

THE ARRIVAL AND SETTLEMENT OF MACEDONIANS IN THE INNER WESTERN SUBURBS OF MELBOURNE

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Abstract

Macedonians from under Yugoslav rule did not arrive in Victoria in large numbers until the 1970s. Many chose Melbourne's inner western suburbs as their new home; here they found abundant employment opportunities and cheap suburban accommodation. Within a decade, Macedonians would come to form an integral part of the 'inner west'. This article identifies the longer history of Macedonians' migration to Australia and then examines this post-war migrant study' in this light, focussing on the suburbs and industries in which Macedonians lived and worked and quickly became identified. It traces their considerable (and continuing) efforts to preserve their ethnic roots—by forming Macedonian associations and establishing institutions. Drawing largely on recent interviews with several migrants and using illustrative evidence from family and community photographs to enlarge on the human story, this study seeks to give new recognition to a people who had struggled under several regimes. It proposes to deepen our knowledge of the diverse backgrounds Melbourne's post-war 'new' migrants and, finally, it tells one nation's story of will and economic and cultural survival—once here.

IT IS ESTIMATED THAT there are between two and three million Macedonians in the diaspora. Outside of the Balkans, the main communities are in Western Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia. During the 20th century, Macedonians arrived in Australia in a

series of waves. They settled predominantly in Perth, Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong and Melbourne. Until the 1940s, most of Australia's Macedonian migrants had lived under Greek rule. This work specifically examines the later cohort who arrived in Victoria after the Second World War following the formation of the Republic of Macedonia (1944), one of six new republics of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) led by Josip Tito (1892–1980). Macedonians, mainly from rural regions, began migrating in the 1950s and 1960s, and their numbers rose considerably in the 1970s, once the Tito government's restrictions had been appreciably eased. A large number settled in the 'inner western' suburbs of Melbourne and have left their imprint. For the purposes of this study, the inner west of Melbourne is defined as the suburbs of Footscray, Seddon, Yarraville, Spotswood, Newport and Williamstown.

Documenting Melbourne's Macedonians

The aim of this study is to document the neglected history of the circumstances, arrival and formative years of the Macedonian community in the western suburbs of Melbourne since the late 1950s. This work traces where Macedonians lived and worked and examines how they sought to preserve and promote their cultural heritage, particularly in light of their country's fragmented political history. It discusses the manner and dedication with which Macedonians celebrated spiritual, social and recreational activities, describing the formation of cafés and sporting clubs, and the establishment of the first Macedonian Orthodox Church in the western suburbs. In their commitment to creating their own organisations and continuing cultural and religious practices—in effect re-establishing their own traditions after a history of subjugation—Macedonians were radically changing the landscape of the inner west.

Although Macedonians formed one of the largest ethnic groups of southern Europeans in Melbourne (and Australia) in the 1970s, there are limited written resources to draw upon. This article relies primarily on oral histories, which proved to be a rich source of personal and social material. In all, 12 individuals were interviewed, including Wally Curran, former secretary of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (Victoria). Apart from Curran, the remaining 11 interviewees were of Macedonian background: 9 were male, aged between approximately 50 and 70 years old. The majority arrived in Australia in the early 1970s, and 3 came here in the 1960s. Only 2 females participated in this study.¹

Table of Macedonian Interviewees

Name	Gender	Marital Status	Year of Birth	Place of Birth	Year of Arrival
Kalcovska, Slavka	Female	Married/ Widowed	1938	Dihovo, Bitola region	1960
Kleshtev, Mihailo	Male	Married	1934	Gorno Aglarci, Bitola region	1964
Stojcevski, Peco	Male	Married	1944	Optichari, Bitola region	1968
Talevski, Slavko	Male	Married	1949	Novaci, Bitola region	1969
Vasilevski, Zivko	Male	Married	1953	Vrajnevc, Bitola region	1970
Ilioski, Petre	Male	Married	1954	Openica, Ohrid region	1970
Koleski, Blagoja	Male	Married	1950	Kuratica, Ohrid region	1970
Nikolovski, Blagoja	Male	Married	1951	Zhabeni, Bitola region	1970
Risteska, Violeta	Female	Married	1966	Dobrushevo, Bitola region	1970
Ilievski, Dobre	Male	Married	1955	Dolno Orizari, Bitola region	1971
Pilovski, Risto	Male	Married	1953	Grunishte, Bitola region	1972

Background: *Pechalba* and *Pechalbari*

For centuries, Macedonians travelled abroad in search of employment. They were mostly young men who would work for several years or more before returning home with the intention of building a larger family home and purchasing more land. This tradition of migratory labour is known as *pechalba*. In the late 19th century, the practice of *pechalba* increased because of unstable conditions under Ottoman Turkish rule, to be followed by temporary suspension during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, and then came Macedonia's partition by her neighbours Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria

in 1913, with Albania acquiring a piece of Macedonian territory in 1920. Once divided into several geo-political entities, Macedonians were forced to endure new assimilatory policies. Overwhelmingly, those seeking work abroad as migrant labourers in the 1920s came from Greek and Serbian territories, with far more limited numbers from Bulgarian and Albanian areas.

***Pechalbari* in Australia Since the 1880s**

Peter Hill, in his 1989 book, *The Macedonians in Australia*, tells stories and traces the circumstances of the first arrivals. Reportedly, those who came to Australia in the latter part of the 19th century and the early 20th century were following news of the discovery of gold. They chose places such as Kalgoorlie in Western Australia, or Broken Hill in New South Wales.² Amongst the early arrivals were men from the Kostur and Lerin regions (under Greek rule) and the Bitola region (under Serb rule).³ The United States was the most popular destination for *pechalbari* from the 1890s until it imposed severe restrictions on certain categories of immigrants in 1924. Many then turned their eyes to Australia, a new and distant destination. Macedonian arrivals in Australia after 1924, and up to the 1960s, were overwhelmingly from under Greek rule, the remainder were from villages in the territory under Serbian–Yugoslav domination.

