

## **My Family's Stories**

*By Hellen Bakarnis*

My paternal grandparents were Mitre and Trepa Vasilof and they were born in the town of Biraltsi, Kalari in Macedonian. I don't know the year of their births. They had six children: Tika (a girl), Vangel, Risto (my father), Zifka, Vasko and Olga. My grandfather worked very hard and purchased many acres of fields and land around the village. My father said that they were well off. They never were without food. My grandfather was illiterate as he didn't go to school. When officials of the Greek government came to their village during the Metaxis era, the person the officials asked to help them identify the villagers was the priest. Either the priest got lazy or the officials did – when they came to my grandfather they changed their family name from Vasilof to Tsanis. When my uncle Vangel went to do compulsory military service he then realized that the name was changed.

My grandfather's family were all Macedonians so when the Greek Civil War started in 1946 they were all sympathizers of the partisans. A Greek friend of my grandfather's came to their home and told my grandfather that he and his sons should leave the village and go across the border as they were wanted by the Greek Government for helping the partisans. My grandfather and his sons fled their homeland and village and went to Belgrade, Yugoslavia. When my grandfather and his sons went to Yugoslavia and registered as citizens of that country my grandfather didn't want to use Tsanis as a surname, he wanted Vasilof. He was told he had to use the name Vasilevski.

My grandfather until the day he died wasn't allowed back into Greece to see his wife and family. My uncle Vasko ( he was the only one to remain in Yugoslavia) was also never allowed back to see his mother and his sisters. My grandmother was a wealthy (by Greek standards) woman and until the day she passed away at 99 she always hoped her husband and sons would come back to the village.

My father was born in 1919 and when he was 30 years of age he was introduced to my mother, Kata Manolova, who was a Neretka (a lady from the village of Neret). They married in 1950. I was born in 1951 and my brother in 1952. My mother begged her brother, Velo Manolas, to organize for us to come to Australia. My vouko (uncle) Velo organized this through Red Cross. We arrived in Australia in 1953 and we went to Bridgetown, Western Australia, where my father worked at a saw mill.

Velo Manolas came to Australia in 1929. He was a taxi driver and everyone knew him as they used his services. He also had a billiard parlour in Bridgetown, other shops and a farm. My mother told me that when they came to Australia they lived on the sawmill in a hut and all they had were crates of different sizes for tables and chairs. She would cry every night as to why they came to this country. Neretsi (people from Neret) who were in Manjimup would visit and they had to sit on the crates. My parents eventually bought land in Bridgetown and they both built the house we lived in until we left for Melbourne.

We came to Melbourne in 1956. They rented a room in a house in Fitzroy. They bought their first house in Young Street, Fitzroy, across the road from the Bulgarian church. No one from my father's village migrated to Australia. My mother on the other hand was related and knew many Neretsi including Stoiche Stoichev. He, Risto Altin, Aspro Asprof were friends of my

parents. My father and mother in later years would help with the, firstly, Neret Reception Centre and then the Macedonian Monastery at King Lake. My father was a carpenter and did work at the Reception Centre and Monastery. My mother was with Petritsa Bozanina and the First Ladies on the committee of the St. George and St. Mary Macedonian Orthodox Church in Epping.

In 1977 my parents organized a six month trip around the world including Greece. My parents told all of their friends and relatives. My father at this time was the treasurer of the Macedonian Senior Citizens Group of Lalor, Thomastown and Epping. I had better add that my father organized for his elder brother Vangel to come to Australia in 1955. His brother Vangel was not involved with the church etc. Uncle Vangel was also planning to go to Greece at the same time as my parents but didn't tell anyone apart from his immediate family. He and his wife left two days after my parents and had no problems getting into Greece, even though he had the same surname as my father. My parents landed at Athens Airport and were stopped by border security and told they would not be allowed admission into Greece. My parents were told to organize flights to go to any other country. My parents were planning to go to Belgrade after Greece and so they booked flights to Belgrade. They were kept in a holding area with guards guarding them and my father said to them "What are you afraid of, two elderly people?" An official from Qantas saw my parents and told when they left Greece on the flight to Belgrade to make sure their luggage was placed on that flight.

My father passed away in 1987.

My maternal grandmother was born Tsveta Trpina in the village of Bapchor about the 1880s. She married her first husband who was a Bapchorets (a man from Bapchor) but he left for France and he never returned. Tsveta then married Mitre Millef who was from Neret. Mitre and Tsveta had three daughters Nika (she married Stefo Cilemanoff), Christina and Sophie. When her youngest was three years old, Mitre Millef died and left her a widow. The Millef family didn't want to help my grandmother and she was very poor. She married for the third time, my grandfather, Mitre Manolof. Mitre Manolof was a widower with two adult children and when he married my grandmother he told her she would have to adopt out her youngest daughters, Christina and Sophie. Christina went to a family in Rula and Sophie to a wealthy family in Lerin.

Can I tell you about their history before I tell the story of my mother.

Christina's adopted family ill-treated her and she was very unhappy and begged my grandmother to take her back. Her adopted family eventually had children of their own and at about 1928 went to Detroit, Michigan. On the other hand, Sophie's adopted family were wealthy and she was much loved and at about the same time they also went to Detroit. When my grandmother found out that they were leaving Greece she went to Sophie's school to say goodbye. She told Sophie "I am your mother," and my teta (aunt) said to her "No, you are ugly." (My grandmother was in black as her husband was in Australia.) I have a beautiful mother. Both sisters lived in Detroit, Michigan, both lived not far from the other and went to the same church and dances. When my teta Sophie was about 18 years of age my grandmother's brother went to work in Detroit and went to the church dance. He knew which families they were both adopted into and went to the eldest, Christina, and said to her "See that girl in the red dress. She is your sister." Christina waited until Sophie went to the toilet and told her "I am your sister". Sophie asked her parents on the way home from the dance and they started to curse the person who told her. The two sisters eventually found out about

the rest of the family and their other siblings. The two sisters couldn't keep in touch until Sophie's adopted parents passed away. Christina married Bill Germanoff and moved to Ohio. They had four children. Sophie married Steve Doinidis and remained in Detroit. She had 3 children.

