

*A Bed for the
Wretched*



A Novel

By

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

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Published by:

Risto Stefov Publications
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Toronto, Canada

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Any similarity is by chance

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 1

In the hard soil and stony ground by the side of the main road there were long gray rotting barracks. In the dip there were a few houses, built with bricks and covered with straw. To the left there was an old outdoor oven. On the uphill there were public toilets. On the downhill there was a cemetery and under it there were barracks arranged in a straight line. The barracks which looked like neatly arranged boxes from the sky had small narrow windows outfitted with iron bars. The entire area was covered in dust. Just a bit below the barracks there were houses built out of carved white flintstone.

This was Prenies...

The main road, covered and packed tightly with thick flintstone gravel, was dusty. The irrigation channels were broad, deep and overgrown with grass and thorns. On days when it rained, red muddy rainwater ran down from the hill and filled the channels with silt. It was stone cold during clear nights and very hot during the day. The stones were bleached white by the rain and baked and cracked by the sun. When the wind blew, it carried clouds of reddish dust from the mountains and deposited it over the barracks.

People from all places, where the red rooster of war crowed, found themselves here. Wretched people filled with misery, strife and ruin, folded over old people, widows of six wars, exhausted women bitten by illness, loners, and mothers nursing babies. In between them were men, ill men, enslaved by fear and men, fighters who had deserted their posts and here they felt like heroes.

A cloud of existence passed over Prenies twice a day. Once at the crack of dawn and then again at dusk. Twice a day a column of trucks passed. If dust was raised from below, from the ovens, then the trucks were carrying the healed from the hospitals in Elbasan, Tirana, Dures and Suk, along with food and ammunition to be taken to the Vicho and Gramos battlefields. The trucks took fighters and supplies to the border and the rest was done by the Partisans. While the fighters were led to the battlefields, the supplies were taken to them on the shoulders of women, by donkey, horse, mule... on foot up the mountains. The gray dust seen flying in the distance in the valley was a sign that the trucks were coming and would soon reach the place of the ovens.

When the gray cloud of dust was raised from above, from the tops of the surrounding mountains, from Preval, in the shimmering first rays of the sun, and when the trucks were snaking their way down towards Prenies, they were carrying wounded fighters.

The wretched quickly descended down to the cobblestone road moaning, groaning, swearing, panicking and feeling frustrated... Twice a

day, in Prenies, someone would yell out “they are coming!” And every day at dawn and dusk the wretched would pour out of the barracks and horse stables like a red cloud and head for the main road, chasing the dust clouds, attempting to catch up to the trucks racing through the compound. And the closer they came to the column of trucks, the more tormented they felt. Those who fell down were trampled as the hordes from every direction raced after the dust cloud shouting and pushing each other. And as they ran they cried out names, first and last names, but in the chaos nothing could be heard except the overriding “oh-oh-oh-a-a-!” and the crying and praying and swearing and cursing and whining. Everyone was calling and looking for their loved ones, closest ones, most expected and thought of ones...

They all were looking for their closest relatives: in those old Czech and Italian trucks that did not want to stop for them. They all ran for the trucks and, in panic, pushed each other. Those who fell remained there, lying on the ground while being trampled by the storm... So every day, twice a day, the horde of traumatized women and decrepit old men ran behind trucks down to the ovens, to the first guard house, to the first bunker behind which the road towards Elbasan continued.

They stopped here...

And inside the barracks, left on the straw mattresses, were the crying babies and the moaning and groaning sick whose life was uncertain. So, every day they ran behind the trucks that snaked their way up hill in hope...

At the crossroad they looked like a tube as they glittered under the first rays of the sun. The horde kept looking, crying, whining, swearing, cursing, criticizing and silently praying as the trucks disappeared behind the last curve. The elderly sent a prayer with them, blessing those returning from the battlefields and going to the hospitals. “Let their wounds heal fast and their scars be healthy...” some would murmur while swallowing hard and trying to force back their tears. The women, with their black head kerchiefs in their hands, in silence, would bid farewell those going to the battlefields. After the trucks disappeared, the women, wearing their black head kerchiefs on their heads, would begin to stir and slowly return to the barracks and horse stables. They did not return promptly. Instead they went back on the road looking down, searching. They searched the entire road, inch by inch, looking for something discarded. A little piece of paper perhaps, all folded up or crumpled, with something written on it, about a loved one; their own or someone else’s. And then, after they were satisfied that they had done a thorough search, disappointed they would return to their barracks and horse stables and sit in silence nursing their pain, waiting, listening, waiting for the next column of trucks to arrive. Sometimes they moved from barrack to barrack like shadows, to visit a friend or a relative and mourn those who had died in the battlefields of

Gramos and Vicho, in Epirus and Thessaly and those who had died in the hospitals on foreign soil... After crying and shedding tears in silence and still feeling their pain would not go, they would cry out loud in the darkness, only occasionally speaking an intelligible word, or two, as if suddenly they had woken up from a nightmare...

No grass grows on the hard, trampled soil on which the black horde descends with the birth and death of each day. In the barracks and horse stables where the wretched lie, there are only four hands of space (about 24 inches) on the straw mat for each person to lie on. Above them are long rotting beams and underneath them are horse urine soaked cobblestones. The healthy wish that those who were sick will soon die - to save themselves from themselves and to save the others from torment.

Outside of the passing trucks, no one is allowed to leave the compound, but some do manage to sneak out without being seen. Those who do sneak out, climb up to Preval and look at the lake water, and in it they see the reflection of the high peaked gray mountains and they whisper to themselves and point with their finger saying : "There... over there is my home..."

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 2

A little to the side, under the steep hill where pebbles constantly dislodge and roll downhill, in the dilapidated barrack is where the wretched were settled. They brought them here from the hospitals in Korcha, Elbasan and Tirana, but mostly from Suk. Among them are also those who are afraid of returning to the battlefield. They learned from the patients how to pretend to be sick. One can see the fear in their eyes, a lot of fear. They hardly move and refuse to leave their cabin. They constantly lie on their straw mats and nurse their pain. Their sickness is strongest when the place is visited by someone from the administration. One can recognize those from the administration from the clean and tidy uniforms they wear. They constantly come here in their worn down jeeps as they drive from hospital to hospital, from camp to camp, from city to city, wherever refugees are gathered and children are placed. They take tours across Albania in their open jeeps and would rather swallow the white and reddish road dust than fight and die in Gramos or Vicho. To convince us of their importance, they often say: “We too are from the first line.” Their meetings with the wounded, the crippled, the healed, the old women in Prenies and the widowed women who care for children, are short, but filled with slogans. They don’t know how to talk to people; all they know is how to shout slogans, eat, lie in the shade and keep their military uniforms clean.

Everyone in Prenies was afraid of the wretched. For as long as they were not in the grip of “madness” they were peaceful, lying around under the eaves, sharing cigarettes, joking and reminiscing. But when “madness” struck, some would “go crazy” and become dangerous. Those who were really sick, lying here and there, banged with their hands and feet, dug their heels, scratched their cheeks until they bled and when they turned over they foamed at their mouths. Those who were not stricken by madness ran around in all directions attempting to take the mad ones back to their quarters, to help them overcome their momentary doomsday experience. Unfortunately some never made it back and, according to some unwritten rule, were buried outside the cemetery, where the ground was rocky, reddish and hard. Pando, the gravedigger, dug the graves as he swore at everything that moved, cursing the mothers, the sisters, the fathers of the dead wretched, swinging his pick and hitting the hard ground. He dug the graves side by side in a straight line and by counting the piles of earth one could figure out how many were buried, but Pando alone knew who was buried in which grave. In the beginning he used to fashion a wooden cross and pencil mark the name of the deceased, but after one of those traveling administrators yelled at him in front of a crowd, telling him that it was an insult to the red flag and counterrevolutionary to use a cross, Pando put away his stolen pencil.

Pando had stolen that pencil from the briefcase belonging to the administrator who yelled at him. One day the administrator happened to leave his briefcase in the jeep so Pando decided to free a pencil from its misery... Pando got more use from the pencil than did the administrator. Pando was known to the people as "Pando the gravedigger". That's what they called him and in response he used to say, "I dig and I bury, that's what I do!" Some from the administration, those who were constantly "sprained" at the hip, neck, or in the spine and those sick with tuberculosis, coughed the most or were the sickest when the administrators mocked Pando because he cried the most at every funeral. They would say "he mourns dead strangers as if they were his closest relatives". After crying at the funeral, Pando would distance himself from the people, hide somewhere behind the rocks, collect some herbs and roots, dry them in the sun, wrap them in a piece of newspaper and then smoke them.

The smoke was yellow and spicy, soothing and pacifying. Pando sat there for hours; he lay in the shade of the dilapidated, old plum tree, looking up at the sky, the clouds and the flying falcons and, without blinking an eye, listened to the wailing of the women mourning their loved ones. Only he knew which herbs and roots to collect to obscure his mind, to bring some indifference to everything that happened around him, to move away from the worries of the people. His dream and the false tranquility he was in were suddenly interrupted by the ringing rail, the metallic triangle that invited the refugees to line up in front of the cauldrons. Like coming out of a deep sleep, Pando stretched his limbs and body, looked down and when he saw people queuing in front of the cauldrons, he went to his barrack, took the tin sardine can hanging from the beam and, while swinging it back and forth in his hand, joined the back of the line. Because his legs were shaky and his step unsure, he stood in line with his legs spread and his eyes lowered. He did not look at the people and he did not want to know if they were looking at him. With his sardine can half filled he returned to the barracks, where the wretched resided, and sat under the eaves beside Numo who was recently brought here from Suk. Numo took his pitted spoon out of his pocket, wiped it on his knee, tapped it on a rock and turned towards Pando. They sipped their soup from their sardine cans, broke their dry and stale cornbread, gathering all the crumbs in their palms and slowly ate in silence. Numo was not one those wretched ones. He had been brought here recently. They brought him here among the wretched to punish him. The man with the jeep who brought him here said to him: "Be careful and keep your tongue behind your teeth," as he pointed at the hill where the cemetery was. And of what should he have been careful? Pando never asked. It seems that both men had an understanding in their silence. But sometimes during the evening when the women sat outside the barrack doors, Numo was heard saying:

“What do the women think about?” And immediately after that he said: “About their husbands and sons of course! So many of them were left to guard Gramos and Vicho, or were lying crippled in some hospital in a foreign country.” Slurping their soup, the men sat in silence while watching the wretched women, with their heads covered by their black head kerchiefs, pass by. After a long silence Numo began with his too familiar, old story which by now Pando knew by heart:

“Hey, woman-wife, don’t wash my shirt. Let it be dirty, soaked with the sour smell of a soldier’s sweat and the aroma of a young woman’s breasts. Don’t toss my coat in a pile of rags. Open it up, air it out like a fluttering flag, let the dust collected from the battlegrounds of Gramos and Vicho and from the mountains in Macedonia, come out on its own. Let the dust fall on dust and don’t wipe it off, leave its footprint un-erased, because it leads to nowhere...” At this point Numo would stop talking, cough and look up high with his gaze lost somewhere in space. He was waiting, contemplating, perhaps to be reminded of where the footprint led... After being silent for a while he continued: “Our homeland, our footprint, always, us, it always guided us to our death or to our crippling... As you can see I too am a cripple...”

I look at you and ask myself...

Where did I leave it?... I only have one now!” said Numo, tapping his wooden leg with his knuckles. “But I can still walk, even with a wooden leg, and one day you will see I will walk down there...”

“Where did I leave it? At Kamna. At Kamna they shot me, at Kamna they crippled me. At the summit, at the peak, naked, like a shaven head. Someone here said that they will have us in their sights, we will be clear targets for them, but our commander wanted to go to the top of the hill so that he could look around with his binoculars, so he ordered us to ‘Dig Here’! My helper Vasil and I, machinegun gunners, only God knows where Vasil is now, dug as much as we could but it was not even enough to cover our heads. We threw some stones around and leaned our machine gun on them. We waited. We smoked a few cigarettes. We inhaled the smelly cigarette smoke from the cigarettes we made with tobacco stems mixed with flowers from the Ianovo plant, which gave them a narcotic scent. I have been, you can say Pando, all over our mountains, but so many Ianovo flowers I have never seen anywhere else. There were bees buzzing everywhere, flying from flower to flower, their legs swollen with yellow pollen. The sunset behind Lipovets began to cast a shadow over Kamna. There was silence as night began to fall. Only the dry stalks of tall grass hissed in the wind and the aroma of the Ianovo flowers became even more intoxicating. When darkness fell, down beneath Kamna, there were small flickering lights. I turned my head towards Vasil and asked: - ‘What are those down there?’ And he, without thinking much, replied: ‘It looks like the women have come out to light a candle for their relatives... Today, I

believe, is the anniversary...' he said and then stopped talking. We kept watching from above, but in the dark we could only see the flickering lights and nothing else.

Behind us we heard steps and we turned our heads. It was our commander, approaching with a long stride. 'Okay you two, go down there and check out those lights. Find out what they are. If it is the enemy then fire a burst of gunfire,' he said. We left. I took the lead with my machine gun on my shoulder and Vasil followed. About fifteen minutes later Vasil said: 'Don't go straight. We need to circle around. A little longer and we will be on top of the rock'.. 'How do you know?' I asked, and he said 'I have been here many times...' He then began to explain..."

Numo paused, adjusted his wooden leg, spit in the ashtray, lit the cigarette he was holding behind his ear and began to talk again.

"And here, as you can see Pando, we again returned from there." Numo nodded his head pointing in the direction of the mountains from where the evening sun was shining directly in their eyes. "There, we sat at the edge of the cliff and as we watched the flickering flames under Kamna, I intently listened to Vasil tell his story:

'Thirty seven,' he said, 'it was March 24, 1937 when our teacher and unit leader ordered all students to come to school dressed in their rotten EON (National Youth Organization) uniforms. I had no uniform because my father had no money to buy me one. I cried... I was embraced to go without a uniform... The day before the holiday, my uncle took me by the hand and said, 'Come with me...' He took me to the clearing under Kamna. 'Do you see that gaping hole in the rock?' he asked. 'I see it,' I said. 'Well, now listen to me,' he said. 'In the year 1903 after our uprising, the people belonging to our village fighting band hid there. One day the Ottomans found them and went on a pursuit after them but they did not want to surrender. Then one of them attempted to escape... Do you see the top of the mountain? A little further from there is a recess, a hole, something like a chimney leading from the cave to the top of the mountain... The Ottomans saw him from Lipovets and began to shoot at him. It was harvest time so they took bundles of straw from the fields, lit them and dropped them down the recess. Our people hiding inside the cave began to suffocate from the smoke and then decided to come out, but not to surrender. The first person that came out shot one of the Ottomans and they shot back at him and knifed him with their bayonets. This is how they all died one by one to the last one'..."

Numo puffed a deep puff of smoke from his cigarette and released it through his nose. He then scratched behind his ear and while staring somewhere into the distance, he continued:

"Not to prolong the story Pando..., as Vasil was telling me, his uncle told him all about the Uprising, who was involved in it, when and why. I had to interrupt him to remind him that we had to get going. I said, 'Vasil

let's go back, if this is the work of the women, there is nothing for us to do down there.' We went back and told the commander that we thought the flames were lit candles carried by the village women and asked him for permission to go back there at dawn the next day. He said okay... We waited until dawn and descended down again. The landscape was beautiful, lush green and resting on a gentle hillside. We could smell burned wax, baked bread, incense and Ianovo flowers...

'Here,' said Vasil, 'lies Giorgi Digalovski. His grandson, also named Giorgi, was a DAG fighter, he was killed in Mechovo. Under this pile here lies Kolio Dremovski, there lies Dicho Karameshovski, over there lie three of his relatives Kolio, Tsvetko and Dono Krstovski, and on this side lies Kolio Kamburovski. His grandson Kolio is a DAG captain. Over there lies Trpo Kichevski. Trpo's son was born twenty days after Trpo was killed. On the other side lies Naum Lafazanovski and beside him lies Risto Markovski. Risto's grandson, also named Risto, is a DAG fighter. And over there beside Risto Markovski, lies Iani Nanchevski. His son Iani, who is now in DAG, was born two months after his father's death! Here lies Sotir Purovski. Sotir's grandson was also a DAG fighter but was killed in Aliavitsa. And there, lie Dono Potskov, Naum Panovski, Trpo Somovski and Lazo Somovski. Giorgi Tserian lost his ear but survived the ordeal and remained alive for many years. He was heavily wounded, presumed dead. The Ottomans cut off one ear from each of the dead as proof that they had killed them. So Giorgi Tserian was left with one ear to wander the world. He died somewhere in Bulgaria...'

Seventeen men, Pando, I counted them! Vasil continued:

'The graves were overgrown with grass as they are now. My uncle put his hand on my shoulder and said 'listen and listen well to the whisper of the grasses, listen to the whorl of the wind in the trees, listen to the trickle of the water as it breaks between the rocks, listen to the hum of the bees hovering over the flowers and you will hear much more here than you will hear elsewhere, and you will not only hear but you will also learn the truth...' My uncle came closer and said 'here, beside this grave', and then pulled the grass out of the way to reveal a white stone with letters written on it.

'Read', he said.

Some letters looked like they belonged to the Greek alphabet, while others did not. I did not recognize them...

'Oh, my boy!' my uncle said, 'these letters, written on the stone, are Cyrillic letters which belong to the Macedonian alphabet, and here on the stone written are the words "Дицо Карамечковски" (Ditso Karamechkovski).'

My uncle spoke to me for a long time; about the Cyrillic letters, about Kiril and about the dead people resting here in the open... he explained to me our Macedonian situation well and why I had to study in a Greek

school and not a Macedonian... Ever since then, I never wanted to wear the EON uniform again... Ever since then I was never angry or made fun of my mother who could not speak Greek. I knew from before that people came here to this place every year. I knew they came here to light candles, to eat bits of bread, to drink rakia and wine, to eat some boiled wheat decorated with dried fruits and sprinkled with sugar and to remember things... I also knew they never spoke about it and returned home quietly. I had never seen sheep or cattle graze on this spot. No one, not even our shepherds or herdsman spent time with their sheep and cattle here. But I did not know why... Every man who passed by here looked strange... But I did not know why... My peers and the younger children, meanwhile, sang songs about the Great Hellas and about Metaxas and we laughed and made fun of those who sang 'our' (Macedonian) songs. So, with the help of our ignorance the Greeks sowed the seeds of Hellenism in us, but they did not sprout, they did not develop roots...

I told people my age what I had learned, they in turn told other people their age and even younger ones and we all started to realize what was going on here. I did not have to be ashamed any more or to wonder why things were the way they were. In fact after that I was proud of my mother speaking Macedonian. I was proud to have seen the candles flicker in the dark under Kamna. This was our spirit shining in the dark... It was shining when we harvested our grain, when we harvested our grapes, and during quite moments when we were out in our fields and in the mountains alone where we could sing our Macedonian songs away from the prying eyes and snooping ears of Metaxas's policemen lurking outside our homes and listening from outside our windows... But 1939 was the year when the mountains became filled with troops. One day policemen from the city came to our village, searched the open territory and found our secret. They wasted no time in unearthing the tomb stones and shattering the Cyrillic letters with the names of our fallen, which were there for generations. When the Italians came the Greeks left and the living once again placed tombstones on the graves of the dead. Pop (priest) Risto Lafazanovski blessed the stones. In 1945 the Greeks returned and wasted no time in again smashing the tombstones. They looked for Pop Risto but he was not there, he hid in Vrbnik. Here Albanians, because of his and their faith, convinced him to shave his beard. And as an ordinary man he went to work as a bricklayer in Bilishta. In 1946 the mountains and forests were filled with partisans, this time they were our people. The Greek soldiers were forced to stay in the cities, and there, under Kamna, the people cut new tombstones, wrote the names of the fallen and placed them on the heads of the dead...'

Well, Pando, that's what Vasil told me. Afterwards we return back up to our original post and later that afternoon we were attacked. I fired my machinegun at the soldiers wearing English helmets and brandishing

American machine guns. And all this while I couldn't help myself but think of the burning candles down at Kamna valley. The candles were burning for years, Pando, for years, secretly in the open, secretly from alien eyes and openly when the strangers were gone. And that's how my dear Pando the Macedonian boy learned what and who he is, not from some thick book or some educated person but from the leftover tombstones that escaped destruction. From the markings made on stone and from the knife carvings made on century old beach tree, oak and pine tree trunks high up in the mountains, hidden from the view of strangers. These were the only signs, symbols and marking left from our historic existence since our country's invasion, occupation and partition. Since then evil has befallen us and brought us nothing but misery and bloodshed... I kept shooting my dear Pando, refusing to obey the order to disengage and withdraw; I felt it was my duty to defend our heritage at Kamna, the meadows, the tombstones, the Cyrillic letters, the candle flames... I did not want the candle flames to go out... Then I suddenly felt as if I was under ground, I could not see the sun and felt excruciating pain in my leg. After that I remember being wrapped in a blanket and carried up and then down for a long time. Sometimes I could hear the rushing water of a stream but it was like in a dream... I kept dreaming of springs, streams, rivers ... and I cried because their water flowed away being wasted while inside me I burned of thirst... cool and crystal clear water flowed before my eyes but I could do noting to quench my thirst. Every time I tried to touch it, it ran away from me, it tormented me, it made me cry in anguish... But still I ran after it until it disappeared... And then I dreamt of dew and of tears and wished that I could shed at least one tear on my lips... A fire was burning inside of me...