Many of these early Macedonian migrants worked in Western Australia and, in the tradition of *pechalba*, did not see themselves as permanent settlers. They were typically bush workers moving around in small groups of three or four men and clearing virgin bushland in remote areas for future farms. Often they remained isolated for months at a time. Working long hours from sunrise to sunset, *pechalbari* followed the road to where there was work, a search that took them scrub-clearing in Ceduna and Sugena on the west coast of South Australia; cutting railway sleepers in Grafton, New South Wales, or in Bridgetown and Manjimup in Western Australia; grape picking in the Riverland of South Australia; and cutting sugar cane in Queensland.⁴ Jan Harper has written of Macedonians in rural Victoria in her 2004 article, ‘The Pecalbars of Gippsland: Macedonian Farmworkers around Kernot in the 1930s’. Her study gives further insight into these small communities of Macedonian migrants who lived and worked around the towns of Kernot, Glen Forbes, Glen Alvie, Krowera, Jeetho West and Korumburra.⁵ Here, they engaged in hard manual work clearing South Gippsland’s bushland several decades before their post–Second World War

Macedonian compatriots came to Victoria's urban regions (apart from a small group who had settled in Melbourne earlier), beginning in the 1950s and increasing to mass proportions in the 1970s.

Melbourne's First Macedonians

Melbourne's first Macedonian community emerged during the 1920s and 1930s in the then inner working-class suburb of Fitzroy. Their numbers grew because of ongoing discriminatory policies of the Greek government. By the 1950s, a flourishing Macedonian community was seen around Gertrude Street, Fitzroy; the Fitzroy community would later spread into the neighbouring suburbs of Collingwood and Clifton Hill, and, by the late 1960s and 1970s, the Melbourne diaspora had extended further north to Northcote, Thornbury and Preston.

Prior to 1960, only a small number of Macedonians were living in the inner west.⁶ They had escaped illegally from Yugoslavia at the end of the Second World War and for some time after.⁷ Typically, they came from traditional *pechalbar* villages, such as Brusnik, Bukovo, Velushina and Graeshnica in the Bitola region upper villages along the Baba Mountains ranges.

The Prespa region's village of Brajchino was renowned for sending its young men abroad on *pechalba*, a practice dating back to the second half of the 19th century. Giorgi Kalcovski followed this tradition when he left Brajchino village by illegally crossing the Yugoslav–Greek border, and, after spending time in a Greek refugee camp, he arrived in Australia in 1958. Kalcovski soon moved to Moore Street, Footscray, where he shared a house with four other recently arrived single men from the Bitola region upper villages. He worked at Kinnears Ropes in Ballarat Road, Footscray, with other men from the Bitola region.⁸ Here



Tose Spasevski arriving at Port Melbourne in 1964

Photograph courtesy of Bob Spasevski

is an early example of a nucleus of a Macedonian inner west community, albeit confined to young men residing at just one house.

It was not until the early 1960s that Yugoslavia's communist regime commenced relaxing travelling restrictions; however, the bureaucracy was complicated and passports were notoriously difficult to obtain from the interior ministry. Macedonians who were employed in state enterprises could not leave the country until they obtained approval from their employer. Those who managed to leave typically did so in the tradition of *pechalba*, and they were single young men who generally intended to work abroad for a few years before returning home. Indeed, these young men working in Melbourne's inner west found factory work vastly different from their rural village employment experiences. Some returned to Macedonia after a few years with savings that enabled them to build new homes, purchase more land, or set up small-scale businesses, but most remained in Australia.

One man who stayed was Mihailo Kleshtev. He arrived in 1964, initially planning to work in Melbourne for a few years then return to his family. He soon saw that there were greater prospects in Australia. In early 1966, Mihailo brought out his wife and two young children and they were one of the first Macedonian families to settle in Williamstown.⁹

1970s and New Arrivals

In 1970, the remaining restrictions on emigration were removed,



Ship docking at Port Melbourne 1968
Photograph courtesy of Mihailo Kleshtev

and young men in traditional *pechalbar* regions such as Ohrid, Prilep, and particularly Bitola (where the author's family had lived), commenced leaving on a large scale. As Macedonia was the southernmost republic of Yugoslavia, the long journey to Australia involved travelling by train across the entire length of Yugoslavia, through Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia and Slovenia, before reaching the Italian border. Genoa was the key port in Italy from which Macedonians boarded

ships for the 30-day voyage to Australia. In the 1960s and 1970s, ships such as *Galileo Galilei*, its sister ship, *Guglielmo Marconi*, and others left on a monthly basis for Australia, docking at Fremantle, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney.

With the easing and then elimination of travel restrictions in the 1960s and 1970s respectively, Macedonian emigration grew slowly at first, then massively during the latter decade. The experience for many was profound. For example, in the Bitola region virtually no family was left untouched by its scale and sweep; and notably, a large number from Bitola's rural villages came to Australia. One interviewee, Zivko Vasilevski, witnessed the constant stream of fellow Macedonians arriving by ship at Port Melbourne in the early to mid-1970s as he and others waited at the dock when ships were due. Among the new arrivals, they would invariably find friends, relatives or acquaintances from their villages or region.¹⁰ The photograph of the Kleshtev family below evokes something of this experience a little earlier in 1968.



