that path took almost everyone from our end... save a few... I those days I was very angry at you and called you a deserter. Forgive me Trpo...

But now I see that you are looking good and things have worked out for you... You were able to see further into the distance than us who stayed home... we, the blind ones, wanted to remain loyal to the revolution... and to the people... That’s how it was...” concluded Krsto.

“To the People...? Please Krsto...!” replied Trpo.

“Well, that’s the way it was then...” said Krsto in a quiet tone of voice and continued:

“But let me say that I am glad you did leave Trpo, you saved yourself from the worst. You avoided the despairing experiences we went through. Those who remained in the struggle, well... After we were defeated I was sent with the disabled to Poland.

I lived there for four years and five months. I worked in a disability cooperative. Then they moved us to Hungary at the discretion of the refugee board. I lived there for three years and seven months. And as you can see these are wholesome slices of my life... that no one believes are true...”

Krsto paused for a moment, sighed and continued: “You know that my wife stayed behind, at home, on our lands and there was no seeing her again... I had a child, a son who was sent to Czechoslovakia as a refugee. I decided to go and stay with him. I lived there for four years and nine months. And then my life took a turn for the worst...”

Krsto stopped talking. He was overwhelmed with emotion. Tears began to run down his cheeks. He continued: “I was destroyed...” he said and again became very emotional. He composed himself and continued:

“When things loosened up, I decided to come here. My wife wrote me and asked me to go back home, to my place of birth, because she did not want to leave our home. But I couldn’t go back after we were defeated because you know of the oath we took when we went to fight for our freedom and for the freedom of our lands... My own pride tormented me for a long time. Now I have no wife... So, Trpo, I came here.

It’s great to be here, I am glad to see that this country is ours... Being a foreigner on foreign shores made my soul burst. Being here and thinking deep thoughts, calms me down...” concluded Krsto.

“And how is your life now, Krsto, is it okay?” asked Trpo.

“Well, it is okay, Trpo...” replied Krsto, looking at his basket and continued:

“And you Trpo where do you work? Are you one of those people who make decisions...?” he asked.

“No, no, Krsto, I am a pensioner. I get a veteran’s pension. Now I am writing my memoirs,” replied Trpo.

Krsto looked confused. “Did I hear you right? You are writing your memoirs? And here I am living like a crab in clear water... I am completely confused... None of this makes any sense to me...” said Krsto.

“I want you to know Krsto,” said Trpo, “that I have devoted a few sentences to you in my memoirs because, you know, I know you as a courageous person, I remember you from Bigla and what you did there...” said Trpo, paused for a moment and asked: “Are you getting a pension, Krsto?”

“No... No I am not...” replied Krsto dryly.

“You aren’t? Why not?” asked Trpo.

“I don’t know... that’s how things turn out sometimes, I guess...” replied Krsto.

“The Poles told me that I needed to have at least five years of continuous active service in Poland in order to qualify for a pension. I tried the same in Czechoslovakia and they too said the same thing. The Hungarians did not even reply to my inquiries,” added Krsto.

Krsto paused, thought for a moment and said: “As for a veteran’s pension... Well I need to prove that I was a fighter... I lost contact with those who know me and I don’t know where they are. But all in all I am trying to forget all that... get it out of my mind... because it is painful for me to remember things from my past...”

“Are you working somewhere?” asked Trpo.

“Yes, I look after the animals of several owners. There is also one person from our part... He has a large vineyard with a cottage on it. This year I did a good job digging his vineyard. He said: ‘Bravo fellow countryman, nice work...’ He also threw a few extra coins, but I did not tell him who I was and where I was from... I recognized he was one of us from the way he talked... I believe he was down there with us in the beginning,” replied Krsto.

“He was with us? Who might he be? Mitre the lawyer? No. The historian...? Ah, yes I know who he is!” said Trpo. “He is the person who had a constant spleen pain... I ran into him here. He came here before I did...”

“Yes! Yes he is the one!” confirmed Krsto and then said: “You should see him now...”

He comes over to the vineyard and greets me from the corner of the lot asking me how I am doing. Then he says things like ‘You need to dig deeper’, and ‘be careful you don’t damage the vines’. And a little woman he has there... Beautiful, educated people...”

Krsto suddenly stopped talking and remained silent with a blank look on his face...

“We should move...” said Trpo’s wife.

“No, no, no need to. You can stay in this beautiful shade, I will go...” said Krsto.

He then took his basket, said goodbye and went to cook his crabs.

“You know Magda, this Krsto was a great fighter down there,” said Trpo to his wife.

“He looks like he was never baptized...” she said and then turned to Trpo and said: “Was that conversation with him really necessary? You will make me explode from your stupid past! How many times have I told you not to talk to people like that? Who needs that kind of past? Here is your precious Krsto, a living history in the flesh!”

SELLER OF CARNATIONS

The train stopped in Skopje station early in the morning. A tall thin man came off a coach. No one was waiting for him.

His relatives lived in Kostur. He did not know anyone in Skopje.

Filip Malenkov just arrived.

He felt good walking down the streets of the city in which, for a long time, he had dreamed and hoped that one day he would work. He was overwhelmed by a sense of pride and dignity looking and reading the signs displayed over the shops and businesses in the Macedonian language.

He approached the building where he was expected to report and submit all the notes that he had collected over the years. He confirmed that this was it. He knocked on the door and when he heard “Yes” he entered. He shook hands and greeted everyone warmly, addressing them with the words: “How are you brother?” Some mockingly replied: “Good, good,” and looked at one another. A stocky young officer picked up the telephone and asked in which shelter to place the newcomer “liberator”.

Filip Malenkov did not strike up a conversation with any one of those whom he had just met to discuss matters that one would discuss with his own people; let them know how life was on foreign shores and unload on them a bit of nostalgia from the insults received abroad. He was surprised that no one cared to know or to discuss anything, even matters of importance. “Perhaps I am a nobody...” he thought to himself and felt a bit suspicious. However, in his own mind he could not explain the word “liberator”. Why was he called a liberator? Was this mockery... irony... or what...? “Oh, Filip, Filip... what is happening to you...” he thought.

Filip Malenkov was a forty-five year old man who had just returned to his fatherland. He came back with a university degree in “History”. He was not just “anybody” he was a qualified historian. He was convinced that he would find his place in his fatherland. “So, what’s with the suspicion, eh Filip...? And why those angry

feelings against the people who called you a ‘liberator’ ... eh Filip?” he asked himself.

He pondered for a moment.

“Now that I have come back I will have to take it easy and spit at the past,” Filip said to himself. “If I were uneducated and had no degree then perhaps I could feel sorry for myself... but now what?” Filip asked himself. “Perhaps this is how things are done here... Perhaps things have not changed that much... but I don’t believe we are that much different from these people here...” he said to himself.

“We are the same people and that’s how we need to remain. We should not be treated like strangers, like we were treated on foreign shores,” Filip assured himself.

He remembered the days when he was getting the newspaper “Nova Makedonija” and reading it over and over again until the next edition arrived. He boasted to his fellow Russian colleagues of how wonderful Macedonia was and that one day he would go back again and regain the taste he had lost. Filip Malenkov was not a man without a life. All his life he had a permanent place to be. This was also true of all the other people who found themselves drifting there. But it was difficult for him to be there because our people are not comfortable living by themselves, without our people, without constantly discussing our narrative. We are a small nation in which the same blood runs and up to now no one was able to change that... Those of us there who came from this country had many thoughts and inflamed sentiments and, as compatriots and co-fighters, cheerfully embraced each other like brothers.

But Filip Malenkov, who had now returned, pronounced his own mother language ridiculously. He still bore the surname “is” and everyone thought he was someone else, someone from the south. But it was not his fault that Filip Malenkov had been thrown out of his home, out of his birthplace, out of his native land... That’s how he felt.

“Filip, you must leave those feelings behind... Get a grip and calm down. You need two things to live; a house and a job,” he tried to convince himself.

Filip Malenkov’s wellbeing got better with time and in the last several years he changed his furniture for the second time. He even bought a car. He set Saturday and Sunday aside for vacations, recreation and for short walks in the countryside.

One morning he went to the market to buy something fresh. On his way a hand grabbed his elbow and held on to it loosely. When he turned around he saw a pair of beautiful eyes curiously staring at him. When he had a good look at them he thought he had done something inappropriate. But those brave eyes kept looking at him, as if wanting something... an answer from the past... about something from the past perhaps...

Then a hand appeared holding a carnation and out of the person’s lips sprang a slight smile.

Filip Malenkov tried to remain passive, looking serious, calm and collected but secretly deep inside he was smiling. Looking serious he asked himself: “What does this seller of carnations want from me? I didn’t do anything...” He stood there holding his bags full of fruit, arms stretched down and fingers blue from the load. “What does she want? I don’t need a carnation? Leave me alone, woman, you can see that my hands are full. Leave me in peace...” he thought to himself and then decided to buy the carnation only because the seller was very persistent.

“How much does it cost?” he asked and immediately thought that this woman too needed to work. He could not deny her that. She needed to earn some money. Perhaps she had a family, he thought to himself.

“It’s a gift...” she said and her face lit up with a smile and her grip on his elbow became tighter.

“It is a gift for you, Filip!” she repeated. Filip, looking a bit guilty, remained motionless. His thoughts ran wild as he thought of friends

and relatives that he knew. After that he thought of those who he had cast into oblivion and in his mind they began to line up like a string of beads, but then they were young, without scars, with beautiful ringtone voices.

Filip looked into her eyes again. “Oh, how much sadness, how much sorrow there was in those beautiful gentle but tired blue eyes...” he thought to himself.

When he shook her hand he felt a hard strong grip. “Oh God, what time can do to a person...” he thought to himself when he realized he could remember nothing about this woman. But he continued to search his mind thinking: “Could it be her? No! Could it be her? No! Who is this woman with such courage? What would it mean if I took her carnation? I won’t accept it. Don’t accept it Filip...” he thought to himself.

He had to decide what to do fast in order to save his dignity.

But he could not escape the thought: “What does this woman want with this carnation? She is keeping me here, in front of the people passing by, like a thief caught in the act,” he thought to himself.

He wanted to ask her: “Tell me lady, what do you want from me. Don’t torment me, please tell me who you are. You must be the mother of one of my students, correct?”

While holding his soft hand, the carnation seller looked at him and said:

“Come on Filip, try and remember, eh?”

He was silent because it was difficult for him to say “I don’t know you.” At this point in his life he did not want to know anything about his past, about those times that tore through life and weakened the senses... about things that he had done... And perhaps of the things that he had done to earn his title “liberator”. But then he thought to himself: “Filip, that was joke, only one person said that and you understand that it was a joke!”

But no matter how hard he tried, Filip was now in a difficult position because “he had forgotten his past and was suffering because of it...”

From a long time ago he carried the idea and the thought that, at least he was loyal to his own nation, but what could he do if time flew and now it seemed to him that he had committed some sort of sin which would not allow him to recognize anyone. “It is best to forget everyone from my past...” he often thought to himself.

“Perhaps until now I may have been a minion but now I am an ordinary individual, a middle-ranking academic I think, with my own honorarium... and I tell people ‘to let me live my life in peace’...” he thought to himself.

“But Filip, why must you not know these people? You shared your life and spilled your blood with them. Why does it now bother you...? Go on, ask your question. Who is she...? She knows you well... and you...? She might have let you leave had you paid for the carnation... right?” he thought to himself.

“Who am I Filip... try and remember...” she asked again.

“I can’t remember... Only some faint traits...” he blurted out.

“I am Tsana.” she said.

“Tsana?! Our sergeant Tsana? I apologize Tsana...” he replied.

Filip put his bags down near the large bunch of flowers and gave her his full attention.

Tsana wanted to know many things about him and asked him a lot of questions. Filip kept shaking his head and trying very hard to remember. His thoughts ran back in time as he tried to remember things from his past. He watched Tsana deal with her customers.

“Take some carnations... take some for your wife... take some for your husband... Hey lady, take a carnation... one red and one white... take some more... They are pretty, take them home. Madam

you usually take three...” Tsana said to her customers and then wrapped the flowers in white paper to keep their stems moist.

Tsana had a gentle smile which spread over her sun-burned face. She had burdensome features which revealed that she had a difficult past, which also gave her a sign of respect.

“Is that really you Tsana? Our beloved Sergeant Tsana from twenty-five years ago?” he asked and continued: “From the days when we were still young partisans and you put us in rows and showed us how to carry our rifles, how to crawl in the ditches and divided out bread equally?”

Filip now remembered the time when Tsana used to read to her unit from the lecture material and from the reports provided by the “Agitation and Propaganda” department on the progress of the revolution, on the progress of the resistance, reminding them that all kinds of people can lead a revolution and not just the nobles. He remembered the time when Tsana asked him: “You, Filip, what do you want to be after we free ourselves?” and he timidly covered his young face.

How nice her partisan beret sat on the top of her thick hair! The wide belt with the bronze buttonholes, the embroidered star on a sergeant’s uniform; half Russian and half English. She taught us to walk like soldiers and to sing songs while we marched. I remember many perished in charges and half our unit was reinforced with new soldiers, from the reserves. They were replaced with younger men, children, old people, widowed women, religious people, cowards, quarrelsome people, non-revolutionaries, deserters who had returned, prisoners, enthusiasts, urban girls and craftsmen who were conscripted after attacks on the cities. It was Tsana’s job to sort them all out and turn them into revolutionaries... But after we lost the war, both she and I ended up going around the world, with just our bare souls to show for it...

“Filip did you ever think that one day we would meet again?” she asked.

“Yes, Tsana. But...” he replied but before he was finished talking she interrupted and said:

“Well you look good. You are well-dressed and you seem to be doing well in life. I am glad Filip my brother, I am glad. You were the youngest in my unit, as I recall, right?” she asked.

“Yes, Tsana, yes I was...” he replied.

“And you, Tsana...” Filip said wanting to ask Tsana about her life but she was interrupted by a customer wanting to buy flowers.

“Help yourself, sir... pick what you want... take some of these flowers here... they are fresher... take some joy home. These here are nice flowers...” she said to the customer.

She then turned to Filip and said: “This is what life has thrown at me... this is how it is Filip,” she said and then sighed a deep sigh. “I came back a few years ago but now my age has become an obstacle for me... I can’t find a good job... But I was not going to give up; I decided to start my own business... It’s seasonal work for as long as the flowers last, but it keeps me busy... When I was abroad I got a job in a factory and worked 100% to standard. I was praised for it but a working person can only achieve so much in life. I gave it my all abroad but...” she said, waved her arm in the air and then turned to Filip, looked him in the eye and said:

“Do you remember the lecture material I used to read to you back in those days...? Well, Filip, they were not telling us the truth!”

She paused and looked away. She then turned to Filip and asked: “What sort of work do you do? Professional work...?”

“Yes, Tsana, I am a historian,” he said but what he wanted to say was: “Tsana when I write that part of history I will be sure to mention you... I will write everything I know about that time... Tsana you deserve to be remembered... and now what...” Unfortunately he did not say any of that ... Neither did he tell her about his honorariums.

He did however think of saying: “Oh, Tsana, if only you were educated? I would have given you one of my honorariums. I would do that because I know you and because you were my commander. But wait Filip...” he thought to himself. He had another idea: “Why does everyone have to be educated?” he thought to himself. But then immediately changed his mind and thought: “Be quiet, Filip. Drop it! Leave the past alone... they are waiting for you at home to bring them groceries...”

“I will go, Tsana. You are working...” he said.

“Good luck, Filip... Have you met anyone else from our people?” she asked.

“No, Tsana. I don’t hang around with anyone...” he replied.

“Carnations? Go ahead, help yourself. These are beautiful flowers. They will bring joy to your soul. They will bring beauty to your home. Sir, please help yourself...” she went about her business.

THE VISIT

Eftim Kamenkovski was in charge of the agitation and propaganda department and worked with a committee when, one day, he had a reception. Eftim was a man in his forties; a little bold with a pleasant exterior and moderate in manners, although some felt he had traces of a saloon upbringing, something from our end of the world. Eftim used big academic words in his conversations to give the impression that he was engaged in some actions that were targeting the daily press. But most importantly, he was important among the people, a trusted cadre and no one was able to accuse him of anything, challenge him, or oppose him.

When he found out that I was the son of the legendary, late commissar he showed interest in me and wanted to know me better.

I loved Eftim immensely from the moment he told me that he was a fellow co-fighter and fought together with my father. Twenty-five years had passed and no one had told me the truth about the Revolution, about “our” Revolution. He also told me that he wanted to see Major Gavril, if I wanted to go with him. But he was not sure where the Major lived.

A few days later before I boarded his luxury car, he teasingly said:

“I know exactly where the Major lives.”

On Eftim’s advice I bought a bottle of Russian vodka and he brought some snacks. The Major obviously did not know we were coming so when we arrived at the meadow, Eftim ran towards him, gave him a hug and congratulated him on his award. I was left behind waiting to be introduced.

The Major looked confused.

“I was afraid we would not be able to find you,” said Eftim to the Major.

Still confused Major Gavril then turned to me.

I stood there feeling uncomfortable and said nothing... I just gave him a firm handshake. He, on the other hand, gave me a hug and a kiss.

At that very moment I saw Eftim wipe his cheek.

After the Major let go of me he said: "So, you are the son of my commissar, eh?"

"Yes!" I replied.

The Major was surprised by our visit. I could see that in him. Eftim continued to torment him, bringing things up and skirting around. Finally when the Major remembered something he said:

"Oh, so you are one of those guys... who..." and lowered his thick eyebrows.

Eftim quickly and skillfully interrupted him and said: "Yes, yes..."

But from the expression on his face I could see that Eftim was trying to hide something. But the Major still wanted to seek clarification, so he smiled...

"You seem very cheerful today. I am glad!" he said to Eftim and then invited us to go inside the cottage, which to me looked like it was leaning slightly. The room where he took us in the basement was tiny. It had a low cracked ceiling and was stained with insect droppings. There were flies everywhere; on the walls, on the floor... crawling, flying, making buzzing sounds...

The Major folded up an old shirt and angrily waved it at the flies on the wall. They flew off sluggishly towards the ceiling and towards the opposite wall. Eftim looked at me and smiled slyly.

"This is the Major's cabinet..." he said.

We sat on the three sides of a table that was pushed against the wall.

The chairs creaked as if they were being rocked by children. The table was covered with a hard polyvinyl cover and cutlery was set in one spot, where the Major sat.

The smell of mold partially overpowered the cologne Eftim wore, which tormented my nose in the car. I noticed several dust covered books lying in a corner, pinned under a plank. One who dealt with such books could immediately recognize them as Marxist literature.

The Major got up and busied himself around the room putting things away, as if embarrassed by the mess.

He brought out three shot glasses and filled them with vodka. The shot glasses were cracked and had dark burned, blurry stains in the bottom. There were insect droppings all around the outside.

The Major sat down next to us and smiled, first looking at Eftim and then at me.

“Congratulations Major!” said Eftim in a toast.

“Congratulations Major!” I repeated the toast.

The Major looked at us curiously, as if not understanding why we were congratulating him. He then swallowed the last drop of his vodka. Eftim shook his head... the vodka was too strong for his taste. He then said: “Russian style, right?”

The Major shook his head “yes” and then said:

“When we first arrived in Russia I drank a wine glass full of this stuff. When Colonel Vasili Konovalov offered it to me he toasted: ‘To Stalin’. When I saw that he drank the entire glass I did the same. I wanted to let him know that I was with him all the way... After that, for nearly three days, Russia spun all around me...” he said and laughed out loud. “Did you ever drink a wine glass full of vodka?” he asked.

We both shook our heads and said “No”.

It was hot that day. Sweat poured down our faces. The Major took off his shirt exposing his sleeveless undershirt. He had a badly crushed and atrophied arm. His entire muscle near the shoulder was missing.

Who knows why during such moments a person's thoughts would return to the past? Memories become fresh. Eftim accidentally touched on something which prompted the Major to pull a yellowed old notebook from his old wooden trunk.

“This will correctly tell us everything...” said the Major. “It is a diary of our battalion”.

The Major first read out the names of the dead and then stood upright to pay them homage. He then leafed through the old pages. The ink was faded. He stopped on a page and looked at me with moistened eyes.

“Your father was killed on May 15, 1948!” he said with a crackling voice.

I was upset and barely able to pick up my shot glass. The Major kept looking at me but I was unable to look back at him. He had touched a sore spot... He topped my shot glass over the top.