When I was able to focus, think and feel, all I could see was darkness. I could hear people talking but I could not see them. I could see no trees and no stones. I couldn't see the moon or the stars. I could not even see the people carrying me. I wondered how long this night and this darkness was going to last? They walked, stopped and someone spoke. Sometimes they waited a long time. Finally, from the way they were carrying me I sensed they were walking on flat and level ground. I heard the noise of trucks, some voices and I suddenly felt lifted and lowered on a hard surface. It was not soil. No matter how hard the soil was, you can still feel it when you are lying, or when you are sleeping, on it. Then something began to hum and shook my body causing me severe pain. I shouted, cursed and opened my eyes. Beside me I saw wounded lying side by side like bullets in a clip. A little further over there was a young woman quietly weeping, whimpering and moaning. I wanted to touch he head, but something was gripping my throat. The truck kept rolling non stop along the cobblestone road, jumping on every bump, taking sharp turns and jolting us and causing us sharp pains. The wounded kept calling for water and spitting

blood. Something was gripping my throat and tightening. I was burning with thirst. Occasionally I saw a flash of light come through the cracks in the tarp covering the back of the truck. We were tossed up, down, left, right, as we traveled on the dusty roads on our way... finally we arrived in Korcha...”

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 3

“A Hungarian cut off my leg, assisted by a Greek. They were often among us. They visited us, comforted us, tapped us on the shoulder, smiled at us gently and scolded us for not having shaven. They spoke Spanish amongst themselves. The Greek was an odd looking man, usually quiet but knew how to play the guitar! The Hungarian sang in Spanish... When I became mobile again, through the use of crutches, the Greek man often approached me, sat beside me and told me things about Spain. There too he was a physician and surgeon. He worked for the International Brigades. He also told me things about Paris. When Ferents, the Hungarian, joined us, Nikos, the Greek man, translated for me. The two spoke in Spanish. They had studied together in Paris and had many nice things to say about the city. Later they ran into each other in Spain, in a military hospital. Nikos and Ferents have been to many places around the world. Ferents found himself in Mexico and Nikos in Algeria and then in Cairo. After that, during the summer of 1940, Nikos finally returned home to Athens.

Nikos’s father, a soap maker, had a soap factory and was financially well off and sent his son to Paris to study to become a doctor. But when Nikos’s father found out that after graduation he had gone to Spain, he disowned him and made it known through a newspaper. He called him awful names and accused him of voluntarily abandoning Greece at a critical time when he was needed and when Greece was being invaded by Italy. He accused Nikos of hating Fascism and of fighting like an ordinary soldier for the communists. But Nikos never carried a rifle and all this was a misunderstanding. But by then he was a marked man and wanted by the Spaniards, Italians, Germans and the English. He was also hated by the Greek communists and, after Varkiza, he was sent to jail.

‘I did not agree with the Varkiza Agreement’ he told me. ‘So I resigned my membership from the Party. This landed me in jail. But then when I found out they had killed Velouhiotis, I called the Camp Commander and signed a statement by which I was released from prison. But when I tried to reconnect with the Party, my former comrades, who were in agreement with the Varkiza agreement, would not accept me. The tormentors knew what they were doing which became very clear to me. If one does not destroy you the other one will. The Civil War started and I was unable to sit calmly and work in a private clinic in Athens. I found out what they were doing to wounded and captured partisans. I approached a friend and asked him to take me to the mountains, to the Partisans. He refused and said he did not trust me. Then I called Partisan Command and asked them to send me to the front. But instead of sending me to the front, I was sent to a military hospital in Kozheni. It was a makeshift hospital consisting of several barracks. My specialty, as you know, was cutting off legs and arms.

As was usually said, my job was also to remove the pieces of metal from the bodies and sew up the wounds. In Kozheni however there were many wounded. I constantly amputated arms and legs and often thought of Spain and Ferents. One day they sent a jeep which took me to Gorusha. There were many wounded there. During the night the Partisans attacked Lazareto and many became wounded. That is why they sent me here.'

Nikos paused and then said something in Spanish to Ferents and they both began to laugh. I did not get a chance to ask why they were laughing. A nurse ran towards us and asked them to go with her. I returned to my hospital room. Two strangers were lying in the beds away from mine; they were wounded, they had fresh wounds. Next to my bed lay someone who was completely wrapped in bandages. Soon after I arrived, Nikos and Ferents entered the room, looked over the newcomers and ordered the wrapped one to be taken somewhere else. Sometime after midnight that person was brought back.

'Numo,' piped up Nikos, 'you now have company,' and pointed to the wheelchair.

Two nurses raised the person wrapped in bandages out of the wheelchair and lay them on the bed. I could not sleep all night. All night I listened to the breathing and moaning and from the moaning I guessed that this person had to be a woman. I did not see her face and I did not know her name. She died before sunrise. Later that day Nikos told me she had no face or legs. Pando, you see and hear many things in the military hospitals. A lot of awful things! Usually one reads about these things in the newspapers, in the latest news about how many wounded and how many dead they took away from the battlefields. But sometimes it's best not to read the news and not to know these things... I dragged myself from room to room and visited the wounded. Sometimes I gave them water, stood next to their beds and listened to their stories. I learned many things this way. When a person finds themselves in difficulty, they need an outlet to dispense their misery.

One day they brought many wounded. Among them was one who constantly shouted:

'Ta podia mou! Ta podia mou!' (My legs! My legs!)

They brought him into my room. All night he moaned and cried. He swore and cursed. They took him away before dawn and returned him around noon. He stunk of chloroform. He was quiet and could hardly breathe.

'What's with him?' I asked one of the nurses.

'Under the hips...' she gestured while pointing at her own thighs.

When he regained consciousness, his eyes opened and he stared at the ceiling. He did not want to talk with anyone. He lay there silent for days. Somehow he accepted being crippled without much fuss. He didn't

complain. He seemed to be grateful for being alive. Later Harilaos, that was his name, opened both his mouth and heart.

‘I was a (Greek government) soldier in the 225 Infantry Battalion. During the first days of the Gramos offensive we failed to penetrate the DAG defense line. They returned us back to the starting position, reinforced the lines and the next day, at dawn, after the artillery ended its bombardment, they sent us on the attack again. We fought face to face and eventually took the first line, but got trapped in a minefield. We spent an entire week there until we arrived at the foot of Sveti Ilia. We tried several times to take the hill but without success. Then they sent military police officers from Kozheni, from the Divisional Headquarters, to extract us. Only eighteen of us returned from our mission. They loaded us on trucks and took us directly to Kozheni. We were briefly visited by a Military prosecutor who told us that we did not show enough courage, patriotism and national virtue against the Slavo-Communists! So, in the evening he was going to send us to the national rehabilitation centre.

This is how we ended up in Makronisos. It is easy to say we arrived. But how did we arrive? I do not know if anyone can truly describe Makronisos. When I say Makronisos I don’t mean the long and dry island, I mean the hot, waterless island where there is not even a single shadow. Apart from the few low thorny plants and a couple of blades of grass existing between the white stones cracked by the sun and occasionally washed by the rain, there is nothing that would provide a little green. The soil was reddish, dusty and dry like ash. When the wind blew it raises clouds of red dust, turning it over and over on the surface of the rocky island with nowhere to put it. Rain was rare and the heat was torturous every day and there was nowhere to hide. This is where both nature and man are sentenced to hell. The sun in Makronisos rises and sets in the sea. The only companion it has is the martyr-man, the enslaved-man...

I was not among the first to arrive. Every day there were new arrivals. They said that there were about twenty-five thousand (Greek government) soldiers dressed in English uniforms there. That’s what those in Athens believed. Twenty-five thousand young men, all nationally ill-mannered, all cowards, all without patriotism and without national honour, that’s why we were sent there, to be “rehabilitated”... But in reality the only thing about these young men being Greek were our names and surnames. Greeks, you can be sure, were those who tortured us... You should go to Makronisos so that you can truly understand what I am talking about, so that you can understand that people are only human and can take only so much before their instincts take over. (Some prisoners came to this island from other dry Aegean islands and said that Makronisos was hell on earth).

One afternoon they brought about fifty young men to the “rehabilitation” squad on the dusty lawn in front of A2 command. As their names and surnames were called out, one by one, they yelled “here” and

dropped their backpacks and joined the back of the line. We, the older ones living in this jungle, stayed on the sidelines. It was raining hard. We looked at each other and wondered: “How many of these young men will hold out and how many will crack?”

The first question thrown at them was: “Will you sign a statement of repentance?”

The people who signed the piece of paper, feeling like they were born again, came back, picked up their backpacks and headed for the lower camp enclosed by wire fence. Those that refused were set aside. The first thing that awaited them was the vice. They left them in front of the vice, throughout the day, to contemplate the kind of torture they were going to experience...

The torturing was conducted during the night, in the dark. Those tortured, the next day were taken outside to spend the day under the hot sun.

During the day they also made us read the slogans whitewashed with limestone paint on the stone cliffs of the camp or those made with arranged white stones carried on the backs of the prisoners. Before they were arranged into slogans, these stones were carried back and forth from the sea to the highest cliffs on the island on the backs of the prisoners.

Some of the slogans read: “Long live King Paul!”, “We want to carry guns!”, “Long live the Greek race!”, and “Don’t forget you were born Greek!”

The tents were also arranged so that, when viewed from high above, they spelled out similar slogans. They forced us to read the slogans out loud in unison with a single voice for hours, but before that they had us break stones into fine, sharp, pointed pieces and made us kneel on them before we were forced to sing:

“Apo kate gonia sou, Ellada, (From your every corner, Greece)
mazemeni s’avto to nisi, (collected on this island)
sto megalo sholio sou patrida (in your great school, fatherland)
Pou to len AETO-ESAN... (Which they call AETO-ESAN...)
Molismeni os tora i psihi mas (Our soul, until now infected)
theli vaptizma ksana ethniko. Ne ethniko! (needs a Greek baptizing again.
Yes, Greek)
fovo pia then to exi i fili mas (our race will no longer fear)
ap’ ton atimo koumounismo! ... (terrible communism!)”

Everyone who passed through Makronisos received this treatment. Rehabilitation began immediately and, with the exception of those who immediately signed the statement of remorse, there was no pity shown to anyone. The only relief in Makronisos was death. You waited for death like the grace of God, but it refused to come. God had forgotten this place and these people. On that precious, dry island, on which the rocks were ruthlessly beaten by the waves of the sea, eaten by the southern and

northern winds, you could find no beauty, no piece of soil on which you could breathe in peace, no green grass for your eyes to see and rejoice... Throughout its length and its width, in all its valleys and hills there were no trees, no flowers, not even a patch of grass. Even the seagulls flying over it, avoided it. Its surface was barren, dry and unproductive; nourished only by the blood, sweat and tears of the modern Greek slaves. The cross that saved Greece was the weeping and cursing of the slave.

After bringing the stones downhill to the sea to wet them, we carried them back up to the top of the hill on our backs. We did this again and again, walking barefoot on a path sown with crushed pebbles and sharp stones. The hill was long and bare with many dips and looked like a long belt. The dips were the valleys of death. This was where they tormented us until we lost consciousness. For us, as long as we stayed erect and maintained our composure they tormented us, but when we fell they would not let us die. Death for us would have been our saviour but they did not want us to be saved. There was only one law that governed Makronisos: "Those who refused to "break" had to be "lamed" for life... After each torture, those still living were treated to make sure they remained alive so that they could again be tortured..."

My brother, they pushed you to dig your own grave, put you in it and they would slowly bury you alive, leaving only your head and right arm out. Then they would ask you: "Are you going to sign?"

Every time they asked me I said, "NO!" Then they burned my hand. "I am left handed!" I yelled out. "I can only write with my left hand."

They dug me out down to my waist, raised my left arm, lowered my right arm and buried me back to my neck with my left arm above the ground.

"Here is the paper and a pen," one of them said. "Now sign!"

The soil was pressing hard on my chest. It was smothering me. I could not breathe.

"Sign you bastard!" I heard another one scream and then began to pound me on my head.

I suddenly began to feel uneasy and was gripped by panic. I began to scream loudly. I could not hold out... I woke up in the camp hospital, chained to a bed with barbed wire.

Beside me lay a man who looked like he had been drowned.

"They tied me with a thick rope," he said. "Then they stuck my face in the salty seawater, just touching it so that every wave could hit me from behind and bury me under water. They left me there for hours, all day... After that they laid me on a rock and asked me to sign. I shouted "No!" and the one that was leaning over me spat in my face.

They dropped me back in the water. I was unable to get a good breath. The waves were smashing my head on the rocks so I decided to drown. But they would not allow me to stay under water for too long. They kept

pulling me up. I struggled to stay in but they pulled me out and began to beat me with strands of barbed wire. I was in pain, strong pain. I yelled for them to stop but I did not beg them. I fell down and one of them stepped on my chest and began to press on my heart with his boot. That's when I begged him to kill me...

"In Makronisos we don't kill," said the one who was stepping on my chest. "In Makronisos we do not kill!" he repeated. "No heroes will come out of here. Only crippled, crazed, broken, worms, or just jerks like me, like us," pointing to himself and to the other torturers... This was my fourth day since they brought me here," concluded the man and he stopped talking.

A long silence followed. He then took a long and hard breath and asked: "Can you get up?"

I nodded my head indicating that I could get up.

"Please stand up," he said, "and look to see if the flag is on the flagpole..."

I did not understand what the man wanted me to do. He must have realized that so then he said: "Get up and see if he is still standing there..." I got up. I felt uneasy as I made my way to the window. I looked outside.

"Do you see him?" he asked. "Do you see him?"

"Who?!" I asked inquisitively.

"The man standing and leaning on the flagpole... Do you see him?" he kept asking.

"Yes, I see him," I said.

"What is he doing?" he asked.

"Standing with his hands up..." I replied.

"Standing there... Bravo... He was standing there before they brought me here... Bravo..." he said.

"Is the sun shining?" asked another man lying in the corner.

"Don't talk to him!" the first man said with a raised tone of voice. "He signed the paper..."

"Yes, I signed!" yelled the man in the corner.

I turned my head and what did I see; a "white mummy" lying in bed. It moved slightly and had the voice of a man.

"I signed all right!" the man lying in the corner yelled out. "I signed, I signed, I signed!" he kept yelling. "When they took me out of the grave they sprinkled me with oil and set me on fire. I was burning like a torch... Then when I woke up here, in this bed, and when I opened my eyes I found the sheet with my signature. Full name and surname... Here, on this bed, I, pulled from the grave and turned into a torch... signed... But you tell me," asked the wrapped man, "tell me who ordered the surrender of our weapons to the English? Who?! My leadership! Who is the traitor then?! Who?! I don't want to pick up another gun from either side. I carried a gun for four years and often used it to defend my country against strangers.

Now both sides call me a traitor. The one side calls me traitor because I fought against the English in December in Athens. The other side calls me traitor because I did not want to surrender my weapons. But when the Party ordered, I did surrender them. And then they both said to me: “Kalo Pethi”! Palikari!” (Good boy! Hero!) Then, when they started to fill the forests and mountains with fighters, they both rushed to purchase my soul. I spat at the prospect because my soul was where the eagles fly, but the “hititi” and the “mavroskufiti” (Nationalist fascist organizations, collaborators and the English) took grasp of me... I Signed... I Signed all right... and crapped on both of their faces...

A tall, pale, gray-haired man entered the room. His hands were wrapped in bandages and he kept them extended in front of him. He looked at me and asked: “Are you new? Have you signed?” “No!” I said.

“And don’t,” he said. “It is not worth it. I was ordered by the Party in 1936 to sign and ever since the same Party has accused me of being a traitor. I fought in the ranks of ELAS but my friends never had confidence in me. But, behold, I am alive, at least for now. I fought against the Italians, Germans and Bulgarians, and finally against the English and the Hititi and mavroskufiti... We fought against the English in Athens, our allies, do you understand? Thousands of us fought against strangers. That is why there are so many of us here. Now they are asking me to sign again, to repent because they think I don’t like the English and the Americans, and because they think I like the Russians, Bulgarians and Macedonians and because they think I want to give them Macedonia. I like the Greeks and everyone who likes the Greeks... Yes, I also like the Macedonians because they fought against strangers in the same trenches as us... But because the worm of a Greater Greece is still eating our brains, we are guilty of not thinking straight and we are unable to see the world with open eyes. We always want to be decorated with wreaths of glory like the ancient Greeks we learned about...”

“It’s true,” yelled the man that was drowned. “Did our patriots not sing, let me see how it went, wait... On the way to take Moscow, we will stop in Sofia to have a drink of coffee... something like that, right? Some were even dreaming about taking India. The dust, they used to say, that rested on the famous route followed by Alexander the Great, needed to be disturbed...”

“They sought contempt,” said the tall man. “They sought to scorn us and glue it to our foreheads... That’s what it means to sign...”

“And you think suicide,” yelled the man wrapped in dressings, “for us is more dignified?”

“Is this dignity? What is so dignified about this? Does anyone here know what dignity is? Is it dignity to be alive and serve simply as a living weapon, a tool and have no personal opinion? What is dignity? To die on this dry island, to die on the rocks of the mountains, to die like slaughtered

sheep in our own homes and fields and to be hung on poles in front of café's and bars? And what is the world, that big slut, doing about this? Nothing!!! How can anyone have a peaceful conscience after seeing all this? And why then do I ask about dignity? I, you, he who drowned in the bag, the young women and young men killed in the mountains, those exiled, those chased out of their homes, those who rot in prisons and camps, maybe, perhaps, we are dignity for the world?" said the tall man.

"Well, maybe..." echoed the wrapped man, "dignity is certainly not biting your own veins with your teeth, right?"

"Yes!" said the newcomer. "They burned my body with lit cigarettes and when they didn't get what they wanted from me they burned me with a hot iron. It was very painful but I did not want to cry from pain. I still had the strength to tear my own veins out in my hands with my teeth and when I saw the blood gush out, I figured finally my troubles would be over. But I was not so lucky, they didn't let me die. After a day or two they would untie my bandages and I would again find myself in the valley of death..."

"Where did they take you?" asked the man that was drowned.

"They took me to see the cats. You know there are several cages with cats nearby, right? They are well fed and they are strong. The cats too are participants in the national rehabilitation program... As I watched them I thought to myself: with which one of you will they put me in a bag and together with me, hands tied behind by back, lower us into the sea from the high cliff? Which one of you will tear my face out with your claws trying to get out? Will you just tear my face out or will you cut my throat, tear my eyes out or tear a hole in my chest fighting for your life? Which one of you? Go, see the cats. You may make a friend and it will be easier on you in the bag."

We heard marching footsteps and singing outside:

Makronisi semno, skapaneon angali (Modest Makronisos, embracing the pioneers)

mia patrida iroon me doxa megali, (you are the homeland of heroes with great glory)

mia patrida megali, trani k'ohi sklavon (a great homeland, but not of the slaves)

i fovera k'o tafos ton varvaron Slavon... (and fear and a grave of the Slav barbarians...)

On the other side, on the side of the tents, was where those who signed the statement of repentance were located, they were grouped in a battalion that was soon to leave for the front. They were singing:

To proto tagma Makronisou (The first Makronisos battalion)

Mise tora to Slavismo... (Now hates Slavism...)

The mummy in the corner rustled a bit and asked: "Is the sun shining?"

"No," I said. "It has drowned in the sea..."

Darkness slowly poured into the room. There were penetrating shrills and screaming outside: “Voithia! Me skotonoun!” (Help! They are killing me!)

The nights in Makronisos were very dark. They were often illuminated by glowing, flying bullets released from bursts of machine gun fire. Bullets fly in every direction. They suddenly stop as if to reload the guns and start up again. This was another way of rehabilitating us. They say they were doing this to turn our nerves to steel and prepare us for battle. But while this went on many of the less stable among us screamed, yelled and went nuts. And there, down there in the valley, the torture began. Can you hear the screaming? “Voithia! Me skotonoun!” (Help! They are killing me!)