Kleshtev family awaiting new arrivals at Port Melbourne, 1968

Photograph courtesy of Mihailo Kleshtev

Newcomers were greeted at Port Melbourne by their sponsors, who were usually relatives. Accommodation was also provided by the sponsor for several months or more, and employment was pre-arranged to commence within days of arrival. The Melbourne working-class suburbs of the inner

north and inner west were the principal destinations during the late 1960s and 1970s; other Macedonians resided in Richmond, Springvale and Dandenong.

Living and Working in the Inner West

The inner western suburbs were attractive to newly arrived Macedonians



Spase Najdovski with friend in Slivica village preparing to leave for Australia, 1969

(photograph courtesy of the Najdovski family)

owing to the availability of inexpensive accommodation and an abundance of employment opportunities. A concentration of industry had been a dominant feature of the western suburbs dating back to the 19th century. However, in the economically charged 1960s, Australia needed to increase its urban population. Macedonians quickly found work and wrote letters home to family and friends encouraging them to migrate to Melbourne. It was a relatively simple process to sponsor others to Australia at the time, and numbers rapidly increased to the point when, in the mid-1970s, a firmly established Macedonian community was spreading across Yarraville, Footscray and Seddon, and also in the outer inner west suburbs of Spotswood, Newport

and Williamstown. The highest concentration was in Yarraville because of the proximity to industries and the pull of chain migration.

Some of the larger employers of Macedonian immigrants included: Kinnears Rope Works in Ballarat Road, Footscray; Olympic Tyre and Rubber in Cross Street, West Footscray; Pelaco in Duke Street, Braybrook; Australian Bobbins in Graingers Road, West Footscray; Invicta (later Pacific Carpets) in Paramount Road, Tottenham; Olex Cables in Sunshine Road, Tottenham; ACI Glass in Hudsons Road, Spotswood; and Port Phillip Wool Mill in Nelson Place, Williamstown.



*Spase Najdovski at work in Invicta Carpets, Tottenham,
in the early 1970s*

Photograph courtesy of the Najdovski family

Macedonians were particularly prevalent in the metal, rubber, textile and meatworks industries. They were prepared to work hard, for low rates of pay, under tough conditions, which were often dirty and at times unsafe. As well, they were opportunistic young men who often sought new employment opportunities with higher paying employers. In 1964, Mihailo Kleshtev commenced work at Port Phillip Wool Mill, in Nelson Place, Williamstown, where he earned \$30.00 per week. He remained there for three months before moving to the James Hardie Company, in Hardie Road, Brooklyn, where he worked on a rotating shift basis for an increased weekly wage of \$43.00.¹¹

There were three principal factories in the Yarraville/Footscray area involved in textile manufacturing—Davis Coop, in Francis Street, Yarraville, Bradmill Cottonmills, in Moreland Street, Yarraville (before moving to Francis Street, Yarraville), and Dickies Towels, in Hyde Street, Yarraville.

A stable workforce of approximately 300 Macedonian men and women worked in these three factories in the mid-1970s, and many more worked for



Bradmill Cottonmills, Francis Street, Yarraville
Photograph Nick Anastasovski

short periods before moving on to other industries that paid better. However, the single most defining industry for the Macedonians of Melbourne's inner west during the 1970s and 1980s was the local meatworks.

The Meatworks—‘smells, blood and guts’

After arriving in Melbourne in 1969, Slavko Talevski spent more than two decades working in the textile industry at Bradmill Cottonmills and Davis Coop. He recalls many Macedonians moving from textiles to the meatworks industry.¹² The western suburbs have had a long association with abattoirs dating back to the mid- to late 19th century.¹³ The arrival of a large number of Macedonians in the 1960s and 1970s saw one of the most recent migrant groups from southern Europe becoming closely identified with the inner west's major meatworks.

Most of the Macedonians had come to Australia from rural villages, where all households maintained livestock, including cows, sheep, pigs and chickens, essential for the family's sustenance. Meat in the villagers' diet came from family farm animals, which were slaughtered by male members of the household (women would slaughter chickens). So Macedonians were used to slaughtering farm animals and were also familiar with the

labouring processes of meat preparation and preservation. These skills equipped them well to work in the abattoirs and meat industry in their new environment. The men were used in the meatworks as slaughtermen, boners and butchers. Employment in the industry was not exclusively male, as Macedonian women also had jobs there as meat cleaners and packers. It was hard, physical work, but these young men and women were attracted to the industry's high wages. In this setting, thousands of cattle and sheep were slaughtered daily. The carcasses would be rotated through the plant on a continuously moving chain, where they would be gutted, trimmed and cleaned. Other tasks included working in the cool rooms and the specialist processing areas such as gut cleaning. Wally Curran noted that it was an industry that 'not everyone could work in—there were smells, blood and guts'.¹⁴ (The graphic images below attest to the meat union secretary's sensory and visual summation).

Dobre Ilievski arrived in Williamstown in September 1971 as a 16 year old from the Bitola region village of Dolno Orizari. His first job



Dobre Ilievski working on the mutton chain at Borthwick's meatworks in Yarraville in the early 1970s

Photograph courtesy of Dobre Ilievski

was in Borthwick's meatworks in Yarraville. Here he worked in the 'offal room' removing brains from severed sheep heads. Dobre stated that he had 'no problem' dealing with the nature of the work; as a boy in Macedonia, he had killed chickens for everyday consumption and had often watched men slaughter other farm animals.¹⁵

Varying numbers of Macedonians worked across the meatworks of the inner west. These included: Gilbertson's Meatworks (later Greenham's) in Champion Road, Newport (see photograph on next page) and Kyle Road, Altona; Angliss Meatworks in Ballarat Road, Footscray; Borthwick's Meatworks in Francis Street,



Peco (Peter) Ilievski working on the chain at Gilbertson's meatworks in Newport late 1970s

Photograph courtesy of Todorka Ilievski

Yarraville; and Smorgon's Meatworks in Somerville Road, Brooklyn. Anecdotal evidence reveals that at Gilbertson's in Newport, Macedonians made up 15–20 per cent of the workforce, whilst at Angliss, Macedonians comprised 40–45 per cent. However, Smorgon's Meatworks in Somerville Road, Brooklyn, contained the single largest number—as many as 70 per cent of the 3000 employees throughout the 1970s were Macedonian men and women.