“Moments like these call for a strong drink of vodka...” he said and continued: “I often think of your father. He was a man from whom I learned a lot. He used to say that life for us, the fighters, would be cruel after the revolution! And he was right...”

After leafing to the end of the diary the Major took out several photographs and documents and handed them to me. One photograph was of my father and the Major riding white horses in front of the battalion. Eftim vainly sifted through the photographs looking for a photo of himself. Looking at him the Major said:

“These are photographs of fighters only...”

When we were alone Eftim had told me many frightening stories, events that he participated in, during which he demonstrated much

courage, so I was under the impression that he was a fighter... some kind of strong fighter.

After that the Major got up and again chased the flies around the room. Several times he apologized for the mess and the way he lived. Eftim was not paying attention and quickly downed his vodka and began to greedily wolf down the snacks he had brought.

I went through the photographs one by one studying my father's comrades in arms. The Major occasionally looked at me stealthily, under the eye. It was obvious that he was uncomfortable that we had found him this way... under these circumstances. He, it seems, had been forgotten by the people. Lost, he lived in freedom. Eftim and I now rediscovered him... and were disturbing his peace...

Eftim was a city official and was making good money. He had an orderly life and a luxury car about which he boasted constantly. He spoke of a high life and of moving up in society and that he was a member of the Union of Veterans. I believed everything he had told me.

I thought these were people of the past. Eftim was able to say: "We the fighters..." exciting my feelings and my respect for them.

I flipped through the diary pages looking for a page that might have information on my father. I encountered many names... names of various fighters, killed, praised, defected, and of spies and traitors. From this one could figure out the well being of the battalion, its strengths and weaknesses, battles won and lost and the dedication of its officers and soldiers. There was a section with names of fighters recommended for decoration. I looked there for Eftim's name.

The Major kept topping up our shot glasses with vodka. Eftim, on the other hand, eagerly waited for the moment when he could show the Major his own awards.

Finally that moment materialized when Eftim said: "It's a mockery that you are not happy with these...! Here they are; one for bravery and the other one for merit!" said Eftim as he handed the Major his two awards.

The Major took them and held them in his hands. He remained silent for a long time. I don't know why but he did not congratulate Eftim. I thought the Major was cruel. Then, with obvious delight, he said:

“So, twenty-five years later, they are finally recognizing our contribution...”

Eftim took his medals back, and hung them on the left side of his chest. He then said:

“Come on Major, pin your medals on your chest and we will reminisce our past...”

“I don't have any medals... We, the old fighters never received such things...” he said, which was a surprise to Eftim and me.

“You don't have medals?! How is that even possible?! Some were given three medals...” piped up Eftim.

“Well, here is the irony...” replied the Major, seeming like he wanted to avoid this conversation, so he suggested we go outside to see the vineyard.

But Eftim did not want to drop the subject and wanted to understand why this was so.

So, we again sat down and the Major began explaining. He said:

“My friends, what can I tell you about that? For me it is a great pleasure to see that people are receiving awards. You Eftim, I don't know how much you appreciated that time. But know that this day has its own heroes and I don't want to get in the way.

I personally feel that everyone should give everything they have when it is needed. Perhaps I was a good commander then, but... since the revolution you have become an official. We don't want anything from you. Your public however needs you, and I what? I was just a plain Major. Now, sometimes I turn my thoughts and think only of death.”

“I know that, Major, I know that! They treated you horribly, I understand that, it was a period of errors and corruption...” said Eftim.

After that they both went silent. I was the first to disrupt the silence. I poured the last drops of the vodka into their shot glasses and gave them to them. They both stood there with their heads bowed down.

A thought crosses my mind. If these people, I thought, are not introduced to the world, they will forever remain insignificant, both in life and in death.

We silently walked out of the cottage and stared at the vines lined up like soldiers in a parade in front of us. The Major, feeling satisfied, was expecting us to leave.

“I forgot to ask you,” said Eftim, “how is your wife Evdokia?” remembering how much she cavorted around the Major.

“I am sure she will be angry if she found out that they forgot me when they were handing out medals. She was a tough woman but after the revolution she changed. It was great to be an ordinary person, but ... when I came back from Tashkent she was playful and joyous. She had a lot of dreams for me which I barely fulfilled... I found a job in an ordinary shop...” replied the Major then sighed deeply.

“Our marriage was a sham... Perhaps the timing was all wrong... That’s how it felt... there are things in life that can’t be measured with any type of norms and rules, but lo and behold, time will tell what kind of person you are. She comes here when the grapes are ripe, looks at the loaded vines and says:

“You still know how to create some things for a woman to still want you...”

STONE

The roads are like strings, leading to somewhere... But when you see mixed footprints you don't know where to search for life.

The people were running away and were going all over the world. They couldn't go any further than that. Married to their grief they constantly had thoughts about their homeland, their corner of the world, their place of birth... and as the old man said: "Their hearth where they were born..."

The passengers had already taken their seats in the semi-dark cars as departing time for the train was approaching.

A black locomotive just arrived on the track next to us and the passengers who were headed for Skopje were quickly transferring over their suitcases, some through the windows, rushing to get on the train before it left. Under the window I saw a thin old man scratching his beard with one hand and holding onto an elegant suitcase with the other.

When he entered the car he accidentally bumped into me and when our eyes met I said: "Please, go ahead". The old man thanked me with the words: "Thank you very much," in English and then sat down.

While wiping the sweat on his face and deep wrinkles on his forehead, he looked at me and asked: "Are you a fellow countryman?" "Yes," I replied. The train began to move heading in the direction of Skopje.

"That's good, my son... thank you very much!" he said and offered me an Australian cigarette. He then began to tell me his life's story, his fate that had been woven for him for the last sixty years... some things were beautiful but most things were shocking.

"I am looking for the living, my son; I want to ask them... I had a wife and son. My son would have been about your age now, but they are both ashes.

He took a long puff from his Australian cigarette and cast his eyes on me. He kept them there for a long time. “Ashes... yes ashes... it is difficult to know that they are ashes... It is even more difficult to try and find them... a sign of them...” he said.

He then looked away and said: “I finally managed to pry myself away from that desolate place... I just got here... I came here directly from there...”

The old man spent a long time telling me about the devastation, about the graves and about the ruins. His old skin quivered with sorrow as he told me things he had seen with his own eyes.

“The people from the valley have disappeared... long grass is growing on the roads... but I kept going...” he said and exhaled deeply as if a large rock was placed on his chest.

“Many years have passed, my son...” he said and counted the decades on his fingers. He then again began to speak, quietly and painfully telling me his story.

“The beauty is gone... everything is ugly now... what else can you call the desolation...?” he said and looked at me for approval. His face turned red as great sadness and pain overwhelmed him. “The war had ruined everything... had turned the soil black... had swallowed the people... the graves are without tombstones, without epitaphs...” he said. The poor man got chills with every step he took in that desolate place he visited. I could see that in his eyes. He had no idea how many were buried in each grave... one... more... many more? I looked at his face... at his wrinkles... at his old hands... but all I wanted to see was his soul...

Words, unspoken words, simmered deep down in this old man's chest. He left when he was young and left behind his love, his child and his heart. And now, hunchbacked from years of torment, sadness and from the guilt he has carried on his shoulders, he has returned to visit what he loved most and to shed his last tears for what he lost.

He walked down the brush infested road with no expectations as to what he was going to find at his place of birth, but the scenery kept grabbing at his heart, reminding him of the countless times he had walked this very same path, of its beauty when he lived here as a young man. The lush tall mountain, full of pride, which stood there for many centuries, suddenly appeared before his eyes. He remembered the fog that poured through the gorge. His avid gaze was struggling to overcome his thoughts of the past and to focus on the long unseen sights but his heart was gripping at his throat and his soul continued to feel ill. He felt a deep pain as if someone had stabbed his heart and drops of blood were dripping from it. He squeezed his eyes tight when he entered the place where he was born. He heard something whisper to him from the depths of his soul:

“No, there is no need for tears when you have blood...” it said. Then, when he first set foot on his native land, a painful tear dropped like it was a drop of blood. He was face to face with the tall old tree and he was petrified. The fate beneath it all was the same for the entire family; the pain of separation cut like a saber through his heart... The old man sat silent by the tree for a long time... thoughts running through his mind... leaves rustling in the breeze as if they were whispering, sounding like they were crying for him... feeling his pain. The old man stood there feeling the breeze on his face and breathing the aroma that came with it. It was a fresh flowery scent that brought even more tears to his eyes... tears that needed to be shed for his family. The old man lowered his hands, placed them on his knees and again looked into my eyes.

“Separation is terrible, my son, it could tear your soul apart...”

The old man fell silent again. I waited a long time for him to say something. He had a lot of grief built up in his chest, enough to leave me breathless. His grief was overpowering me. I felt many chills run down my spine.

He took a dry puff of smoke from his cigarette. It seemed like it soothed his sorrow; the strong sadness that had overpowered him. It was both pleasant and painful to have returned back to the old country; to the place of birth, especially after it was devastated by

war and neglect and everything was lost. And so the old man, step by step, visited the place where he was born, looking at the devastation and listening to the river water rolling down the hill and vanishing down the valley, reverberating with a certain pleasant ring. The road the old man took led him out of the valley and around a wide curve. Beyond that, a little further along the straight road was the old man's house.

It was built with stone and mud and it was customary to bury a gold coin along with 300 prayers in its foundation in order to keep the bad magic away and to protect the home from evil because, as they used to say: "There are bad people in this world..."

"It was customary for us to kiss the stones that were used to build the foundation..." he said. It was even more difficult for the old man to speak about his home. He sighed deeply.

"I left when I was young and took to foreign shores... I left with nothing..." he said.

"There were no letters sent or received for years... It was war, my son... No one cares during a war... Dzvezda and I built our house... from which there are only ashes left now..."

When I saw it destroyed, I could not gather enough strength to step over the threshold. My heart trembled... I was petrified..." he said.

His separation from his family and home was hard on the old man. It wore him down and made him wither prematurely. A man lives to be happy. But happiness is easily forgotten... not misery. When a bad thought enters a sick heart a man feels pain and misery runs through his veins.

The old man lit another cigarette and said:

"I lived during my young years. I then left my life. And now instead of living... all I feel is sadness..."

His eyes were focused on the devastation. His forehead swam in sweat as he tried to take a few more steps through the rubble. Then, from the depth of the rubble, he heard a little bird chirp.

He looked for it and stroked it with his silent gaze. His heart felt like he was putting his hand over his dear deceased child... whose grave he had not yet found. With his heart he begged the bird: "Wait little bird, let me kiss you because you are mine, you live in my home, in this wilderness..." and as he took another step the bird flew away leaving him all alone, exposed and frowning in the ruins. The ruins mocked him... laughed at his loneliness and weakened his poor soul... But the smouldering desire to find the grave kept him alive... kept him going...

The ruins were illuminated by the warm spring sun... but he... he felt like he was covered in darkness and not even sunlight could penetrate his soul. He came out from the ruins and, as he put his foot on the street, he was reminded of the days when two children grabbed him by the hand and ran with him... the thought made him feel good...

He kept walking down the desolate streets, devoid of people... There was no one there... no old people to tell him what had happened here... no one to tell him the whole story...

We both stood on the train looking out of the window. The train was moving fast. The old man grabbed and opened his suitcase. He removed something. He held a couple of smoke-laden stones in his hand and caressed them with his fingers like they were living beings. I thought the stones were coloured quartz, but the old man made me think differently.

"When I was in the ruins I picked up these stones from the ashes... what was left over from my home... there was nothing else..."

The old man stuck his gaze on the rocks.

"Ash and stones..." he said and then lifted his hand and, with his fingers, rubbed his eyes.

“Only ash... ash from blood and bones... that’s all that is left from my life... I will keep these until my death,” he said.

The old man then squeezed the stones against one another in his hand until they made a grinding sound... as if speaking to him. The stones were burnt and darkened by smoke. Ashes had penetrated their pores and cracks... just like the old man’s life.

“These will keep my soul warm on the foreign shores,” he said, brought them closer to his face and wept over them.

Stones are durable and will have no problem being taken overseas. Other people will look at them and they too will weep over them. When they see stones from someone else’s hearth they will weep for the loss of their own. These people love their homeland, their place of birth... Fate has also struck them with the same fist. These stones have a strong heart and will withstand the sadness of the people when the old man tells them of his own home’s fate.

The old man wrapped the stones in a white handkerchief and put them back in his heavy suitcase.

LAND OF ETERNAL SADNESS

From just over Preval one could see Little Prespa Lake looking like an eye in tears. One could also see it from the top of Mount Bigla. The Prespa valley looked like someone had dropped and spread bundles of hay and in the middle of it was what seemed like a hose spilling water, which strongly reflected the sun's rays. During the night the raspberry-blue cold lake valley trembled anxiously waiting for the sun to rise and for the flocks of Belvitsa (species of trout) to play in its waves. During the summer Prespa Valley is beautifully decorated with many colourful flowers; scarlet, white and thick-soaked with the smell of honey. The still air hovers above the ground and will overwhelm you with its powerful aroma...

The moment the sun hides behind the hill only the poplar tops remain illuminated in front of Ioshe Sekulovski's tavern. That's when the sun's gilded rays say goodnight.

Twilight sets. First the tavern begins to dim, then the street. The light to the top of the poplars diminishes. The day fades... Darkness sets. Sparks hover over the fishermen's fire, the waves splashing on the boat quietly die down, and in the bluish cold evening mist begins to rise in the valley.

Spring came and gave the people renewed strength and renewed life.

The fishermen happily sang while they fished and their songs echoed strongly throughout the valley. The farmers worked their soil and listened to the songs. They looked here and looked there, by the lake under the rays of the golden sun. The fisherman felt like they needed to sing from dawn to dusk. But now German is full of grief and his pain is eating away at him, poking at him... like a drill poking at a heart.

He slowly walked down the road, looking at everything. He paused and looked at the dried willows. He noticed the song from the loaded village wagons was gone.

He listened... He heard a nocturnal bird's sinister cry in the distance. The earth, the sky, the forest and the fields were all hunted by the mad cries of this night bird...

And now, many, many years later, that sound still bothered him...

“Don't sing to me, don't sing to me! Spare me your song. I come from afar and fire is burning in my chest. You evil birds don't know what it means to live in hope. But our hope depends on our destiny...” whispered German.

German Trpenovski kept walking and then took a run over Preval just like he had done many times before when he was a child, rushing into the arms of his mother. He heard a sound coming from the wild reeds by the shore which startled him. He stopped to look. His thoughts took him back to a time when the fishermen sang.

He looked towards the lake. “This is the lake that fed the people... that protected them and took care of them,” he thought. The strange sound that startled him earlier was now getting much closer. He thought he heard it again... but this time closer. He looked around. There was nothing there... not a living soul. It was a dry spring, everything was dry; the landscape, the trees, the grass... The sound was probably made by the dry grass he figured.

German Trpenovski was full of joy to have been able to come back to his beautiful home in Prespa after so many years of being away. He went closer to the shore and scooped a handful of water. He watched the tiny fish race away to hide in the deep water. He then looked at the soil. It looked sad... poor... as if someone had badly abused it... and the willow trees stood there hanging, crying and weeping.

“Oh, what a night! All the stars are out... to the last one. It is so warm and peaceful... I can feel it warm my soul again!” he thought to himself.

“I am back!” he yelled. “I came back with a song, rather unwilling but with a song, perhaps with the last song. How lucky of me...” he said. “Alone... just the night and me...! I feel a surge of love and I

cannot keep it quiet. So hear me my place of birth, understand me... I will not hide my passion from you. I want to tell you that I love you... and only you... Oh birthplace of mine!" he shouted out loud.

When he left for the village he walked over the ruins of what was once a beautiful cobblestone road. The village was completely silent. It was a deafening silence like life itself was deaf...

The moon was shining brightly in the peaceful sky. The mulberry tree in the yard was loaded with fruit. All was tranquil.

German Trpenovski stood under the blue sky, fearless but troubled by the destruction. He felt like something heavy was pressing on his chest... and that's how he spent the night. He breathed deeply but there was no aroma of life in the air. He kept looking at the pile of black ruins that once were his house... his home. "Is this a dream? Am I sleeping? What is this?" he kept asking... looking for answers. "The coast and river that looked like a silver belt around the valley are still here but where are the houses?" he asked. "No, no, I am not going to yell. My mother is old and sick. She is certainly very old. She is very old. How long will she tease me like this? Maybe she is hiding in here somewhere. How long has it been since I have seen her last? Very long! She will cry a lot for me but I will not... I don't want to upset her even more. I want her to be happy..." said German to himself.

He walked through the ruins looking at the dark charred remains.

The roofs were scattered and the supports stuck out like dead arms pointing skyward...

He looked away towards the slopes... They were absent of the shimmering endless rye fields and the roaring flocks of sheep... He picked up the pace and ran towards a pile of logs. He ran frantically because he was afraid of what he saw... the ruins of his own home... Desolation stared at him from behind every broken down wall...

"Calm down, calm down!" he kept telling himself.

“Maybe a few more steps and I will find my dear old mother. This is where I spent my childhood... I am such a coward...” he thought.

He saw smoke coming out from an underground hut.

“It must be my mother... she is awake and waiting for me. I must have made a mistake and gone to the wrong house...” he said to himself.

That night he was unable to hide his tears. On the way he ran into an old female dog which forced him to hide in the charred ruins and defend himself with smoke laden stones.

“Stop! Calm down dog! Can’t you see I am a person...? I am not your enemy you stupid dog...!” he yelled out loud.

“Why are you yelling so much? Who are you, eh, son? Where do you come from?” he heard the voice of an old woman ask. She came closer.

“I am German... I had difficulty finding you...” he replied.

“German? Oh, poor Iana, she did not wait for you son,” said the old woman while dropping the pile of dry tree branches that she was carrying on her back. “She waited for years...” the old woman said and embraced him.

The old woman braced herself on the first upright log she ran into then pointed and said:

“Your uncle is there, go in...”

A faint and muffled voice was heard coming from the corner, seeming like it was coming from a crack deep in the cellar.

German went closer to greet the old man but the old man did not see German’s extended hand and did not shake it. The old man was sitting down on a straw mattress. He was very thin... skin and bones...

“How are you, Uncle?” German asked.

When he heard German’s voice the old man was delighted and stood up slightly.

“Which one are you?” he asked.

“I am German...” German answered with a hoarse voice.

“Ah, you came back? Where is Dame? Dame? Dame? Son...?” asked the old man and got up to see how many there were in the room. The old woman ran in and tried to calm him down. He slowly sat down again.

“Well, you are not all here...” the old man said quietly with a disappointed tone of voice.

“Well, my nephew I have been waiting for all of you... Life goes on by its own rules...” he then added.

The old man took a long pause and then said: “Little by little the days are going by and your Aunt Tsveta and I have been anxiously waiting for you to come back. We have been waiting for destiny to bring us happy news. The old woman has always stood by me. She gives me water and other things. We have remained here as guardians. Now things are not as they used to be. No one says anything to us now... They are not afraid of us giving more births and populating this country with our kind... Listen Tsveta, go out there and shut that dog up. I am tired of listening to it barking. Tell her the man is one of us...”

German handed the old man the package he brought for his mother but it was too heavy for the old man and pulled his dry thin arms down to his lap. The old man held it there... looking at it... Tears began to drop on it.

“I want one thing from life...” said the old man, “I want our people to return... to come back to their families... to the place where they were born... I want the desolation to go away. I want the devastation, the rubble and the infirmity to be gone. These things, my son, are

murderers of man's spirit. These things will suck the life out of anyone who runs into them. We who find ourselves in them, and live among them, are being slowly eaten away; they gnaw at us slowly, day by day. But if you ask me, nephew, it is good for a man to die in his own country, on the soil where he was born. We did not come to this country over the mountains and along the rivers. This has been our homeland for many generations. For centuries we were born here and we died here. If those who banished us think they can take our lands, I will be the last one to give it up, but before I do I want to testify that anyone who dares touch this land is a thief..." said the old man.

"Who will remain on this soil when you and I are gone?" interjected the old woman.

"This land does not belong to just anyone! It belongs to my son! It belongs to him even though he was chased away and banished from this country! Tsveta, go out there and dig up some soil. Put it in the white handkerchief you were saving for the mother-in-law. And you, German, you will look everywhere in the world until you find my son and you will give this to him as a gift!"