Torturers wearing dog masks would, at any time, unexpectedly crash into the tents and begin to beat everyone in sight with punches and push them outside where “pustides” (gays), also wearing dog masks, would wait for them, grab them and begin their sadistic ritual savagery...

After that there would be silence. A brief but blessed silence, the crying and screaming momentarily would stop, the ugliness and horror of death would be momentarily removed from sight, a star might light up the sky, one might even barely manage to capture the quiet sound of a wave splashing on the seashore. And even then one could not stop thinking about their troubles, about their suffering, even though they were now barely a ruined shadow of their former selves. And one might wonder why did this ugliness called Greece ever give them birth?

“Is the sun shining,” asked the man wrapped in bandages, “look outside and please tell me if the sun is shining!” he insisted.

“It is shining!” I said.

The man that was drowned then pointed towards the window with his eyes and said, “Go to the window and see if he is still standing there.”

“Yes, yes, the sun is shining and the person is standing there,” I said after I looked out the window.

It seemed to me that all those from the valley of death, from the attacked tents, from the sloping view glancing toward the pillar, from the sharp rock laced path carrying large rocks barefoot up and down the hill and beaten with barbed wire, those who suffered rifle butt blows, belt whipping and exhaustion, had the same question for me about the man standing by the flagpole.

“Yes, he is still standing there with his arms over his head!” was my answer. “Except now his forearms seem to be drooping down like they were ready to fall off at the elbows. There, I see the sergeant is running towards him. He tried to raise them but he couldn’t seem to. The sergeant slapped the man on the face... The man stood there... he then stood up straight... His feet were swollen, they looked like bloated stomachs. His shoes were torn and his feet were sticking out... There was a swarm of flies

buzzing around his face, his belly and around his hands and swollen feet...”

“What is he doing now? Can you see?” asked the man that was drowned.

“It looks like he is looking up at the sky,” I said. “He must be thinking about its vastness and how it meets the sea in the distance. He also looks like he is moving his lips...”

“He is singing, he is singing... Sing! Sing!” shouted the man with the bandaged hands. “He is singing, I am sure of it but we can’t hear his song...” he said.

That afternoon the man who stood beside the flagpole for twelve days died standing. What was his name? We all called him “the standing man”. He died standing. He died standing... The tormentors quickly removed him because they hated hearing all the applause. All of us standing by the windows in the hospital kept clapping. Then, suddenly two tormentors entered our room with clubs in their hands and began to beat us. I was knocked out with the first blow to my head. I felt like I was caught in a ring from which there was no escape. A loud yell brought me to. I opened my eyes and that’s when I saw a boot in front of my face. I don’t know when they put me on a stretcher. I moved my arm and then my leg. I figured I was still alive. Blood was flowing out of my ear and dripping on the stone floor. As each drop fell on the other drops, the blood began to pool and spread, the pool kept growing and coagulating. Beaten, I began to whisper “Anakrisi triti vathmou” (“Interrogation of the third degree”). This was a poem written by a Greek poet and Makronisos prisoner named Andreas Leondaris:

I renounced the glory in my own mind.

I renounced the sorrow that burns in my heart.

Just don’t squeeze my head with an iron wreath, don’t put my temple in a vice.

I give up! I give up! Just let me live!

I curse my dark days and my white nights,

They are not worth a heap of rags.

Just don’t put a silk tie around my neck.

I give up! I give up! Just let me live!

And on the faithful look of my old comrades I spit.

And to you I reveal all my secrets!

Just untie my hands and feet.

I give up! I give up! Just let me live!

I renounce my father,

Who brought me into this exile and bitterness!

Just don’t break my legs and don’t burn my loins with lit cigarettes.

I give up! I give up! Just let me live!

I renounce the silent look of my mother,
With disgust I vomit her holy milk.
Just extinguish the torch and don't throw any water on me.
I give up! I give up! Just let me live!

I renounce my love for my little one,
My happy little angel lying there in the cradle!
Just don't make my baby cry and make me its burden.
I give up! I give up! Just let me live!

And if something still remains to be done to make things right,
I wholeheartedly, sacredly and gloriously renounce it voluntarily!
Just don't stick splinters under my fingernails, and pour salt in my wounds.
I give up! I give up! Just let me live!

Ah! How great! Now I will live! And now take me, if I am worthy of you, to where you led me: a wounded body, in dreadful pain, unworthy even of death...

I whispered the poem with contempt, because contempt helped me survive and live. But, for how long?

In Makronisos they don't let you die. Death is desirable because it is freedom but death is prohibited there. Human desires are worthless there because all the violence carried out throughout Greece is concentrated there. In this world it is forbidden for a person to have dreams and desires like other people have. There it is forbidden to believe in more than one god...

One night they took us to the valley at the women's camp. They made us stand in line single file and watch them beat the women. At dawn they released the wolf-hounds. The dogs kept barking as the women screamed and cried. They fired a red rocket into the air and the dogs went back to their cages. At sunrise they gathered the women.

... And then and there I decided... In the morning I reported to the Sergeant and said: "Sir, take me to the A2 Commander".

"Why?" asked the Sergeant while staring at me intensely. I would not tell him why as I stubbornly insisted. He took me there. I stood still until I was invited to see a military officer. I said: "Major, sir, allow me to sign... I repent..."

The Major silently handed me a pen and paper and said: "Please go ahead, my boy, welcome back to the embrace of your fatherland."

I signed, stood up and stood still, stiff like a soldier at attention. The Major looked at the paper and after reading my name, shouted out with a commanding voice: "Soldier Harilae, return to your line and faithfully serve the fatherland!"

I stood there.

“Harilae, soldier, now go back to your line!” he again said.

“Major Sir! Please allow me to join the battalion that is preparing for the front!” I demanded in a loud military style tone of voice.

“Bravo! Bravo!” shouted the Major. “You finally realized your mistake... Bravo! Your country has forgiven you, my boy! Now get back to your line!” he said and then called the guard.

The guard appeared at the door and the Major ordered him to take me to the battalion. After two months of exercises in Makronisos the battalion was sent to Gramos. This was my way out of hell... I got in through a narrow door leading to torture and then I left through the same narrow door... Behind this door I left tens and hundreds of prisoners like myself. But, unlike me, they did not want to look at the narrow door through which I left. They all, in their tormented and suffering eyes, looked at my exit with contempt. There was contempt all right and determination in my eyes. During our first assault, I, a machine gunner belonging to the second decade of the fourth line, as soon as I advanced about twenty metres ahead of my squad, turned around, looked at the boys in English helmets and opened fire on them... It was Makronisos that I was shooting at... I unloaded the empty cartridges and loaded a full one and then began to fire again... The squad ducked. The other side charged. I stood upright and when the other side came closer I tossed my machine gun. But even before the gun was out of my hands an automatic burst cut my legs off. As I was falling down I saw the Sergeant, the same sergeant who took me to the Major to sign the paper. He was kneeling on one knee while shooting at me... No, it was not the Sergeant who shot me... It was Makronisos...

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 4

That's all Harilaos told me. He was a twenty-two-year-old young man from a mountain village in the Peloponnesus. Ten days later he was moved to another room and then transferred to a military hospital in Tirana. After that I never saw him again. But I did see others, like him, mutilated young men. Some were sent to the cemetery located a little further back from the hospital, I cheered for them when they leveled the ground above them and then I returned to my bed. New wounded arrived every day, those who recovered were transferred to other hospitals, usually to Suk. Eh... Suk... I was there too, but I will tell you about Suk another time. I used to go there; I am talking about the Partisan cemetery, yes, our cemetery, but not to bury people, but to speak to our comrades, known and unknown. I stood there leaning on my crutch and like a crazy man, talked to those underground, under the red soil. I told them about what I heard from the new wounded. I went there until it became too cold. I did that because I did not want our comrades from the battlefield to be forgotten. I stopped going not only because of the cold, but also because I had nothing to wear. One morning when I woke up, a nurse came in and gave me a piece of paper. It read: "Comrade you don't need your overcoat or your pants. I borrowed them until I see you again. Be well and guard your underwear. Goodbye!" That was it! Two days later someone borrowed my boots. One boot was brand new, the one belonging to my severed leg, and the other one was well worn out. I was left barefoot. But that did not stop me from visiting my newcomer friends. I wrapped myself in a blanket and limped my way from room to room. I twisted cigarettes for the wounded, I gave them water, I fixed their pillows, I comforted them and I listened to them telling me their troubles. It was both interesting and painful. We were losing the war everywhere...

The first snow arrived and with it things began to freeze.

There was continuous flow of wounded arriving at the hospital after the new year up until the end of January. Most had frostbite on their feet. They lost the battles for Voden and Negush and in February failed to win the battle for Lerin. New beds were set in the rooms and in the corridors and sometimes two and even three patients were laid on a single bed. It was very crowded. They move us, the old patients, into the neighboring barracks. One night the entire hospital court yard was filled with trucks and it began to snow hard as they were unloading the wounded. I came out of my cabin and got close to one of the drivers resting on the snow.

"Are you wounded, comrade?" I asked.

He looked at me with an exhausted look and said:

"I'm tired, comrade. I haven't slept in two nights. I am waiting for them to unload my truck so that I can leave again. Hundreds of wounded are waiting at the border freezing in the cold... We truly screwed up in

Voden and Negush... We really screwed up... Do you have a cigarette? I am freezing; I can't feel my hands or my feet... I really got tired driving up the dangerous winding road over Prenies. The snow was above my knees. Visibility was very poor with sheets of snow coming down. Every time my truck got stuck in the snow I had to offload everyone, move the truck up and carry everyone back on it. I did this all day long. Both I and the wounded had to endure it, especially the cold. And then when we passed by Prenies, eh, what can I tell you... women and old people poured out of the barracks and onto the road chasing my truck attempting to stop it. We had orders not to stop. Mothers were shouting for their children, crying and cursing. As we drove by them we splashed them with snow, but they persisted with their chase through the sleet, through the water and through the mud shouting and calling the names of their children. Someone in the truck in front of me opened the tarp slightly and tossed a handful of pieces of paper. The turbulence of the passing trucks scattered the papers all over the snow. The women dashed for them. I can't imagine these people going through all that snow to find a piece of paper and hoping it will say something, anything about their loved ones... I am tired of being around the dead and wounded and especially around the sorrowful, sad and crying women. Who was the mad man who put these refugees in Prenies, exactly on the road where we have to pass with the wounded every day? Who?"

"Are you asking me, comrade?" I replied as I handed him a cigarette.

"I am asking you, I am asking myself, I am asking everyone..." He said and asked: "And you have you been here long? I see you lost a leg..."

I did not say a word. I just turned around and limbed my way towards the cabin. I could not sleep all night that night. I could not sleep at all. But it was not my first night that I could not sleep. Wounded kept arriving even after February the fifteenth but not as many as before. We truly screwed up in Lerin, we truly did...

Pando my good man, one morning I went to the hospital to one of the rooms. I noticed a young woman lying in a bed set next to the door. She looked familiar but I could not place her where I knew her from. I watched her and watched her but still I could not remember where I knew her from. Then I recognized her from her eyebrows.

"Kalesha!" I spoke up. She opened her eyes slightly and looked at me. She moved her long and thin eyebrows, looking more like leeches, repositioned her head to have a better look at me and tried hard to remember who I was, but without success.

"Kalesha!" I said again. "Don't you recognize me? It's Numo".

We called her Kalesha (Brunette) and so did her co-fighters in other units. She gave me a tiny smile with a painful look on her face and whispered:

"Numo, Numo... Are you alive? You are alive!"

“Well, I am not an angel, Donka, if that’s what you think? Of course I am alive!” I replied.

“But we thought... Down there at Kamna...” she whispered with a broken voice. “I am so happy, Numo, to see you... And I, now, I..” she began to whimper and raised her right arm. “I lost my hand, Numo. I am now without my right hand... I was wounded at the battle in Lerin. When we were pulling out I sprained my leg and I stayed behind in the snow. I froze...”

I sat beside her on her bed, took her right arm and with both my wide hands held it and began to caress it. All I could think of was the loss of her hand, her beautiful hand, her soft and gentle hand, now gone. She turned her head away from me. She did not want me to see her tears.

“Donka... Kalesha....” I whispered. “Don’t worry so much. I too am without a leg but as you can see, I am alive. Didn’t you say I was alive, right?”

Just at that moment the doctors entered the room. Ferents greeted me and asked:

“Do you know each other? You are old friends, aren’t you? How is my girl today? Are you brave, very brave? Let us see your legs. Nurse, a little help here?”

I got off the bed and stood on the side. When they were removing her bandages I closed my eyes. When I opened them what do I see... Her feet were black and over her ankles her legs were swollen and blue. Ferents tapped his fingers along the frame of the bed, sighed deeply and said something to Bogdan in Spanish. He then addressed the nurse:

“Nurse, prepare the patient...” He looked at Donka’s feet again and said something in Spanish. He then stroked her face and said:

“You are a brave girl... What is your name?” He asked in Spanish and Nikos immediately translated. “Donka, my name is Donka!” she replied

A half an hour later I went to visit Doctor Ferents. Doctor Nikos was there too.

“Dr. Ferents, what is happening with Donka’s feet?” I asked.

Dr. Ferents looked at me intensely and through Dr. Nikos said: “Numo, this is war...”

“And where is her braid of long hair, Dr. Ferents?” I asked.

“Her braid of hair? Her hair was burnt down to her roots when she arrived, Numo. Why do you ask?” he replied.

“Her braid, Dr. Ferents, was the pride of our entire company, of the entire battalion. We all envied her long hair Doctor. Before we went into battle we would say: ‘Donka... Kalesha... protect your braid...’ Her hair was long, thick and black, stretching down to her hips. She braded it into a thick braid and curled it around her head. It looked like a crown, like a wreath. Sometimes we would beg her to weave some flowers into her braid, violets, jasmine, and other flowers that grew in the wild. And not to

disappoint anyone, she often did that. It brought us so much joy to watch her. We loved her and her braid. And when she combed it Dr. Ferents, and when she combed it, it was like wires, all black, but shined like black silk in the presence of the sun. And when she let it fly free, it settled on her shoulders covering her back down to her hips. When she combed it, Doctor, when she combed it and there was a bit of wind, it fluttered like waves, like the waves, Dr. Ferents, in a wheat field... She never allowed a man's hand to touch it... She was quick but gentle with her finger movements and was able to braid it in a flash. And her braid, her braid, Dr. Ferents, not only did it have the scent of young woman, but it had the aroma of the mountains and forests at dawn, the fresh morning wind, the dew on the trembling violets, and the aroma of fresh pine. It reminded us of the cold water crystal clear mountain streams, the aroma of fresh grass in the night wind, and, yes Dr. Ferents, of the smell of a freshly dug pit, of the smell of a newly built bunker, of the aroma of Ianovo flowers, of the aroma of wild strawberries and often of the smell of gunpowder... Dr. Ferents."

Dr. Ferents looked at me and, after a long silence, asked: "Numo, why are you pacing from room to room wrapped in a blanket? Haven't you got any clothes to wear?"

"No I don't." I replied. "If you don't watch your clothes here someone will borrow them... It's the Partisan way."

"Nurse!" called out Dr. Ferents. "Take this fellow to the store room and tell them to give him a pair of pants, a blouse and an overcoat. Tell them the doctor ordered. If there are no overcoats, then a blanket will do."

"A blanket, Dr. Ferents? I don't need a blanket. I already have this one."

"That one will stay here. Tonight, along with many others, you will be going to Suk..." he said.

"To Suk?!" I enquired.

"Yes, Numo to Suk. I go there sometimes, and I will see you there. Go say goodbye to your friends and then go to the trucks waiting outside. Adios amigo..." he concluded.

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 5

I don't know how many of us there were. A lot, brought there from all the hospitals. Most of us were wounded that had almost recovered, but many were without eyes, without arms, without legs, lame and blind... Those healed or almost healed from their wounds, that were not blind or missing limbs did not stay long. The trucks came at night and after a quick handshake and a short farewell they were shipped back to the front.

We slept in two storey barracks, on flat boards nailed down on both sides with a passageway in the middle, just wide enough for two people to pass one another. We slept next to each other on the bed of boards with nothing on them. Dividing us we usually had a coat, a worn out blanket, or nothing. Two of us slept under my coat, myself and Vangelis, a Greek man from Thessaly. In the bed next to ours was a Madzhir (Asia Minor colonist) from Kostur. Every day they woke us early in the morning before sunrise and took us out for exercise. We flapped around our empty sleeves and pant legs and hopped up and down for a short while to get limbered up and get our blood flowing before returning to our bare board, rough beds. There, in the silence of the vast green meadows and vineyards, we all became generals and had answers for every battle we lost. We argued bitterly all day and night. Why? Because we lost the war and those who were a bit more enlightened about military matters and had gone to officer school tried to explain why, but without much success because our desire for achieving something imagined could not be overridden. Icarus certainly knew what awaited him in the heights even before he sealed his wings with wax, but as he drifted up high in the sky the height became his desire and in him born was the spirit of "anything was possible". It was the same with us. We villagers, peasants, nobodies, with confiscated weapons managed to seriously fight the enemy, to extricate him from the cement bunkers, to persecute him, boasting that we were not only fighting against the Greek Royal Army, but against Britain and against America. We, a bunch of village idiots, were going to fight against America... We had fought against our enemy in Kopanche, Aliavitsa, Krusha, Tumba, Bela Voda, Bigla, Gorusha, Haro, Kleftis, Patomata, Orle, Odreto, Pirgos, Bel Kamen, Glavata, Kula, Sveti Ilija, Iorgova Glava, Mali Madi, Vicho, Butsi, Ianova Glava, Plati, Kulkuturia, Bukovik, Baro, Iamata, Polenata, Vrbitsa, Stenite, Kaimakchalan ... We had fought the enemy in the mountains in Macedonia, Epirus, Thessaly, the Peloponnesus and Rumeli... In Suk we had fighters who had fought in every battle mentioned above. Opposite me was an older man with two empty sleeves. His hair was gray. He had been a participant in World War I and in the Asia Minor Greek campaign. He had survived Akronafplia, Metaksas's salty fish and castor oil. He had fought in the Albanian mountains and clashed with the Germans. He had fought with ELAS; he had fought in the mountains and hills of Kichevia

and Shar Planina and now this... Time and his ordeals were weighing down on his shoulders... Beside him was a Greek of similar age. One of his sleeves was empty and in place of an eye he had a black ball. He constantly sang quiet and soft, pious and sad, disturbing and moving, isolating and compassionate songs. And after he cried and cried, he again sang the same song:

Why are the mountains black and constantly crying?

Is it because the blizzards beat on them and the rain thrashes them?

No blizzards beat on them and no rain thrashes them,

Only death passes and sows the dead.

First it takes the young and then the old after them,

And fragile children are next in line to be saddled...

He stopped and remained silent, as if to take a deep breath. His face was yellow and waxy and his good eye was sparkling blue...

“Why are the mountains black and constantly crying?” he quietly asked while rocking side to side on his wooden bed.

So, Pando, there were people in Suk from everywhere. We suffered together but were unable to “reconcile our differences”. We suffered many sorrows before we reached a fork in the road. But even at the fork it was still possible to extend a hand. But we didn’t even do that so, as a result, we abandoned everything including the blood we spilled together in the same trenches, in the same bunkers, the piece of bread we shared, the drop of water we drank, the tears and the dignity that we built together. Everything we built together in the snow-laden hills of Gramos and Vicho we abandoned. And had we done any differently we would have been unworthy. And for those on the one side or on the other, after they abandoned their posts and hung their rifles somewhere on a thorn tree and found a warm bed somewhere in a hole under a roof to weather the storm and sow evil, we also need to find a place among us. We are the seed of Macedonia; we belong on the land over there, on the other side of the border. We belong there and life there too can be exactly as we want it... The time will come when we will walk the boulevards of Solun and Athens, with these wooden legs. These wooden legs will creak to remind us of the bursts of gunfire we endured, of our friends we left behind and buried every day, day after day and of those who stopped believing. But by then who knows how far we will go and where we will end up. And who knows over how many roads we will travel before we return to our homes only to find our yards overgrown with thorn trees... Why do we always have to go somewhere and always have to come back from that somewhere... I have said this and I will say it again, we are the seed of this land called Macedonia. If we succeed in eradicating the hatred then these seeds will sprout and grow into trees that will bear rich fruit. We are still burdened by our many vices and perhaps that is why there is no trust in us. And that too is a struggle, like it is a struggle when you want to get out of

a swamp, from every evil, from every wrong, from the stench, I would say... And that cannot be cleansed just with slogans. And the larger the letters on the slogans, the more garbage they spread. The maggots cannot be cleansed that easily. The trash has to be cleaned first...