'Smorgon's was a Mother to the Macedonians'

Entire sections of the workforce at Smorgon's were almost exclusively made up of Macedonians. For example, 80 per cent of the workers on the mutton chains, beef chains and in the boning rooms were Macedonian.¹⁶ This very large Macedonian presence at Smorgon's gave rise to a saying in the western suburbs Macedonian community at the time—'*ako majka si go izgube sinot, vo Smorgon ke go najde*' ('if a mother has lost her son, he can be found at Smorgon's').¹⁷ Dobro Ilievski worked as a butcher on the mutton chain at Smorgon's from 1978 to 1980 and stated '*Smorgon's majka mu beshe na Makedoncite*' ('Smorgon's was a mother to the Macedonians').¹⁸

Macedonians worked hard in the meatworks and this enabled them to buy and pay off their homes and secure a future for their children.¹⁹



Macedonian meatworkers on the mutton chain at Gilbertson's Meatworks in Newport, 1972

Photograph courtesy of Dobre Ilievski

Commenting on the benefits of working in the meatworks industry, Wally Curran stated that ‘often a husband and wife worked together in the same plant and, although they arrived with no English language skills, training or education, the industry allowed them the opportunity to develop skills and establish themselves financially’.²⁰ Macedonian meatworkers were not as politicised as some other ethnic groups; however, Curran recalled that ‘they respected and understood the need for the union’ and were active participants, providing delegates, shop stewards and representatives on the AMIEU’s committee of management.²¹

Given the tough physical nature of the meat-processing industry, which required the use of sharp knives and blades, workers were susceptible to tendon cuts and other specific work-related injuries. In 1964, in support of workers, the meatworkers’ union established a ten-bed hospital and specialist centre—‘The Trade Union Clinic and Research Centre’ in Paisley Street, Footscray—which in the 1970s employed a Macedonian interpreter to assist compatriot injured meatworkers.²²



*Peco (Peter) Ilievski and Mitko Mihailov at
Gilbertson's Newport, early 1970s
Photograph courtesy of Todorka Ilievski*

The 1980s was to be a crucial turning point when a number of the inner west's meatworks had ceased operating. Just as two decades earlier, hard-working Macedonians had been welcomed to this then flourishing industry, now a different economic climate and changing cultural trends saw employers close their doors and thus bring an end to this industry's Macedonian subculture. As a result, these 'old' meat workers now sought 'new' working lives and workplaces—and perhaps a 'new Mother' for the Macedonians of the inner west.

Cultural and Religious Life

This section now turns to telling the story of Macedonians' remarkable achievements in creating a cultural and religious community within Melbourne's inner west.. It also briefly traces Macedonians' mark on Australian culture more generally. It is less about finding a 'new Mother' than showing Macedonians bringing their 'old Mother' to the inner west.

Cafés

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was common for Macedonians to establish cafés and boarding houses in places where their *pechalbar* colonies formed. In Australia, the first institutions of this kind were established in Perth, Western Australia, in the 1920s. In Melbourne, earlier waves of *pechalbari* and newly arrived migrants found Macedonian cafés and boarding houses operating in the inner suburb of Fitzroy. The first Macedonian café in the inner western suburbs was situated at 134 Stephen Street, Yarraville. It was owned and operated by Alekso Manevski, who came

from the Bitola region village of Velushina and commenced operating the café in 1970. It was a popular place for newly arrived young men to gather; there they could socialise with other Macedonians, discuss potential employment opportunities, organise accommodation and generally share their experiences. There were a number of bedrooms at the back of the café and these were rented out to the most recent arrivals.²³

Weddings and Social Occasions

Macedonians' celebration of weddings and christenings have traditionally been grand family events. In Melbourne in the 1960s, wedding celebrations were normally held at home as the extended family was often not

present. When large numbers of Macedonian migrants had arrived in the 1970s, the St Augustine's parish church hall in Somerville Road, Yarraville, became one of the most popular venues used by local Macedonians to hold wedding receptions. This church hall was also used for christenings, village dances and community functions. Macedonians commonly referred to the hall as '*Polskiot hall*' (literally meaning 'Polish hall', apparently because the manager of the hall was of Polish nationality).

Village Associations

Macedonian village associations were also formed. Every weekend there were several *village dances* held throughout the inner west at venues that included, in addition to St Augustine's parish church hall, the local scout hall in Canterbury Street, Yarraville, the Maltese Club in Severn Street,



*Site of the first Macedonian café in the inner western suburbs (Yarraville)
Photograph Nick Anastasovski*



Macedonian wedding, Yarraville, 1969
Photograph courtesy of Bob Spasevski

Yarraville, the Masonic Hall in Newport, Altona North High School hall and Paisley High School hall.