"The soil?!" asked German.

"Yes, the soil, son... You will give him this soil and you will tell him it's his! Let this be his greatest proof before the people that this soil is his..."

German took the lump of soil and wanted to cry because he knew that Dame would never accept it.

The old woman just shook her head and began to cry. She was sad and afraid...

German bid farewell to everything... It seemed like the flowers were talking to him, with their heads bowing down, saying: "Well, goodbye. You will never again see your father's home, your place of birth or the lake..." Heavy black clouds began to creep over the horizon.

The spring by the roadside was still gushing water. He remembered filling a water jug when he was a little boy and handing it to his grandfather. His grandfather raised it up with both hands and drank from it. While he was drinking droplets were rolling down his chin like beads, leaving no trace. He watched his grandfather quench his thirst with the water he fetched for him. His grandfather then wiped the sweat from his forehead and said: “Bless you, my son”.

German then turned towards the valley and said: “Rest in peace old fisherman...”

It was getting dark. He was alone in the train car. The train’s wheels were noisy. German was clutching the lump of soil the old man had given him, like he was hugging his homeland for the last time. The windows in his car were dark. He felt like he was traveling through a tunnel.

German was on his way back to Australia.

Finally the train came to a stop.

“Solun! - Thessaloniki!” yelled the conductor.

German did not hear him... he could not hear him. He lay on the floor of the empty car, firmly squeezing the lump of soil.

His children were left waiting for him in a foreign country...

THE WAR AS IF IT WAS THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY

It seemed like Kostadin Tsrnodenov died suddenly, like he was run over by a boulder that had slipped from the hands of a frail martyr who was unable to hold it back. He kept looking at it rolling back but was unable to stop it... until it hit the bottom of the abyss... War for Kostadin Tsrnodenov was something like that, which left scars that now make him see his own life as the enemy...

Tsrnodenov is abroad all alone with only his feelings and sometimes with despair scratching at his life and at the time in 1947, which he sprinkled with his own blood.

After the war Kostadin Tsrnodenov remained in treatment at the Zgorzelets city hospital. Several plastic surgeries had to be performed on his face because he had deep scars from a blast he received during the war. He carries the scar with him everywhere he goes and feels its pain. The pain is strongest when he thinks of his life, his wife Rumena, their life together... which crashed as a result of this patched up ugly face.

When the war ended Rumena Tsrnodenova went on living her life in anticipation... But she never anticipated that war could bring so much evil, devastation and eternal pain. She served in the Trauma units to the last moments, along with others, carrying wounded from the front to the hospital.

Rumena was a beautiful woman, stout with rosy cheeks, a real country girl. That's how Kostadin Tsrnodenov remembered her.

One day fate called upon Kostadin to return. Remembering his old life, with aroused old desires, he landed in the city and was placed in a shelter in "Chair".

When he arrived he was met by people with whom he had lived in Poland. It became a habit for these people to come out and welcome new arrivals. They were always interested to know what was happening with the people they left behind.

“Welcome Kostadin,” said one of the oldest residents from barrack number four.

“Thank you, Ioshe...” he replied. “It was difficult living alone abroad... All our lives they trample on us and humiliate us because we are foreigners...” he added.

“Here we are all the same... We are with my own people even though we came here from all corners of the world, Poland, Russia, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and elsewhere...” said Ioshe.

“I am glad to hear that, Ioshe...” replied Kostadin.

“Kostadin, have you met any of your relatives yet?” asked Ioshe and then said: “I have no one... I am living alone...”

“No, Ioshe. I have not seen any of my relatives. I too have no one...” Kostadin replied.

“No one Kostadin?” Ioshe asked sounding surprised. “For us it seems like the war was over yesterday. Our fate has gifted us these shelters... They are now our eternal homes,” added Ioshe.

Kostadin left and walked down the long hallway. He did not want to talk any more.

He lived alone and alienated. One thought was constantly biting him: “I will blacken Rumena’s youth. She needs to find a nice man. Surely she has received the letter and believes I am dead. If I contact her she will probably accept me and I will make her life a living hell. She will want to get out and meet people... and me with this face...? Let her get married and after that I will contact our child...”

He inquired about his son and found out that he was enrolled in “May 9” elementary school. He found out from the other children who his son was; the child named Tsrnodenov. He watched his son from afar. He could not stand not seeing him every day. He bought a huge chocolate bar wishing to give it to him but he did not want anyone to see him. One day he came closer. He held out his hand and gave it to him. The boy looked at him with fear in his eyes!

“What’s your name, boy?” Kostadin asked.

“Mitko Tsrnodenov,” answered the boy.

“Mitko?” he asked.

“Yes!” said the boy

“Do you have parents, Mitko?” he asked.

“Just a mother,” answered the boy.

“Only a mother? Where is your father?” Kostadin asked.

“I don’t know. My mother says he will return... A woman once said that he might be dead. We have not heard from him to this day...” answered the boy.

“Dead?” he asked.

“That’s what the woman said...” replied the boy.

At that moment the bell rang and boy ran into the school.

Kostadin Tsrnodenov went back to shelter number four.

When he went home Mitko told his mother about meeting and talking to an ugly man.

Rumena became excited and frightened. She was afraid she might also lose her child.

“Who might this damn man be...? Why is he circling only around my boy?” she kept thinking. The next day she decided to hide and see who this man was and what he wanted from her child.

Kostadin could not wait to go and see Mitko again... to talk to his son, to caress him...

But on his way he saw Rumena from the distance. He did not want to reveal himself to her. Not after he sent her that letter... he definitely did not want to...

Rumena was not only angry but also curious to find out who this man was, so she hid and waited. Seeing that she was gone, Kostadin continued to walk towards the school. When she saw that the stranger was Kostadin her heart began to pound wildly. She found it hard to believe it was him. She kept asking herself: "Can he be Kostadin? It can't be! Can it be...? No, it can not be Kostadin!?"

But it was him, a tall, blond man clumsily looking around. When he saw her and saw that she was looking right at him, his face lit up.

"Rumena!" he cried out and ran towards her. They met in the school yard. Every nerve in their bodies was tense. Rumena could not contain herself.

"Rumena! What is it?" he asked anxiously. Then he remembered. "Yes, she was not supposed to see me like this. She was disappointed by my ugliness..." he thought and wanted to run away.

Kostadin took a few steps away from Rumena.

"It's him! It's him, Kostadin!" she said to herself and then yelled out:

"Don't run away! It's you! Why are you running away from me?"

He stopped, bowed his head and stood there with his back to her.

"I waited for you! Everyone was telling me you were dead. Who was the bastard who wrote me that you were dead?" she asked.

"It was me, Rumena... look at me... what I look like... Look at me... You wouldn't want me like this... Do you?" he asked.

She was silent. She looked like she wanted to say: "I don't know what to do... It is impossible for me to decide! Oh, Kostadin! This is

not just a bad dream? What is happening to me? What does life want from me...? I need to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’...” but she said nothing.

Kostadin kept looking at her wistfully. Rumena felt an irresistible urge to know what he was thinking. Kostadin did not like it when someone showed compassion for him. He was a proud man but he could not always show his pride with this kind of face.

Rumena was suffering. Kostadin looked at her with compassion and lovingly smiled. She was ready to throw her arms around him. “Yes, it’s him,” she said out loud and all negative thoughts suddenly vaporized.

“Is this why you have been hiding all these years?” she asked and quickly added, “For me you are handsome. I love you for your heart, which has remained the same and I believe it still has a place for me... Right Kostadin!”

He smiled and hugged her. Rumena puckered her lips to kiss him but felt a void in her mouth, dry scars, traces from the iron pieces that had cut up his face.

Rumena pressed his head against her heart and proudly cried. She then kissed him on the head, on the forehead, on the eyes and thought to herself: “Where is your beauty Kostadin? They all looked at your face and not my happiness...” She kept looking at him then asked:

“Why did you want to run away from me?”

“But I came back Rumena. I hope that there is a place for me here?” he replied barely audibly when he saw her moist eyes.

“Yes, Kostadin you are still mine. The war has punished you badly but has given me back my joy...” she said.

Kostadin then hugged her and told her about the letter and how much it pained him to have to send it to her.

They both took little Mitko by the hand and went home.

When Mitko saw them sitting side by side, and his mother being so cheerful, he was left with a particular impression. He got closer to Kostadin, looked at him as if wanting to say:

“Forgive me father for running away from you...”

I HAVE RETURNED TO DIE IN MY OWN HOMELAND

Voices were heard that Labro Linin, husband of the famous beauty Lina, had returned from America. He had no problem returning to his village Gabresh, nestled against Mount Malimadi. It was completely desolate... a wasteland. It as if he was the only resident in Koreshta. "When you travel alone, the road seems longer," he thought to himself when he sat on the threshing floor, overgrown with grass, to have a good look at the wide valley, or "My beloved Koreshta", as he used to call it.

That's what he used to call it and grieved and pined for it. He sat there motionless, languishing for a long time and then, suddenly, as if he was the master of his own emotions, tears sprang up from the deep abyss of his soul and he began to lament. He remembered the young ladies returning from the water spring carrying colourful earthenware jugs and smiling and giggling as they passed by the bachelors. His thoughts then took him away, like a captive, far away to a different time. He forgot everything and, with a strong trembling voice, he began to sing:

"Lino mori Sevdalino, Lapka (iabolko) ke frlam po tebe mori chupo, Ti ke se svrtish da gledash, Ke ti go vidam litseto, Litseto belo, Lino mori tsrveno..." (Lina hey Sevdalina, an apple I will toss at you hey girl, you will turn to look, I will see your face, your beautiful face, hey Lina your rosy face...)

He got up and caught hold of the centre post. He looked toward the barn. The doors were wide open and gaping at him. He remembered the trampled straw under his feet but there was no smell of cow dung that coated the threshing field. The wooden pitch forks were all rotting. The threshing field was abandoned right in the middle of its use. The people left their jobs and their homes when the opposing army was coming...

That morning the sky above the Koreshta valley was colourful; blue with white clouds. Labro listened to the sounds of the river and to the songs of the birds. He then began to circle around the centre post... spinning around it, moving faster and faster. His awareness took him back, back to his youth, allowing him to peer through the

memories that had faded away, that were suppressed and that were beaten down by his suffering. But the man who passionately loves his father's hearth needs to safeguard his memories in a secret hiding place, in the deepest recesses of his soul until he dies.

It seemed to him as if he had just seen Lina dressed in a bridal gown, riding a white horse. She wore a white wreath with long braided gilded silver threads, covered with a white translucent handkerchief. Her face was as white as snow and now Labro was losing sight of her through his sorrowful tears. Lina bowed before him like he was her husband and said her vows in our language (Macedonian). He stood before her, arms stretched out and Lina gracefully, as if floating on air, came into his embrace... he caressed her... and lost her as a passenger in the civil war, when she was cut down by an exploding grenade and lost both legs on Mount Malimadi. Lina was a great Macedonian fighter... asking for Labro while she was dying... refusing to surrender to death. She begged him to come but, there in that great love, Labro came too late, but it was not his fault.

He has now returned so that his bones can be together with hers. Labro knows that Lina is expecting him.

He stopped spinning, wiped the sweat from forehead and lay there like a wounded beast until sunset. When the shadow of the mountain began to cover him he felt like he was covered by a thick, black plaid woolen blanket. He sighed and said: "Eh, love is like a worm, it eats away at you every day, little by little, turning your life into crumbs... Love is a tyrant..."

He lay there thinking about how life was in that country when it was full of people, full of songs, full of richness and good health.

According to the elderly people from the village, Labro Linin was a nice modest boy, separated from politics and ignorance. He was interested only in his piece of land upon which he had grown up. He belonged to the Bochkarovski family which had old and deep roots here. Now he is an American and goes by the name Mr. Lem. He has come here to die on his piece of land, where he was born. He wanted to build a lighthouse. And that is what happened. He had

prepared his plans a long time ago explaining to the villagers what the structure would look like. They looked at him strangely. Some even told him that he was insane and that the only way he could save himself was if he jumped in the D'mbeni abyss. But when he started building the structure, even those who mocked him came and joined him. Mr. Lem, of course, paid double the going rate for their labour but most wanted to work for free...

The workers were all dressed in white robes and the exterior of the lighthouse was covered with white granite. "I want to turn my black suffering into white... Our roots are here, in this soil. They are deep and white. Capable of giving birth and sustaining life..." Labro Linin told the workers.

The foundation was dug deep. The walls were slowly and painstakingly being built, but only during the night, and the structure was taking a discernible shape. "We need to emerge from the darkness," he explained. The unusual building was growing and passersby could not tell what it was going to be; a church, a museum, a monument, a hotel... Some even said it might be a space station. They kept guessing until the structure began to take the shape of a tall tower with three corners over the top of Mount Malimadi. The builders worked tirelessly. One day the workers announced that they could see Mount Pelister from the top of the structure. Mr. Lem wanted to see for himself. When he reached the top, in a loud voice, he cried out:

"People! Brothers! From the darkness here we can see our brothers over the border. Who now wants to see their fate?" he said then looked deep into the south and yelled out: "Now a person can see the devastation and the graves in this country.

Everything to him was depersonalized, wild...

"Who wants to tell their brothers, the world about this, let them climb up here!" he called out to those below who were waiting for him to descend.

"This here is our land! Look at it! It looks sad before our eyes. But it is the most beautiful land in the world. It is my native land! And I,

Labro, belong to it... Look at us... the kind of people we are! Like the ants we are all gathered together. We are with you, day and night, and now we are far from you... We care for you, we love you like a mother. Our land! Your people are scattered, chased away all over the world, but they cry for you.”

He climbed down the tower magnificently and proud. He then invited everyone who wanted to attend to do so. A little later ploughmen, reapers, shepherds, young and old began to arrive. Labro started the ceremony by climbing up the tower and lighting the eternal flame. That was all there was to the entire ceremony. People expected a speech but when he came down he wept with joy.

“Let it, let it people! Let the eternal flame burn over our Koreshta. Let there be one common light over all over our graves,” he announced.

Now all of Koreshta was illuminated with light. A nocturnal bird flew over Labro’s head. He followed its flight until it was lost against the light...

“Where is it hurrying to?” Labro was wondering and shaking his head. He was happy to see the bird fly, free from all restrictions. “Fly bird, fly! Tell the world about our celebration here today...” he yelled out loud.

All of Koreshta was lit, everyone in Koreshta danced, sang, dressed in folk dresses, which the people wore on special occasions.

There were voices amongst the people saying the Greco-philas, the son of the lame Kiratsa and Vane from the Durov family had left.

Someone saw them sneaking out of Beriki and running hard to get to Kostur to inform the government that the peace had been disturbed; many people have gone wild and have fallen into some kind of trance.

Right before dusk armed horofilakes (Greek policemen) arrived at the tower. They were looking for Mr. Lem, the American. The yellowish, pale horse-faced astonomos (Greek police chief) Mr.

Mitsotakis, was impatiently tapping his foot ordering the policemen to bring him Mr. Lem at any cost.

But when the policeman Parcalakis returned and said “I am pleased to announce that Mr. Lem has invited you to attend a dance at his place,” the Chief became even angrier. He jumped up to his feet and, with military steps, went closer to Mr. Lem.

“When will you scoundrels learn not to come back here?! You have long been written off in accordance with decree number 2536,” he sternly said to Mr. Lem and without pause yelled out: “Tell me!!”

Mr. Lem jumped up a little with the rhythm of the dance, turned towards the chief, looked him up and down and ignored his question. During the next jump he mockingly asked:

“What is your problem Sir?! You are welcome to join us... today is a celebration of my soul. I am paying for everything myself...” Mr. Lem then spoke to him in English and said: “Please, will you please join us. I am very happy that you came to my merriment... Sir, here sir, this is my hometown. I love everything about it, our dances, our language, our friends, our streets. For me, all these places are...”

Without letting him finish, the Chief interrupted Mr. Lem and said: “So, you are allegedly an American, eh? So go back and look for your hometown in America!”

“Sir, I feel great in America but America is not the first place I would have chosen to be. I chose America only because of my misfortune and, as much as I want to, it cannot be like my real homeland. This here is my homeland which I carry in my heart and soul, Sir!” he replied.

“You are a stranger to us!” said the Chief.

“Please Sir, don’t be like that... What do you think? This beauty here can so easily be erased from my memory...? “No! No! You don’t understand, Sir. The world today has a completely different understanding. You cannot take away something that is dearest to a man with violence. You, for example, why do you love your Crete?”

To me that end of the world is alien. I would not even want to bother thinking...”

Again, without waiting for Mr. Lem to finish speaking, the Chief interrupted him and said: Mr. Lem! I don't need to hear all that... I am asking you to say something in your defense.”

“What defense? I have not committed a crime. All I have done is return to my homeland, the place where I was born, so that I can die here. If I have committed some kind of crime by doing that then, please take me to the international court and take legal action against me,” replied Mr. Lem.

Chief Mitsotakis pulled out his sword and charged towards Mr. Lem yelling:

“Listen you! You don't seem to recognize our authority here!”

“And you, Sir, you don't recognize us in our own country, on the soil where we were born and lived for generations. So, what do you want from me? To recognize the destruction and desolation you left here?” retorted Mr. Lem.

After he calmed down a little, Mr. Lem said: “See this place here, this is Koreshta! This is where my roots begin and I came here to die! Right here! That's all there is to it! I want my bones to be buried here and to remain here. If my bones remain here my family, one day, will want to do the same... This is exactly what my aims are, Sir. To rest in eternal peace in the country where I was born... This is how it is in our tradition... just like the eels...” explained Mr. Lem.

“I can't allow you to do that! Because I am the authority here!” replied the Chief.

“You, Mr. Mitsotakis, may have more understanding of international law, but I am the owner of this threshing yard... As far as I know it is the same everywhere in the world, even in your Crete, right? And you, sir, you have no right to assault my guests on this piece of land. I have cultivated this soil. My father and grandfather cultivated this

soil before me. This is the soil where by grandfather is buried; a celebrated hero of Ilinden, brought down by bullets from your gendarmes. In 1921 my father was a soldier and left his bones in Asia Minor fighting Turkey for your Greater Greece! In 1939 my brothers put on Greek uniforms and fought the Italians on the Albanian front in defense of your Greater Greece; they never came back! Oh, my dear sir! After that you chased me away. That is why today I am celebrating the day of my soul. Every day you threaten and abuse people and you loudly proclaim that you are civilized? Do you hear me, eh? I married my Lina here. My children were born here... and you expelled them to the Eastern European Countries. See that road there, leading to the cemetery? My friends carried my beloved Lina in a white coffin along that road. You can see why I am so happy. Today I saw my entire country from that lighthouse... Do you hear me man, Mr. Police Chief? Here, have a drink... for the soul! Leave the politics alone..." said Mr. Lem.

But before Mr. Lem was done talking, the Chief jumped in and loudly yelled: "Don't talk to me like that, Mr. Lem. You will be forced to..."

Mr. Lem got upset and yelled back: "Don't you call me Mr. Lem! My name is Labro Bochkarovski! I am the son of Tsilo and Vesa Bochkarovski! Grandson of Ilinden fighter and leader Krsto Bochkarovski! I was born right there, in the corner of these ruins! I was forcibly evicted from my ancestral home! I am not a refugee and ashamed of coming back... I have been exiled by force...!"

The Chief again interrupted him and said: "Your documents, Mr. Lem. And I forbid you to speak that Slavophone language. For us you don't exist."

"I don't have documents. I buried them in the foundations of the tower. I came here to die... on my land..." replied Labro.

"That can't be! We need to extract you from our Ellada (Greece) alive. Remember, you are an American Mr. Lem," said the chief.

“My dear sir, I worked all my life to build this lighthouse. It gives me great pleasure to die on his piece of land. It is my human right where I lay my life...” replied Labro.

“You still think this thing is a lighthouse?” asked the chief.

“Yes sir, I do! The hardest thing for me was to cross myself in foreign and alien lighthouses. Don’t forget! We too have heroic figures. Do you want me to count them? I have already picked out a place for all of them here. What do you think; they did very little for their people? They believed in the people...! We have saints too, sir, born of our people... and what wrong did I do by paying tribute to them before I die... it is our human duty and tradition. The winds did not bring me here you know... my heart did...” replied Labro.

“You mean you were involved in the revolution? Then you know what awaits you Mr. Lem?” said the chief.