It is nice when you look into people's eyes and see a peaceful reflection in their pupils. It's the same as looking at the wheat field you sowed last spring and watching the green wheat ripple in the wind in front of you. We had such moments in Suk, peaceful moments, serene moments when things came together. We looked up into the blue sky and together with the clouds pushed our way to the light and flew through the endless blue... We sat on the green grass on May afternoons and stared at the surrounding mountains until they turned ash gray. We watched the various colours in the sky changing from blue to gold, to purple, to silver and sometimes to flaming red and burgundy during sunsets. The colours were soft, soft like the moist morning dew, like the wet of a late evening shower. Watching the colours gave us hope that life goes on no matter what, and let us know that the struggle for life is continuous and never ending... And by doing this we managed to calm ourselves and our feelings, but then there were always those amongst us who wanted to destroy that sense of self...

In the first days of May they brought many lame young ladies to Suk. Among them was our Kalesha.

I watched them, Pando, and wondered. What kind of hearts did they have to encourage them to stand up straight and walk tall, as tall as they could with broken ribs, shattered shoulders, missing arms and legs, blind and with crutches in their hands and under their armpits? What kind of future is there for them? What kind of dreams would they dream?

Almost all of us were like that in that place. And even though we were all like that, we still took joy in watching the sun rise and observing nature's rainbow of morning colours. We took delight in the first rays of the morning sun entering our barracks through the cracks of the beams and watching the sun spots on the wall climb down to the floor as the day progressed. We watched the blessed sunlight in silence and it filled us with thoughts of hope and joy. We watched it as long as we could. We waited for morning, for the break of dawn, so that we could listen to the birds sing; it gave us a sense of serenity. We relished the sunrise and it was always a pleasure to stare into the flower cups and watch them bloom. We felt gifted to be able to sit and watch the bees fly from flower to flower on a carpet of green grass that stretched to infinity and to watch the clouds float in the blue sky all day...

And who knows, maybe that is why the young women on crutches, the blind, those with defaced cheeks, shaved heads, full of wounds and fresh scars, those with empty sleeves and pant legs, looked so beautiful. At night

we dreamt and during the day, for hours, we gently fondled them with our eyes... blissfully, passionately, modestly, warmly and with delight...

As I watched them I thought: What kind of fate were they dealt? Hey, you, Donka, Kalesha, you with your two cut off feet and missing right hand, how will you, as a bride, wave your handkerchief when you dance the bridal dance? How will you dance our “Beracheto” dance?

And as I thought of her, Donka, Kalesha, dancing, I cried and cried like a crazy idiot! I then dragged myself and hopped down to the vineyard, lay in the grass and cried some more, Pando. Then I began to cry with joy. I felt something hit me here in my chest; it was Kalesha’s pride and dignity. Even though now she was not the same Kalesha as the one from our company, the goddess with the long braid of hair, the slender woman that could dance like a fairy... Still, she was our Kalesha. Even though she was sluggish in her movement, had less fire in her eyes and her smile was a little sadder, nonetheless she was our Donka, our Kaleshata. Even though her hair was only a few centimetres long, it was still black, thick and it shone in the bright sun. And so, even though she was caught up in the game of cripples, she was alive and carried on dancing the steps of life being held under the arms... fate brought her to this dance which she must now find the strength, the clarity, the means, the support, the joy of existence, the dignity and the security in her friends in order to dance it to its end. I then began to see our Kalesha happy, learning slowly, carefully, how to walk as if barefoot on broken glass, kneeling beside some daisies, gently plucking them and collecting them in her lap, then braiding them in her long braid of hair...

One day I saw Kalesha with a wreath of flowers on her head. She was with Katerini, the Greek woman from Rumeli who had a caved-in temple and a missing left eye. Kalesha’s hair had grown. With her one hand she was adjusting the wreath of daisies whose white petals were covering her eyes. Kosta, a bulky man, an artillery man from the Greek-Italian war and later a DAG fighter, leaning on his crutches was looking at the women. And Donka, after passing by him, said: “Hey, fat boy, don’t lean so much on your crutches you might break them...”

Katerini was walking ahead. She was smiling, but from the vibrations of her shoulders I could sense that she was crying inside. She was protective of her blind eye and her sunken temple and had them well covered up so no one could see them. She also had a large scar on her right cheek. But we all looked past that and only saw a beautiful, slender young woman, the machine gunner who wore a medal for bravery. All I saw was a beautiful girl wearing very wide military trousers and an oversized English blouse that hid everything. She came to Suk from a hospital in Tirana; she was wounded in Bela Voda. She had received a severe head wound which took out her eye and left a large scar on her right cheek, but

outside of that she had red, plump, passionate lips. And her smile; it was fulsome, narcotic and passionate...

And as such new moments of joy were born among us and hopes that, by nature of things, would only last a brief time and move on to make way for new concerns, doubts, internal erosion, dark thoughts that would come after new experiences...

But, while we were still in Suk, we did not concern ourselves with our scars, our wounds and our pain. We would not sleep until our friends were loaded on the trucks and had left the compound. There were no organized sendoff ceremonies; we knew that they were taking them back to where they brought them from. This was our job, a task we took on to do every day, just the same as those who were sent to the front. "Safe trip comrades and take care not to come back here again!" we whispered after the trucks moved away. And being as we were, without limbs, we still had the desire to be back at the front with them. By going back we felt that we could enrich the battlefield with our wounds, with our scars, with our missing eyes, with our empty sleeves and empty pant legs, but much smarter and wiser... And I must say that we were most sorrowful when the sun did not shine and when the sky was covered with black clouds. One time the sky was black, thunderous and gray for an entire week. We anxiously waited for brighter days while we quarreled more frequently with our friends.

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 6

Loud thunder shook the mountainside and lightning lit the sky as it began to rain hard. Now this was some rain! Then we heard a voice from the administration office yelling: “Everybody out! Get up and get out. Get out!”

“Why?” someone asked.

“Why do you ask why? Are you blind? Can’t you see it’s raining?” the person from the administration office replied.

“I am blind comrade... I am blind...” the man replied.

“Then, can you not hear that it is raining?” asked the man from the administration office.

“I can hear it! I can hear it!” replied the blind man.

“Well then, get out!” the man from the administration office ordered.

One by one we began to hesitantly make our way out and allowed the pouring water from the sky to fall on us and wash the dirt from our bodies.

“Wash everything, including your smelly packages gentlemen! Make them shiny!” someone yelled. We stunk like maggots from the sweat and from everything else and once we felt the cleansing rain on our bodies we began to wash everything, rubbing off all the dirt and letting the rainwater take it away...

“By God I will rub every part of my body,” said another man, “and then I will sit all day and squash lice.”

“Hey, you over there! Take your socks off and wash your feet. You stink like a village manure heap.

“Why should I take my socks off? So that my feet can get dirty in the mud? You are a wise guy, aren’t you?” replied the smelly man.

“Hey, guys! Look! The women are enjoying the rain too!” someone whispered.

And why shouldn’t they? They have more things to wash than we do. I remember last year we were somewhere in Gramos and the commander of our squad gave all the women a piece of soap from the supplies we had seized the day before. He then sent them to a stream up the mountain to wash themselves. Dear God, when they came back they looked bright and clean and rosy, just beautiful. I said to one: “Give me some of that soap so that I too can wash and be handsome.” She laughed and laughed and then looked me in the eye and said: “Oh, some soap ha! There wasn’t enough there to wash half my butt. My other half is still dirty...” I looked at her... she was quite meaty... ouch!

“Wash yourselves well!” said the man responsible for our barrack.

“Wash yourselves well because we don’t know when it will rain again...”

This man was a DAG Unit commander and still had the confidence of a commander. He always carried himself like a commander.

“And I promise you, when we liberate Athens...” he said but before he finished he was interrupted by another man who shouted out:

“Oh mother! We haven’t even come out of the forest and he is dreaming of Athens...”

“Don’t talk, just listen!” replied the commander with a raised tone of voice while standing in the mud with his legs apart and rubbing his chest with his right hand. He lost his left hand in Kajmakchalan. “When we liberate Athens, I, your commander, promise you that each one of you, at least once, will have a bath in the Queen’s bathtub. I will personally make sure the bathtub is filled with hot water fit for a popular fighter. And each one of you will receive a bottle of shampoo...”

“Well thank you, but that may be a little too much for me. I would not want to lie drunk in the royal bathtub. Just look at what this man is preparing for us...” said the man who spoke up earlier.

“Oh, you ox, the shampoo is not for drinking; its soap for washing. Just listen and don’t say anything until I explain everything to you so that you don’t embarrass me in front of a colonel or a general. You will pour the bottle of shampoo in the warm water, swash the water with your finger two or three times and the water will form soap suds. They it will be as thick as a cloud. And after that you will enter into this fragrant white, blue, or red soap cloud, depending on what colour of shampoo you chose, and you will enjoy your bath lying there looking at the walls covered with gilded tiles...” explained the commander.

“And then I will curse and swear at the Queen’s mother for having our national treasures glued to the walls... That German so and so...” replied the man.

“I told you to listen carefully and to not interrupt because you will embarrass me in front of some general... In other words, you will be looking at the walls covered with large, reflective mirrors. After that you will get out of the tub and you will stand under the shower...” explained the commander, but before he could finish he was interrupted again.

“And what is that, huh?” inquired the same man.

“That is a smaller room, coated with silver tiles...” explained the commander who was again interrupted.

“Oh, that German so and so, here too she has found a place to hide the people’s silver...”

“Stop interrupting the man! Look how beautifully he tells the story!” piped up another man.

“...walls covered with silver tiles, like I said. Yes, with silver tiles. And up in the ceiling and on all sides in the walls there are little holes. And when you press a button...” continued the commander until he was again interrupted by the same man who said:

“And how do I know which button to press...?”

“Hey buddy, you are frustrating the man. He told you he will personally explain everything to you. So please listen, huh, buddy?” piped up the other man.

“Like I said, you press the button and then water starts to flow... like rain...” continued the commander until he was again interrupted by the same man who then said:

“She is some queen huh... She comes out of the scented soap and then goes into the rain. I ask you, if the queen has a bath and warm water why would she want to go into the rain? She must be some crazy queen huh, to be going into the rain? Is that queen a bit insane, eh?”

“A shower, you idiot, is not exactly rain...” replied the commander.

“But it does come down in droplets, right Commander?...” said the same man.

“Yes! Yes it does!” another man from the other side of the creek, kneeling in the muddy water, attempted to explain.

“No, no, don’t listen to him!” said another man; a machine gunner. “Listen to the commander. If the commander says she goes into the rain, then she goes into the rain. And if she does, she must be some crazy queen! No thank you. Don’t make me go under the rain because I have had enough rain in my lifetime...”

“And how are you smart birds going to wash the soap off your body after you come out from the bath? Huh? In the shower! The man is telling you right! Please continue Comrade!” piped up another man.

“After you rinse the soap off your body in the shower, you will then wipe yourself with a large towel made of soft cloth. Then you will put on a long scented silk gown and go to the massage room and lie in the queen’s bed...” explained the commander until he was again interrupted by the same man who said:

“What? What?”

“I said lie in the queen’s bed...” explained the commander.

“With the queen or without her?” the same man interrupted again.

“Oh shut up! The queen would be long gone by then. She would have escaped to London, to America, or to France. And if she hasn’t, then we will hang her at Plaka,” explained the commander.

“And after that, comrade?” asked the same man.

“What then? Refreshed, everyone will wear a custom made suit, expensive shoes, a neck tie or bowtie and take a walk in Athens. You can go to a café and have a cup of Turkish coffee, a glass of “Metaxa” brandy, or a glass of “Mastika dodekato Vareli” (Twelve Barrel Mastika),” explained the commander.

“And what do I do with my crutches, Comrade?” asked the same man.

“Enough with the questions!” someone yelled impatiently. “Have patience, everything will be revealed!”

“Be patient, the man is taking us for a visit to Athens and is reserving a place for us to have coffee in a café? Right comrades, we have come this far?” piped up another man.

“So what if we came this far, now we will sit quietly, drink some coffee or mastika and listen for our orders...” said another man.

“Continue, Comrade... continue,” said the man who constantly interrupted.

“Once we outlive our suffering, we will be able to live normal lives,” said the commander.

“And food, what kind of food will we be eating?” asked the interrupting man.

“You again?! For as long as we are walking the parks and visiting café’s we will not starve? We will still have our canned food,” replied the commander.

“American canned food with meat, I hope,” said the interrupting man.

Those American cans again; they gave us diarrhea for a month last fall. The Unit Political Commissar spent hours and hours in the outhouse because of those American cans...

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 7

It stopped raining as the storm blew over beyond the mountains. We all went back inside our barracks. I could still hear vibrations and thunder in the distance.

“That’s it for the rain! The storm is over!” I heard someone say quietly.

“Ah you don’t know that!” I heard another person say from the opposite side of the creek. “The storm will never be over. It’s here, inside of us! I can feel its madness inside my chest! I can feel it gaining strength, circling around and returning again, breaking out and thundering inside of me...”

And the storm did come, but not the one that washed us. This was another storm, a different kind of storm. This was an insidious, finger pointing, bootlicking type of storm, the kind that would often leave empty beds behind. It was hard to wake up at dawn and see an empty bed beside you and the person, your friend, who slept in it gone. At first you might think the person had gone out, to get some fresh air, to smoke a cigarette... And you waited and waited looking at the empty bed and at the half open door. But eventually you came to accept that the storm took them...

I never did finish telling you about Kalesha... When she went for a walk or when she went to the dining hall or to the meadow to pick daisies, Kaleshata often fell down. In the beginning some people wanted to help her and she became reliant on them. But I think because she was determined to have a life, she struggled hard to overcome all her difficulties and made an extra effort to remove all obstacles. Her greatest wish was to live. That’s why she wanted to struggle with her crippling problem by herself, alone. She wanted to take care of herself alone and used all her strength to do it. She constantly kept saying out loud: “Alone... I will do this alone!”

And in that I could see this young lady taking her first steps in making a life for herself, like a baby taking its first steps out of the cradle with its first words being “I alone!” That’s how one begins life. It was hard, very hard for Donka, for our Kaleshata, as she struggled with tears in her eyes and with a broken voice promising herself that she was going to do this alone, by her lonesome self. She began and ended her days with these crazy words, “I alone!” and with the strength and determination of a strong heart. And what didn’t she have? This rebellious youth also had a sense of personal dignity, compassion, faith and consciously made every effort to live and fight for life. And during the nights, when the hot winds blew carrying the scent of seawater and a light coolness from the vineyards, when the moon and the narcotic scent of the jasmine and carob trees compelled everyone to gather together and sit under the eaves of the barracks, she never talked about her troubles.

“Oh, how beautiful, how silent it is...” she often whispered while rubbing her legs squeezed tight by the belts she wore. “Oh, how nice and quiet it is!”

Those who had healthy legs walked around, made love, danced and rejoiced because these eighteen to twenty-year olds knew that they were in the prime of their life and that in a war people their age were not exempt from death, mutilation and from lying in the dampness of bunkers and barracks in a 24 inch wide bed made of rough boards with no mattress, pillow and no covers. And they knew that there was no guarantee that they would remain alive and healthy and not end up lame without arms or legs in the longest journey of their life...

We who did not have legs also walked, but not so much, and made some love, that we did. A person cannot cover themselves with a veil by forgetting because they will never leave the closed circle of weakness and doubt in themselves, because under them everything withers and becomes strange and rarely gives comfort and hope. We encouraged one another to overcome our problems, to start anew, to eradicate the weeds of despair. We needed to start everything from scratch as Kalesha did. Alone ... It was a new beginning for us! We could not let up because each time you let up you lost your freedom... It was often welcoming at night to think of the crippled girls who wore flowers in their hair. It gave us a strange, mysterious, thrilling feeling of rapture and narcotic happiness. But most of all we were cheered by the songs Kalesha sang for us. We were all crazy in love with her:

Tailors, brothers, tailors,
Oh, stitch me a white dress,
Tailor made without scissors,
Hemmed without thread...

This is how Donka started the song. Then when she came to the part “Hemmed without thread...” the male voices would begin to sing. And in her eyes and in her smile we could see anxiousness... how will they respond... what verse will they sing next?

Girl, devilish, girl,
Oh, bake us a round loaf of bread,
Without a sieve to sift the flour,
Without water to knead the dough,
Without fire to bake it...

And then Kalesha, in her beautiful voice, would warmly respond:
Tailors, brothers, tailors,
I will bake a round loaf for you,
Through my eyelashes I will sift the flour,
With my tears I will wet the dough,
On my chest I will bake the bread...

When Kalesha sang, Pando, it seemed like a gentle breeze was blowing through the forest and the golden sun was setting beyond the horizon. We all felt privileged and happy to be alive and breathing. Is there a name for such a feeling? The name of that feeling was us, there in Suk...

You see that man, Pando, the one that's leaning on the jeep? Well, one day he came to Suk. Then he was healthy and clean when he entered the dining room and yelled out:

"Comrade fighters!"

I stopped eating and looked up at him. He climbed on a chair and started staring at us with half closed eyes. He again yelled out:

"Comrade fighters!" And then began to talk to us generally about the struggle. You see, Pando, we were the ones who put this burden on our own backs... He walked around, walked around and came back to the middle of the room again. He figured there were agents, spies and no-goods among us here in Suk.

"A band of Slavo-Macedonians..." he opened his big mouth, "have surrendered to the Yugoslavs and..."

"Facts, Comrade, facts! Where is your evidence?!" I yelled out at the top of my voice. "Everyone has a name... Name some names..."

"These people," he continued, ignoring my yelling, "have orders to undermine us from within and to destroy our struggle! There comrades," pointing to the door through which four young men walked in looking as if they had been in a fight, "are your traitors!" Clearly they looked as if they were beaten, especially from the cuts and bruises on their faces. "They were caught leaving, on their way to Yugoslavia. They wanted to flee there but the watchful eye of our revolutionaries discovered their plot."

After an hour and a half of barking he finally stopped talking. Then others got up to speak; to actually swear and curse the boys. After that we all dispersed and listened to the cries of those unfortunate young men until dawn. They beat them all night and wanted to make an example of them for the rest of us.

The next day, in the afternoon, the same idiot came back, ordered us to assemble and began to lecture us about the socialist revolution and about its leaders.

"Let's go, you, you, and you with the bent head," pointing at me with his finger. "Tell us in which one of his works and what does the great Stalin say about the socialist revolution?" he asked.

And I, Pando, I had my wooden leg unleashed and was leaning slightly forward.

"Stand up when I talk to you!" he yelled at me. "Are you, coincidentally, one of those who has one eye turned towards Belgrade, eh?" he asked.

All eyes turned on me. Then someone from the other corner of the dining room yelled out: “He was with the Aegean Brigade, Comrade, so who knows, right?”

“Yeah!” the man hissed. “Is that so? We know plenty about them. We know them well! Now stand up and answer the question!” he barked at me.

I became enraged, stood up and raised my wooden leg above my head and with all my strength, smashed it on the table and said:

“Here, you noncombatant, is my revolution with all its glory! Here it is! Here it is!!!” I shouted angrily as I slammed my wooden leg on the table again and again.

I spent the night between the wooden beds. The corridor was very narrow and there was nowhere to escape. I was hit with canes, punched, kicked, cursed and spat on. And you know, Pando, the physical blows did not hurt me so much. What hurt me the most was the fact that the blows were delivered by my fellow co-fighters, the people with whom I bled in the bunkers, the people with whom I shared my last crumb of food, my last drop of water, the people for whom I was willing to sacrifice my life... That hurt me the most and is still hurting. I got to the end of the hallway and, while holding my wooden leg under my armpit, I looked back at the enraged people. Some still held their canes up and shook them at me; others held their heads down and others kept spitting on the side in disgust. Slowly I began to get the idea. And I, as if it was nothing, sat on the chair by the door, slowly tied my wood leg, stood up, looked in the hallway. No one would look me in the eye. I walked to my cabin in silence. I headed straight for my wooden bed. The only noise I heard was the creaking of my wooden leg. Oh, how loud it creaked... Oh, how the creaking of my step drowned the silence of shame.

I never made it to my bed. The duty officer called me. I turned and walked towards the door. I went outside where a truck was waiting. Two men took me by my arms and threw me inside. Then they entered and the truck left the compound. When we got on the road leading to the seaside, I asked: “Where are you taking me?”

“Be happy it ended this way,” one of them said.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked again.

“To the madhouse...” the other one replied.