In Newport, there was a significant number of Macedonians from the village of Kuratica in the Ohrid region. The first to arrive was Mile Derusevski, in 1962. He sponsored four co-villagers to Australia, and, through the process of chain migration, others followed throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Except for a handful of families that settled in Sydney and Wollongong, the remainder settled in Newport, and, by the end of the 1970s, 35 families from Kuratica were living there.²⁴ The Kuratica village community was characterised by its blood ties and was particularly close knit. A village social association was formed and dances were regularly held at the scout hall in Market Street, Newport and later at the Masonic Hall, on the corner of Melbourne Road and Mason Street, Newport.²⁵

Community Picnics

Macedonians left fertile valleys, rich mountain scenery and an agricultural lifestyle to live and work in the cities and factories of Australia.

Melbourne's industrialised environment was foreign and, in order to reconnect to their lives and the landscape they left behind, Macedonians organised community picnics in garden or bush settings. During the 1950s and early 1960s, those living in Fitzroy and surrounding suburbs regularly spent their Sunday afternoons at the Exhibition Gardens, these occasions are said to have resembled traditional Macedonian village square gatherings.



*Masonic Hall Newport
Photograph Nick Anastasovski*

Community picnics came to be an integral part of Macedonian life in Melbourne generally. A live band would play Macedonian folk music, young and old would participate in traditional dancing, and copious amounts of meat and peppers were cooked on barbecues. Kalorama, in the Dandenongs, became a popular location where Macedonians gathered on an annual basis and, in 1969, the community purchased a large picnic site at Kinglake. On the western outskirts of Melbourne, Macedonians from Greek-occupied Macedonia had been living in Werribee South since the 1920s, where they engaged in market-gardening businesses. They established an annual Macedonian community picnic on 25 December at Eastern Beach in Geelong, an event dating back to the 1940s. When Macedonians under Yugoslav rule arrived in the late 1960s and 1970s, it seemed natural for them to join with their Macedonian brothers and sisters.²⁶ At its height during this period, many thousands of Macedonian families attended the Eastern Beach annual holiday event—a day when their ethnic and religious sensibilities would have been even more accentuated than usual, as their Christmas Day (following the Julian calendar) is on 7 January. Price Reserve, along the Werribee South foreshore, was also a popular picnic ground over the summer months for western suburbs village associations during the latter part of the 1970s. Soccer competitions between villages were among the events often held at these picnics.

The popularity of picnics is evident from the number of village associations that purchased their own picnic grounds outside Melbourne (the Bitola region villages of Mogila purchased a picnic site near Kilmore; Logovardi purchased a site near Bendigo; and Beranci near Kinglake). In 1984, Seddon's Macedonian Orthodox Church, Saint Prophet Elijah (*Sveti Prorok Ilija*), purchased a 40-acre picnic ground in picturesque Rocklyn (Shire of Hepburn). An annual picnic is held there on the first Sunday after Orthodox Christmas and a monastery, Saint Naum of Ohrid (*Sveti Naum Ohridski*), is presently under construction on the site.

Soccer

Recreational time was important to young Macedonian men, who worked hard during the week in textile factories and meatworks. They regularly played soccer. Amongst the most popular locations were Beaton Reserve in Fehon Street, Yarraville, Footscray Park in Footscray, Greenwich Reserve on The Strand in Newport, and Bond Reserve in Altona North. Soccer, rather than Australian Rules football, was their game of choice. Unofficial competitions emerged, whereby Macedonian teams from one neighbourhood or suburb would challenge a Macedonian team from another neighbourhood or suburb.²⁷

Owing to the mass of Macedonians settling in the inner western suburbs in the 1970s, it was inevitable that a second major Macedonian soccer club in Victoria would be established (the first being Preston Makedonia). That club is today called Altona Magic but is known to Macedonians as Altona Vardar. Altona Magic has its roots in the late 1960s, when recently arrived young Macedonian men formed the Kingsville team, then based in Yarraville. Finding new players was no issue, as each ship that docked at Port Melbourne brought more soccer players from Macedonia. Club talent scouts usually knew in advance when to expect the arrival of a Macedonian migrant with highly regarded soccer abilities. Kingsville scouts waited at Port Melbourne dock ready to recruit their skilled new players.²⁸

By the mid-1970s, the club had evolved into the Central Altona Social and Soccer Club (CASSC) and competed in the Victorian Provisional League. J.T. Gray Reserve in Kororoit Creek Road, Williamstown, served as the club's home ground. In 1979, with valuable assistance from the then Altona City Council, a permanent home for the club was secured at the newly constructed complex at Paisley Park in Altona North.²⁹ The CASSC would become the principal soccer club for the Macedonian community in



Kingsville Soccer Club, 1968

Photograph courtesy of Altona Magic football club

the western suburbs, providing much more than an opportunity for young Macedonian men to display their football skills. There were some who participated as club administrators and volunteers, whilst many others made up the supporters that came each week to watch their local team play.

Industrial League Soccer

In the early 1970s, the Victorian Soccer Federation (VSF) formed the Industrial League (IL) soccer competition. Factory workers formed their own soccer teams and factory management provided team strips and insurance against injury. Macedonians actively participated in several company-sponsored factory soccer teams in the IL competition, making up almost the entire team from the Quaker Love factory in West Footscray, and the Aquila Steel factory in Altona North.³⁰ At the James Miller plastics manufacturing factory in Altona North, workers formally registered a team in 1974 (through the factory social club) specifically for the purpose of entering the new IL competition, and Macedonians comprised approximately 95 per cent of the side that entered IL Division 3. P.J. Grey Reserve in Williamstown was utilised as the new club's home ground.³¹ But, in 1977, the future of the team was placed in jeopardy when the James Miller factory relocated its operation away from Altona North. Faced with the prospect

of no longer having a sponsor, the players registered a new soccer club under the name of Altona Ilinden. In its first year, the club won the IL championship under its coach, Williamstown resident and meatworker Peco (Peter) Ilievski. Ilievski had migrated here from Dolno Orizari village in Macedonia's Bitola region.³²