The two men stood there facing each other face to face.

“Sir, our people say it is better to be killed than die of fear. This is my land and a grave for me is the safest place against my destiny...” replied Labro.

“So, that’s the way it’s going to be, eh old man?!” said the chief.

Behind them stood the Greko-phils Vane from the Durov family and the son of the lame Kiratsa, rubbing their hands.

“Shoot him, Mr. Chief! Shoot him because he bamboozled the villagers into building him this scenic white house!” said one of the Greko-phils.

And so unfolded the history of Labro Linin, a troubled man, full of thirst for righteousness, along with all the suffering of his ancestors; which seemed to be culminating in him. In a dignified outburst of pride, wearing a white robe, Labro raised his shaky hands skyward and set himself on fire.

He was standing while burning, refusing to fall down. This is how he surrendered his life to the land and the country he loved.

A CONFESSION

That day Dobrin Suvogorski wandered aimlessly around town and then decided to go back to his relatives in Lerin.

Seeming like his mind was at ease from his concerns, he stood on platform number one, holding his diploma as a Greek teacher which he received a year ago from the academy in Solun, while being flogged by the dry sea wind. He climbed aboard the train car, which was divided into two classes, and sat by the window in the direction of travel. Suvogorski traveled from town to town all throughout Greece looking for work. Now he was returning to his father's homeland and everything felt better, including the wind that was blowing hard on him. The space up here was wider and more beautiful but also trampled by everyone. At the same time it seemed like he was looking at it with alien eyes. It looked strange and gloomy, and everyone seemed like they were carrying the souls of others. Most of the passengers in second class were squeezed next to one another and the situation made some to go to first class. A 33 to 35 year-old man wearing a khaki coat with medals and other badges pinned on it arrived on the opposite side of Dobrin and was about to sit down. "Not even the King can make me move from here..." said the man through his teeth, voicing his determination.

The man clumsily dropped his tired body on the car seat, which made his medals flutter and reflect light all throughout the car, receiving funny looks from the other passengers. At the same time a villager with a penetrating look in his eyes arrived and sat opposite to him. He said:

"Hey, you! Are you still wearing those good-for-nothing royal medals when there is no king or government left in power in this country? You can piss on them now..."

Dobrin smiled with a hidden smile. There was an outburst of laughter in the crowd.

"It is well-known, people! The sheep wear bells and men wear medals, but now my friend, people wear five-pointed red stars or swastikas but you, you decorate yourself with medals from a

frightened king. There he is hiding in Cairo and the people here...? Listen to me friend! If you get on the nerves of some Prussian he will rip them out like ripe plums..." said the villager.

"I earned them, I fought against the Germans when this country had a king and an army!" angrily replied Manolis Ladas while adjusting the medals pinned on the left side of his chest.

"My good man, it is now 1941 and have you heard what the Reds are saying? They are saying that we now have to fight against the Germans, but our victory will turn us into communists. Then you will have to toss your medals, along with your coat and you will become a different person, the same as the rest of us... we will all be the same..." said the villager, advising the man.

There was strange, loud laughter. "Is that you?!" chuckled Vangelitsa, from the public house "Eros", who was traveling to the neighbouring city and, as manager of the house, was looking to recruit new young ladies for her establishment because she and everyone like her was feeling exhausted from the arriving Fritz (German).

"I saw this honey yesterday, decked out like this in front of 'Eros', skulking around with no money to pay..." said Vangelitsa out loud while giggling.

"When the Fritz's were not here you knew me very well, but now what can I tell you Miss Vangelitsa. You should know one thing: your glory today is actually the death of your happiness..." said the man with the medals.

The train had left Solun station a long time ago, perhaps a few hours ago. Suvogorski, sitting by the window, kept looking outside. He recognized a few places. The stations he passed through were very busy, filled with beggars, hungry children hopping from car to car... Greater Greece was falling apart... the same was asserted by the man with the medals. While looking at Sugororski's peaceful face, he kindly said:

“You are a gentle and intelligent man. I am Manolis Ladas, captain of the royal army and the son of a colonist in this region.

You... you look like a native (endopios) of this region... you understand, I bear the pain. You see I still wear this outfit, which makes me ugly, but I wear it so that they can swear at those who made me wear it and sent me on this path to my destiny... Because when I think of the past, I feel as though my happiness returns. My father appears to me in a dream unshaven, tired and weak, with bleary eyes and his cheeks and forehead are always wrinkled. But his smile makes him humane and gentle, as if he is the only person in the world with a big heart. His back is bent and he constantly coughs. He wanders around... his is happy when he is moving. I sometimes see him in my dreams clumsily wandering around wrapped up in his big old coat, looking happy watching us, his children playing in the cobblestone yard and growing half hungry. He was a good and honest man willing to do good work... Now, and now that he is unruly and a refined egotist who only loves his own enjoyment, he is darkening my thoughts.”

“I am sorry, sir... I am so ashamed! Only the devil knows what is happening to our people... what makes us hate one another... especially when we are told ‘different blood runs in us’... My father found his good in someone else’s evil... He did not understand that one cannot protect himself by insulting others...” replied Dobrin.

The man with the medals angrily spat on the floor. Dobrin noticed that his tongue was dark red... probably from the wine. Dobrin thought the man was going to stop talking. A strong gust of wind blew and shook the partly opened window. Air rushed in and blew the man’s hair. Manolis nodded his head and continued:

“A few individuals, including my father, had a desire to seek their fortune in this end of the country, on this soil here, which we Greeks have acquired, only by a ‘foggy concept’ derived from many myths about Alexander the Great and about you Slavs. They told us that you are barbarians and bad people. This world is strange... Politics! Politics! Sir! But only the weak love themselves... the strong carry all nations in their hearts... The people in this land are gentle people. My father should have thought of that... of his humanity... But

instead he became wild... but from what? What made him do that...? Sir...? What...? My father once said to me: ‘If I die, you continue my work. Here is your life... here is your power...’ Do you see the legacy he wanted to leave me? I, Manolis Ladas, am a teacher by profession. My story is a family secret. My father carried it and lived it. I was going to inherit it. That curse was also supported by law. People could be given happiness and it was easily taken away. But you know, sir, one day his luck ran out... it could no longer carry him on its shoulders... It dropped him on the spot... like it did you and now me... sir...” said the man with the medals as his head slumped forward.

Dobrin looked at Manolis who was now sunk in deep thought. He watched him as Manolis slowly began to unwind his accumulated sadness, looking for an exit... to talk about everything that was life...

“My father, old man Ladas, initially thought that he would stay only a few years and when he had amassed a sufficient amount of wealth, perhaps, he would forget about returning to his native Epirus. He had no nostalgia for his home to attract him to return. This was after the Turks left and after 1913 when Macedonia was divided and given to several masters. That’s when the Greek government summoned old Ladas and made him an official. He gladly accepted the appointment. He wanted to feel the taste of wealth and to forget the winter time which tormented his life; of constantly having to sleep in a hut dug at the foot of Murgana. He was weak. His wife Melpomena lay with him under a blanket. She did everything during the long winters so that they could eat less. The government gave him this position because he believed he was entitled to it. He believed he would live a good and carefree life.

The man who brought him to the village and introduced him to the villagers had no hair on his face. He had a yellowish dark complexion and deep wrinkles. His eyes were small, dark, sunken and full of hatred. He was the representative of the new Greek government here. My father, Ladas, was his representative because this man thought he could make him an obedient clerk, who would lead the birth registry and other things that the government required.

The first mistake that Ladas made, after finishing his mini course in diplomatic training, was during an intimate lunch when he wanted to express his view of things, namely, that the people here were good-natured and not believed to have bad intentions. He stood up because he felt that he would be more authoritative if he stood up and was ready to say something...

When he opened his mouth, the man from the government looked at him with curled eyebrows and Ladas swallowed hard and sat down. The man had Ladas trained like a puppy dog.

In Epirus, our birthplace, my father was depressed and desperate. He used to say ‘we live here waiting to die...’

But somewhere along the way he changed. Now, he could punish and forgive people in the name of his position. It is easier for him to express his thoughts now.

After that lunch the man from the government took him aside and said: ‘Mr. Ladas you must always remember that a different kind of blood flows in the veins of these people... one more thing... It is a terrible thing to be self-confident. It is the same as making your life bitter with some trinkets. You must bash the snake on the head... leave the body alone... let it squirm. You Ladas, as a politician, you must have a thick skin and a fat belly...’

Ladas, with his head bowed down, stood in front of the man, looked at him in the eyes and hung onto every word he said.

Ladas quickly realized that what was required from a government representative was to be able to hate and to act with instinctive diplomacy... But deep down, Ladas was sure that to rule one had to rely on knowledge, power and will. A man needed to have these things.

And because of this he fell into despair and his empty head began to collect plenty of thoughts. He began to sink in his own thoughts, seeming that he could not come to peace with himself. He existed for days away from himself and mumbled: ‘Ladas, you are not alone; everyone in the government is like that... This is how your

life is now; you can only taste wealth if you are crude and rude to them. Don't forget that glory and peace can't exist together. Yes, yes. To live is to run through droplets of sweat... This is eternal wisdom. Everything else is a farce, fraud! A trap!' He would stop talking and start running... 'oh, God forbid, someone might be listening to me' he would think. He also had this imbedded fear that someone might be reading his thoughts... He thought he needed to be alone... far away... But then, suddenly he thought of himself a cunning, wise and clever man, ready to rule... He thought that this was the shortest path to prosperity. He was nothing yesterday, as the gentleman from the government had told him, and now the entire government is hiding behind him!?

They gave old Ladas a uniform and he became like a general who saw things with alien eyes. He eventually lost the calluses on his hands and became fat, with his belly hanging down, looking like the belly of a pregnant mare.

He was missing a couple of front teeth, he had no other faults but when he spoke he stammered especially when he read his condemnations of Slavism. Trying to paraphrase, he would lose his order of words and would feel humiliated. He then would angrily hit his papers with his fist and say: 'This is what it says, just like I read it! And like it says in this letter!'..." concluded Manolis and stopped talking.

Manolis was a little boy when he first arrived and met the children with whom he was going to share a school bench. They were cheerful and kind. They liked him. He grew up with them. He learned their language and many of their customs. He also spoke their language, the same language which his father hated, forbade and punished people for speaking. For years he shared his pencil and eraser with a girl named Bisera Rumenova who sat with him at the same desk. The older he became the more he established what was going to be free, spiritual, true, strong and eternal traits. Perhaps since then his love became strong for such things. Bisera grew up to be a solid and beautiful girl. Manolis... he was already aware of many things. His father, with so much influence, could have done anything for him. But all old Ladas did was send his son, at public expense, to study to become a teacher. Good for him, he succeeded

in doing what no native had the right to do. The natives had no “kinonika fronimata” (social beliefs) or they needed to be Greekophile to the bone to achieve even that.

So one day Manolis, with a sad heart, was separated from the children whom he loved. Bisera was there when he was leaving. He wanted to say something but he held back and just blushed. He was not happy in Athens. He was preparing for exams and lived on a special government allowance. Now many times he came into conflict with his father. The old Ladas made all sorts of accusations against people who were not guilty...

Manolis looked at Dobrin and said: “You are a lucky man and that’s why, sir, you can’t understand the pain of others. What kind of villain do you think my father was to these people, who he served, you are naïve and good-natured people, you don’t know and you will never know our family secret, and what do you think, that my father invented this discrimination?”

He was not capable, sir, his mind could not grasp all the work he was expected to do, but he did manage to separate me from Bisera... to prohibit our love. Perhaps it was because of Bisera that he sent me so far away. But I wrote to her...”

Manolis remembered last spring, when his and Bisera’s loved flourished wide at the same time the lilac trees were flowering. After completing his first and second year, they would not allow him to return home. But Bisera waited for him. When they finally met Manolis was overwhelmed by her beauty. He was elated with a feeling that he finally would have his beautiful and gentle woman. He thought there was no need for him to explain anything to her. But then she said:

“Manolis, your people don’t want me!”

Manolis was crushed. He embraced her with a sense of guilt and wanted to say: “I love you. I want you and I deserve you. You are the woman whom I love... and no other...”

His heart was filled with joy but he could not get the words out of his constricted throat. He became obsessed with a sense of uncertainty and tears began to flow freely.

Bisera's heart was delighted, her love floated like a flame. With her blonde hair, teary eyes and embroidered shirt, she looked like a wounded bird. When Bisera went silent Manolis began to whisper his love for her. He never talked much, perhaps because he did not know that he doubted their love. He wanted to swear but then he said things which brought tears to his eyes and made his heart beat joyfully. He noticed Bisera, with her fragile body, come closer to him, open her mouth slightly, smile and raise her eyebrows. Slowly, still timid, but with boundless trust...

Manolis began to talk again. He said: "And so I left and she was left there alone with nothing... I simply said: 'Let it be born... there will be joy for it too...'"

Then I returned to Athens to graduate. Meanwhile my father talked to the authorities and made sure I was immediately drafted into the army. He assumed that love had its own time..."

Manolis looked at Dobrin... they were both sunk in their own thoughts. Dobrin was thinking of his own childhood, of the time when his mother and father had visited him in Solun, carrying colourful bags filled with things, wide-eyed and joyful dressed in the most beautifully embroidered Macedonian folk dresses. They waited for him outside the entrance. He was ashamed to receive them because he was afraid that his friends and classmates would find out his background; that he was an "endopios" (indigenous). He did not want anyone to know his roots. Only his teacher knew about that, who after a long upbringing had Dobrin reborn as a man who separated himself from his own kind and had accepted a Hellenic consciousness and convinced him that he would be a pillar in his homeland in the hellenization of the natives. Dobrin remembered how he had loathed his own parents because they had Slavic blood. He loathed and mocked them, especially when they spoke Greek because they sounded so unnatural...

These memories were painful for him. Every time he thought of this, pain began to surface from the depths of his soul, a pain he could not get rid of. "I loved something I did not understand... A person cannot uncover himself from his own actions..." Dobrin thought to himself while looking at Manolis. He began to hate Manolis for uncovering his truth. "Yes, nothing offends as much as unjust politics," Dobrin thought to himself. The bad language he tossed at his parents was like mud which has now dried on their faces, which he wants to quickly wipe off. He felt like getting off the train and going on foot. He was afraid his faith would abandon him.

His homeland and his mother whom, before his eyes, he had lost a long time ago he now wants returned to his heart. Dobrin remembered what his mother had told him: "Go, let it be that your father and mother are foreigners (non-Greeks), but no matter how far you go, remember you are one of us, your roots are from here, you belong to this nation of ours... try and show some interest in our dead generations. This is the only way to be merciful to us living here and have less difficulty understanding our history, our Macedonian misfortune..." Now his understanding is torturing him so much so that lately he has been unable to sleep all night, looking for ways to apologize to his mother who gave him birth. The war has created a different view of the hellenization he so desired. He joined a progressive organization in the people's movement and there they proposed to him that he become a representative of the nation, which he yesterday had not appreciated and looked at it as simple and backwards. Now he wants freedom in the same way his ancestors wanted freedom. But this wish has begun to slowly conflict Dobrin Suvogorski because in his soul he still carried the lie of Hellenism which stunk like rawhide and sometimes tortured him so much so that he found no joy in living. He now admits to himself that: "No one is unhappy without fault... Only in his work can a man find himself... The only one who truly grieves is the one who mourns all alone and without a witness..."

The train moved slowly through the train station signals in Voden and then rushed through the lush fields of Lerin Region. He remembered Tsveta Kostencheva who was madly in love with him and who suffered for it.

He wanted to have a big bunch of flowers, seemingly without purpose, but maybe now Tsveta will accept such overdue flowers.

Dobrin wanted to do this to free himself from the yoke of anxiety and from that which, the entire time in Solun, he failed find a girlfriend. So he thought: “Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, I will truly start to live...” but now he was left wishing that the train would reach his destination when it gets dark...

“When a man dies he leaves his name behind. When a cat dies it leaves its skin behind.” said Manolis with a painful look on his face as he adjusted himself on the seat. “And that’s what happened. But many things changed over the years. The entire village knew. My father was angry and overwhelmed by thoughts of how to get rid of Rumena’s family and avoid conflict. Then, a little later, Risto Rumenov was denounced and sent to exile where he died after being tortured,” concluded Manolis.

He then paused, looked at Dobrin and said: “Yes, sir, I have lived long enough and I have looked hard for the differences in our people... for our mutual hatred... and I have found that it actually does not exist...”

At that time, the war had already started and was raging on. Life became difficult for everyone, especially for the Ladas family which had no roots there. As before the land fed the peasants but the Ladas had no land and depended on the market for their food. But when the market ceased to function they ate whatever they could find on the ground and mostly begged the people to give them food. Then one day the Ladas family had nothing to eat. They decided to go to Epirus. But on the long way there, under the bosom of Mount Zmoliaka, old man Ladas said to his wife Melpomena: “Close your eyes and don’t look at me... this way I can die faster. The gods of our end have caught up to us... there is nothing to see in this desolate place... we have seen everything there was to see...” He died... more of what plagued him and less of his hunger.

The war ended and people returned. Manolis knew nothing. For years he dreamed of such a meeting. He kept Bisera in mind and burned with love. After he arrived in the village, no one recognized

him. Rumena's house was empty. The only person left there was old man Nedelko with the round head.

“You?! What are you doing here?! Your father crushed us all here! You came to do the same? To inherit his deeds?! Bisera killed herself... she jumped off the rocks... Did you not know that?”

Manolis took off his hat, wiped his face with his handkerchief and said nothing.

“A long time ago we lost our freedom and have no power...” said old man Nedelko.

“Do you understand, Mr. Ladas? That's why our customs are stronger than your laws. We had a festive funeral for Bisera. We all sang songs and danced the heavy dance. When your son was born your father called her a whore! He abused her... You, what do you think? Do you think Bisera was a whore? asked Nedelko angrily.

“A mother, she became paralyzed. Now you have an empty house... when a person meets people he needs to be human, Mr. Ladas...!” added old man Nedelko.

Looking for some sort of justification Manolis quietly said: “Well, the times were like that...” Angriely the old man said: “It was not the times that were like that... the people were like that... evil... A good person would be ashamed of even thinking like that, even in front of a dog... but your father...?”

But before old man Nedelko was finished talking, Manolis interrupted him and asked: “What about the boy...?” At that very moment a young child got into the conversation and asked:

“Are you looking for the orphan?”

“Yes, yes I am looking for him...” said Manolis.

“Come he said,” and then screamed out: “Hey everybody, have you seen the Greek boy?”

“Come with me, sir...” the boy repeated.

“We followed a whole pile of children asking them where he was,” said Manolis.

“There he is...!” yelled one of the children. “I remained stunned. We looked into each other’s eyes, seeming like in that very moment we were looking for the culprit who caused us this misfortune... I did not have the heart to ask: ‘Where is your mother?’ The child ran away from me frightened,” said Manolis.

“I contemplated committing suicide but then I thought how would my death solve this problem? I never did try to catch him, and so I thought I had lost him... I left and went back to my Epirus, looking for a new life, but my thoughts were constantly with him. I said to myself: ‘Manolis, a man must never stop hoping; eventually he will get to know you and will love you...’ I want to take all the blame and I hope it will bring me some peace from which no one can distract me. That is why I am going back there; to look for him. I would love to hear him call me father,” said Manolis.

A PERSON

Do you remember? It was a long time ago... Oh in our desolate country... why can't you remember...? It was that huge old man Risto Dorin. That mountain man with white hair and a hairy chest, with shoes stained with fresh mud, with his head half white covered by his fur hat and the other half, bold, burned by the sun, and his entire face, blue like a blue homespun coat.

He was dead; hanging from a tree for a few days and clusters of ravens landed and flew off him when the rope unwound. Those cursed birds hurried, each trying to drink more from Risto Dorin's expired eyes... He was hung there as an example to the others... so that the people in the area could understand what could happen to them...

It was early morning when Kapetanios Stathis arrived with his company. He was purported to be a strong man with shapely good bones. He had grown a beard and hung his guns and knives from his belt. People said he never put his knife back after he killed someone with it, without licking the blood dry from it. It was as if by law he had to lick his victim's blood from it. He always wanted to see what his victim's blood tasted like. He believed it protected him from losing his own blood...

That Kapetanios Stathis was a terribly cruel person, whose mission was to end us all... to shake up the people to help him begin that long process, because the people of that region of Greece were very strange, stubborn and even revolted against the laws of the Holy Kingdom.