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 8

The doctors behaved well towards me. They even tried to protect me from those among the staff who had orders to tie me and beat me. One day while I was walking in the yard I happened to run into an Albanian colonel. When he saw me limping, with crutches in my hands, he came over and greeted me. I stood up straight and looked at him... he looked familiar... I knew this man. The Albanian colonel was a fellow Macedonian. I told him who I was and that I knew him. We met in 1940. How? That's a different story. He was a fellow Macedonian, you know, from the Macedonian people living in the Albanian occupied part of Macedonia. You know, from the part of Macedonia that was given to Albania in 1912 to make Albania larger. Anyway, I told him everything. I also told him that I had my own opinions about things and that there was no justice for people like me here... He patted me on the shoulder and took me to the person in charge. They spoke in Albanian. The colonel raised his voice, but about what, I don't know. Anyway, when we walked away he said in Macedonian: "Take your rags and get on the truck."

I said: "I have nothing!" and he said: "Then move!" He brought me back to Suk.

Unfortunately there were a handful of sons of bitches there with big ears and big mouths who would sell their own mothers. Well, Pando, that's how I became a freak show. And last night one of these unfortunate people said to me: "Comrade, watch your back..."

And I do watch my back. Do you know why that idiot leaning on the jeep was talking for so long today? You probably don't know! I'll tell you, but you will have to forget. The idiot lost his hand gun. This is why he was talking for a long time...

"And what was said this morning in that long conversation? While explaining something and motioning with the hands..." asked Pando.

"Ah, that! Yes! I asked those in the jeep something. You are asking me about that, right?" replied Numo unsure of what Pando was asking about.

"Yes! What else would I be asking you about, Numo?" replied Pando sarcastically.

I asked them to take me down there. I need to go here and there. They made a mistake with diagnosing my illness. I said to them take me down there and leave me somewhere in a bunker. Give me a pitcher of water, some bread, two or three boxes of cartridges and a machine gun. Am I asking for too much? That should be nothing for a cripple like me, right Pando? Huh? Prenies is not for me and neither is the company it keeps... I know what Prenies is like. And they know that too. You are dying but you can't die, you are insane but you can't go insane. You can only hang yourself. And who needs that? All I ask from them is to put me in a bunker

and give me a machine gun, a pitcher of water and some bread. Am I asking for too much, Pando? What do you say?

Pando, fiddling with his cigarette made of herbs, looked at me with his blue eyes, spit to the side and said:

“What do I say? Nothing... We uprooted ourselves from our homeland for nothing... And no one cares or wants to know about the uprooted ones and where their roots are from... Our stone, Numo, has been rolled where no grass grows... There, I said it, I, crazy Pando; the gravedigger, as they call me...”

Numo sighed, shrugged his shoulders, spat and said: “I have a very bad bitter taste in my mouth...”

“Well, Numo, what do you expect when your entire life is filled with bitterness,” replied Pando.

“Maybe it is, Pando, maybe it is... But know this, that if one day I disappear from under this roof then you will know that I am somewhere in Vicho. I am not accustomed to not getting what I want. I will limp my way there with my wooden leg if I have to... I don't have the strength to watch the women run to the road here in Prenies every sunrise and every sunset when the trucks pass by... It scares me when I see a woman in black running behind a truck with her hands raised up in the air; it scares me when I think of the conditions we created to make this woman behave this way. Okay we men did what we had to do and went where we had to go, but the women, why the women, what did they ever do to deserve this? I did some stupid things in my time too... I was one of those who convinced many young women to join the partisans, I was one of those mobilizing them, so tell me why do I now feel sorry for them? Should I feel sorry for them? No I shouldn't, Pando, I did what I had to... What man endured more than these women? Well, I ask you because you are older than me and you've seen more of the world... I too have seen plenty, in Vicho, in Gramos and here, in Albania, in the hospitals ... What did I see? Well, a lot more than what I told you. I will tell you again: It is sad to watch young women walking with crutches. I will ask you again: What kind of a wedding will they have if they ever have a wedding at all? And if they have one, how will they dance the bridal dance with no legs or with one leg, and how will they fan the handkerchief with no arms? How will they? Well I, Numo the cripple, whose tongue they wanted to pull out because of the kinds of questions I was asking, I ask you because you're older and you've seen more than me, but you have not seen Gramos, you have not seen Vicho and you did not see the crippled young men and women and have never wondered how they will dance the bridal dance at their wedding...”

Pando shrugged his shoulders and said: “Nothing can be said here in Prenies. This is a place for grieving, complaining, running behind the

trucks twice a day, crying and if anyone does say something of worth, no one today has the capacity to understand its implications...”

“Let me ask you something else,” said Numo. “Did you ever see how they disposed of legs, arms, eyes and other body parts that they cut off people? Did they carry them in waste baskets or garbage carts after they were cut off? No? It is best you don’t know. The nurse at the hospital in Elbasan told me that my leg was taken away in a garbage cart. This means that part of me lies in some garbage dump here in Albania. I don’t want the rest of me left here; I want to go back, down beyond the mountains. My mind does not feel right here in Prenies and my soul feels crushed. And do you know what Prenies looks like? It looks like a festering wound. Like a festering wound... What do you say to that, Pando?”

“What can I say..? No one’s pain has left and no one’s wounds have healed from just talking... I got used to the quiet, to the silence and to dealing with my own pain... I dig the graves in silence, I bury the dead in silence and I watch those clean and well-fed in the jeeps in silence. Not because I am afraid of them, but to spite them... I don’t look at them or turn towards them when they pass by me with their shiny new boots crackling or when they gather everyone around them shouting slogans of victory, slogans which they themselves probably don’t believe...”

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 9

It rained the entire day yesterday and all of last night. The roads were muddy from being trampled by our people. They traveled the road in long queues with their horses, mules and donkeys, kneading the mud with every step and then turned uphill towards Shak, you know those places, right? Uphill travel was difficult. It was very slippery and dangerous especially for those carrying heavy loads. It was more dangerous for the animals. Those who slipped ended up rolling down into the wild torrent in the swollen river. They were transporting crates of ammunition and bags of food. They had to carry the supplies uphill on their own backs. The animals that broke their legs were killed and loaded on other animals or were skinned on the spot, cut to pieces and taken up to be cooked and eaten.

At dawn I went from my bunker to the river. The water was high, covering the lower branches of the willow trees. I thought for sure it was going to overflow the river banks. The sky was black and it didn't look like it was going to stop raining anytime soon. I returned back to my bunker, took a thick rope and tied it to a willow tree. Then I went in the river and swam to the other side. This was Albanian territory. When I was tying my end of the rope to a pine tree, I was approached by an Albanian sergeant who came to help. He told me that (Greek) government troops were seen yesterday coming down from Stenite and occupying Krchishta and were digging trenches on the hill above Sinadevid. You know those places, right? He also said that if they came to Telok, it would be easy for them to come down here and attempt to capture us. I finished tying the rope and, while hanging on to it, I returned to my bunker. By sunrise it had stopped raining and the sun was shining. People came out of their barracks and began to hang their clothes, blankets, rags, etc., to dry. Then, suddenly I heard the popping sound of machine gun fire; it was coming from the Albanian side. For some reason the Albanians had opened fire. Bullets were whistling over our heads. Then I heard fire coming from the woods above us, I knew it was not us firing. Then someone started shouting: "Run! Run towards Albania." We all ran to the river but unfortunately it was still swollen with muddy, fast running water. Good thing I had tied the rope. I then yelled out, "People there is a rope here that you can use to cross. Hang onto the rope and you will be okay." But in the panic, and from the noises made by the running water and the machine guns firing on both sides, it was difficult to hear. But the people improvised and by holding hands, made a long line and began to cross. After that several Albanian soldiers threw ropes at them which helped them cross faster. No one crossed using my rope. I then took my wife's hand, entered the water and, while holding the rope, we crossed the river. That's when others noticed my rope. I then went back to pick up some food and blankets. I

took as much as I could carry and then went back into the river. When I reached the shore on the other side, I heard a woman yelling. I turned and looked back. She was up to her waist in water and was holding her child up above her head. It was Labrovitsa and she was crying. "Hold onto the rope," I yelled but she could not hear me because she was screaming and because of all the other noises. The gunfire was also getting stronger. Labrovitsa was walking towards the rope as the water began to rise above her chest and splashing the frightened little girl. "Lift her head up, I shouted again and ran towards her. But at that same moment, someone else jumped into the water and I got silt in my eyes from the splash. I held the rope and blindly walked towards Labrovitsa. When I opened my eyes, I saw her in front of me. She was holding onto the rope. Her eyes were wide open and filled with fear and horror. She was screaming loudly. The little girl was gone. I took her under my arm and carried her to the Albanian side. I did not know what to say. I could not find the words... my throat went dry... I immediately thought of my own wife. I looked in the muddy water but all I could see were uprooted trees, logs, branches and leaves floating down river.

The people hid behind the bend, in the dense trees, and started climbing up the mountain along the dense grove. Here they were safe from being purposely shot. The Albanians ceased fire. From the cliffs we could see the Burandari (Greek government soldiers) slowly descending down towards the barracks and shouting: "Don't run away, come back. We won't harm you!" We had heard those words before and we Macedonians knew very well that a promise from a Greek is meaningless. We had had experience with Greek promises for half a century. And as such, Numo, we abandoned our homeland. During the night we arrived at the village Dobrani. The Albanian people there welcomed us with open arms and no one was left out in the open. During the night the Albanian people also took our sheep, goats and cattle and looked after them for us, as we spent two days in the village. We figured our Partisans would attack the government troops, drive them out and then we could go back home. They may have attacked but we did not know, all we knew was that we couldn't go home. We knew that for sure. During the morning of the third day we were awakened and told to go to the village square. They gathered us there to tell us that we would be traveling on a certain road, but where that certain road would take us they would not say. The only thing they said was that there were people amongst us who knew where the road led.

I cannot express the happiness I felt there, Numo, in the open village space, when suddenly I saw Labrovitsa holding her little girl in her arms. She was alive! I ran over to her, grabbed the little girl out of her arms and hugged her and hugged her. I cried uncontrollably. Then she told me that the Albanian soldier who had jumped into the river just before me had taken the little girl from her arms and brought her to shore.

The road we took, Numo, brought us here to Prenies. We gathered our sheep, goats, cattle, mules and donkeys and together went off on this road. I had a prch (male goat), Numo, which was the envy of the entire village. Unfortunately from the long walk its hooves wore down so it constantly lagged behind. It was limping from all four legs. Some people suggested I slaughter it and put it out of its misery before it died from suffering, but I refused. I kept saying no! It would be a sin! One day the animal stopped walking. Its hooves were completely gone. It was standing on naked flesh. At first it would not move. Then it lay down on the ground. Some of my fellow villagers, and others, again suggested that I slaughter it. But I kept refusing! When the people left, my wife gathered some grass and broke some branches with leaves and put them in a pile in front of the animal. She then filled a kettle with water and also put it front of it. The Prch refused to eat or drink. It kept looking at us with sad eyes. After that we left and followed the moving column. The Prch remained behind in desolation, and as we moved further and further away it began to bleat, not bleat, but cry like a child... I turned to look. It was slightly raised on its knees and the further away we moved, the more it bleated and the sadder its bleating became. It seemed like it was crying and cursing us. Numo, my friend, it seems that even the animals understood injustice and anguish...

We finally arrived here... They put us in barracks. Everyone got forty centimetres of space. We were arranged like bullets in two rows on mats made of straw. Every day more and more people arrived and our numbers grew. And every day we ran on the road as we do now. The truck drivers were saying Gramos was burning and that they had to carry more and more wounded with each passing day. They tossed more and more leaflets on the road and we heard more screaming and crying. No day passed without bad news. One day it was my turn. I found a piece of paper with information regarding my Trpo. My middle son Trpo was killed in Gramos. I went down there and hid in the meadows beyond the river and cried out loudly. I went there to hide from my wife but someone told her. Two weeks later I found another piece of paper. It was my youngest child, my seventeen year old, he was lying wounded in a hospital in Elbasan. I told my wife and we slipped out of the compound during the night. We went to Elbasan on foot. We hid from place to place to avoid being caught and by the afternoon the next day we were there. We found the hospital, but could not find our son. They said he died in surgery...

How did we get back? Only we know how, Numo. A month later my wife got sick. She was heart-broken and her heart gave out. I dug a grave for her with my own two hands. I buried her myself and ever since then I became Pando the gravedigger... The first grave on the left is that of my wife... That's how it was... concluded Pando.

“And those graves there?” asked Numo.

“They belong to the Italians. Italian soldiers lie in those graves,” answered Pando.

Numo’s hands were shaking as he prepared a cigarette, sprinkling tobacco on a piece of paper.

“Give it to me, I will twist it for you, Numo,” said Pando.

Numo continued making his cigarette, lit it, took a deep puff and after he blew the smoke out, said:

“Now I know why you are like that...”

“Like what?” asked Pando.

“Silent...” replied Numo.

“No. I am not silent. I constantly talk. Wherever I am, I always talk to myself. I talk to my children. I see them in front of me, I follow them, they follow me, I walk beside them and always talk to them. When I am alone I talk to myself loudly and when I was with my wife we have conversations... It depends on how I feel. Now let’s go down to the road. You know I have another son, he is at Vicho... Maybe someone will tell me something good about him... And you, perhaps, you will meet that driver friend of yours, eh?” said Pando.

Numo moved to the side of the road and stopped. The last time he did this he was caught up in the stampede, knocked down and stomped on by the crowd. Unfortunately when the trucks drive by they are mobbed by the people and it is almost impossible to see the drivers from the side of the road. He has only one leg and it is impossible for him to run or steady himself during the pushing and shoving. So, Numo stands on the side of the road calling: “Trpo, it’s Numo calling!” But in the screaming and yelling that goes on nobody can hear him or can see him where he stands. So, Numo stands at the side of the road twice a day waiting and hoping to get a glimpse of his truck driver friend.

The dust that was lifted by the passing trucks slowly began to settle. The crying heard coming out of the barracks unfortunately lasted much longer. Pando and Numo kept walking on the side of the road, combing the dry grass looking for pieces of paper. Again Pando found nothing. Was this easier or more difficult on his soul? He felt heaviness on his chest, which he found difficult to get rid of. Like a dry cough.

Suddenly Numo spoke up: “Yesterday I limped my way down to the river. I looked at the shores, they were white and hundreds of women were washing wool. Where did all that wool come from, Pando?”

“It was from the sheep the people from Kostur brought to Albania. The smarter ones, Numo, immediately sold their sheep to the Albanians in the villages and managed to put a gold coin or two in their pockets. But the others, like me who had one hundred and twenty sheep and sixty goats, brought them here thinking that tomorrow we would return to our homes. Unfortunately those in the jeep, with help from those who watched our animals, who never had any of their own, took them from us. They gave

us, Numo, a piece of paper with some handwriting on it. Well, this is how much my flocks were worth. I tossed the piece of paper because I recognized a con when I saw one. They told me that the government, the people's government, when it comes to power, will pay for them.

So, all the sheep and goats were put under the knife. And the meat, they said, was sent to the front. The skins were sold to retailers and the wool was washed in the river. Our women worked for months in the barracks spinning and knitting stockings and sweaters for those in the battlefields..." concluded Pando.

"You should have hung onto the piece of paper..." advised Numo.

"Why? Do you think someone is going to return my herds? Whatever government comes to power, it must eat first. After it eats, what will there be left for me? I saw with my own eyes how those in the people's government behaved in the villages. They were a people's government in power then but did they plough, plant, harvest and collect firewood? No! They just took whatever they wanted from us. They were more interested in eating our food, for free, and lying in the shade all day. They did nothing to help us even in the worst of times. And here too they are doing nothing. Take Mitre for example. He visited from place to place there and he is doing the same thing here. All he has are two patches covering his ass yet he constantly preaches about communism. He and others like him do not hesitate, not even for a moment, to send other people's children to the battlefields to get killed, while they stay here in Prenies and live a better life than they did at home. This kind of person does not get up early in the morning and does not plough. There is no field or village work for them. This is how they live, Numo, on the backs of others. They have big mouths when it comes to eating and shouting slogans. They are first in line in front of the cauldron every day. They ate meat from Easter to Easter, and here they eat meat at least once a week. They have their wives beside them and their children are nowhere near the battlefields. Most of them sent their children to the Eastern European States. They had nothing to eat at home but here all they do is eat. Well, Numo, I want nothing from a people's government such the one Mitre envisions. And I don't want to speak about Kuze..."

"Who is this Kuze?" asked Numo.

"Kuze? It's better you don't know who he is. But if you do want to know, then tomorrow, go up there where the sheep graze. There you will find him, Mitre, and two or three others. They go there pretending to count the sheep, or the people's sheep, as they like to call them. Kuze, Mite and the others are now the new owners of someone else's sheep. Don't be surprised if you find them roasting a lamb. Also, don't be surprised if they tell you it's for the wounded in Elbasan. And if you choose not to believe them, don't say a word because they will report you to the authorities with trumped-up charges and you will find yourself in hot water. Kuze is a

lizard, Numo; he almost poisoned the people here. It was his turn to collect firewood for the kitchen so he went up to the grove, who knows how the devil he did it, but he found a cave. Inside the cave were piles of bags of flour, boxes filled with cans of macaroni and who knows what else. I guess Kuze thought he was smarter than the devil when he loaded two bags on a donkey and took them down to the ovens. He made a deal with both the baker and the chef and got some compensation from the baker. But when the baker saw that the flour was hard and compressed, he went after him and they began to argue. They had a fight. When Kuze was questioned by the administration he told them that he had bought the flour from some Albanian in a neighbouring village and the whole thing was covered up. Unfortunately the greedy chef decided to use the flour in the cauldron as part of the meal he was preparing. The people ate it and then spent the night in the toilets and in the ditches behind the barracks. Thousands of people were severely affected. There were not enough toilets to accommodate them so they went all over the place. Premies began to stink.

A day or two later other people came upon the cave. One person said they had seen Kuze come out of it and told the others. They all entered the cave but no one would say what they saw. The flour was hard as rock. It was left there by the Italians years ago. The people who found it took some, crushed it with rocks and made bread from it. They ate the bread and became sick with bad diarrhea but refused to tell anyone what had happened. But to be brief. Those in the Administration decided to investigate. Kuze realized what was going to happen so he blamed the shepherd. They took the poor man and transferred him to Smrdesh on a jeep and from there they took him to Breznitsa and filled him with lead (had him shot)... You know, if anyone should have been shot to death, it should have been Kuze and the entire incompetent administration. As you know, they are not allowed to touch anyone here in Albania. Those in Vineni passed judgment on an innocent man. Anyone unfortunate enough to be accused, however, barely ever made it out of Vineni. Once they arrive in Smrdesh, they know what is coming next. These are terrible times, Numo, when a rooster or a chicken is worth a lot more than a human.

So, you still want to know who this Kuze character is Numo? From what I have heard from other people, Kuze took the boxes of macaroni and hid them. Then, unseen, during the night he would take a box, walk down to the Albanian villages and sell them to the Albanians. Don't think that the Albanians were not hungry. They were hungry alright. They could only get rations of bread and for that they needed a ticket. And you know what? They were good people because they were willing to share their little bit of bread with us. Our conflict was also a big burden on them. They had to carry us too. Why? If you have been at war with the Italians and the

Germans, and turned your guns on ELAS and, as you say, reached the great and rich plain, what did you call it?..."

"Srem... I called it Srem!" said Numo.

"Yes, Srem! Tell me why did that happen?" asked Pando.

Numo adjusted his body by leaning a bit more on his crutches, composed himself and said:

"And what were you doing in the battlefields in Kukush Region and in Ali Veran in Asia Minor? They ordered you to go and fight for your country and you went. But for whose country did you fight? We all fought for our country but under whose flag? That is why we are here in Prenies eating rancid Italian flour, having deadly diarrhea, being eaten by swarms of fleas and houseflies and run like crazy people behind the trucks... Don't push me, Pando, to speak about this. I told you I will go back down. And do you know why?" asked Numo.

"To get killed. To lose your head. Why else would you be going down there..." replied Pando.

"I will lose my head, perhaps, but at the same time I will leave a legacy for the Macedonians that Macedonia belongs to them... To us," replied Numo.