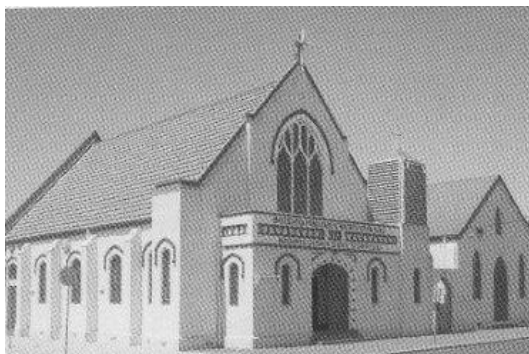
Altona Ilinden, 1977
 Photograph courtesy of Todorka Ilievski

Although an IL club, Footscray United Vardar (FUV) began as 'social soccer' and did not emerge through a factory-based team. Social soccer was initiated by young Macedonian men in Footscray Park in the mid-1970s. In the summer of 1977–1978, a group of players decided to formalise their social game. They formed their own club and FUV became part of a recognised competition. The club was registered with the VSF and commenced playing in IL Division 2 in 1978 wearing red and black.³³

The Church of Saint Prophet Elijah

Overwhelmingly of the Orthodox Christian faith, Macedonians have their own church. Plans began in 1971 to establish the first Macedonian Orthodox Church in the inner west. However, it was not until 1974 that the former Methodist church at 83–85 Victoria Street, Seddon, was purchased. The new church was named Saint Prophet Elijah (*Sveti Prohrok Ilija*).

Macedonians' involvement in the church went beyond wedding and christening ceremonies; attendance at Sunday mass and at community



*Macedonian Orthodox Church, Sveti Prorok Ilija
(Saint Prophet Elijah), Seddon
Photograph courtesy of Macedonian Orthodox
Church*

services during Orthodox Easter and Christmas was consistently high (Orthodox Christian holy days are celebrated according to the Julian calendar; Easter can be celebrated up to four weeks after western Easter celebrations). The local council assisted by closing a section of Victoria Street to traffic on special days in an effort to manage the large crowds in attendance.



*Young Macedonian men in the
Macedonian Orthodox Church Sveti Prorok Ilija in
Seddon, mid-1970s
Photograph courtesy of Goran Kotev*

Language, Films and Folk Dancing

Seddon's Saint Prophet Elijah church played a leading role in establishing Macedonians' sense of belonging, and in organising their social, cultural and educational life. The church confirmed their Macedonian identity among the many religions and cultures of the inner west. A church committee managed non-religious activities and financial affairs. The church complex consisted of a church hall and a number of residential properties facing Victoria Street, Pilgrim Street and Walter Street. Some of these properties would later be sold by the church committee. A residential dwelling on the southern side of the church facing Victoria Street was transformed into a Macedonian language school (Macedonian Sunday School).

Preserving and speaking the Macedonian language were seen as being of great importance. Parents communicated with their children in Macedonian in the home and expected that their children would be Macedonian speakers. How else would they communicate with their grandparents in Macedonia? When the Macedonian language school opened in 1974 it was received with enthusiasm by the Macedonians community who saw it as a formal continuation of the language and love of the homeland they had left behind.

Every Saturday more than 100 students, ranging from 6 to 15 years of age, attended the school to be taught Macedonian language, geography and



*Site of the Macedonian language school
'Goce Delchev'*

*Photograph courtesy of Macedonian Orthodox
Church*

history. Teachers came out from Macedonia and instructed the children, though problems arose when it became clear that political values were infiltrating the curriculum in support of Tito's Yugo-communist regime (which was the reason many families had left for a different life here).

The Saint Prophet Elijah church at Seddon organised film nights in the church hall in the 1970s, screening popular contemporary movies, such as *Krvava Svadba* (Blood Wedding), *Dolgiot Pat* (The Longest Road), and *Crno Seme* (Black Seed), brought out from the Republic of Macedonia and screened to packed houses. Such was the popularity of these film nights that a larger venue was sought to accommodate community demand. A new home was found in La Scala Theatre, Footscray, which held approximately 400 people.³⁴

The Ilinden Cultural Association was the first Macedonian folk-dancing group in the western suburbs. Other Macedonian churches in Melbourne also established their own cultural associations and these were very popular with the young people. Folk-dancing groups offered the younger Macedonian generation a sense of belonging and the experience of continuity of village life. A second folkloric dancing school began in Yarraville in 1977—the Nikola Karev group.³⁵ The Nikola Karev group was officially founded on 12 December 1977 and controversially was the first Macedonian folkloric dance group in Melbourne to be established independently of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The Stale Popov dance group was also formed in the 1970s and operated from a council-owned facility at Langshaw Reserve in Altona North.



*Nikola Karev Folkloric Dance Group, 1977
(Senior group).*

Since the Eighties

The final section of this study turns to the changes since the 1980s and the ongoing questions of Macedonians' cultural identity more generally, and more particularly, the place and needs of the now elderly men and women (many of whom were amongst the first wave of the inner west's Macedonians) in a changing world and expanding 'outer' inner west community.

In search of new homes on larger blocks of land, large numbers of the Macedonian community begin moving further westwards in the 1980s: Altona Meadows, Sunshine, Keilor, St Albans, Sydenham (now named Watergardens), Delahey and Taylors Lakes. A number of existing cultural and social groups followed the community to these new areas where people once again established new lives and institutions. Of note is the Macedonian Orthodox Cathedral Church, named 'The Nativity of the Holy Mother of God', in Sydenham, erected in support of the large Macedonian community in the region.