The Kapetanios came here to serve with his "special units" and to put things in order. He was in a very good psychological mood and knew how to treat these people, who for many years did not understand the general line. They did not understand the sword that swung over their heads and the gallows that dangle from the breath of pain and cries of horror.

Calmly, in the bosom of the night, as was always since immemorial, the villagers were sleeping under the legendary mountain Vicho. But

this morning they woke shaken from the bursts of exploding mortars that exploded in the streets.

Even the dogs did not bark. Something unusual had happened to all living creatures down the valley. It lasted a long time. Then strong and fast, just like bursts of exploding mortars, someone's hand rang the church bell and a dirty distressed voice cried out:

“Attention, attention! Listen, listen, villagers! Everyone, from cradle to the eldest, must report to the church. Do it now, in five minutes, because if we find you later we will consider you a bandit”.

This call was repeated several times. And so, half asleep, the people quickly shuffled their way down the streets to reach the church before the five minutes expired. Just in time they arrived in front of the church, in front of the walls built with inscribed stones during Samoil's time. And now those inscribed stones, which the Greek authorities had covered with stucco so that they couldn't be seen, had the people trapped. Those were images carved with great pain, as the fearless soldiers stood in front of the red hot sword. And how, a one-eyed guide had painfully led the blind in a difficult march to their hometown. And now their descendants kneel outside those same walls facing machine guns, under the whip of time, exposed to the psychological process of that Kapetanos Stathis, who anxiously looked at the clock and was terribly angry because those lame elderly limped along the streets, those mothers who washed their infants on their breasts with tears were crying, and because their dry cough cut the morning silence... The people walked like slaves under the rugged look of the kapetanos being led to their slaughter.

They walked with a grim thought, which at times is so strong that it erodes the human mind; how do you respond in a language you don't know, when the price for not knowing is paid in blood... every one is hoping: “maybe he will not ask me...”

And he, Kapetanos Stathis, wearing those braids and armed to the teeth was calmly puffing his cigarette, looking like he was watching a defeated army approaching. But what is true is true; he greatly contributed to the order in this region because he fulfilled all the royal laws with utmost conscience, and it was not that easy to deal

with those “Ohranists” from the northern part of the country. But he knew he would be rewarded and promoted to Major, so...

He ordered the formation of the “tunnel of death”. That’s what the villagers called it. The gendarmes stood in two rows, facing each other, and the people passed through the tunnel they made. But often the makeshift tunnel was blocked with falling bodies. Stathis easily knew how to solve that problem. He had his two lines of gendarmes move along in the direction of the people called on to then hit harder.

“Be ruthless; show no mercy, not for the old, not for the weak, not for the wounded... And those veiled women...? you know nothing about them... they are underhanded ‘Amazons’ ...!” he yelled.

After everyone was beaten he went down to examine his work... his excitement was rising in his chest...

“I want to ask you, ladies, gentlemen!” he addressed them in an ironic tone of voice. “Is there anyone here born of a Greek mother?” He then waited in silence listening to the moaning and groaning.

“Speak! Barbarians...! Bandits...!” he yelled out and pointed his whip at individual people.

“You...! Over there...! What’s your name?” he asked a man.

“Bozhin, Sir, but in your registry, in my birth certificate, I am called Theofilos, Sir!” he replied.

“Skase! Slavomutro!” (“Shut up! Slavic scum!” in Greek) he yelled and ordered the phalanx to take him away and beat him to unconsciousness.

“And you old dove... What’s your name,” he asked an old lady.

“Nevena, my dear grandson...” she replied in Macedonian.

“What?! What?! Were you not given a Greek name?” he yelled at her.

“What is he asking me people? I don’t understand him...” yelled the old woman in Macedonian. But Stathis welcomed her reply with a swift punch in the mouth knocking out more of her sparse teeth. She forgot about her fear when she dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

But this was not the preferred method the phalanx would have used. The phalanx has a perfect method for dealing with situations like this. The phalanx would have tied the person with a rope around the neck and around the legs just under the knees in a circle so that the person’s feet were up while the person was lying on their back on the ground. This had a traumatic and psychological effect on those watching, especially when the person was beaten with sticks under the feet and struck with a rifle all over the body, but particularly on the gut. And what was most important about all this was that the phalanx had done its job... a job well done...

Then he, Kapetanios Stathis, would go from beaten body to beaten body and mercifully ask:

“Now my dear sir, tell me where are the bandits...? Are you helping them? Do you have a gun? Why aren’t you telling me? You can see for yourself how much you are suffering... Don’t you want all this to stop?”

He had a very soft soul when he was in the mood. But when he wasn’t, watch out, may God have mercy on the poor souls he was torturing...

After being beaten some passed out... And what good was it beating a person who did not feel it. But the phalanx knew its job. It would revive the person with a cold bucket of water. This was a folk remedy. Then, after that, they pointed the black revolutionary pipe (rifle barrel) at the person’s temple. Those watching were dying much faster than those being tortured.

That was well and good but my father, Risto Dorin, who could no longer watch, jumped out from the pile of old men and grabbed the rifle barrel. After that the old man stopped struggling and the

phalanx pacified him. All excited, Kapetanio Stathis came over and personally engaged himself in the short speech:

“In the name of the law, in honour of the king, in self-defense, in saving the image and honour of the army, I order you to hang this underhanded bandit by the neck...”

After this the gathering was disbanded, but not until after several “underhanded” bandits who, at any moment could become a danger to the state, were selectively apprehended to be sent to the island Leros. Then the guardians of the law ordered the villagers to prepare lunch for them and bring it under the thick shade of the tree where several villagers were already roasting mountain lambs over a spit. “Nice... Very nice...! Tomorrow we will go to another village. Koreshtata is a larger village. This is now Kapetanio Stathis’s kingdom, he is here now... his capital is set in a beautiful white country house...” one of the gendarmes was heard saying.

But as Kapetanio Stathis collected the “underhanded” bandits, less and less of them remained in his kingdom so he pondered and asked himself “how hard could it be to crush these barbarians who are a burden to the state? To exterminate all these “Ohranians” to the last person...?” Then, one day, rumours were circulating that our people had captured Stathis in one of the villages. When those who captured “burandar Stathis” brought him to their unit commander, they introduced him as follows:

“This is Kapetanio Stathis the one who slaughtered everything. The one who burned our villages... who tortured the very soul of our homeland...”

The unit commander looked at him from top to bottom and, with a sense of pride, asked him:

“Do you have a family Kapetanio Stathis?”

“I have...” answered Stathis patiently.

“Do you want to live, Kapetanio Stathis?” asked the unit commander.

“Yes, Commander, yes, I do...” replied Stathis.

“I know, Kapetanios, that when a man commits evil without thought he will always find an excuse for his crime,” said the unit commander and then ordered his unit:

“Let him go!”

All those who heard this were shocked.

“Let him go, Commander!?” yelled a young man whose house Stathis had burned down.

“Let him go!” shouted the commander, and addressed the young man:

“Young man, a soul cannot be won with weapons, it has to be won with humanity...”

Burandar Stathis was unable to come to grips with what was happening. “How is that possible?” he thought to himself. “Is this man telling me the truth... after all the destruction I have caused?” Stathis looked at his own hands. They looked like they were covered with fresh blood. He shook them to get rid of it. Then he felt like his very soul was stained...

Then, when the partisans left, he was left alone. He looked at the sky. It seemed like all his victims were gathering around him... all the people he had slain with passion. He could not walk... he felt like his legs were paralyzed. It seemed like the large stones in the surrounding landscape had turned into people and they were silently crying after being stabbed with a sharp dagger... This was Stathis’s method of ending their line.

“No, not here where the soil is bare! No, no, those encircling me are not those whom I have slain, but...” he was mumbling in fear.

Then, when he reassured himself that everything was okay, he took a step checking to make sure that he did not step on any blood. He

then remembered how he had toyed with his victims... poking them with his dagger to make sure they were not alive.

There is no one left for him now... He no longer deserved to be called a person.

His thoughts circled through his head rushing to find answers: “Why did he free me? Why does he not require revenge? He is a man, a commander. He is a man just like another man who lost everything because I killed his father, mother, wife and children. Why has he set me free? Who am I...?” He kept walking somehow insecure and again asking himself: “Maybe I should go back to my family that is waiting for me to come back after the war... I should go back to my children. The war here is ending... In what state will the commander find his family? And where will he find it? Where will he find all the people that I drove out of their homes...?”

With what kind of passion did I slaughter them? Why did I do that? Why?” Then he remembered shooting at a cradle with a child inside. The child was laughing and waving its hands at him. Then, frightened from the exploding gun, the child ran to its mother. But to save herself from further torment and humiliation she took the child and jumped out of the window. He stood there laughing and aiming his gun at her while she lay on the ground in terrible pain.

“What made me do that? Who am I serving? Whose interests are served to make this nation suffer so much? Yes, a man rarely perpetrates such evil acts on his own... But why am I the only one that is guilty? And whose orders did I follow...?” he thought to himself.

He walked slowly and then suddenly turned and yelled:

“Where the hell would you go, man?!”

He then said: “Keep going! Keep going... And if you can, go ahead; live free in the evil world you created...”

From the distance we all were yelling at him, calling his name. He stood over a cliff and replied:

“People!” he yelled, “Be proud of your birthright... You have earned the right to call yourselves people! You carry humanity in your soul!” and then thought to himself: “How great are these people...? Now one can see how strong they are. They too can kill... but will not... and I?! ... Who needs this kind of freedom...?”

He looked down the valley... It seemed to him like he saw his victims coming to meet him... and then there he was... a huge man approaching... an inexorable growl emerged from his mouth... He looked again and saw houses burning... in flames, people on fire calling him... extending their burning arms to him...

He started running frantically towards the rocks and collapsed... a little later the damn birds were pecking at him...

THE NICKNAMES OF IONE BUKOVALOV

God will not give to everyone. But now I am old.

I did not amass wealth and I did not commit evil. I have two sons and they too now carry the nickname “sweepers”. This is what they called us in the city. The entire family was nicknamed “sweepers”. I was the “old sweeper”, my wife was the “female sweeper” and our sons inherited their nickname from us, their parents. As I remember we also had a dog that followed us around.

When we lived in the village we were nicknamed “Bishkari” (pig herders)

We looked after the village pigs... and thus the nickname “pig herders”. It was hard for me carrying that cursed nickname, especially before I was married. No woman wanted to marry a “pig herder”. The women avoided me like the plague. But my Krstana did not care... and neither did she think that she too would be nicknamed “pig herder” after me. But she did not regret marrying me... She soon got used to the nickname and agreed to work with me and we looked after the village pigs together... for a crust of bread.

We had a nice time in those days. We had food to eat... and that was enough. The villagers were good people and shared with us what little they had... and on top of that they gave us a few slices of bacon. This is how we brought up our children, healthy and strong... we also looked after our own health. We had clothing... a few of everything... worn but fine according to us... smelly, rotten and loaded with sweat, according to others. As I remember, those clothes were given to us by the villagers... God bless them all.

To dispel rumours, it was not the villagers who drove us out of the village; they did not even fire us from our job. It was my decision... I decided to go to the city and find work there... something... a job that did not have a nickname. I thought to myself I will go to the city where there are good nicknames. I was more concerned for my children. I wanted them to lose the nickname “bishkari” (pig herders). What was I guilty of, for everyone to say: “There he is the

pig herder...” or “Call the pig herder” and even “Give it to the pig herder...?”

My wife and I had endured enough... of listening to people say:

“Give it to the ‘bishkar’, ‘bishkarka’ or ‘bishkari’...” (Man pig herder, woman pig herder, family of pig herders.) And all this charity was to keep us in the village so that we could continue to look after the village pigs. I felt pain in my heart when I heard things like that... especially for my children. Krstana is a meek and gentle woman. She knows how to spin yarn, knit... she is better than most women... that is why she does not care about the insults... Our children are now growing and can also help out with the work.

So one day I decided to go. I left my family in the village until I could establish myself in the city. I was dreaming of becoming a mailman, a guard at the baths... unfortunately I was illiterate. Then I thought, with God’s help I could become a shepherd... that’s what I wanted to be the most. But then I thought perhaps I could become something in the local government? And what’s wrong with that? And lucky for me we became “sweepers”. Now I tell people that if I was literate I could have become a minister...

When villagers heard about this, they envied me and said:

“The pig herder has set his butt in a government job...” After I was appointed sweeper I was sent to sweep the main street in town along which many prominent citizens walked... both buyers and sellers... and the young people walked on the promenade in the evenings. I was doing my job conscientiously. They wanted me to start sweeping very early in the morning so that the dust would settle before life joined the new day. And that is exactly what I was doing and for that reason they liked me. They called me “sweeper”, but I say it’s better than being called “pig herder”. It seemed to me like I was reborn. I was careful not to annoy any of the villagers who knew me. I did not want them to start yelling: “Look people, there he is, Ione the pig herder...!” But fortunately nothing like that ever happened. Meanwhile as the city grew so did the rubbish in the streets. There was as plenty of work to be done.

I was confident that they needed me and would not cause me problems, so I slyly brought in my son and gave him the side streets to sweep so that he could learn the job.

Not long after that, on May 1st, I brought my entire family to the city. We lived in a house with not even an inch of yard space around it. During the census they described us as “Proletarians”. I was very proud. I thought to myself: “Ione, Ione, you have made such a jump... there is no trace of the ‘pig herder’ in you.”

One day Trifun the shoemaker said to him: “Ione, we make up the core of the working class... It is well for you to remember that...” But all Ione did was nod his head because he did not know what that meant. He did not know many things. Then Trifun proudly, in the name of the party, said:

“You Ione, you truly love Stalin... not just any old way but you have his face tattooed on your chest... Oh, my dear Ione you must at least know that these people have special skins... Right!? Open your soul... we are all of the same kind...”

After that Trifun always addressed him as “Comrade Ione”. For a long time Trifun tried to find out who Ione was but without much success. Then, after he found out that he was tattooed with sickles, hammers and stars on the elbows, he suggested to him to become a member of the local committee. This way Ione and his family lived with all the benefits the city had to offer. The entire family worked sweeping streets and sometimes they swept the yards of the more prominent members of the community... making them sparkle, as Ione put it.

One day Ione was sweeping slowly while daydreaming, when he heard a woman’s voice. She said:

“You there... The ‘Captain’s wife’! All the other captain’s wives have become wives of majors and even generals... Only you and that man of yours have aged as Captains...”

“Listen, listen Ione”, Ione said to himself and perked up his ears.

He then heard another woman's voice. "Oh, you, girl... you have some face... 'Sacristan'! You boasted that you would become a 'priest's wife'. The people would then bow to you. Ha, ha, ha... You still can, all your man has to do is steal the liturgy from that priest Arso and then you can be a 'priest's wife?! Ha, ha, ha... And some 'priest's wife' you will be...!" said the other woman and spit a couple of times.

Ione continued to sweep while listening to their conversation and thought to himself: "If only my Krstana was here. Her heart would have been filled with joy to learn that other people too ate their eggs (made a living) from some sort of nickname. I made a big mistake not sending her to sweep this street today."

Ione dragged his broom so as not to make too much noise.

"For twenty dinars..." replied Ione.

"But why only twenty? I will give you forty dinars and let the 'Captain's wife' go ballistic," said the woman who earlier was called a "Sakristan".

"For that kind of money I will even wash the tiles..." replied Ione meekly.

"You come tomorrow, bring your wife with you. This will show everyone who is rich around here and who can afford to pay servants. I will also give you lunch..." said the woman with a begging tone of voice.

Ione immediately went to see his wife Krstana and told her everything he had heard, in detail, while she watched him with her gentle eyes.

"We are given an opportunity to meet the prominent people in this city..." Ione said to Krstana while looking at the perspiration on her forehead. A gentle smile began to appear on her face, seeming like it was coming from the depths of her heart.

“Only be careful...” he said to her. “Don’t be too quick with your words... Be careful not to expose us... We don’t want the city people to know that we were ‘pig herders’. We don’t need that...” he advised.

The next morning he knocked at the gate and listened. He then heard the clatter of wooden soles on the tiles: tlak-tluk, tlak-tluk...

“Welcome! Welcome!” he heard a happy voice say as if it was welcoming a group of nobles. Without being told what to do they immediately got down to work. Moments later, a woman, the one called the “Captain’s wife”, appeared on the neighbouring balcony and stared at them wide-eyed. Then, suddenly, all the women came out on their balconies to see what was going on. Some dragged their husbands with them.

Occasionally Ione threw a glance at them while Krstana busied herself like an ant cleaning the tiles... rubbing, rubbing, rubbing... just like licking them. Ione was getting upset and felt like telling her off: “Be smart you stupid... The people are watching you!”

They served lunch in the garden and paid the sweepers while everyone was watching from their balconies. They took their time counting the money in front of everyone, one coin at a time. One, two, three, four... thirty nine, forty... The sweepers made sure to thank them and show them respect. They then put their brooms on their shoulders and left.

Just outside of the gate the “Captain’s wife” was waiting for them.

“Tomorrow... my place! I pay 80 coins!” she said. Ione and his wife said nothing.

“If a ‘Sacristan’ who eats donated buns made by other people can pay 40 coins why can’t I...?” she said.

“And our business began to pick up. Not a word about our charges for the service. We cleaned any yard but I would like to say that the ‘Captain’s wife’ was the best. She also gave me a pair of pants, slightly worn but okay. She gave my wife a fashionable, slightly

worn dress. This was enough for our children to make fun of us. Our younger one called me ‘captain’ and suggested to his mother that with the money we earned we should buy a few jewels for her to wear on her neck... to go with her fashionable dress... Krstana always blessed them and loved them... It was a life without many worries... especially about our city nicknames,” commented Ione.

They always started their street sweeping from the centre and went towards the outskirts. The trash had its own course: to be expelled from the city. One morning a large crowd of people started out from the centre singing and breaking things while it headed for the outskirts. The sweepers kept sweeping just like they did every day. Then, suddenly, the crowd began to approach the sweepers. Being inexperienced in situations like this, instead of waiting for the crowd to pass, Ione continued to sweep and unconsciously began to sing the same song the crowd was singing. He did this for a while, pushing the accumulated garbage outwards. He thought to himself: “at least the road will be clean by the time they return... and surely that’s what the citizens would want?” Unfortunately, day by day, the city was getting more polluted and it became even more difficult for the sweepers to keep it clean. Ione, however, did not mind because the more garbage there was the more secure he felt about his job...

Opposite to him Ione watched these people run, cheerfully calling out: “Long live the Reds!” while he pushed his broom and happily muttered the same song they were singing. When he stopped to shake the dust off himself, Ione saw a woman, all puffed up and angry, running towards him. Then, suddenly, she grabbed his broom. Ione was shocked when he recognized her. She was the wife of his dear beloved timid boss. Ione knew her as a kind woman always decked out in silk, wearing too much perfume. One time he remembered his sons dropping their brooms and staring at her, salivating like a couple of colts that had caught the sent of a mare’s urine.

“Hey, Ione!” she yelled out. “You too are with them...?”

“Why, my gracious lady? Is it not clean enough? What is it that you wish?” he said to her but, still angry, she raised the broom and said:

“So that’s it, eh! You knew that the Reds were coming and you said nothing...”

The crazy people that were running by were yelling at Ione:

“Hit her! Hit her with the broom. Hit her Ione! Hit her on her head... hit her on her butt... they can’t push us around anymore... they can’t suck our blood anymore... don’t be afraid to fight back! The occupier will be gone...” Ione watched in horror what he knew to be a gentle woman, raise the broom over him in anger and the idiots running by yelling: “Hit her Ione! This is the only way to dig out the exploiters... Long live the Reds!!!”

Their voices resonated as poor Ione stood there in horror not knowing what was happening to him and what he had done that was so wrong. He said to himself: “You poor Ione... no freedom... and not even a single German soldier to be seen...” His boss too was nowhere to be found.

The crowd was growing. People were coming from everywhere. Trifun Shindevski was there too, sitting in his car like the commander of a riled mob. When he saw me coming from afar, I heard him yell:

“Russian... toss that broom away and take command. The government is in the hands of the proletariat...”