"If only you make it there to leave a legacy," said Pando mockingly as he slowly pulled ahead. "If only they allow you to do that. But I am telling you, if you do something like that, they will do everything in their power to erase you completely. No one will ever know where you are buried and no one will ever hear your name again. Our people will participate in that. Sometimes we are condemned by our own people. Give them a little bit of wind and they will not only gauge out your eyes, but they will tear your heart out with their dirty little fingers... And you ask me for whose fatherland I fought...? I fought for my fatherland, I swear to you that's what I believed then. And all the time for them I was a 'neznamitis' (ne znam-itis is what the Greeks called the Macedonian soldiers in the Asia Minor campaign who did not speak Greek. Ne znam in Macedonian means – I don't know). I was a nameless soldier, a neznamitis. A slave may swallow sorrow but the words 'freedom' and 'homeland' are sweet to him. I wanted my homeland and how... When we were running back, being pursued by the Turks and barely escaping with our lives into the sea, we were greeted by Venizelos and after he raised a gun up high, which he took from an exasperated soldier, he shouted:

"Pedia, hasame tin Mikri Asia, ala kerdisame tin Makedhonia! Zito i Elas!" (Boys, we lost Asia Minor, but we gained Macedonia! Long live Greece!)

"Well," I said to a bunch of Macedonians in Greek uniform, "how can it be that way"..., but it was that way..., it was that way alright... Perhaps some day there will be a piece of Macedonia left for us...

They stripped off my uniform and started calling me ‘dirty Slavophone’. And what was I doing, asking for my homeland... That’s why I ended up in jail. Asking for my homeland landed me in Aegina. That was when Pangalos was in power. General Pangalos was a dictator. They accused me of being a communist. When they interrogated me I told them I don’t want communism and I don’t need it. What I want is Macedonia and that’s what I am looking for. They labeled me an autonomist and sent me to a dry island. Two years later they let me go. I went back home. I figured the place would be devastated, but my boys and their mother kept the property in good shape. They also ploughed, sowed and harvested the fields and managed to stave off hunger. I rejoiced to see that I still lived in a country full of such riches.

As soon as I arrived home, I took my medals of bravery that I was given during the Asia Minor War with the Turks and went straight to Kostur. I went to see the mayor. I told him: “I no longer need these medals given to me by the Greek state, you can have them. Being sent to Aegina was reward enough for me for having fought for Greece in the Asia Minor campaign.” No sooner had I finished speaking than he slapped me hard on the face and literally kicked me out of his office.

Later, as you know, Metaxas came to power. For years, Numo, I had been passing through all kinds of doors in the hands of the Greek police. My file followed me like a shadow everywhere I went; I was an ‘autonomist’ and it was always the same. It would start, Numo, with oil. Yes, castor oil. The lead investigator was very patient and sometimes spent the entire day questioning me, tormenting me, making my life miserable in an attempt to convince me to admit that I spoke two or three Macedonian words. He kept three glasses on the table. The first glass he filled with 30 grams of castor oil, the second with 75 and the third with 100 grams. After that the interrogation followed. With me he always started by accusing me of being an autonomist. I always answered by telling him that I was not an autonomist and not even a Greek. After that he would give me the first glass, the thirty grams of oil. I would drink it like I was drinking water during harvest time; slowly and with delight, then looking satisfied, I would put the empty glass on the table. After that it was beating time. A half hour later he would ask me the same questions and I would give him the same answers. After my answer he would give me the second glass of oil. And after he heard the same thing from me he would grab the third glass of oil in his hand. During the third interrogation I would say to him, since I had nothing to hide, ‘I am telling you, sir, sometimes I do say a word or two in my native language’. That’s when he would offer me the 100 grams of oil. And after that they would lock me up in a small cell and they kept me there for four days. I would have severe diarrhea all the time I was there. Sometimes, instead of giving me oil, they made me sit bare-butt on blocks of ice for hours. It had the same effects as the oil.

In 1937 I wanted to leave for America. I went to get permission from the authorities and they told me to wait. I waited... and waited... and waited. I then called the police to find out what was taking so long and they accused me of being associated with the Communist Party. I was not associated with any party so I told them that it was not true. I was a sympathizer, that was true, but I was not a member.

I was stupid too, that's for sure. Initially when they started with me they spoke eloquent words, offered me cigarettes and ouzo... So I believed things had changed, so as not to make them think that my tongue was cut off, I spoke a few Macedonian words in front of them. They got angry. I could not believe how angry they became. They began to yell at me and eventually they beat me. After that they began to pull my fingernails and then my toenails. The pain was the same. Still not satisfied, they lit matches under my arms and placed hot eggs in my armpits. And after that they beat my feet and put them in bags filled with sand. Did it hurt? It hurt, Numo, believe me!

One time, while torturing me, they said they would crown me king of an autonomous Macedonia. They placed an iron band, an iron wreath, on my head and began to slowly tighten it. I thought my eyes would explode from the pain. I was swearing and screaming at the top of my voice. They left me alone for a day or two and then gave me peppers. They were very hot peppers. When you bit into one it felt like you just bit into a burning coal. It was horrible! In 1939 they stuck a cat under my shirt and put me under water. This torture was not invented and exclusively used in Makronisos. I think they adopted it from somewhere else and perfected it on us... After that they used it to torture their own. That's how it was...

During Ilinden celebrations we gathered together under the shady old oak tree at the Sveti Ilia church. As usual, we reminisced about earlier times, about bloodier times and about the times we were proud. They were traditional, ordinary rituals performed in memory of our fallen during which we sang our patriotic songs. We sang, Numo, slowly and quietly. Dono would start singing and stretch the song out and I would take over when we came to the words: 'Enough, enough, wake up, come out of your sleep...' The melody was good and the words were even better. Dono kept the volume of the song to a minimum and, pausing long enough to swallow his tears, he would sing: "It's a great shame for you..." and his words, sung in bass, would echo under the old oak tree and then, "to not know yourself" they would echo at a higher tone. And when the words: "... and for others to know you..." were sung the melody would be raised and our glasses would be lowered... as we looked at each other..." concluded Pando.

“Shame?” asked Numo silently as he spat on the side and began to lift his wooden leg with both hands. “Shame, isn’t it!” he said again as he took a deep breath and watched his spit dissolve into the dry, red soil.

“Yeah... But what can you do when you look at your face in the mirror and don’t know who you are. My father sang a different song. When he listened to the whistling bullets fly and when he watched the flying flag flutter, he sang:

Listen, brothers, listen, sisters,
What a phenomenon, a phenomenon has taken place,
A phenomenon has taken place in Kostur kaaza!
The Sultan was sitting, sitting and thinking,
Sitting and thinking who to kill:
An Armenian or a Greek?
Not an Armenian and not a Greek,
But a Macedonian from Kostur kaaza.

And we then, at the Ilinden celebration, sang ‘shame on you...’
Unfortunately the village elder, that bastard, informed on us and it was the cat under the shirt for me. A living cat, Numo, meowing and screaming while tearing at my chest with its sharp nails. On the same day they put us in a phalanx. A phalanx, Numo, where five or six police officers beat you as you pass by them. They hit you wherever they can. They just don’t hit, they pound at you with all their strength... After they pounded us to their satisfaction, they laced us with two or three buckets of shit. And now, after all that, I and hundreds of others like me are still alive. And you know why? Of course you don’t know. I will tell you why. They beat us but not to kill us. The rule was to maim, not to kill! Maim! Kill their spirit, their defiance, not them. Cripple them so others would be afraid of being crippled! This is what our Greek fatherland did to us. This was done to us inside the ‘cradle of democracy’! I don’t believe there is any other country in the world, outside of the ‘cradle of democracy’ where this happens!

They are savages, Numo. They want you to go mad even with their smile. They want to lead us to madness and despair. Even with what they did to us, the everyday hopelessness and despair, our living was never in doubt. We still wanted to live and have hopes that someday, somehow, there would be better days ahead. They scolded us at every opportunity, insulted us and called us every name in the book. They wanted to make us feel like we were nothing, not worth living, but rarely did any one of us ever pay attention to their arrogance. Every time someone new came they would invent a new name to call us, more derogatory than the previous one. We watched them come and we watched them go while counting the time in between. And this is nothing new, Numo, our ancestors have watched savages like them come and go for centuries, different people, same tactics... Savages, Numo... Savages...

And who knows what they have in store for us in the future and what kinds of names they will invent to call us. And you know what, Numo, we endured and we will keep on enduring. We are like the weeds in a garden; we keep coming back no matter how hard they try to get rid of us... Look at the clouds above. They get blown by the wind here and there and moved around. Sometimes they appear light, other times dark and heavy, thundering and fierce. They come and they go, appearing and disappearing, over the fields, over the mountains, above the forests... Look at the moving water, Numo. It runs, twists, curls, slithers like a snake, disappears under the stones, reappears again and does the same thing again somewhere else... It follows its eternal path... That's us Numo. We are like the weeds, like the clouds and like the water. No matter what others try to turn us into, we are what we are, they can't change that...

I, Numo, have fought in wars, have spent time in prison, have been tortured and beaten by the police and by the gendarmerie, and have learned their ways. Since my younger days, I, Numo, the 'neznamitis', have also learned their language and have read many of their books. And you know what's sad about all this; they now hate me even more. They hate us when we 'barbarians' know a little bit more. They hate us when their uniforms look good on us. They hate us when we are better fighters than they are, even though we fight for them. Everything we do bothers them! Why, Numo, why?

I Pando, the gravedigger in Prenies, ask you, Numo, because you have fought for the patrida (Greek fatherland) against Italy and Germany and now you are fighting for some new kind of patrida, why? Don't even try opening your mouth. You will not convince me of anything. If you try to convince me, I'm sure you would be lying to me. No one can convince me! The only one that can convince me is the one that has the power to turn our hopes and dreams into reality. Numo ... And not with words... not with empty words... Don't you agree, Numo, eh?

Four years I sang the song 'Narode Makedonski...' (Macedonian People...) and for doing so, four years I was forced to drink Greek oil (castor oil) and shit diarrhea in Greek gendarmerie and Greek police cells and basements. On top of that, every year I spent at least a month frying under the Greek sun on one of their dry Greek islands. There, sitting above the rocky shore, I searched for my Ithaca. And let's not speak of the angaria (Turkish word for work without pay) I had to do. After they had me in their grip they put me to work for them without pay...

I told you earlier that I found a piece of paper on the road that had information about my oldest son... They put me in a Greek army uniform just before 1940 and sent me to sunny Giura (Greek island prison camp). When war broke out with the Italians, they let me go. They needed me again. They gathered about one hundred of us and made us carry ammunition, food, repair roads and do whatever was necessary to help in

the defense of our homeland. That is what they told us and that is exactly what we did – defend our homeland as best we could. A lot of snow, waist high, fell during the third month of the war. They gave us shovels and sent us to clean the road leading from Kostur to Bilishta. We were mostly people from Kostur. On the other side, on the Lerin side, they sent people from Lerin and Voden Regions to do the same. Trucks passed by day and night. They were carrying ammunition, weapons, food and wounded just like they are doing now here in Prenies. One day they told me to go to Kostur and report to the mayor's office. I hailed one of those military trucks, showed them my orders, got on it and arrived in Kostur. The next day I knocked at the office door. They told me to wait. I sat on a stool. I heard loud talking in the office. I moved my stool closer and I listened:

‘Mr. Minister Rendis, a soldier came to my Headquarters yesterday and complained that his father was interned because he spoke in his Slavic language. Do you know, Mr. Minister, that their children are the heart of our units and that they are keeping the Italians back? Do you know that my division is made up of boys from Lerin, Kostur and Voden Regions? What are these stupidities that you are doing behind the scenes? What do you think will happen if all their children find out what you are doing to their fathers? Don't you think that such stupidities could get them to abandon the front? How long do you think it will take the Italians to find this out and use it in their propaganda? To put it simply they will say: ‘Hey, you stupid sheep! You are fighting here for the Greeks while your fathers lie in prison for speaking their own language!’ Huh?! What do you think that will do, huh? What, eh?’

Then I heard steps and after that I heard:

‘General Cholakoglu.’ I figured this was the voice of Minister Rendis so I paid close attention. ‘You as commander should know what to do in such cases. The state has no confidence in these people, even though their children are given guns, machine guns, cannons and even though they are fighting at the forefront of the war. As far as I know, they are excellent fighters, but... Here is a list of those the Greek state deems most dangerous. Some are interned and some, because they are older, were sent home to work angaria. That is all. Now let us do our duty...’

The door opened and a sickly looking young man invited me in. I entered. The Minister welcomed me in and shook my hand but with only two fingers. I did not squeeze his fingers. The general came closer and asked me how I was and what my name was. After I told him he said:

‘Ah, so you are the father of that very brave young man? You have a brave son. Your Greek fatherland will not forget this.’ And then opened his briefcase, pulled out a golden cross attached to a ribbon, raised it and said:

‘I am honoured to express my admiration for your son's courage as well as to express my sympathy for his heroic death...’

The moment I heard those words I felt weak at the knees but I did not flinch; only my chin was trembling. I stood up, composed myself and looked outside the window. Heavy snow was falling. The general took my right arm, placed the medal in my hand and said:

‘In its gratitude, your Greek fatherland would posthumously like to decorate your son and advance him to the rank of corporal.’

I squeezed my hand into a fist and shed no tear. Then, without saying a word, I put the medal on the table and left...” concluded Pando.

“Yes...” muttered Numo after a long silence. “Now it is becoming very clear to me...”

“What is becoming clear to you?” asked Pando.

“Let us sit down,” said Numo and, while handing me his bag of tobacco, asked me to twist him a cigarette.

The smoke from the crushed tobacco wrapped in paper from a newspaper was thick and cast a shadow over their faces. Their eyes began to tear after exhaling and their lips became red from the hot smoke.

“Yes...” repeated Numo, “it is becoming very clear to me.” And without waiting for a response from Pando, he continued: “As you said, during the third month of the war, a lot of snow fell on Morava. There were a lot of Italian cannons concentrated and they were pounding us. One day, at dusk, when the Italian artillery stopped thundering, they gathered us all. We assembled under some large beech trees and a major began to call roll call. There were fifty of us, all Macedonians. ‘Brave heroes!’ he yelled out. ‘Your fatherland calls on you to silence those Italian cannons by tomorrow!’ He also said a lot of other nice words.

During the night we sharpened our bayonets, packed our backpacks, loaded our belts with grenades and explosives and off we went. After midnight we arrived at the Italian position, but we did not silence the Italian cannons. Instead, the Italians welcome us with their own rifles and grenades and the next day, when it was visible outside, they hunted us down like rabbits in the deep snow. A rocket explosion flashed in front of me and that’s all I remember. When I came to I was in an Italian tent. A soldier was standing over me trying to comfort me. He spoke to me in Macedonian and said: ‘Brother you have been yelling in your sleep, relax...’ What the hell, I thought to myself, an Italian speaking to me in Macedonian? But, as it turned out, Pando, he was not Italian, he was a fellow countryman. He was a Macedonian from Albania. He was one of the first people to be stuck in an Italian uniform and told to go fight for his fatherland. What the hell? How many fatherlands does a Macedonian person have? How many?

I was wounded but I had not quite recovered from my wound. One day the Macedonian wearing the Italian uniform came over and said: ‘This evening we are going home. The Greeks opened the front and left...’

My wound was not completely closed but I decided to leave anyway. We left during the night. I have no idea if the Italians came to look for us or not. Why would they be looking for us when they had their own problems? They were a miserable bunch, complaining at every opportunity, missing their wives and girlfriends and singing sad songs... But, compared to us, their troubles were nothing..." concluded Numo.

"So, you were on the roster with the others..." muttered Pando quietly.

"Yes I was, but I managed to stay alive... My Macedonian friend from Albania saved me twice. Now that man is a colonel in the Albanian army. He is a colonel in his Albanian fatherland... Screw all these fatherlands, Pando..."

Both men remained silent. They were both bitter and their bitterness was gnawing at them. They were both in deep thought and bitterness was racing through their minds; yesterday and today's bitterness. One could see it in their nervously vibrating muscles, in the shiver of their Adam's apple. Their stares became sharp and penetrating. The skin on their foreheads began to wrinkle. Their brows curled at the edges. They both stared at the bees fly from flower to flower and their buzzing caused ringing in their ears as if someone was striking a large bell.

"And what do you think?" asked Pando quietly. "You think we were naïve? Perhaps we were not naïve at all but crippled in the mind..."

Numo looked at Pando with hatred in his eyes and before he was able to finish, said:

"Maybe we are not crippled in the mind, maybe we are beaten on the temple... I often wondered: 'What have we come out of and what is left for us as our legacy? Churches, monasteries and silent graves! Yes, yes, graves that are silent, Pando. At our places the graves are quiet. And do you know why graves speak in other countries and other parts of the world? Because they have crosses, monuments, gravestones, inscriptions, mausoleums, climbing vines, dates of birth, dates of death and yes, the names of the people buried in them... I am saying the graves are silent here but do you know why they are silent? Do you know why life is silent? You say we may not have been naïve. I say we were naïve, and very naïve. Did they not make us feel like we were part of them? They certainly did. We were seduced by their propaganda and sold on their ideals because someone told us to and we said – amen to that. They always told us "fight for your fatherland... for this fatherland... for that fatherland... because you are fighting for yourselves... and we always believed them... and we always did fight... But for whom did we fight? We fought for them. We fought for their greatness. We fought for the great words they spewed upon us. That too is true. But what is also true, Pando, is that we were always the first to be trampled by foreign boots..."

"Well, because," interrupted Pando, "we were first to wear their coats, to put on their boots and to wear their symbols on our hats. As you have

said, we did it for us. You yourself said it Numo that we were struggling and fighting for ourselves. You and I have fought in wars alongside the Greeks and have seen them die and they have seen us die alongside them in the same trenches. I have carried wounded Greeks in my arms and they have died as I was carrying them. I buried them as if they were my own relatives. I have eaten with them and we have shared our food and sometimes we used the same utensils. I have eaten with a Greek using the same spoon. I have served in prison with Greeks and I fried in the hot sun alongside them... Many times I felt that we were all born to suffer together, but then when I told them who I was, a wall of hatred grew between us. I would be ignored and avoided like the plague. I would not exist for them. And behind my back they would say: 'Elada mou to megalio sou vasilema den ehi...' (My Greece, your greatness has no sunset...)

I wondered why? And then I would say to myself, let them do whatever they want, let them sing their song. What bothered me though, is that they perfectly understood that they were people with feelings, needs, homes and family but when it came to me, because I was Macedonian and nothing more and nothing less, none of that mattered! As far as they were concerned they would be better off without me. As far as they were concerned, banning me and exiling me from my family, my home, my lands, my ancestral hearth, was a better option for them than allowing me to stay and be among them.

That's why, Numo, I have been saying that we are not naïve, we are just empty headed. Everyone was there because they had been promised something and did whatever they were asked to do without thinking, without knocking themselves on the head, on the temple, without questioning what they were doing, and always allowing others to lead them and hit them on the temple... That's why I say the war is in me, in you and in all of those here and everywhere else. We fight, we endure and we think somehow things will change with your death and with my death. No! Things will not change, not in our generation and not in the next generation for as long as we exist. Things will not change until we are all driven out of our homes and lands... Things for us will only change when we become homeless and fulfill the Greek prophesy of a Macedonia without Macedonians. That's what we must always remember every time we think of them as our friends and every time we commit our lives to helping them. And so, Numo, whenever we sleep, whether in light or darkness, under a shady beech or under an oak tree, near a spring or near a creek, in a ditch or in a bunker, in the shade or in the sun, during the day or during the night, we need to dream the same dream. One common dream..." concluded Pando.

"I will tell you again," piped up Numo after being silent for a long time, "that our graves are silent. I've read or heard from someone that

when the graves become silent life begins to disappear. If you want to know how dignified and proud a nation is then go to its cemeteries and examine them. And look at us, Pando; we don't even have the right to bury our dead with dignity. Why?"

"So that we forget everything," snapped Pando. "Everything! Because when people forget everything, they lose their dignity and people who have no memories slowly shrivel away and die... Die, Numo, die..."

The two men went silent. They were deeply engrossed in their own thoughts. It seemed like they were digesting everything that was said.

Numo lifted his head, looked up and quietly said to himself: "There it is! It is circling again..."

"Who is circling?" asked Pando.

"The vulture," said Numo. "Do you see it? Every day it circles over Prenies. Is it looking for a victim? And you know what, Pando? When you see eagles, hawks, vultures and other birds of prey, you always think of death and blood being spilled. The thought of it makes me feel strange. It is beyond me why some people would choose these creatures as their national symbols?"

"Well, I think because these creatures are strong, dignified, proud..." replied Pando.

"And bloodthirsty too, right?" added Numo.

"Something like that," said Pando as he watched the vulture circle over Prenies. "This is an omen, Numo, which foretells of death, you realize that, right? Perhaps it senses the death in us from above... The vulture has a keen eye and a sharp nose and can sense the smell of death from great distances... Not only can it see dead carcasses, but it can sense death in living things before they die..."