What happened to the elderly when a large segment of the Macedonian community moved out of the inner west, leaving the aging members of the community behind? Macedonian communities are generally characterised by strong family bonds, and elderly parents often actively assist with the caring of grandchildren. Thus, some elderly Macedonians moved out to the new areas of settlement to be with their children and grandchildren; however, many others chose to remain in the familiar surroundings of the inner west.

After they had retired from the workforce and their children had left home, many older Macedonians formed groups providing a social outlet where they could mix with other Macedonians and share common interests.³⁶ The first Macedonian elderly group formed in the western region was in the inner western suburb of Footscray in 1983.³⁷

Macedonians generally have a high level of home ownership, having come to Australia with a strong tradition of being self sufficient and a determination to improve their economic position.³⁸ A 1993 'needs study' into Macedonian elderly in the western suburbs revealed that, in a sample group of 100 respondents, 73 per cent owned their home, 4 per cent had a mortgage on their home, and another 5 per cent lived in their own home with their children or a relative.³⁹ In response to the question 'when you can't manage on your own what will happen?' 52 per cent of respondents were unsure about their future when they became frail, 28 per cent responded

that they would stay at home with help from family, and 11 per cent stated that they would move to a Macedonian home for the aged (if one existed).⁴⁰

Almost 20 years after the study was conducted, a specifically Macedonian aged-care facility has yet to be established in Melbourne. Those unable to maintain independent living have become residents in mainstream homes; however, a lack of English language skills can leave Macedonian residents feeling isolated and lonely. The need for a their own facility continues to be an important priority for the Macedonian community into the 21st century and one that may be led by the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

In Search of Macedonian Identity

Precisely how many Macedonians resided in the inner west (and in Australia generally) during the 1970s (prior to the mass movement to newer suburbs further west in the 1980s) is difficult to determine, given the ambiguity of statistical data. Prior to 1996, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) censuses only included 'country of birth' data as the indicator of ethnic identity. As such, Macedonians from the Republic of Macedonia were categorised as coming from 'Yugoslavia' and grouped together with Serbs, Croats and others. Similarly, Macedonians from Greece appeared on ABS data as Greek migrants—not as ethnic Macedonians.

Importantly, the 1996 census was the first in which Macedonians living in Australia were identified statistically as a separate ethnic group. The Republic of Macedonia, under Yugoslav control from 1944 until 1991, had only emerged as an independent nation with the end of communism. Yet, there still remained obstacles to Macedonians being accurately represented in official statistics. A key problem has been the enduring legacy of the historical persecution and forced assimilation Macedonians have been subjected to, in particular by the Greek state since 1913, which has resulted in some Macedonians being reluctant to publicly acknowledge their true ethnic identity. Similarly, there were also Macedonians from the former Yugoslavia who identified as Yugoslav.⁴¹ These personal 'choices' raise very complex questions beyond the scope of this study but are nonetheless important to consider in relation to Macedonian migrants and their children and grandchildren making their lives in Melbourne's inner west.

Macedonian community organisations estimate the number of Macedonians in Australia to be significantly higher than what the official figures say. Local Government Area (LGA) data from the 1996 census, compiled on the basis of 'language spoken at home', reveal that in 1996

(at this stage significant numbers of Macedonians had left the inner west), there were 1,431 Macedonian speakers in the City of Hobson's Bay (1,273 in 2006), and 1,477 Macedonian speakers in the City of Maribyrnong (903 in 2006). Unsurprisingly, the number of Macedonian speakers in the City of Brimbank in 1996 was the highest in the entire western region of Melbourne, with 6,133 recorded (5,811 in 2006).⁴² LGA data also reveal that there has been further movement of 'Macedonian speakers' to the outer west municipalities of Wyndham Vale and Melton. The former has seen a gradual increase in numbers from 715 in 1996 to 953 in 2006, whilst the latter has seen more substantial growth over the same period, from 137 in 1996 to 1,400 in 2006.

Conclusion

This article provides a new ethnographic and historical narrative of the cohort of Macedonians who came from the Republic of Macedonia and settled in the inner west of Melbourne in the 1960s and 1970s. A unique feature of this study is that it is largely based on original research drawing primarily on oral histories. Unlike other more prominent Italian or Greek communities living in Melbourne, Macedonians were for a considerable period a relatively obscure ethnic group following their arrival in the inner west, though this was in contrast to the actual size of the community. Their visibility was often obscured by the 'Yugoslav' label, and this was further reinforced by official government statistics at that time. However, this article has shown that Macedonians maintained a strong connection with their homeland and their traditions, and that Macedonians' sense of 'self' was crucial to their wellbeing. Importantly, their beleaguered national history meant that preservation of their national identity was of paramount concern as they established communities in their new homeland, and they worked hard to keep it alive and robust in their working lives and in their clubs, churches, cafés, celebrations, and recreations.

This story has introduced Melbourne's inner west Macedonians to a wider readership, and has contributed towards presenting a more visible and authentic 'beneath the surface' account of their recent history, and their specific and unique place in the region since the 1960s. It has traced their working and cultural lives and involvement in shaping the inner west of today. In particular, this study documents for the first time, Macedonians' statistical and human presence in the meatworks industry before many of

the major abattoirs in the west's working-class suburbs closed their doors in the 1980s.