“There we go again...” Ione thought to himself, “another nickname... ‘Russian’...” The weather was hot that day and Ione was perspiring profusely. He unbuttoned his shirt... Everyone was gazing at his tattoo, the image of the great leader Stalin. He wasn’t going to hide his chest. He looked like the “batushki” (comrades) who fought in Chapaev’s detachment, he thought to himself. But now Trifun the cobbler, it seemed to Ione, was a genius. Ione remembered the day when this “visionary of a man” told him: “We need to unite... we are proletarians who need to build the future...” He also remembered what Trifun had told him about Marxism and Leninism. But then Ione tricked him. Ione knew that he, Ione, was a simple man and did what he knew how to do. He also did what others did... he did what was popular at the time... that was the time

when Ione had his skin tattooed with the image of the Generalissimo... not because he knew who he was or because he cared for him... but simply because “it was the thing to do at the time”... But then Ione never did tell Trifun about this.

The time had come to rebuild. The people were enthusiastic, humble and obedient and appreciated their piece of bread. Everything was acquired by coupon, if they were given coupons... if someone wanted to give them coupons... That was a time when the leadership was appreciated and its word was the law. Ione and his wife went to a special shop and acquired new clothes. Krstana looked lean and fit like a fasting fox. Her sons were making fun of her saying she looked like Mrs. Fonda. Ione and his family were happy... They were happy to be sweepers. Ione now belonged to the top leadership of the city staff, which worked on the creation of the new government.

They began to go out to outings, gatherings, special restaurants, etc. But women are women... Krstana chummed with Trifon's wife and did things as they always had done things, and said things like they always had said things. This prompted Ione to say: “A woman is a woman; she is the same in socialism as she is in any other political system, just like the Captain's wife and priest's wife.”

Ione started to work on the “reconstruction” which required him to give eloquent speeches, but the words he had to use... let's say they were arranged like bricks under the sun.

He always ended his speeches with the words: “In honour of... long live our victory and the Red Commune led by...”

This is how it was during the “reconstruction”. It was a common cause done collectively which brought happiness to the people. They had fun going out, dancing in the evenings... dancing to accordion music... sometimes drums were involved, depending on the community... the drummers beat their drums in honour of every newcomer from the city committee who came to the event... One time a bank clerk, a woman, said to Ione:

“Comrade Russian, will you dance the tango with me?” He was floored, but to avoid her he lifted his sleeve, looked at his watch and said:

“Comrade, I need to go. I have something to do...” Ione then thought to himself: “What kind of tango was this crazy banker thinking off... get lost... Me dancing a tango...? That’s so crazy... I don’t know how to dance the tango...?”

A few years later Ione began to feel anxious, like a trapped lion. They often invited him for discussions but he thought that they were testing him, his loyalty, especially when they asked him if he “loved Stalin?” One time he uncovered his chest and said: “Here he is...”

At that point the interrogator squinted his eyes and said: “You will need to tell us that your neighbour too is against the government and against the leadership.” Ione was shocked, especially when they called him an “Informburo” supporter. At that point they pushed him down a set of narrow stairs and locked him in a basement with all the other people who had been beaten. They stared at Ione. His neighbour looked at him but did not believe him. Ione did not want to explain to him so he took his shirt off to show him. Ione began to feel like another person was hiding under his skin and he could not remove him... drive him away... And so, he carried him under his naked skin everywhere... Ione tried to run away from him... he did not need him anymore... he was no longer good for his future... Just curious glances and spitting... that’s all he got now for carrying the moustached face of the Generalissimo on his chest.

One hot day, when the sun was baking the ground, Angielko Mitich showed up. He came close to Ione and ordered him to get up. Ione stood up and remained still like a soldier in front of a general. There was only Ione and the Generalissimo standing in front of Angielko’s big staring eyes. Finally Angielko said: “From now on you are the ‘undertaker’...” And so they all began to call him by his new nickname “The Undertaker”. Ione’s job was simple. Every day he had to carry the corpses on his back, in the scorching sun... When asked how that felt, Ione said: “The cold corpses are the only thing that keep my sweaty neck cool and from burning in the scorching sun...”

He took the dead without a death certificate, without a ceremony, like they were goods from a “special store” and carried them to the “cemetery”, full of vultures... When he was asked about that, Ione said: “I did not know their names, to which family they belonged, or who to inform about their deaths... All I did for them was say: ‘May God forgive your sins’ ...that was all...”

When Ione returned from prison he went straight to his village, where the villagers gave him another nickname. This time they called him the “camp gravedigger”. Now he lives in peace. He and Krstana took back their old jobs of looking after the village pigs. Ione says: “I never take my shirt off now, not even in front of the pigs...”

THE KLECHKAROVSKIS

Mialche Klechkarovski felt satisfaction in his sleepy eyes, on his thick lips, and on his entire round, fleshy face. He now lives in the “Proletarians of the world unite” building No. 26. The rooms in the apartments were choice, facing the sun. Nice.

Mialche Klechkarovski has set his life like never before. This is so that people will not say that there are many people like him.

He is now happy and pleased with himself and the road ahead of him is straight like a bullet... His and his wife’s pensions were enough for them.

“They are enough for us, Ilinka... Right?” he asked his wife.

“Oh, more than enough...” answered Ilinka. “It is not money from sweat and blood...” she added.

“Well, I could gulp down a national one too...just like the Voriasovski’s...but they wronged me...” said Mialche.

“I wrote down everything for them, for those blind idiots. All they had to do was confirm it. Who was going to challenge their word... except for the evil-doers...” he added.

“Mr Klechkarovski you said that beautiful carpets were laid in the white rooms and a picture of a nobleman hung in the corner? Why was that picture hung there?” he was asked. But only Mialche knew why that picture hung there.

The people were at Mialche’s place. Some were amazed at the number of books he had stacked all over the furniture. You can say that almost all of them were Marxist literature.

Almost all the books were loaded with dust. Many were in foreign languages, with one here and there in our language.

The foreign language ones Mialche Klechkarovski had brought from there. He used to say: “Whether you want them or not, brother, the Secretary would push them on you...”

“Mialche, Mialche, as if you opened them even one time...” his wife slipped up and said in front of the guests.

He looked at her sternly while thinking of what to say. He wanted to say:

“People, where do I find the time to read them? I dedicated my entire life to being an activist. If one is devoted to reading, one will lose his connections and everything will be gone. And you can’t find the reasons why. Then do you think anyone will care to ask who Mialche Klechkarovski is...?”

But then he said: “No...” admitting that he had never opened them.

“That’s right! You are right about that Mialche...” disabled Nadezhdin Kostolomov wanted to say angrily... But instead, he said:

“People, the true fighters, after the revolution, ended up becoming engineers, professors and other things... and now they are looking for statements from me. They don’t know anyone; you can see that, they waited a few years for an apartment, for work... And I, here I am, on top of the world!”

Nadezhdin Kostolomov paused for a moment and then said: “Well, that is one thing... but it is another thing to be known as an activist of those times... or for them to run you around the archives as an official...”

“One time Nadezhdin,” replied Mialche, “I insisted that they give me my Party pension retroactively. But the official said to me: ‘Don’t bother me with principles; let it be what it wants to be, Comrade Klechkarovski! It is not modest...”

When I saw that the man was getting a bit abrasive I changed my tactics. I said: ‘You are still a young man and look at you; you are

already in a senior position. You must be of a noble person, and so sharp??" ...

He immediately laughed and I got him! This is how, Nadezhdin, I found the man's soft spot..." concluded Mialche.

"You are truly a capable man, Mialche. The commission for disability asked me: 'Okay Nadezhdin, what is your complaint...?' I just stood up like a corpse and told them: 'Look at me, I am all broken up, my arm is paralyzed and one of my legs is shorter..."

The doctor laughed, then took the form and wrote down 'one hundred percent disabled'. He then told me go the office for social programs and there they would give me material assistance. Even though everything about me was visible, Mialche, no one to this day has ever asked me who I am and where I am from? No one has asked me if I am in pain or not? Did we not fight for justice? For the rights if our people. It is nice for everyone to live in this collective but the suffering and dying still remains individual work..."

"You, Nadezhdin, as a fighter who is disabled, you should be getting a slightly better pension. I know that what you are getting is not enough... It's just enough for your bread..." said Mialche.

"That's how much the disability pension is, Mialche... Don't look at your pension... yours is from the People's pension. You say 'as a fighter', but whose fighter...? They don't recognize my contribution, Mialche..."

"Well... Nadezhdin... I am sad to see you like this. We have played chess together for many years. I can testify for you that you served in the people's government! I will confirm that you were a secretary, okay?" said Mialche.

"Well, as I remember, one time somebody appeared claiming to be a secretary and did receive a pension..." said Nadezhdin with some skepticism.

"Well, I can tell you he was not from my village..." replied Mialche laughingly and then asked:

“And what were you, Nadezhdin...?”

“Well, Mialche, I was a fighter just like you, from the Kostolomov family... But I was never a part of the People’s government. I cannot lie. As you can see, there are many people like me out there. But you at least, you have been a part of the National government and, as you know, it is not good to lie. We fought for justice... remember?” replied Nadezhdin.

“Yes, yes, you are right Nadezhdin. I just... I just said that hastily... as a joke. We are fighters, Nadezhdin... you know how many sacrifices we made for this justice...” said Mialche and again began to talk about the “activities” he was involved in:

“Over there where we were, Nadezhdin, it was fine for them! Everyone knew me as Mialche Klechkarovski the hawk. There were also many Voriasovs there. Everyone thought that I was one of them, one of those old commissars. I wore a leather jacket, looking like one of those Russians, and all the while I wore a leather hat. Even the dogs were afraid of me, let alone people... And every one of them, Nadezhdin, greeted me with the words ‘Comrade Klechkarovski’. One does not need to carry on too much in situations like that. Dress well my brother... just like those old officials who led the people’s government and they will embrace you... After that you can carry yourself in whatever way your heart desires! Just like now...” said Mialche.

Mialche Klechkarovski, the hawk, went on and on talking, telling stories about his experiences until Nadezhdin had had enough and decided to interrupt him:

“Well, that’s what you call the experience of an old activist! For sure you must have had an uneasy past, Comrade Mialche?” said Nadezhdin and moved a chess piece.

“Oh, don’t get me started on that, Nadezhdin, because I get restless when I think about those times... about the past... Check! Nadezhdin!” said Mialche.

“That was good Comrade Mialche... you gave it your all... and you got what you deserved... It’s good when a man adjusts his life to support his purpose... Well, that was your true reward. I still remember those brave fighters... You watch them jump into the fire and die with pride yelling: ‘I will die so that my comrades and my children will live free...’ They were the real people of the revolution... The people say that the great ones received their honour from their sacrifices,” said Nadezhdin.

“Yes, Nadezhdin, there are people who are braver facing death than facing life...” replied Mialche.

“I know one of those people who truly gave everything. He was my commander... He was one of the first... But now when he went to apply for his veteran’s pension the official said to him: ‘Dear Comrade Zasenkovski the brigade then numbered 300 and now a brigade numbers 3,000...

The man got very upset and left. But before he did he scolded the official, swore at him and told him he would appeal to every official in the ministry until his case was reviewed...

Zasenkovski also told him that there were many who were cheating the system, Mialche, and the official said ‘tell me who they are Comrade Zasenkovski’ and we will deal with them in accordance with the law... It’s your move,” said Nadezhdin.

“Well? Yes, that’s the kind of people we are... we poke our own eyes out... Nadezhdin...” replied Mialche.

“But he is not against the fighters... he is against those who...” said Nadezhdin and paused.

“You should also know him... he is an old official. That Comrade Zasenkovski...” added Nadezhdin.

“Zasenkovski?” yelled Mialche and stood there stunned, looking like an ominous black cloud had fallen on him. The thought that he might have been guilty and unfair to this man, in all this, may have crossed his mind. He shuddered. He thought of going through his

files and “memoirs” which he had written as his basis for obtaining his status as a fighter... He was stunned... he took soft steps as if he was full of fear... He felt pain deep down, like opening old wounds... just when things were going so well for him and his life was finally in order...

“Checkmate! Comrade Mialche!” declared Nadezhdin.

“Yes, it’s true... checkmate...” agreed those who were watching the game. “Great checkmate, Nadezhdin...” voices were heard saying.

“Checkmate?” asked Mialche while he thought “You will be very sorry if you start looking through your archives...” cut through him like a sabre.

When he remembered things from his past Mialche Klechkarovski began to wither. He shuddered... uncontrollable memories from his past began to flood his mind.

“Mialche, you look like you’ve started to wither...” said his wife.

“Tell me what’s wrong?” she asked.

Mialche Klechkarovski the hawk had long forgotten about those times... his past had gone... the blood that dripped had stopped... he only had a minor pain... Those were unhealthy days.

Mialche never went to the front line to fight for freedom. “Good for Mialche Klechkarovski the hawk, he made a good move and saved himself. He was in good terms with all those responsible and with the activists of the People’s Government...” people were saying.

One time, who knows why, Mialche found himself at a rally and became an activist, but still in fear until things cleared up. Then one day, during a gathering, he said something useful to the party. He said: “I, comrades have doubts about Riste Dzhukleski. The other day he sold fish to the Greek police for money. He justified that by saying he needed the money to buy something for his kids but I want to challenge his justification here in front of the party, in front of our people’s government, Comrades...”

A few days later Riste Dzhukleski “was eaten by the black”, as the old women used to say. And ever since then the Dzhukleski family was stigmatized and considered “anti-people”. During a gathering of the people’s government there were even requests to declare that family anti-Prespa.

And because of this Mialche, little by little, became very loyal... People did this because of great fanaticism, from the trust they were given to cleanse everything that was anti-popular... And when the time came to evacuate the children from that country, Riste Dzhukleski remained an enemy of the people... his children were left behind as the last children to die in that country.

But what did our Comrade hawk remember? Well if you don’t put your life in order, even at the end, things will come back to haunt you. Maybe things would have been okay but now he needed to know what happened to Zasenkovski... he needed to go to the archives for that. He would not have remembered all the details from those days... except for that short autobiography... But even with that he still regretted that it was not detailed enough... He also regretted that he had not joined the people’s government earlier... life would have been so much better now... But Mialche in those days was a working man, a plowman and a fisherman just like Riste... just like every man in Prespa. But he made a good move. All the deserters did the same... made good moves. No matter what the people say, Mialche and all the deserters improved their lives. Mialche got what he wanted for himself and for his wife.

“Will all the fighters get veteran’s pensions...” someone asked.

Mialche said: “Come on you people? What do you want me to tell you? You just don’t know how to ask for it... I am telling you this from experience. A person needs to be smart about how he goes about it. A person does not need to be educated or to know a lot. Look at the officials responsible for housing and those in the social system... how they look you in the eye... Cope with it... people!”

THE TASTE OF SALTWATER

Today is May 1st. The parade just ended. I was passing through the city square walking near the windows. The streets were empty.

I looked at the telegram and read it again: “Will be arriving at 12 o’clock. Wait for me at the train station. Your brother Giorgi... Stop.”

It was a hot spring day. I was very nervous. I arrived at the station. The platform was teeming with people. My brother was standing in the crowd, on his toes, looking for me. We stared at each other for a long time as if we wanted to ask each other: “Who are you... and who are you?”

I ran towards him and embraced him. He picked me up in his arms.

After that, embracing each other, we headed home.

So many years have passed by. I don’t know what to ask first... who do I ask about? I thought about our native land for years... I welcomed my brother with a full glass of wine... I looked at him... as if asking him to tell me everything about himself... to tell me his ill-fated story.

He took a sip of the wine and smiled... seeming like his bleeding heart had just opened. And I, looking intense, listened to what he had to say: “Look here brother; this is what happened to us... They grabbed us outside of the village, about one hour walking distance... it was not like it was night? They surrounded our barn during the day... The sheep were bleating in fear... like dogs were barking at them. And a little while later, as we sat in the barn, father and I saw them outside. Then suddenly these bearded men, Burandari, jumped into the barn. They grabbed me and took me outside. They had the entire place surrounded. They began to question me: ‘Whose child are you?’ but they already knew the answers. I said: ‘I am Risto Suvogorski’s son.’ They asked me again, and again I told them the same thing. They pointed their guns at me and searched me. They searched the barn and then the enclosure. Then I saw them bringing father out, tied up. They also tied me up. After that they took us to

the village. They beat us all the way there... with their fists, with their boots, kicking and tormenting us all the way there. They took us to their chief. He was decked out with braids. He sat there yelling at us: 'Tell me... where are they hiding? Where is the Macedonian squad 'Vicho' hiding? Where are your older boys Risto?' he asked father. But before father had a chance to say anything I said: 'They are gone to fight for our human rights, Mister... So that we too can gain our rights and our liberties... so that we too can freely speak our mother tongue... so that we too can go to school and learn in our own language... so that we too can have officials like you of our own... and like other people, we too can have everything of our own...' I told him everything... After that they beat us to pulp and tossed us in a dark basement.

Poor father then began to weep and said: 'Giorgi we screwed up. The sheep are now left out all alone and unattended and are in peril. But the truth is the truth and it was time we told the truth... You did what you had to...' The poor man was truly sad. He continued: 'The whole nation needs to stand up and fight for our rights and not hide in their shirts... It was different during Ottoman times... at least we could speak our language freely...' he said. Early the next day they tied us up and took us to Kostur. When we arrived we saw many people looking at us. There they took us to the Jewish school. Then on March 12, 1947, when the military court was established in Kostur, they took us to trial. They produced all kinds of witnesses who criticized us a lot, especially those who had caught us. They accused us of wanting to create a Macedonian state, of providing food to the Macedonian partisans and all sorts of other ridiculous things... Poor father could not take it anymore so he said: 'Sir, can you not see how we live? We are citizens yet we live like slaves. All we want is to be free to speak our language, to learn our ways... You came here to our country, we did not come to yours...' But before father had a chance to finish, the judge jumped him and hit him in the mouth and broke two of his teeth. I got very angry and I wanted to defend father.

As he kept hitting father, the judge kept yelling furiously: 'You are Greeks and nothing else!' I began to yell in Macedonian and father wanted to say something but his mouth was full of blood so he kept motioning with his hands 'No!', 'No!', 'No!' Finally he spit the

blood on the floor and yelled out: 'We are Macedonians!' I jumped in and said: 'Listen Sir, it doesn't bother us that you are Greeks; why are you so tormented that we are Macedonians? You know very well that we have lived here in our ancestral lands since time immemorial. Ask any educated person and they will tell you that... We are not asking you to become Macedonians but it would be nice if people are left alone to be who they are... who their mothers bore them to be...'

In the end, in spite of what we said, the judge still sentenced us to ten years imprisonment. On July 15, 1947 they took us by truck to Solun and dumped us on a train. The cars were truly dirty and seemed like they had not been washed since Ottoman times. They would not give us water and let's not even talk about food. Thank God father was there with me, he gave me courage... Poor father, he kept talking to me throughout the entire trip. When we arrived in Athens at the 'Pavlos Melas' prison, for eight days they fed us salted fish and a bit of bread. It was very hot in Athens, especially when they took us out of the prison, loaded us on trucks, took us to the train station, loaded us on the train and from there they dumped us into the bowels of a ship. Father and I were tied up and we looked at each other wondering where they were taking us. We were very thirsty but there was no water to drink... for anyone...

We heard people whispering, asking where they were taking us... No one knew. After a while it got quiet and we all fell asleep on the floor of the bottom of the ship like animals. It was still dark and we could not see a thing when we heard noises coming from above. Someone yelled: 'Everyone out!' This was the first time I had seen an island; land surrounded by water. Looking at all that water made me realize how thirsty we were. We were so thirsty we could not speak. We got off the ship one by one. My father and I, still tied together, walked one behind the other while we were being hit with sticks... on our heads, bodies and especially on our legs...

We walked for about an hour and a quarter and then we saw the tents. They gathered us all together in front of a person in authority and told us to line up one behind the other and then began to search us. To keep us in line they whipped us with their sticks. We wore no

hats so it was especially painful being hit on the head. We screamed and protested but they did not care. We were not allowed to have forks, knives, watches, cigarettes and, as they confiscated them, they further beat us with their sticks. Many of us protested about that too but they did not care. We lost most of our clothing, shoes and other items on the way here.