"Last year in Gramos, after the aircraft flew, the vultures took over the sky and circled around. They made shrill whistles which sounded like barking, yes, they were barking as if calling others to join them. I watched them as they circled above the battlefield. The wounded feared them and always tried to hide in their bunkers or in the shade of trees. As they circled above, they came lower and lower with each circle. I never shot at them. If I did I would be giving away my position to the enemy and they then would shoot at me. Worse, they would radio my position to the aircraft and it then would bomb the entire area.

When vultures concentrated and circled in an area, that area was usually bombarded by aircraft. For the enemy the concentration of vultures meant that we had taken position nearby. After a while, we would hear the thunder of aircraft flying by and the popping of bombs exploding. Then shortly after that we would hear the whistling of cannon and artillery shells passing by and exploding on the rocks. Then came the charge and assault from the infantry.

This was our enemy's every day routine from dawn to dusk; bomb, shell and charge; then collect the wounded. The vultures would start circling at early dawn and give away our position. The living would be crouching in trenches and in their machine gun nests, keeping their eye on their targets and ready to sow death. That's how it was every day...

One day, just as dawn was breaking, I helped my wounded friend get on the mule and handed the mule over to a seventeen year old young nurse to take him to the field hospital. No sooner had they pulled away than I heard the shrill of a barking vulture then some shouting and screaming. I jumped out of the trench and ran towards the scream and what do I see? The vultures had not only attacked my comrade who was tied to the saddle of the mule but they also attacked the nurse when she tried to chase them away. I fired into the air, but nothing. The vultures beat their wings a couple of times and that was it. The mule began to jump around in an attempt to dislodge the vultures off its back but all it did was knock the nurse to the ground and drag her as she tried to hold onto it. I picked up a stick and began to hit them with it. That got their attention and they began to disburse.

Blood, Pando, has a strange effect on creatures... One time, a long time ago when I was a child, my father slaughtered a calf. In the evening when the grazing cattle were returning to the village, the cows gathered in front of our door. They started to dig with front hooves and moo loudly. It sounded like they were crying. They were drawn there by the smell of the calf's blood..." concluded Numo.

"The vulture is circling over Prenies," said Pando while watching the bird circle around and make its way over the peaks of the dark mountains. He followed the vulture with his eyes and as it made its way over the hill, a little to the right of Kiafasan, he said:

"There, over there," pointing with his eyes and raising his eyebrows, "behind that mountain is a large body of water. And behind that, there is another mountain and behind it is another large body of water. And beyond those mountains are more mountains..."

"Yes I know. There is Bela Voda, Prevolot, Vrba, Mali Madi, Vicho, they are all there..." said Numo with a painful look on his face.

"Yes, and our burned down houses too, don't forget," continued Pando, "our fields that now only grow weeds, our unattended vineyards, our hopes, dreams, aspirations..." and as he spoke Pando became choked up, his voice broke and tears began to flow out of his old eyes, bitter, painful, sad and angry tears. Just at that very same moment the vulture disappeared behind the hill, behind which was the large body of water...

A tear broke away from Pando's old eye and disappeared into scorched and trampled grass. This was only a small part of the great pain burning inside him like an open wound. And when Pando's Adam's apple began to swell for a second time, he lifted up his old arm and with his rough, tough,

bony hand, wiped his eyes and face clean, leaving no trace of his humiliation. But even in his old age there were moments in his life when his tears were not an indication of weakness, but of pain, joy, sadness, pride and a sign of humanity.

And as such, this was a reminder of the days of humiliation and of the moments of pride because he had managed to survive and defy everything foreign, unpleasant, dark, and hateful and his fate wheeled by foreign will. Life flowed in the narrow valley between the horse stables, the underground barracks, the three cauldrons, the dirt road, the trucks running twice a day and carrying wounded and healed, the wailing, the crying, the red soil, the sick, the parching sun, the wretched, the hopeful, the black vultures circling and the troubled waters after it rains...

The shadow of the hill had already passed the cemetery and was slowly descending over the roofs of the barracks. The sound of the ringing rail was heard coming from the kitchen. That's when Pando said: "Well, let's go to dinner, Numo..."

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 10

Like shadows, the people came out of the barracks and began to join the long lines in front of the three cauldrons. Women dressed in black, old people, frail and bent forward, old men leaning on their canes, widows with infants, with one and two-year old children, tattered and weeping. And the wide-eyed children, looking mortified like frightened chickens, cling to their mothers' chests, sharing their fate. The sky is deep blue and is reflected in their eyes. The lines move slowly. If you look down from high above, all you will see is black, wrapped heads in black head kerchiefs, bent and crumpled bodies walking like shadows, taking steps with their heads down and barely visible to one another. One behind the other, they take slow steps and walk up to the cauldrons with rusty cans, copper pots, sardine cans, military canteens, smoke blackened jugs and whatever they can get their hands on that holds half a portion of the semi-liquid they call food. They then leave and at a stepped up pace, return to their straw mats in the old Italian stables which, after years of being abandoned, still smell of horse urine.

Numo, leaning on his crutches, stood to the side. He stared at the black line moving slowly and took another puff of smoke from his smelly cigarette. When Pando returned with a full can and two pieces of dry cornbread, Numo said:

“You are right, Pando, a person can't even go mad here in Prenies... I am standing here, on the side and my heart is being torn out from looking at our people and listening to them whimper day and night... Then I wonder how many, if any, hearts have been torn out by this? And I say to myself, only they who survived and outlived defeat can tell you how a person can exist in this human existence, in our existence, and with our pain and suffering. As far as I know, there was never any young life for a lot of these women here. They were married just as they reached age sixteen or seventeen and a year later, they would have a child. It was rare to see a twenty year old unmarried or without children. Unfortunately, for most of them their time with their young husbands was very short, lasting only a few nights, if they were lucky... I, Pando, only had two nights with my wife, which we can call our own. They took me in the military in 1938 and I did not see my wife again until 1947. I sent word with one of my acquaintances and she came to the forest where our squad was resting. That was the first time I saw my son, a strong boy looking like me. When I was in the hospital with a crippled leg, a cousin of mine came to visit me. When I told him about my condition and showed him my leg we both cried. He then said:

‘Now cousin, I have to ask you to give me ‘muzhe’ / ‘siarik’ (a gift of money).’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Why? Because you have a daughter, cousin, that’s why,’ he replied.

I cried with joy and pain. I had no money to give him so I took the shirt off my back and gave it to him. I then said:

‘I have no money, cousin, but please take my shirt, you will need it. You are healthy and soon they will send you to the front. Wear it in good health...’ After that we were separated and that’s all I know about my second child. In fact, I know nothing about all my three children...

Most couples, Pando, were married at ages seventeen, eighteen and very few at age twenty... After that, after spending a few nights together, the men left and the women waited for them... They waited for letters from America, from the battlefields, from the dry island prison camps... and life became cruel and cursed. Now? What now? The men are now getting killed in Gramos, in Vicho, dying in hospitals in foreign lands and their wives are waiting, hoping... Who knows where their bones will end up! Will anyone tomorrow or another day mention them, bury their bones and put a marker on their graves?

And what of their wives, how will they know what happened to their husbands? And what of the mothers who don’t know the fate of their children? Will they mourn them as if they were dead? I ask you, who will sort all this out... Who will look for the scattered bones of the dead... Will someone tomorrow or another day search for the bones of the dead and will they count the nameless graves they find? And the wives, now old, unable to fight in the war, unable to look for their husbands, the women, who at one time were so strong they could crush stones beneath their feet, will they now begin to mourn their long lost men?

I look at the women, they all look heartbroken, their hearts are trembling and they are full of fear, they don’t know the fate of their husbands, of their children and don’t know whether to hope that they are still alive or to mourn them as if they were dead... One moment they live in precious hope... another in dreadful fear. And when the south wind blows, it makes them sad and with their tight lips trembling, they quietly, compassionately, sing sad songs... That’s when I feel like grabbing my crutches and limping my way over there and comforting them all, kissing each one of them on their wrinkled foreheads and whispering in their ears: ‘Sing, my dear, sing. Sob and cry my darling. This is therapeutic for both you and me...’

A few days ago I passed by some of them and asked: ‘What is happening with you, dear women? How are you? Why do you hurt so much?’ but all I got from them was silence and more silence. They tightened their black head kerchiefs so that even less of their faces would show. They lowered their heads, looked down and tightened their hearts... Looking at them I felt the joy had completely gone out of them... Then I thought that their pain must be great because they are so strong in every respect... Oh, Pando, Pando, life flows with them, not by them, and time

passes with all this, time passes with them and not by them... You can ask them how they are and you can ask them who they are, Pando. But the fact is they are suffering, Pando, in silence, with poison running through their veins, yet they look so dignified... Look at them... they are sipping their soup with eyes sloping down. Until yesterday they were the housewives, whose only familiarity with the world was their village and perhaps a couple of neighbouring villages, they were the cooks who cooked feasts for everyone to enjoy and, while smiling, looked you in the eye with pride. Look at them now Pando, their hands are trembling as they handle the spoon... The bread tastes like wormwood in their mouths..."

"Enough!" said Pando in a low voice. "Sit down, let us first eat and then we will go and see how the young lady is doing..."

"What young lady?" asked Numo.

"She is dreadfully sick, the poor girl, and has not gotten out of bed for a month. Here, eat..." said Pando and gave Numo a piece of corn bread and the two men began to spoon the soup out of the military canteen. The only time these two are separated is when Pando stands in line in front of the cauldron.

"The sun is setting," echoed Numo. "Very soon the people will be going down to the road. Pando, you go see the girl, I will stay on the road. I will wait for my friend Trpo, the driver; I am sure one of these days he is bound to spot me..."

"Okay Numo. Get it out of your system but behave yourself. This time there may be some news about you, the crippled. Maybe they will put you in a home for the crippled or something like that..." said Pando sarcastically.

Numo wiped the bottom of the canteen with the left over bread, tightened his belts and said: "Pando, many have discouraged me, but to this day, no one has convinced me any different..."

"You are a stubborn man Numo, a stubborn man..." replied Pando.

"So be it, Pando. I will only remember the good things about you," retorted Numo.

The two men parted company in the dark. More and more people arrived at the road, pouring out of the long horse barracks. A group of old people, holding their cigarettes made of crushed tobacco and twisted pieces of newspaper in their hands, were arguing about something. And others, anxiously moving back and forth, looked down past the ovens. At the end of the road, on both sides, the storm was building, gaining strength and turning black.

Pando slowly approached the cabin where the sick girl lay. He always carried something in his pocket in hopes of bringing her some happiness. Oh, how he wished to see a surprise on her face, a small glitter in her eye, a smile on her lips, even a slight one. The cabin door was wide open. The dark corner where the girl lay was quiet. He could hear nothing from here.

But as Pando went closer he could clearly hear the heavy breathing of the girl.

“Who is it?” asked her mother as she jumped to her feet from being startled.

“It is me, Pando, Kostovitse, Pando. How is she, any better?” asked Pando.

Kostovitsa lit a candle and put it in a cup.

The young lady’s eyes were wide open but she looked exhausted from her illness. Day after day she lay here under this rotting roof, between these moldy walls smelling of sweat and stale horse urine and melting away into oblivion. Her blond hair was glued to her forehead from the cold and hot sweats she experienced, caused by the raging fever within her. Her blond hair covered her big blue eyes which were slowly losing their luster. She constantly stared at the bleak ceiling. Her sight, pinned to one of the many beams, was becoming muddy. Her chest movements were becoming less and less frequent as her breathing slowed and her wheezing heightened. She moistened her lips with her tongue while recovering from painful spasms. A tear was rolling down the corner of her left eye and spreading across her face like a thin silver thread. She was wheezing and shaking more frequently from painful spasms which sent her entire body into shivers. Her chin trebled as she tried to sob ever so quietly, barely audibly. Another spasm shook her entire body. Her wheezing slowed and the colour of her eyes became even blurrier.

Pando put his palm on her pale face and, as gently as he could, closed her eyes. Then he took his rosary beads out of his pocket, knelt and slowly, as if not to wake the girl, raised her head and put them around her neck.

“May they be your bridal necklace my dear... Necklace ... I am so sorry you will never wear a bridal dress... so sorry this is your destiny my dear...” said Pando in a sad tone of voice.

This was heartbreaking for Pando. His already wrinkled face became even more wrinkled as tears began to flow from his old eyes. He crossed himself and left, leaving her alone with her mother who was in even greater pain.

Pando dug in the hard stony soil by the moonlight all night long. He tossed the red soil out of the hole with his dull shovel and when he felt emptiness in his chest, he lit one of his hand-made cigarettes. By dawn he had dug a grave deep to his waist. He then gathered the last chunks of earth and stones from the bottom with his hands and, as he was coming out of the grave, he said: “The child does not need a deeper grave to rest in peace...”

They brought the girl’s body wrapped in a faded Italian army blanket. With trembling hands, Pando laid her at the bottom of the grave and came out. He then left the funeral, hid behind a large rock and cried hard for a

long time. He took a deep puff of smoke from his herb-laden cigarette, sat down and slowly became lost.

When he came to, the sun was already up high. The funeral was over and there was no one in the cemetery, except for Kostovitsa. She was still there, crouching beside the freshly covered grave, lighting candles whose flames flickered in her palm...

Not a whisper, not a cry... There was only silence. Even the birds and the crickets went silent...

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 11

The horde that ran behind the trucks pushed him down and he remained there until the first birds sang (dawn). He could hear the last truck leaving, struggling to make it up the hill, as he swore at everything living that passed by him repeating the same curses over and over again. He swore at every fall he had ever had, at every humiliation he ever experienced and at every evil and empty promise ever made to him. When the hum of the engines completely disappeared and the valley returned to silence, he stared at the starry sky which made him feel even lonelier. He felt completely lost in that vast and elusive world, then suddenly he heard screaming and then a barely audible hum of moving trucks. The trucks appeared at the top of Preval, behind the curve that starts the downhill decline. He came out of the ditch and when the trucks appeared before him, about one hundred metres away, he took his crutch. The driver waved at him and continued to drive towards Prenies, where the people were already massing, running and screaming. The old jeep with the usual passengers followed behind the last truck. When it came closer to Numo it stopped and the person, the officer who accused Numo of stealing his gun, came out. He quickly approached Numo at a fast pace and without greeting him, asked:

“And you, you bum, you loiter around, eh? Don’t you know where your place is? Have you not been told where to stay and not to loiter in this area? Or do you want to go back to where your Albanian friend pulled you out from? Think about it because if we sent you there once we can send you again and then even Christ, your God, will not be able to get you out. Katalaves? (Got that?) And now – march out of here...!”

The experience gave Numo goose bumps so he used his crutch firmly to stand up straight and firmly stepped on his wooden leg. He then angrily said:

“I have already done all my marching and I did it well. I did my marching so well that I lost my leg in the process... Now you be careful that you don’t get your boots dirty when you do your marching. I am telling you this so that you know and if you want to know more, I will tell you even more but by a different means...”

“Shut up!” he yelled at Numo and came closer, so much so that Numo could smell his cheap cologne. “Shut up! And now report to the administration office, katalaves (understand)?! That’s where we will come to an understanding!”

“What is there to come to an understanding at the administration office when everything is very clear here? I understood you already and I am not going to the administration office. I have a forty centimetre-wide straw mat in my horse barracks which I share with the other sardines there

waiting for me and that's enough for me. I am also glad to have seen you..." replied Numo sarcastically.

"You scoundrel, you can do as you like! Do you know what...?" said the officer while grabbing his gun holster. Numo at that very moment pulled out the tobacco pouch from his pocket, looked sideways at the other two men in the jeep and quietly said:

"Sir, don't go grabbing your gun now. For you that gun is only a decoration. If you want to be a real hero then go over there (to the front)..." said Numo as he pointed to the east, "prove yourself there, and not here so far from the battlefield! Why are you doing this? What are you trying to prove?"

"We will see each other again and that's when you will be sorry!" said the officer.

"So we will see each other again, let that be your wish, but you can be sure I will not regret it... Now get out of my sight... I am a wretched man and I will hurt you..."

"Are you a member of the Party?" asked the officer with a stern voice.

"No!" replied Numo angrily.

"How lucky of you...?" said the officer.

"If you say so! How lucky of me...!" Numo replied sarcastically.

"You are disrespectful, aren't you..." said the officer.

"I told you I am a wretched man. What do you want from me? Do you want me to stand at attention in front of you? I have stood at attention but not here, up there," Numo pointed his head towards Preval. "I have stood there and I am not going to do it here. I have seen heroes like you many times before in other places. So please go away, your comrades are waiting for you. Go..."

As the officer was climbing onto the jeep, Numo overheard one of his comrades say: "Why do you bother with that lame man?" And the officer said: "I will teach him a lesson he will never forget!"

Numo then coughed slightly while stroking the gun he was hiding under his shirt.

The trucks were passing through Prenies and the people were running from every direction shouting and screaming. White pieces of paper and envelopes were flying high being blown away into the ditch by the turbulence caused by the moving trucks and by the running horde. When Numo came close to the first barracks he could hear crying and sobbing inside. Those who were earlier crying outside now brought their misery inside. Inside the women were crying out loud, mourning their loved ones. The old people, sitting on the rocks in front of the barracks, were slowly puffing smoke from their cigarettes while openly wiping the tears from their eyes. Here in Prenies, nobody is ashamed of their tears. Crying is a normal activity for both old and strong. Every day life is filled with anticipation of the worst. It is rare for anyone to anticipate anything but

bad news. But at the same time, everyone hopes and secretly wishes for good news from the battlefields just secretly hoping to get good news. But, that is only wishful thinking and is always wrapped in an atmosphere of trembling fear, of vague hope and of long night prayers...

Numo sat down on a rock near the road. He stretched his good leg beside his wooden one and stared at the horde. He saw Pando. He was among the people who were picking through the tall grasses looking for pieces of paper. He raised a crutch and shouted: "Pando, hey, Pando!"

Pando lifted his head and when he saw Numo waving his crutch, he headed toward him.

"Well, here I am, Pando, I failed again," said Numo. When Pando came closer he again said "I failed again..."

"I see..." said Pando.

"I heard the girl died. Did they bury her?" asked Numo.

"It's over..." replied Pando in a quiet voice.

"You mean they already buried the beautiful blond girl? Did they put anything in her grave or did they just toss her in the earth and bury her in a mound of soil, eh?" asked Numo.

"It was the way it was Numo..." replied Pando.

"And is that our destiny, Pando? Is that how they will bury me when I am gone? Under a mound of soil?! I don't want just a mound of soil..." said Numo.

"I suppose you want a Turkish dome on top of you..." remarked Pando.

"No, I don't want a dome but I do want everyone who comes to my funeral to throw a stone on top of me. I also want everyone who comes to visit my grave after that to put a stone on it. Then after many years have passed a whole bunch of stones would have collected. These stones would have been brought there from the mountains, the rivers, the streams and from everywhere. You know, every stone has its own destiny even though it has no will of its own; it depends on the will of others to move it. Somebody else decides where it should be and what role it should play. Imagine a huge variety of stones sitting on me, stone resting on stone. That's the kind of tomb I want that grows into a hill over time... I don't want an inscription, just many, many stones. And when someone passes by they are sure to ask 'who lies under that hill of stones?' That way my grave will not remain silent. It will speak through the stones..." concluded Numo.

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 12

For the second day in a row before sunrise, DAG soldiers were marching at the bottom of Prenies, marching at a fast pace in four columns and singing. That's what those in Prenies command called them - soldiers - but those in the barracks and horse stables used to say: - The children are out. Pando and Numo used to call them "our children".

"Look at that little one, the skinny one, how he stomps with his old boots!" said Pando to Numo. "Oops, he stumbled and almost fell down. He tripped, the poor guy, his boots are too big. But look how he stomps, eh?"

"Wow! They truly are children!" replied Numo, surprised. "Have those up there gone mad? Now they are taking children?"

"Mad or not as you can see they are children. When I watched them getting off the trucks at midnight a couple of nights ago, I thought they were army rejects. But when I looked closer at their faces I could see that they were children. I was astonished. And yesterday, when their singing woke everyone, I felt something cut me here... and I have been a soldier in three wars, but my voice was that of a man, strong, powerful, but it still shook. I never sang a Macedonian song or walked under a Macedonian flag... In the Second Balkan War, wearing a Greek uniform, I sang like a rooster sitting on a low fence. Then during World War I, after I learned some Greek, I had to sing a little louder, otherwise I would have got the whip, imprisoned for a day or two, or both. Those were the penalties for us, the 'neznamiti' (non-Greek speakers). Our entire unit would also have been penalized. And in Asia Minor when the Turks were chasing us we did a lot of singing running away..." concluded Pando.

"And before that?" interrupted Numo.