Given the general lack of published material on this subject, it is envisaged that this study of Macedonians in Melbourne's inner west will help, in some measure, to fill that void. By capturing the community's formative period during the 1970s and giving greater recognition to the diverse urban landscape of Melbourne's inner west, this article demonstrates how Macedonians, deprived of their autonomy and identity under different rulers since the late 19th century, made their own valuable contribution to modern multicultural Australia.

NOTES

1. Most of the interviews were conducted in the second half of 2008 by Nick Anastasovski, the author of this article. Nick was born in the Macedonian region of Bitola in 1965, and he came to live in Melbourne's 'inner west' as a one year old child in 1966.
2. Peter Hill, *The Macedonians in Australia*, Carlisle, WA, Hesperian Press, 1989, p. 12.
3. Hill, p. 12.
4. Hill, p. 20.
5. Jan Harper, 'The Pecalbars of Gippsland: Macedonian Farm Workers around Kernot in the 1930s', *Gippsland Heritage Journal*, no. 28, 2004, pp. 2–9.
6. There was a small community of Macedonians living in Altona North from the Lerin region of Greek-ruled Macedonia.
7. Mihailo Kleshtev interview, conducted 17 October 2008. Mihailo was born in the Bitola region village of Gorno Aglarci and arrived in Australia in 1964.
After forming their own republic through armed struggle in 1944, Macedonians enjoyed a new-found cultural freedom but not the political freedom they aspired to, for Serbian interests continued to dominate the new Yugoslavia. There were many dissatisfied elements in the newly created Yugoslavia, and the Tito regime was eager to suppress any outward intimation that the experimental new nation was imperfect. To consolidate the myth, stringent restrictions were placed on leaving. Young Macedonian men responded to Serbian domination and the economically backward policies of communist rule by risking their lives and departing illegally over the border into the neighbouring states from where they sought passage to western democracies such as Canada, the United States and Australia.
8. Slavka Kalcovska interview, conducted 23 December 2008. Slavka was born in the Bitola region village of Dihovo and arrived in Australia in 1960.
9. Kleshtev interview.
10. Zivko Vasilevski interview, conducted 5 June 2008. Zivko was born in the Bitola region village of Vrajnevcı and arrived in Australia in 1970.

- 11 Kleshtev interview.
- 12 Slavko Talevski interview, conducted 10 September 2008. Slavko was born in the Bitola region village of Novaci and arrived in Australia in 1969.
- 13 *Hobsons Bay Heritage Study*, Volume 1b, Thematic Environmental History, October 2003, p. 20.
- 14 Wally Curran interview, conducted 30 July 2010. Wally Curran is the former state secretary of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (Victoria) 1973–1997.
- 15 Dobre Ilievski interview, conducted 8 September 2008. Dobre was born in the Bitola region village of Dolno Orizari and arrived in Australia in 1971.
- 16 Ilievski interview.
- 17 Vasilevski interview.
- 18 Ilievski interview.
- 19 Ilievski interview.
- 20 Curran interview.
- 21 Curran interview.
- 22 Curran interview.
- 23 Blagoja Nikolovski interview, conducted 19 November 2008. Blagoja was born in the Bitola region village of Zhabeni and arrived in Australia in 1970.
- 24 Blagoja Koleski interview, conducted 5 December 2008. Blagoja was born in the Ohrid region village of Kuratica and arrived in Australia in 1971.
- 25 Koleski interview.
- 26 Kleshtev interview.
- 27 Vasilevski interview.
- 28 Peco Stojcevski interview, conducted 15 July 2008. Peco Stojcevski was born in the Bitola region village of Optichari and is a past president of Altona Vardar Soccer Club.
- 29 Stojcevski interview.
- 30 Risto Pilovski interview, conducted 3 December 2008. Risto was born in the Mariovo district village of Grunishte and arrived in Australia in 1972.
- 31 Pilovski interview.
- 32 Pilovski interview. Risto Pilovski further advised that J.T. Gray Reserve remained the home ground of Altona Ilinden for several years until council moved the club to an alternative venue at Blackshaws Road, Altona North. However, a lack of acceptable sporting facilities (no change rooms or training lights) at the new ground saw the team utilise a truck belonging to player Vele Matovski as the team change room on match days! Following protests to council over the conditions they were forced to play under, the club was soon given Bond Reserve in Chambers Road Altona North as its permanent home ground.
- 33 Petre Ilioski interview, conducted 25 November 2008. Petre was born in the Ohrid region village of Openica and arrived in Melbourne in 1970.
- 34 Kleshtev interview. See also *Makedonski Zhivot* (newspaper), August 1974, p. 8.

- 35 Violeta Risteska interview, conducted 20 June 2008. Violeta Risteska (Trifunovska) joined the Nikola Karev group in 1977 upon its establishment and remained an active member until the early 1980s.
- 36 *Macedonians in Victoria: Community Profile*, p. 66.
- 37 *Macedonian Background Notes*, Footscray Migrant Resource Centre Inc., prepared by Spase Velanovski, October 1991, p. 4.
- 38 Macedonian Community Welfare Association of the Western Region Inc., 'The Macedonian Elderly: A Needs Study of the Macedonian Elderly in the Western Region of Melbourne', in Victor Bivell (ed.), *Macedonian Agenda: Sixteen Essays on the Development of Macedonian Culture in Australia*, Five Dock, NSW, Pollitecon Publications, 1995, pp. 74–112.
- 39 Bivell (ed.), p. 95.
- 40 Bivell (ed.), p. 105.
- 41 *Macedonians in Victoria: Community Profile*, Melbourne, Macedonian Welfare Workers' Network of Victoria, undated, p. 26.
- 42 Statistical data relating to Macedonian speakers has been sourced from the respective local government websites.