Finally we were allowed to go to the tents. Unfortunately there was no water... by now our mouths were so dry our tongues were sticking to them. We heard someone say: 'There is a well over there!' so we all ran to it like sheep. It was not a well but a shallow puddle, about a metre deep. We soon realized that it was salt water but we were so thirsty we drank and drank, but no matter how much we drank we were thirstier than when we started. Soon we all began to have terrible diarrhea. What can I tell you, we all got diarrhea, there was not a single person who did not get it. There were no toilets, only some holes dug in the ground below our tents. We were all crouching there naked... Soon after a terrible stench rose and I am telling you this because our tents were only steps away. However, we were not ashamed of what happened and we soon became used to the bad smell. It was not exactly our fault for what happened to us... The worst thing that happened to us was not the smell... it was the prison guards who would not leave us alone... we always had to humble ourselves before them even though we hated them with a passion...

Now when I think of father, how he wandered around all alone, looking after our sheep... but now I couldn't tell him anything. I often called out to him: 'Father, it's me Giorgi.' He would then go away... the other way. This is how he was... he often knelt under the icon of the Virgin Mary and prayed to her to look after us... to protect us from worse evils...

The only time our souls felt at peace was when we thought about our past. I often spoke to the sun, which made me think of all the times I drank sour milk (buttermilk). I drank it at home when the weather was hot. I drank it and I felt cool all over. Not really, but I managed to convince my brain that I felt cooler. I spent countless sleepless nights looking up and thinking of home, planning what to do but nothing materialized. They separated me from my father and put me

with Fote Mechkarov. He constantly told me things... complaining about his own troubles. Sometimes I listened and sometimes I didn't. I was constantly hungry. One day, I don't remember the exact date, Fote said 'Giorgi, do you hunger for some bread?' 'Of course I do!' I replied. He then said, 'Come with me.' We went to a big iron box full of garbage. It was during the night. We began to pick out small chunks of bread and ate them. Some were dirty and some were moldy but we didn't care. We couldn't see them in the dark anyway. We ate and ate. Hunger was an awful thing... We had no idea who threw the bread out and why. Some time later my stomach began to ache and I rushed towards the toilets. Unfortunately the guards did not allow unscheduled visits to the toilets. On my way I looked back and in the dark and I saw someone with a long stick running after me, attempting to hit me. I turned away and began to run through the tents. He continued to run after me. Thank God I escaped but he continued to look for me in the tents. I crossed myself and thanked God for giving me the strength to outrun him or I would have been beaten to a pulp.

One day, I don't remember the exact date, there was no bread. They put us to work hungry with nothing to eat. The next day the same thing. This continued for seven days. By then we were so hungry we could not see properly. No one was going to the toilets either... It was scary... Hunger and thirst are scary things. We completely lost our strength and our morale... however little we had. We had no shoes and we had to walk on sharp stones barefoot. Go ahead... try it... walk barefoot on hot sharp stones, see if you can! We were cursed! We were born to endure pain and humiliation. I often thought we were cursed and born to suffer.

Every day we stood in line for our meal. It was so little it was not worth it but we were so hungry. Often, for no apparent reason, we were attacked and beaten by the guards for standing in line. Those who stood at the front of the line near the cauldron were always beaten. One time they hit a man in the eye. I don't remember his name. The guards took his eye out and the man fell on the ground. The guard then became frightened as we all began to yell, 'Why would you do such a thing!' Soon many of them rushed to the scene and began to beat us. They then tipped the cauldron and spilled our food on the ground. There was no food for us that day...

One other day, at 12 o'clock, we were returning to our tents as usual. On our way back we always had to carry a stone so that we did not return empty handed. That day I was carrying a large stone. The Greeks who were jailed amongst us, having committed crimes such as theft and murder, never carried stones. They walked amongst us and, just before reaching our destination, they would grab our stones by force and if we complained they would tell the guards that we were lying. As I was carrying this large stone, I looked back and saw one of those Greeks making his way towards me. He grabbed my stone but I refused to let it go so he pushed me and I fell down. Those who did not bring a stone back did not get food. No stone, no food, that was the deal! Still refusing to let go of the stone, I fell down with it in my hand. Look here at this hand, I am missing four of my fingers... because of the cursed stone... when I fell it crushed my fingers. The bastard took my stone anyway so there was no food for me that day. I was hungry and in pain all night long. I didn't know what to do. I drank some salt water... I can still taste it... my hand kept bleeding. The doctors who were there in the jails asked me what happened. I told them 'I don't know... The island Giura began to turn on me and I fell,' that's what I told them.

After that things got worse for me. I couldn't work but they kept pushing me anyway. They didn't believe me that I was in pain. It was better working than having to kneel in front of those bastards all day long acting submissive like a captured beast that had been beaten. They kept talking about how much money the Greek state paid for what we were doing and how they taught us how to do this kind of work. They kept telling us that we should be grateful for the nice things the Greek state was doing for us and for giving us the opportunity to regenerate. But I will tell you this; a person can understand people well not by what gains they have made in life but by the similar sufferings they have experienced and every soul is left pure... We were all repulsed by the smell of the food, which smelled like cat barf and made us feel like losing all the humanity in us; love, friendship, envy, mercy, compassion... slowly disappearing from us... evaporating under the bright sunlight. But there were spies in the prison amongst us. There were many but there was this one guy I know of, his name was Stratos. We did not dare complain about anything...

One day a loaded ship arrived. It was loaded with iron, cement, lime and other things. It was loaded to the top. They gathered us all together at the side of it and placed a couple of boards, one to get on the ship and the other to get off it. All day long we worked offloading things while the guards beat us with sticks. My biggest concern was not to get dizzy and fall into the sea. This happened to a man from the Voden or Lerin Region villages, I don't remember which village, he fell into the sea with a full bag of lime and drowned... May God bless his soul... Where would he have learned to swim? The sailors pulled him out and left him out in the sun. He was left there all day long and by the end of the day he was covered with flies. The captain felt sorry for us and during the evening he let us bury the man... and, by that, gave us a small break from the hard work.

No one spoke at the man's funeral. This is how it was with us here at the prison for many years. Many had died and no one spoke at their funeral. People died from all sorts of sicknesses; tuberculosis, stomach and intestinal problems, etc. A lot of people became mad after a priest started coming to our camps, preaching to us about all those commandments of God's while we listened to him hungry. One day, it was Christmas I think, when he again came to tell us things. After talking a while one of us said to him: 'Look here father, look at the kind of foul food we eat and disgusting water we drink, is this how God intended us to be according your religion?' They grab our people, having done nothing wrong, and bring them to these islands, only because they were born by a different mother, only because they are not Greek. Then I opened my mouth and said: 'Dear father, if you are God's child, you must tell the truth... what is ours, ours will remain... that's the way it is...' There is nothing more to say. The priest kept staring at me like he was paralyzed. I got angry and said, 'What do you say about these things? Does your book say it is okay, it is humane, to do all these things to us, eh? Tell me... answer my question!' The priest stormed out angry and left us and, like the good Samaritan that he was, he reported us to the authorities.

One day early in the morning the island was surrounded by military ships ready to pulverize us. The priest, among other things, had told

the authorities that we were planning an uprising; that we were hardened revolutionaries and refused to receive any of God's commandments. We all came out and looked around that morning. That's when we realized that there were many camps on the same island; we were not the only ones. Many of our people (Macedonians) had been sent to the islands. Included amongst them were communists, both Greeks and Macedonians, thieves, murderers... Then we saw them chasing a large group of women and corralling them on a wide slope. I looked for my father but he was nowhere to be found...

Many of these people were running wild, hungry and thirsty... being tormented they lost their minds. Later they forced us to build yards for the mad, with high walls. Many died in those yards... Everyone needs to be told about this... Everyone should know what happened to us... People need to write books about it...

Then came the time to release us from the prisons; it was in the fifties. I came back to our village and found it burned down. Everything was flattened to the ground, there were no people left either. I went down to our small barn and found father wandering around... looking for our lost sheep. I couldn't say anything to him... I called to him: 'Father, it's me Giorgi.' When he heard my voice he ran off...

Yes, dear brother, this is how it was with us. The Greeks chased us off and we fled everywhere..." concluded my brother.

He then looked me in the eye and said: "You are crying; I know you are sad about father, about our home, about our barns, fields, meadows, gardens... I don't know if you know but our cemetery has been destroyed and ploughed over... The Greeks have decided to leave no mark, to erase everything about us... to erase everything about our existence..."

TESTAMENT

It was announced at that time that the Aegeans would be moved. I saw people running around collecting and packing their things... This is what life was like in those days... up to this day.

They never cared for us... you never knew when they were going to throw you out like a stray dog...

My father was a hard man, but thank God I fulfilled his promise, may he rest in peace... Our people in the long term never knew where life was going to take them. Sometimes things may have seemed simple but turned out to be difficult. God, it is so difficult to abandon stores full of grain and to only take what you can carry and then run and not know where you are running... Then, when you lose your will, when you tire... you realize you left your home... you lost your home... and it is no longer yours. Blessed are the people who did not leave their homes. My God, I thought, why are we so crazy to be running away from our blessed soil... And then I try to convince myself that it was because of "the circumstances"... That's what my father Dimo used to tell me.

In the old days we used to whitewash our rooms around Petrovden (St. Peter's day). The smell of lime caused our nostrils to open wide open. The strong smell of lime reminded me of the old festive times. I felt like dressing up in something festive and eating something good... like roasted lamb... like my father used to say... It has been our tradition for generations to roast lamb, he would say. It would have been nice to drink some fresh milk too. Milk is thick and tasty in the spring... The dinner table would be covered with a colorful tablecloth and placed on it would be warm zelniks... spreading an irresistible aroma all through the dining room. Your mouth would water for buttermilk... We waited patiently salivating for the pitcher to go by so that we could have a drink of refreshing fresh buttermilk... "We have all kinds of good food..." my mother used to say, so eat up boys! The women were always busy during these festive times preparing the food, cooking it, serving it, washing the dishes... And they always seemed to be happy doing all that work... And no matter how much food we ate my father would still say:

“eat, eat more!” And when I looked at him he was either smiling... looking serious... or talking...

My mother was standing on the veranda looking towards the village Dolno Lozharsko and began to yell: “Fire, fire, people... everything is burning...” We heard gunshots... there were people running everywhere... many people. The old dog began to bark... My father trusted the old dog. He put down the clay plate and ordered everyone to get dressed, pick up something in their hands and go up the hill. In the meantime he gathered the cattle and followed us. And so we fled towards the Purdovi fields, up towards Mount Kilindreska, over Filin Kamen and ended up in Soluna spring. We hid ourselves in the thick beech tree grove. The cattle arrived and, after grazing for a short while, went to sleep. Only the dogs and us stayed up. Other people from the village followed us. As we sat there waiting for the night to pass, we listened to the old people talking... One old woman said: “It was the same during the Ottoman occupation... Every time we were attacked we ran up here to hide...” History is repeating itself... these are unholy times... The children ate bread and water... evil hung over them... Perhaps it was this evil that drove us to cross the border... people fleeing with their livestock. “My God, what are we doing?!” I thought to myself. My father, looking sad, looked at me and said: “Son, I am coming with you... Just decide which way you want to go... down the hill... or across the border...” But honestly, I don’t remember any of this... I only remember that my mind was empty at that time... grey empty space...

One day I was salivating for some cool buttermilk, the next day here we were passing through Mariovo... going... and going... and going... but where? Then I thought: “God, blessed are those people who remained at home...” Well, I have to share this blame with my father because he was the one that suggested we run... There was no road to be seen anywhere in this desolate place where we found ourselves and it was getting dark. We spent the night in Topolchani. That’s when I heard people saying that they would be sending us north...

We heard a train whistle and people began to line up in front of these dilapidated, black train cars. We kept staring at them. We had

never seen a train car or a train for that matter. Only the old people who had been abroad talked about them, these “French miracles” as they called them, which they had seen during their travels. So now, here they were in front of our eyes.

It was almost evening. They started cramming people into these train cars and left the livestock outside. The animals looked uneasy. The sheep kept bleating, looking at their owners as they were leaving. The dogs took the separation the hardest. “If our cattle die, we too will die because we cannot stand to be without each other...” said my father.

Anyway, we left our animals outside and boarded one of the train cars. Everyone sat or stood wherever they felt like it. There was no order. The doors closed... The inside was dark... We saw no light for a long time. We found each other by sound and feel. The children were already asleep. Once in a while we saw some light coming in through the cracks in the car as we passed through stations. My father was trying to boost our courage by telling us that our first order of business was to conquer our fear. That’s what he said even though he had no idea where they were taking us. We waited for dawn to arrive and for them to open the doors. I listened to the various voices in the dark... some of the comments were frightening. At one point my father said: “Who knows where we are going to leave our bones...” We dragged my grandmother Meglena into the car and left her lying down in the corner. She was a sickly little woman, drained of her energy and constantly coughing. She was a tiny woman. She wore pig skin moccasins and all kinds of old-fashioned clothes. She put on a lot of clothing before we left... including several of her favourite head kerchiefs... the very colourful ones of course. Her face was wrinkled and tanned dark brown. She died in the train car, in the corner where we left her. They took her at the station with out us having performed any kind of ceremony.

My father took my grandmother’s passing the hardest. I could see that he was hurting. He stood there moping in silence... The water that we brought with us became like urine, most of the jugs by now were empty and we used them as pillows to put our heads on when we slept. But who could sleep...? How can one sleep under these

circumstances? The noise from the train aggravated the situation even further, I have never been on a train before never mind being on one for days on end... traveling on a road I could see. Without knowing where we were going and what was going to happen to us, our minds were left to wonder... and think of the worst. I didn't know what to do... cry or sing... But like the old people were saying "these are evil times" and no one would want to hear you sing or cry. The burning question in my mind was: "Why are they taking us so far away...?" We all cried in silence during those long nights... The priest was also there. He was a handsome and clever man... but he too did not know where they were taking us... and so he prayed: "Dear God is Macedonia that big that it takes so many days to get to our destination?" One time he said: "Oh my God, my dear God, are they taking us to some camps like they did the Jews...?"

Led by the priest's wife we all repeated the prayer: "Dear God, we are innocent people... we carry Christ in our soul..."

The priest's assistant, Mr. Durdubak, a strong man, was very helpful during these trying times. He took a positive spin on all this and told us that this was "God's will" and better times would follow. We just had to be patient and enduring. And thank God, the days and nights passed easier for us.

My father occasionally said: "Our cattle are now gone... they are burning with thirst..." My mother lay there sad, curled up like a raindrop...

The train cars soon began to stink of shit and piss... We are living creatures and we needed to relieve ourselves... Some people had serious bowel problems and could not hold out for too long. There were no provisions made for us in the cars... Once we reached a station and they opened the doors the older ones ran out and let their streams go around the cars like dogs. Both men and women... We then happily jumped on the cars... Our thoughts still gnawing at us... where are they taking us and what are they going to do with us... Deep bad thoughts kept entering our minds like the deep roots of a fig tree.

The roots of a fig tree are not only deep but strong. Some say they are so strong they can hold up an entire house.

From time to time the priest came along and blessed everyone. In spite of his great optimism he too now began to suspect something was not right... he became concerned. The word out there was that we just passed through Belgrade and were headed north. Everyone speculated as to where they were taking us. Some even voiced their opinions. Some were saying they may be taking us to camps because there were such things... Some were speculating that they were taking us to Great Russia... where our ancestors came from... Mitse Purda, with his tiny, clever little blinking eyes, seeming like he was cursing all of Macedonia and its entire leadership for allowing them to uproot us from our homeland, like we were not Macedonian sons, was swearing and cursing something awful... words that are not fit to repeat... But then in the blush of dawn Mr. Durdubak, with his rosy cheeks, stepped up and said: "People, they are dropping us off right here..." There were sighs of relief in the whispering voices saying: "Thank God!" Then we heard the doors open...

There was open space all around us... The wind was blowing something awful... We grabbed our few things that we brought with us from Pozharsko and, like a flock of bleating sheep, set off for Giakovo from Sombor. "Our luck... to leave our bones in this desolate place..." I heard my father muttering. Voivodina was flat like a pan, it lacked the mountains, like Mount Kilindera, we had back home in Pozharsko. When you were thirsty you always thought of the Soluna cool spring on Mount Kilindera. But a person never knows where life will take him. The first year in Giakovo my little Sofia died... she was almost two years old.

My father Dimo was always complaining. I don't know what was eating him inside... He used to say to me: "Conquer your fear son and you will live longer..."

Nine days after little Sofia's burial, the cross from her grave was gone. The people collected all the wooden crosses from the various graves and burned them to keep warm. It was very cold there. I kept that in mind. When my father died, in place of a wooden cross, I placed a cement post on his grave, the kind that was used on the

curb of the road. I stuck it deep into the soil at the head of his grave to make sure I did not lose it. I did the same with little Sofia's grave.

The war was long over in our country when, in the 1950's, we heard that they would again be moving the Aegeans... And sure enough we again boarded those decrepit train cars and headed for Shtip to a place called "Trite Cheshmi" (Three fountains). "Good God," I thought to myself, "if this is true then we will at least be on Macedonian soil..." but I didn't say anything to anyone. I couldn't sleep all that night. Everything reminded me of my father and the time we had spent together. He was a serious man, a man of his word. I grew up with him. He taught me everything about Pozharsko... about every field, about every brook, about every piece of space... what it was called and its history. And now I felt tingly all over... like something was crawling all over me. I spent my time crying and grieving for him and for my little Sofia. My wife was concerned for me and said: "Sleep Petre... it's almost morning..." I said to her: "I can't sleep, I am too excited..." She too was not right. She was all excited about the great life we were going to have together... and now this... these unholy times have destroyed our love... But Mara does not hold it against me... she still respects me as her husband.

I got a feeling that made me unsure about this move. Perhaps I should have stayed where I was... But what choice was I given? I tried to sleep again. The moment I closed my eyes my father appeared... in my dreams. I was in tears again... thinking of my father and of my little girl. Life is like a flower... at the end all you have is dried grass. "Nobody knows the weight of another's burden..." my father used to say. It's simple, this is the kind of people we are, a bad dog ambushes us and we run like a herd of sheep... without experience... living only in the present... stuck in some Aegean habitat. I decided to keep my thoughts to myself and not put them to words, not because I didn't believe the bad times would pass quickly, even in the 1950's the times were just as bad, but because of what might happen... Like people used to say: "Be careful even when crossing a shallow river..."

The trip was long and arduous... painful. It is difficult to wipe out the mark created during the travels of a refugee... everyone, over the shadow, looks into your soul.

Ristoitsa Mankina has become the guardian of the cemetery. She is still there, on site. She feeds on the food and bread left behind by the women who honour the dead. This is where she buried her husband. "Where am I supposed to go in these murky times..." she said to me. Meglena was squeezing her bags in her arms... she was afraid of me. I asked her for a shovel or a hoe... Ristoitsa Mankina carefully passed me a shovel and said: "Petre, there are no markers on the graves here so be careful where you dig... don't unearth some half decomposed voivodinets (a person from Voivodina)... what are we going to do then..." I felt sad thinking of our destiny, which brought us here to this desolation. "Don't worry," I said. "I have a marker on my father and on my daughter's graves and I know exactly where they are. I have placed large markers on their graves and they have not been moved." Dawn was slowly creeping in and a new day was breaking through. I dug both graves and removed the bones... Ristoitsa filled her apron with them and cried all the time she was helping me. "We are all one family..." she said. I thought to myself: "God give me the strength not to cry today while I am digging..." I kept tossing soil in front of Ristoitsa's feet and with it my father's skull. She picked up the skull and caressed it. She then began to cry out loud, yelling, her fear seemed to have disappeared... she looked relieved... I grabbed the skeleton, whatever was left intact, and broke it up into its bony parts so that I could carry it easier. The road was long, it was a foreign country and the wind was blowing wildly...

I don't know whether I said goodbye to Ristoitsa or not. I left alone and in a hurry. I left the grave open. I thought to myself: "Okay Petre, now run through the cornfields. Run through the mud... it's safer that way. I ran through the rows of corn stalks like a wild animal... some sort of strong unseen force was pushing me. The sun was up and I had this awful feeling that someone might see me and think I was stealing corn. "It's best I get to the road..." I thought to myself. My feet were sinking into the mud and I was getting very tired. With some difficulty I got out of the cornfield. My feet were covered in thick mud and the bags in my hands squeaked with every

step I took, like they were full of snails. The bones were rubbing against one another... I arrived at the station. There were so many passengers I could not understand how they were all going to fit in that train. I made my way to a car. I got close to a door and jumped on. I felt uneasy. What if a guard wanders in and asks me to open the bags? I thought it's best if I go into the washroom and lock myself in.