And now my mother. Tsveta and Mitre Manolof had two children, Georgi and Kata. My mother was born in 1926. Shortly after she was born, Mitre Manolof left Neret to come to Australia via Egypt with another Neretets (person from Neret). He landed in Fremantle and went to Bridgetown to work at the sawmill. In 1929 his son Velo came to Australia to join his father. He came with other Neretsi (people from Neret) via Naples. My grandfather died in 1934. Because she was now a widow, Tsveta and her children were very poor. My grandmother gave the teacher six eggs so that my mother could leave school at the age of seven and work for different families in and outside of the village, working in the fields and tending to the animals.

My mother told me horrible stories about her younger years in the village. When the Civil War occurred my uncle Georgi became a partisan and fought against the Greek government. He was killed at Gramos and his body has never been found.

My mother became a "partisanka" (female partizan) and together with other young ladies from the village she collected supplies and food from other Macedonian sympathizers. The police were told by a Neretets that my mother was the leader of other girls/ladies from the village. My mother was hiding so she wouldn't get caught. My mother told me that the police came to my grandmother's house looking for my mother. My mother was hiding in the "izba" (cellar). The police looked for her but couldn't find her. She left the village and helped the partizani (partizans) during the conflict. She witnessed the murder and mutilation of a friend of hers. The lady's husband was in Australia and not fighting with the partizans and they kept asking where he was. (The older Neretsi would in later years tell me about my mother.)

Almost at the end of the Civil War my mother was told to leave Greece before the Greek police caught her, as she was wanted for helping the partisans. She found out that another Neretski family was leaving the village and crossing the border to Macedonia. By coincidence he was my husband's uncle. My mother was to hide in the izba until they came for her. My grandmother didn't know my mother was there and locked her in. They came to look for her and when she didn't come out they thought something was wrong and found the door locked. Overnight they traveled to Macedonia. Husband, wife and two children and my mother.

When they arrived in Skopje my husband's uncle realized he forgot something and went back to the village. He was killed going back to Neret. When they arrived in Skopje, my husband's aunt had relatives there and stayed with them. As my mother had no relatives in Skopje she was taken to the Monastery at Matka. There she worked in the fields and farms. Other girls were working as domestic labourers for wealthier families and she asked to do that work. One of the families she worked for were relocating to Belgrade and they took her with them. In 1950 she was introduced to my father and they married in April, 1950.

While we were in Bridgetown my grandmother wrote to my mother and asked her to see if she could come to Australia. My parents didn't have the money and weren't permanent residents yet. My mother asked her half-brother to help with the paperwork and guarantee the passage. As it was his stepmother, he refused. My mother had relatives in Manjimup and she

went there by bus. They willingly signed as guarantors and lent my parents the money. My grandmother came to Australia in 1955 but unfortunately she only lived another six months and passed away. My grandfather was buried in Perth and the plot was in my uncle's name and he refused for my grandmother to be buried there. She is buried in Bridgetown Cemetery.

After my grandmother's death, my mother became ill, so they decided to move to Melbourne. Also there was a greater opportunity for both of them to work there. We came to Melbourne in 1956. My father found work immediately at Burgess Furniture where he remained until his retirement.

My mother on the other hand went from factory to factory looking for work. She told me that at one time, being unable to read, she thought all the buses went in the same direction. She kept looking for her stop and couldn't see it. At the end of the line near Fawkner Cemetery the bus stopped, the driver asked her "Mrs, where are you going?" My mother replied "Fitzroy". The driver told her which bus to catch to get home.

My mother first got a job at Rosella, then at a factory making dolls. I still have the doll she gave me for Christmas when I was 9 years old. Lastly, she worked at Nilsen Electrical in Fitzroy. She was their tea lady. Nilsen owned 3KZ radio station and when needed they even sent her to the city to get tea and coffee for the staff there. She retired from Nilsen Electrical after working for them for 25 years.

When my mother retired between looking after grandchildren, she became an active member of the Macedonian Community. She was a Committee Member of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in Epping. She has a Recognition Certificate from the Macedonian Orthodox Church. For many years she was on the Committee of the Senior Citizen Group of Lalor, Thomastown and Epping. She was a participant of the Seniors Macedonian Dancing Group and they danced at the Exhibition Building in Melbourne, Council functions and wherever they were asked to perform Macedonian traditional dancing. For her contribution to the Community she was awarded the Commonwealth Recognition Award for Senior Australians in 2001. Written on her award is the following: "This Award recognizes the significant contribution of Kata Vasilevski to the community of Scullin. On behalf of the Australian people we congratulate you on your achievement of being awarded a Commonwealth Recognition Award for Senior Australians." It was signed by Prime Minister John Howard, Harry Jenkins, and Minister for the Aged Bronwyn Bishop.

In 2003 my mother received a Certificate stating "This Certificate recognizes that Kata Vasilevski was nominated for an International Women's Day Award 2003 in the City of Whittlesea." It was signed on behalf of the International Women's Day Committee.

My mother was a very active woman into her 90s. She passed away just before her 96th birthday.

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