I still felt uneasy. I began to talk to myself... speaking to my father... speaking to my girl... I heard a voice saying "tata – tak – tata - tuk", the bones were talking to me. I heard the train whistle. The car was full of people. They were hungry and they needed to use the washroom. People kept knocking on the door but I held the door handle tightly in my hand. I heard them cursing and saying that now they had to go to another car to relieve themselves. It stunk in here, which caused me to gag... but there was nothing there to vomit, I had not eaten for days. It was best this way... that I was in here. I stayed in the washroom all through the day but decided to go out in the evening. I figured it was safe...

I shoved my way to the hallway and waited there like a lost dog, stinking of urine. I looked around... all the wooden seats were taken. People were sitting... slouching... sleeping... eyes looking sluggish, but not with malice. They all hung on tightly to their belongings. They looked for a moment and then went back to sleep in the pale light.

I thought now would be a good time for me to sit down... but where? I looked around. There was a man slouching over two seats. He was sleeping. He was snoring like a frog in a lily pond. I made my way there and squeezed in. The poor man must have been very tired, he did not notice me... He apologized for slouching when he woke up. He was a good-natured man. He cut some bacon, garlic and onions and handed me his flask of plum rakia to have a drink. He wanted me to have the first drink. "Have a gulp..." he said in a mild tone of voice. I took a drink but that damn rakia was very hot, a devil's brew. It burned my insides. It would have been impolite not to have a drink... so I drank for both the living and for the dead. The man smiled at me and pushed some bacon and onions towards me. "Have some..." he said. I took some and sucked them in like a woman

stuffing a sausage through a funnel. I thought to myself: “God has provided for me and I am eating with such appetite...” We both had several more sips of rakia from the flask. Unfortunately my body was frail and the alcohol affected me... I slept until the next morning...

When I woke up I looked outside. I saw hills... our hills... it was like some secret had been uncovered and I was back home... Had I been sleeping all this time? I forced all the thoughts out of my mind and tried to focus... was fate deceiving me? Love is a tyrant; it pains you for a long time. It opens every crevice in your soul...

I will again mention my father. He once said to me: “Petre my son, do what you are obligated to do and don’t worry about other people’s affairs...” And with that I fulfilled my first duty, I overcame my fear.

Perhaps it was my hatred for having to bury my father in a foreign cemetery that made me conquer my fear... I remembered the station “Bakarno Gumno” because this is where they loaded us on the train and left our cattle outside mooing for us... I can still hear the cows mooing to this day.

It was a terrible and unholy time. I hung onto the bags of bones like a wolf, while burning of thirst. You don’t die from a little thirst, I convinced myself... while walking all night long trying to follow the path we took that brought us here. It was almost morning and from the top of the hill in Mrezhichko I could hear the rustling river water. I was close to our place but I was not sure where I had to come out. But as they say, love conquers all... I ran down the hill as fast as could to moisten my mouth. I had to crawl back at one place because it was so steep. Bitterness ate at my soul... “Please God don’t let me lose the bags...” I prayed. Finally, half conscious, I splashed my way into the river water... up to my knees... then up to my ass... I felt joy deep down in my heart... I felt alive again... I calmed down quickly, put down the bags and drank water to my heart’s content. I moistened my cracked lips and rinsed my eyes. I could now see perfectly... I sat there and wondered... in silence... without smiling... I stayed like that until dawn.

I opened my eyes wide. And what did I see - our mountain – Kilinderka... that's what we called it. I felt a tingling sensation creep over me and shed a few tears for my little girl and for my father. When we were running away, leaving this place, we were all alive... and now? What is a life but a flower which will blossom and bear fruit for as long as its roots remain in the ground. I tensed my brain, thoughts quickly ran through my mind, and then I pulled up my sleeves and got the bones out. I first sorted my girl's bones then my father's. One by one I washed them and then placed them in head kerchiefs. I placed my girl's bones in a white head kerchief and wrote Sofia Kirovakova on it. I then placed my father's bones in a head kerchief that looked like our flag but without the lion, and wrote Dimo Kirovakov on it. I could have written other but I was not myself... I was in constant tears. The wind was blowing hard over the steep hill. It was howling over the tall pines. The trees moaned and crackled under its pressure. And I, walking among them, was approaching Mount Kilinderka, where I had to cross the border. "God give me strength to get to the forest..." I thought to myself as I climbed up with the bones in my hands. Then, out of nowhere, I heard footsteps. They sounded like they belonged to heavy, solid men. I looked away and saw a dog with its snout lifted pointing towards me. I was so close to my Pozharsko, only a few steps away and I would be at "Zhelezna Vrata" at the top of Mount Koziak, then through the tall beech trees, past the spring Soluna and I would be there. It was raining hard that night... and perhaps that's what saved me. When they started running towards me, the dog became very aggressive and its body tensed. "Now what do I do?!" I thought to myself. I began to run downhill and they ran after me. I saw a large stone on my way. I pulled it out of the ground and let it roll down hill. And just as I took about ten steps, there to my left was a rotten tree trunk. I hid behind it and watched the men run past me chasing the noisy rock rolling downhill. I waited until there was some distance between us before I resumed my uphill journey. I crossed myself and thanked God for not letting them capture me. I passed over the Katrevi oak grove, towards Filin Kamen and saw a goat herder in the fields playing his flute. I then turned towards the "Sveti Giorgi" church and sat down to drink some water from the Bostanska spring.

The goat herder didn't see me. He was too busy playing his flute and then left for the village. It was sunset. After he left I went to the cemetery. I quickly wandered from grave to grave and decided where to dig. I was going to dig on top of my grandfather's grave. His name was Petre the Ilinden fighter, that's what the villagers called him. I was named after him. As I sat on his grave I tried to remember our customs and what to do during the burial. My bitterness again overcame me. I shed more tears over them. I stood there with an axe in my hand deciding to break into the "Sveti Ivan" church and get some candles and oil to anoint the bones. I climbed up the bell tower and lay there like a beaten beast, protecting the bones under my head. The next morning I was awakened by the church bell. It was Petrovden (St. Peter's day). I crossed myself for both the living and for the dead. I held the axe tightly in my hands as I climbed down from the bell tower. At the bottom of the stairs stood Lina Iacheva - Katreva. Lina was crossing herself and shaking all over. I said: "Lina..." wanting to know what was wrong with her. But when she heard my voice she fled inside the altar and peered through the cracks. Finally she recognized me... we are family... After that she told me everything... We waited until it was dark and Lina performed all the necessary rituals; she put oil on the bones, wine, incense, left the cross there over night and so on... She then lit candles for all the dead who she knew were dead. I piled the grave with a lot of soil, enough for two and felt like my life was once again in Pozharsko.

With a half-burned candle in her hand Lina crossed herself and began calling on the almighty... I remained with my axe in my hand... We have not seen each other for such a long time and yet we follow an unknown path in our lives. In Giakovo the guardian of the cemetery was Ristoitsa Mankina and in Pozharsko it was Lina Iachevo – Katreva... I don't know who the guardians are in Australia and America... The men left their bones in the mountains and there are no men left to do the job...

My heels were blood-stained but still I thought about returning. When the ambers began to form ash I started looking towards the border.

Lina was sad when she told me to greet everyone, whoever I remembered between the living and the dead. After saying goodbye I left. The sky, like a bed cover made of a grey goat's hair, covered Mount Kaimakchalan. I walked through the village with my axe in my hand, looking around like a wild cat... Waiting for the people to open the door for me... not knowing that the people were gone with the wind... blown to Giakovo or to Trite Cheshmi. I lifted my head and looked around. I looked at each house... I said nothing... I glanced at our house... It looked so beautiful in my own eyes... I was unable to see its deformities.

I thought of my father again as I began to climb up Mount Kilinderka. It was raining again, raining buckets. I decided to take shelter in the Durdubakova barn. I tried to sleep but still had difficulties. Looking at familiar places did ease my pain a little. I was very close to the dead zone... I was thinking of the artificial border placed here that divided our Pozharsko... our fields from our mountains. This was an imposed border put there when our old generation was young. Then the Greeks did their job well... they brought foreigners and gave them our houses and lands... They brought Madzhiri (Christian Turks from Asia Minor) from the Pontus and we, like frightened sheep, fled in the wind....

My heels were bleeding and I was hungry. I slowed down a little. I used the axe to brace myself. I remembered when we were running away from Pozharsko, my father brought two cans of meat with him ... from UNRA... He gave them to me to hide. It was clear to me, clear as day, where I hid them. I went to the rock, stuck my hand in a hole and felt something strange wrapped around the can. Hastily I pulled my hand out and with the can I pulled out a snake. After that I did not feel like eating. The evil follows us everywhere... No one knows where and in what circumstances time and life will take you. Beware even of a shallow river.

My clothes were wet... drenched. I was walking slowly approaching the Papradnik border crossing. This is where they killed Giorgi Peichov and Stoian Grudev. A little further on is the Krivitsa pass. It doesn't look like anyone is there... from either side. I crossed myself and prayed that no damn cursed bullet would reach me. But thank God for the strength he gave me, I picked up the pace and

jumped like a wounded beast. The only regret I have is that I didn't stay long enough to enjoy my homeland. I was leaving like a bandit from a heist. I raised my head and looked back, O Lord my God, I felt like I was a living target. Perhaps I was... or perhaps I wasn't. It seemed to me at that moment that I was. Finally I made it across the border. I heard them talking... yelling at each other... over me. I had the strangest feeling they could have killed me. All your life you struggle for your country... and for strangers to kill you... we are people too... what kind of country is this...? All the time we run with bloodied heels.

I rolled into the Tsrna River. It was ice cold. I looked into the distance. The valley was flat like a pancake.

I thought I should rest for a while. I was naked like a wild beast. My father used to say: "The secret of misery is in the will itself..." I cut a few leafy branches from the trees with my axe. I laid some on the ground, in a sunny spot, and covered myself with the rest. I was afraid of being discovered so I tossed some dried branches on top of the freshly cut ones.

I was in pain. My heels were sore. I wanted to sleep. I was feeling calm; perhaps because of the aroma emanating from the fresh leaves or perhaps because I had fulfilled my father's wish. I fell asleep and began to dream. To this day I can't explain my dream, not that it has an explanation. There were three men; I can still see them before my eyes. I know the middle one was "Sveti Ilia" (St. Elia) because he blessed me and gave me a wafer and then sprinkled me with something. The other two were as beautiful as angels. They just smiled at me and blessed me like I had done something important on earth and I deserved to be taken to heaven.

Then it was the migrants, the living, they were persecuting me, saying that I would be next; next for what? To this day I don't know... Perhaps I would be next to leave my bones in Pozharsko...

We the people of Pozharsko wanted to be together but we were never all in one place. Our graves are scattered everywhere.

We always left someone somewhere. I always felt that “this might be the last place we settle” but in reality we continued to be moved and further separated from one another. And everywhere we went (were sent) we left someone behind... from old age... from sickness... from stubbornness... No one knows why they refused to run. God bless Ristoitsa Mankina in Giakovo and Lina Iacheva – Katreva in Pozharsko... together we cried a lot those nights...

NOTE: This story was based on a real case, as was told to me by Petre Kirovakov (transferor of bones), at his house in Bitola. This story was published in “Nova Makedonija” from February 2 to February 5, 1992 under the title “Poedinechnata tragedia kako opshta sudbina”.

POEM – Death of an old woman. This poem is dedicated to my grandmother Tsilka who died in Tashkent in 1957 at age 90.

DEATH OF AN OLD WOMAN

The old warrior woman is dead,
That great granddaughter of Macedonian warriors,
No trunk, no gun carriage,
No pitched sound of a trumpet,
No sign to mark her death.

Seeming like an object found in the night,
From the spirited Asian horses,
Repentant is the old woman soldier,
Flag bearer of the defeated flag.

She who gave blessing to the born,
She who gave birth to a proud gender,
She who lost her own born,
She who rushed after us, the defeated,
She who wore her covenant to Tashkent,
Died without tears.

She died with a curse in her mouth,
With fear from fire,
Something in her soul was burning.

Dying she asked me for my hand,
Pleading with her faded eyes,
“Grandson!” she said to me,
“You have a legacy...,
The responsibility is now yours,
To return home and see...

There is but one thing that constantly worries me,
Maybe the fireplace...,
Maybe the icon lamp...,
Maybe the candle....
Is still burning...”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stoian Kochov was born in 1930 in the village Turie, Lerin Region. During the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) he was an active participant in the DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) units. From 1950 to 1957 he lived and studied in the USSR until his return to the Republic of Macedonia in 1957. Stoian graduated from Belgrade University and after that moved to Skopje.

Stoian authored the following works:

1. СРЕДБА раскази „Студентски збор” - Скопје, 1989;
2. ЕДНА МРТВА ВОЈСКА - поезија „Македонска книга” - Скопје, 1992;
3. САМО) ЖРТВУВАЊЕТО НА МАКЕДОНСКИОТ НАРОД ПОД ГРЦИЈА - критички огледи „Матица македонска” - Скопје, 1994.
4. МРТВОТО ЛИЦЕ НА ВОЈНАТА - поезија „Македонско сонце” - Скопје, 1996.
5. ГОРЃИ ПЕЈКОВ - МАКЕДОНСКИ ВОИН НИЗ ИСТОРИЈАТА НА ДАГ (1945-1949) - монографија - „Академик” - Скопје, 1996.
6. ТАЛКАЧИ - роман, „Матица македонска”, Скопје, 1997;
7. НОВА ГОДИНА ВО ЗЕМЈАНКИТЕ НА ГРАМОС - роман „Матица македонска”, Скопје, 1998
8. КАЗНА БЕЗ ВИНА - роман „Матица македонска”, Скопје, 2001
9. ВО ПРЕСРЕТ НА СУДБИНАТА - раскази „Огледало”, Скопје, 1998
10. ИДЕОЛОШКИОТ АКТИВИЗАМ НАД МАКЕДОНЦИТЕ ПОД ГРЦИЈА - критички огледи, „Матица македонска”, Скопје, 2000
11. ЕСЕИ И ЛИТЕРАТУРНИ ТОЛКУВАЊА - критички огледи, „Матица македонска”, Скопје, 2002.
12. КОБА И ГНЕВ - Раскази “Менора”, Скопје, 2010.
13. ГРОБОРОТ ОД ЛЕРИН - роман „Детска радост”, Скопје, 2001
14. БАЛКАНСКА САГА - роман “Макавеј”- Скопје, 2004.
15. БИЛЕТ ВО ЕДЕН ПРАВЕЦ - Историски критички огледи „Матица македонска”, Скопје, 2004

16. ГОЛЕМОТО ВРАЌАЊЕ НА ТАЛКАЧИТЕ - роман „Современост”, Скопје, 2006
17. МАКЕДОНЦИТЕ НИЗ ПЕКОЛОТ НА ЦРВЕНОТО ГУБИЛИШТЕ - Историски критички огледи “Матица македонска”, Скопје, 2007.
18. ВОИНОТ И МАРГАРИТА - Роман “Матица македонска”, 2008.
19. ЈАМКА - роман “Матица македонска”, Скопје, 2009.
20. ВРАЌАЊЕТО НА ПОТОМЦИТЕ - роман “Менора”, Скопје, 2009.
21. ГЛАСОТ НА ТАЛКАЧИТЕ - Поезија, 2009
22. ГРОБНИЦАТА НА БРАТОЈАДЦИТЕ - роман, 2011.

REVIEWS

First Review

Stoian Kochov, (1930), poet, short story writer and lover of history; a person close to his people. I should mention up front that Stoian was among the first people to object to the division present in the people from Aegean, Vardar and Pirin Macedonia, which has been imposed on us by others, and which we have accepted and have carried with us for decades. This author has revolted against the indignation, the disagreements, the views and the negative opinions of others about us. This he has made very clear in his books.

His knowledge of the military campaigns in the destructive war imposed on us (in which nobody could ever imagine that there would be a victorious end for us) is impressive and more impressive is this man's knowledge of events and life that came later, after the war (1946-1949), in Greek occupied Macedonia.

In retrospect Stoian seeks (and manages) to reconstruct something of a past life full of war horrors and terrifying suffering. And everywhere he looks he feels the conscience of a man without his own will, who found himself in the whirlpool of war fighting for DAG. After that the devastation and banishment of our people from the southern parts of our homeland... He writes about the youthful blind faith that willed our people to fight, and fight for our national liberation (who in reality were fighting for our national extermination), without knowing the true intention, not only of the DAG leadership and the Greek Monarcho-Fascists, but also of those in Moscow, Belgrade and the other communist centres that fueled the war in this unfortunate part of Macedonia.

And what of Stoian Kochov's short stories? They were written with great love and true feelings for the people about whom the author speaks. They were written with the sole desire to keep them alive... a testimony to our past... the stories are voices which speak of the tragedy of our people from Greek occupied Macedonia... of their experiences... of their dark and evil fate... of an oppressed and humiliated people...

Done Panovski, literary critic

Second Review

“...Stoian Kochov’s stories are laced with bitter awareness of a tragic fate that swept the Macedonian people in Greece. The stories offer a wide range of themes and as many plots as there are people...”

Giorgi Stalev

Third Review

For fifty years now, on a daily basis, the Macedonian readers have endured a sickness stemming from the violent tragedy that took place in their homeland. According to the depth and duration, this violent tragedy has caused the people from the southern Macedonian regions to disperse around the world and to be irreversibly separated from their homes. There is very little known of this unprecedented injustice done to our people. The general public in Europe and North America, which carries much of the blame for this tragedy and human suffering for almost all of our people in Greek occupied Macedonia, knows very little to nothing about this.

What is most unfortunate is that even the Macedonian people in general know very little about this Macedonian tragedy and those who do know something have shown indifference, not because of ignorance but because, it should be said, of understandably wanting to hold their distance. I am not talking about ordinary Macedonian people here, I am talking about the “official Macedonian views” that had been held for half a century now.

The short stories under the title “Tragedy and Wrath” by Stoian Kochov, like all his other published short stories and novels, not only enrich our literature dealing with this Macedonian tragedy, but offers an in-depth analysis of a number of individual human destinies, taken from the lives and journeys of those who have suffered. These short stories are not fictitious, they are based on real people and real events which provide the reader with a rounded

picture of the 1950's and the suffering of a large part of the Macedonian nation, which is still ongoing, with no end in sight.

One general characteristic that the author subtly offers the reader is proof that the Macedonian people who have taken the hardest, cruelest and most tragic blows of fate have accepted them with stoicism and with calm, keeping their pain to themselves, not cultivating anger and hatred against anyone, not even against the direct perpetrators of this tragedy. This stoicism, calmness and peacefulness that the Macedonian people possess are repeatedly confirmed through their artistic creations and also through their acts in political life.

Stoian Kochov's stories offer the reader noticeable values and simplicity in style, a clear language with clarity and simplicity in his sentences. With all their values, these stories, of course, should reach out to the widest circle of Macedonian readers.

Nikola Kichevski

ACRONYMS

AFZH - Women's Anti-Fascist Front
ASNOM – Anti-Fascist Assembly of National Liberation of Macedonia
BRP(k) – Communist Party of Bulgaria
CPG - Communist Party of Greece
CPM - Communist Party of Macedonia
CPY - Communist Party of Yugoslavia
CVG - Greek Civil War
DAG – Democratic Army of Greece
EAM – National Liberation Front
ELAS – National Liberation Army of Greece
EON – National Youth Organization
EPON – All Greek National Youth Organization
KOEM – Communist Organization of Aegean Macedonia
KOS - Counter-intelligence Sector of JAN
NKVD – People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
NOBG – People's Liberation Struggle in Greece
NOBM – People's Liberation Struggle in Macedonia
NOF – Peoples' Liberation Front
NOMS - Peoples' Liberation Youth Organization
OKNE - Communist Youth Organization of Greece
ONOO – Local People's Liberation Council
OZNA – People's Defense Division
PAO - Pan-Hellenic Liberation Organization
PDEG – Pan-Greek Democratic Union of Women
PDOG – International Federation of Democratic Women
POJ - Partisan Units of Yugoslavia
SID - Information Services of the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs
SNOF - Slavo-Macedonian National Liberation Front
SKP(b) – Communist Party of the Soviet Union
UDBA - Directorate of State Security
USSR – United Soviet Socialist Republics