"Before that, you know how it was, the Turks were running and we were chasing them loudly, singing Greek songs as ordered by Greek command. When we were chasing them we thought the Greeks were following in Alexander the Greats' footsteps and made us sing out loud so that our voices could be heard beyond Turkey, threatening all of Persia and India. The Greeks knew how to sing, and loud, when things went well for them. They played their bouzoukis all the time and when they had no wires, they used strands of horsetail binds. Anything to make some noise... ta-na-na-na-na..."

The conversation was suddenly interrupted by a sound coming from command:

"Halt! Turn left!"

"Now, Numo, they will deliver a speech and then let them go," said Pando. "This is what they did yesterday. I watched them all the time. And you, who knows where you were wandering..." said Pando.

"I was down there arguing with those in the jeep," replied Numo.

“What? Were you asking them to take you down to the bunkers again?” asked Pando.

“Yes! What else would I be asking them for? I said that I was able and willing to go. I again said: ‘What would it cost to take a lame person to one of the bunkers, give them a pitcher of water, a loaf of bread, two or three boxes of ammunition and a machine gun?’ Not that I am going to conquer the hills? Not that I am going to attack the enemy? I will put my crutches to the side, grab the machine gun and I will fire short and long bursts. And, oh, what songs I will sing, Pando. Am I asking for too much?” replied Numo.

A young soldier approached. His boots were wide and long for his narrow feet and short legs. His pants were too long as well and his pant legs were folded at the bottom at least three times. His military sweater was wide and long stretching down to his knees. His military hat rested on his ears. In place of a military belt he was wearing a plain belt. His sleeves were wide and unevenly folded. But he was sure footed.

“Good day,” he said.

“Good day,” Numo replied.

Pando adjusted himself, tucked his shirt in and, without greeting the young soldier, asked: “Would you like to join us?”

“I think I will join you!” he replied and then asked if he could have a cigarette.

Numo looked at him and asked: “How old are you son?”

“Fifteen and some...” he replied.

“Well, if you are old enough to wear a uniform, you are not too young to light a cigarette, right?” Pando reassured the young soldier. “Do you want me to make it for you or will you make it yourself?”

“I can make it myself,” replied the young soldier.

“What’s your name?” asked Pando.

“My name is Kirche... Kiro!” replied the young soldier. “And yours Sir?”

“Pandentse... Pando...” replied Pando mockingly.

Kirche took the tobacco bag from Pando, took out a newspaper from his pocket, ripped a piece, set it between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand and with his left hand, sprinkled the tobacco. He squeezed the paper tight, licked it along the edge and glued it shut. He then lit it with Numo’s cigarette. After taking a puff he coughed, spat to the side and, with eyes watering, said: “This is very strong tobacco, like it’s made of hazel leaves...”

Numo took his newspaper and began to slowly leaf through it.

“Do you read?” asked Kirche.

“Do you?” replied Numo with a question.

“No. I never learned to read Greek... What does it say?” asked Kirche.

“Well, here it talks about decrees that were enacted (13 decrees were enacted in 1947 and many more in 1948) to give the authorities power to confiscate the properties of those who are DAG supporters, like you and me Pando, and participants like Kirche. They also enacted decrees to strip us of our Greek citizenship...”

“I do not understand any of this...” said Kirche while coughing. “Why would they take our properties? Do they think they can work them better...?”

“Where did you get this newspaper?” asked Numo.

“They were throwing them from the airplanes, they are good for making cigarettes,” replied Kirche.

“And look what it says they did...” said Numo.

“Don’t worry about it,” commented Pando. “This is only the beginning. They will do even more. You’ll see.” And then he addressed Kirche: “And where are you from, son?”

“I am from a village called ‘Kukavichino’!” Kirche proudly announced. “If you were a soldier, then you would know what a military secret is, right?”

Numo smiled with a sad look on his face and said: “Here is a better cigarette whose smoke does not sting like a hazel leaf because now you are a grown man, even though your uniform is a bit too big for you...”

“Listen,” interrupted Kirche, “you should have seen the uniform I had! You would have thought it was tailor made for me. The crease on the trousers was so sharp it felt like it would cut the wing of a fly. And new? Oh yes, it was new! Just out of the tailor shop...”

“Where is your uniform now?” asked Pando.

“Well, when they decided to send us back, they took our uniforms and gave us these rags,” replied Kirche.

“So they figured you were too young to fight, right?” asked Pando.

“What young?!” replied Kirche loudly. “It wasn’t because we were too young! When we were in Prespa, we went out marching in our nice new uniforms, nice new shoes, socks, shirts, belts and Ganz automatic rifles, strutting our stuff in columns of four, singing songs to the music of orchestras playing marches and we were seen by the people. The people stood there like a sea of candles being amazed by our presence. What kind of army was this new army, they were wondering? Where did it come from? Then as we came closer to the people they began to recognize us. One woman yelled out ‘Kole, is that you Kole?!’ KOLE was marching in front of me. That’s the guy down there, the one with the shovel! That guy! Do you not see him? Him, the one who is now raising the shovel! It was his mother calling him, he recognized her voice. After that all the women, mothers began to yell... and...”

“And what? asked Pando.

“Whatever?...” replied Kirche as if losing interest in the subject.

“Hey, Kirche!” shouted one of the young soldiers. “Come on back, stop talking and come back. The commander is asking for you.

“I have to go. Hopefully they will not punish me for leaving without permission,” said Kirche as he was getting ready to leave.

“Find out what they want from you and come back for a chat...” said Numo.

“And for a cigarette...” added Pando.

“I will be back... and I will tell you how it went...” said Kirche and he left.

Then, suddenly, Kuze popped up unannounced from the side, from behind the rocks and, without greeting the men, said:

“Every time I see you I wonder! You, Pando, you are a gray haired old man who should know better than to sit and talk to a soldier and make cigarettes for him to smoke. You should be ashamed of yourself! And you, whatever your name is, you who limps here and there every day instead of sitting in your barracks like the other invalids, you like to chat with the young soldier and who knows what you are telling him to brainwash him! Huh?”

Numo became visibly upset, but when he looked into Pando’s eyes he composed himself, spat to the side and said: “Well, if my wife was here I could have sat with her. If I was a kiss ass like you I could have followed the Prenies commander around. But as you can see I don’t have a wife or the desire to be a kiss ass. Do you know something Kuze,” Numo raised his voice, “I am not interested in listening to you...”

“And that is why they keep returning you here and treating you like a homeless bugger...” replied Kuze.

“Get lost, asshole!” Numo yelled out and raised his crutch.

“You are telling me to get lost?” Kuze snapped back. “Me? I am going to the commander’s office right now and you will see!”

“Where else would you go? You useless piece of crap!” retorted Numo.

“Get hold of yourself Numo and leave Kuze alone, can’t you see the poor guy is upset? The man wants to do his job and you hinder him. Can’t you see that he is burning with desire to condemn someone? And someone said that he was a fellow countryman! This guy, Numo, will carve your eyes out deeper than anyone else just because he is a fellow countryman. Oh, you don’t know the old story do you? A blind person went out to beg and on the way he met some men who asked him: ‘Tell us, who took your eyes out?’ ‘My brother,’ replied the blind man. Well, that is why they are dug so deep... Let him go and don’t be so stubborn. Kuze is Kuze. He will report you to the authorities even if you don’t do anything to him,” concluded Pando.

“Pando, you shut up!” Kuze yelled, “and stay put because...”

“Because you will grab me by the short and curly, Kuze? You pathetic little man...” retorted Pando.

Kuze then did an about face and went towards the ovens.

“He is like a dog, he is everywhere,” said Numo. “One of these nights the dark will take him away. I am sure of it. People have already suffered enough. Their pain is already too great, on top of which they have to put up with idiots like that.”

Pando turned his head towards the river where women were washing the wool, and in a slow voice said: “Let us go Numo, it is starting to stink around here!”

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 13

“Our mother hugged us silently and kept us in her arms for a long time. All three of us found ourselves in the tight but gentle grasp of her short arms. She kept squeezing us and her tears kept dripping down her cheeks. It seemed that we remained that way, as one, for a long time. Mother then loosened her embrace and, like a hen in fear of losing her scattered chicks, she spread her arms and pushed us into the crowd of children. We left at sunset singing a song. I thought, well we must be already grown up; that is why they let us travel down an unfamiliar road. We did not know how long the road was ahead of us. They told us we would be gone for a while, until things calmed down, until the government troops were pushed south of Mount Olympus, until the airports and the airplanes were destroyed, then we could come back home, so that we would not have to hide in the woods and sleep in caves, or under the open sky. We left in the dark of night and entered an unknown world without knowing what awaited us. There were many, many children. When I turned my head and looked back I saw a long column of children traveling up the hill and many women gathering at the side of the road. Among them was our mother, a short woman with tightly collected shoulders and short arms. Like many others, she too was dressed in black. I recognized her from the distance. Strange, isn't it? That was my mother. She kept waving with one end of her black head kerchief and had her eyes covered with the other end. I thought why doesn't mother want to see where we are going? Then I thought that can't be right. She must be covering her eyes because she wants to keep the image of us imprinted in her memory for ever. But why, we will be back in no time? And the more I thought about these things the smaller I felt. Suddenly it seemed to me like her big blue eyes appeared before me, looking at me, quietly with her watery eyes. At that moment I felt the warmth and bitterness of my mother's tears. Many of the other children must have felt the same way because I could also hear them sobbing just like me. My sister, holding onto the hem of my coat, was crying loudly. The younger one, three-year-old Kosta, kept looking behind and kept tripping and, with tears running down his cheeks, kept yelling 'Mamooo'. I tried to calm him down but I could not hide my own tears. When he saw my tears he cried even louder. Then when it became dark I stopped wiping my tears. The leader of the group yelled out: 'Song! We need to sing a song!' He started singing first then many joined in and many more kept crying even louder. Someone then said: 'We have crossed the border.' I then turned my head and looked back but could not see the hill. I was pretty sure, however, that somewhere back there my mother was standing and waving her black head kerchief.

Before we crossed the border, several men came on horseback, armed with automatic rifles. One of them spoke with our leader and then climbed on top of a big rock, made a funnel with his hands and said: 'Leave your bags, blankets, extra clothes and food here beside me; you will not need them where you are going. They will give you everything you need in Albania'. We did exactly as they asked and we were left without any food and with only the clothing on our backs. The men collected all our belongings, put them in bags and loaded them on their horses. That night and all the next day we stayed hidden by a brook. During the night we lit large fires but the Albanian border guards came and told us to put them out. Do you think we, the older children, got any sleep that night? No! We went looking around at the border, planning to escape and go back home. Unfortunately the Albanian border guards caught us and took us back. Sometime before sunrise, when from there, far above the mountain, towards Kostur, at the crack of dawn we heard the roar of airplanes. The moment we heard those dreadful sounds we all dispersed as best as we could. The airplanes circled around near the Albanian border a couple of times and disappeared. Then when the sun was up we could clearly see Krchishta in the distance, maybe an hour and a half walking distance. We could see that people were gathering at the old cemetery near the church. I thought surely my mother must be among them...

The morning after, when the sun was fully up and everything was visible, I could clearly see the immense number of children hiding by the brook. There were children from Kosinets, Labanitsa, Krchishta, Dolno Papratsko, Ezerets, Galishte, Breshteni and even some from the Kostenaria villages. We were not allowed to go anywhere so all day long we wandered around in the area. Some children tried to escape and go home but the Albanians were vigilant and kept returning them. A convoy of large trucks arrived at sunset and took us. Where they were taking us we did not know. Around midnight we arrived in Korcha. They then offloaded us and took us to a great big bright house with long hallways and large wide empty rooms. When we arrived we were joined by some Albanian youths. Then someone climbed on a table and announced in both Greek and Macedonian: 'Tonight and tomorrow night and perhaps longer you will be staying in the houses where these young people will take you.'

The young Albanians then walked among us and chose whoever they wanted to take. I happened to go to a family of good people. I was taken by a couple of young ladies. Their grandfather spoke Macedonian. They were good people but the girls did not have a father. They said that the Italians had shot him. Photographs of him were hung all over the wall above the chimney. Their mother was a bit fat but was a good-natured and peaceful person. When, through the grandfather, I told the woman that I too had no father, she hugged me and began to cry. The next day the girls held me by my hands and took me to a shop. They showed me all kinds of

toys, small balls, toy guns, toy machine guns, but all I kept doing was asking to see my brother and sister. Of course they did not understand what I was saying until we returned home and their grandfather explained. They then wrote down the names of my siblings and one of the girls went out. About half an hour later she was back and, through her grandfather, explained that the Committee told her that my siblings were still there and that the girls were going to get them. By noon the three of us were together again and after lunch the girls took us for a walk to the park. It was a very nice place with tall trees, clean walks and many, many roses. And to my surprise we met other children there, some from my village.

One day we found ourselves at a playground by the river. We spent a lot of time there. We only split up to go to eat and sleep. We also spent a lot of time exploring the hospital. Many children found their fathers and older brothers and sisters there. When we were asked where we were going we said we were going to see the Partisans. We became close with some and shared our food with them, we even cried with them when they were in pain. My hostess always gave me a piece of corn bread and some sweets which I then took to the partisans in the hospital.

“Do you see that person down there waving his hands?” said Kirche.

“The tall one?” asked Pando.

“No. The guy next to him,” said Kirche.

“I see him...” replied Pando.

“Yes, that guy. One day he said to me: ‘Listen. We would like to start a theater. We want to sing partisan songs in two voices. Like the partisan choir which sang in our village. Each will alternately sing a verse like we were taught by our master. After that we will perform the ‘Macedonian Bloody Wedding’ for the Partisans. Kirche you convince one of the girls to play Tsveta and I will play Spase.’”

We used to go to the hospital every day to visit the wounded, sing songs and recite poetry for them. Unfortunately, we never did get to perform the ‘Macedonian Bloody Wedding’ to a live audience. One rainy day, during the night, they quickly gathered us together, loaded us on trucks and we were off on the road. I never got the chance to go back and say goodbye to my host family and thank them for looking after me. We traveled most of the night and by dawn we had reached the sea. None of us had ever seen the sea before so we were all wondering what this large body of water could be? There they placed us in a two-storey house about one hundred metres away from the big water. We found out from the kitchen staff and from the facilities manager that we were in ‘Bania’, a place near the city Durres in Albania and that the big water was the Adriatic Sea. Around the houses and all along the seacoast was a great beach covered in fine yellow sand, looking like corn flour. The sand was so hot, you could not walk on it with bare feet during the day.

After we were settled in the house the ‘mothers’, that’s what we called the women who cared for us, informed us that this would be our last move. They assured us that as soon as the fighting back home subsided and as soon as the government troops were driven out south of Mount Olympus, we would be going home to our parents. ‘And when will that be?’ someone asked. ‘In twenty days!’ we were assured.

So, we spent the next twenty days or so with great joy knowing that we were going home. The days passed quickly so when the time expired we became apprehensive and began to look for the trucks. In no time we went from being happy to being depressed. Our low morale greatly affected the mood of the little ones, making them constantly sob and cry, calling for their mothers. The ‘mothers’ who looked after us gathered us around, did whatever they could to distract us. They sang to us, told us stories and invented all kinds of games to keep us busy. They tried their best to stop us from thinking of our mothers, to stop grieving and to stop dreaming of airplanes, trucks, armed men and the wounded...

We would often ask: ‘Where are our homes?’ And the mothers would say, ‘Over there where the sun rises’.

Since then the younger children, while playing in the sand, would tell each other that their mother was in a place where the sun rises. Then they would argue as to whose mother was the closest, while looking to determine where exactly the sun rose. One day one of the mothers told them that the sun rose where the big trees grew, many little ones fled towards the big trees to look for their mothers. When they were caught and asked where they were going, one of them said: “I am going to my mother, she is over there where the big trees are.’ They constantly cried and looked towards the big trees hoping to catch a glimpse of their mothers. My mother too was where the sun rose... After that, the sun, the trees and the hill became our dream. It was very sad...

While we were in Bania, the girls used to go to the grassy areas of the beach near the road and pick flowers. They made headbands with some and gardens with the rest. The boys played near the shoreline and built trenches, bunkers and demolished houses. That is what was familiar to us and that is what we built. One day mother Evgenia came over and began to yell at us. Evgenia was a widow. Her husband’s name was Kosta. He was killed near Prekopana while fighting. He was an old partisan. Kostovitsa, I mean mother Evgenia, had four children of her own. She was also responsible for twenty other children ages two to fourteen years old but in actual fact she looked after all sixty children from our village. There were two other mothers, younger inexperienced women without children of their own. As I said, mother Evgenia began to yell at us, disappointed with the things we were building. After that we began to build sand mills, bridges and a railway line with a locomotive and three cars mimicking the real one that traveled by us.

One day the sun was particularly intense and several children became very ill. A doctor was dispatched from Durres to see them. When he was done, he passed by us and when he saw what we had done in the sand he laughed and laughed. When a lot of children and mothers came over to see what the commotion was he put down his briefcase, grabbed a bucket and began to collect sand. He then called one of the mothers from Ianoveni over who spoke Albanian and began to tell us what he was building. The sand structure looked strange, something we had never seen before. It looked like a house with thick walls, high towers, wide doors, guard stalls, but was surrounded by water. He told us it was a castle from very old times in which a king and queen lived. He also talked about an enchanted princess and dragons. The woman who spoke Albanian translated everything for us as we listened intently with our eyes and mouths wide open.

During those moments we forgot about everything; about our troubles, about the sea, the endless sands and no one mentioned anything about food or drink. We even forgot to run over and wave at the passing train. We did not even hear the train whistle...

Before that we used to look for the train. We knew when it was going to pass us by from the shadows cast by the linden trees growing on the banks of the sea. Before the train passed by us it blew its whistle and when we heard it we would drop everything and dash for the railway track. But by the time we got there the train, with one locomotive and three cars, would have passed us by on its way to or from Durres.

As I said, we intently listened to the doctor. When he was done building the castle he told us a story about it. He said that a beautiful princess, the daughter of the king and queen lived in this castle. Unfortunately she was put to sleep by the magic of a bad witch. Her father and mother were so devastated that they both died from great sorrow. The witch wanted the princess imprisoned so she summoned two fire-breathing dragons and put them in charge of guarding the gates so that no one could rescue the princess.

After the doctor left we all got down and started building new castles, palaces, gardens, parks, moats and roadways connecting them together. We did this day after day, toiling and getting dirty in the mud and sand. The entire beach was covered with sand structures. We even built traps to capture the witch...

We played and played day after day, forgetting our pain and hunger. We subsisted on a small slice of corn bread and a dry cube of jam. We had corn bread and jam twice a day. Our main meal was a portion of hot soup with a couple of grains of rice and lots and lots of greens. We ate at long tables made of unfinished boards under the shade of a grove of poplar trees. Our bowls were old Italian army issue pans.

One day a boy from my village, may he rest in peace; he was recruited and sent out to the front with the first group of child fighters and was killed at Bukovik. He told us the greens in the soup were linden leaves. Mother Evgenia begged us not to tell anyone about this and we honoured her wish and told no one.

The hardest thing for the 'mothers' who looked for us was looking after the youngest children who did not understand what was happening and constantly cried for their own mothers. They would wake up in the middle of the night and cry for their mothers. The worst times were in the outdoors. When one started crying they would all cry and call for their mothers. There would be crying on the beach, near the water, in the meadows, in front of the houses by the street, everywhere. They would be crying and screaming looking for their mothers while rubbing their eyes with their dirty little fists. There were too many of them for the mothers to handle all at once so they relied on the older girls to step in and calm the little ones down. At first, we the older boys helped but after we started playing with the sand we were too busy to be bothered. The sand was a magnificent toy, that is, until one day, while exploring the depths of the beach, we discovered a broken down tank.

Discovering the rusty old, broken down tank had a profound effect on all of us. Our time for building castles was over. It was time for war. Waging war on each other became our new preoccupation. We dislocated shoulders, arms and fingers, gave each other black eyes and even spilled blood from our broken noses to possess the tank. We organized ourselves in groups and fought each other for the tank until one day tragedy struck. The game ended for good when a boy caught his leg in the door and by the time he was freed, he lost his leg. Our stupid game crippled that poor boy for life. After that we hated the tank. We didn't even go near it. We all walked around with long faces because, even though we did not do it on purpose, the boy lost his leg because of us. We were all to blame for his accident...

One day we sat by the road waiting for the train to go by. We knew exactly when the train was going to pass by from Durres to Tirana and vice versa by the location of the linden tree shadows. Vangel, another boy from our village, may he rest in peace, he too was killed with the first group of child soldiers, crossed the road and went to the other side. There he came across a man carrying a huge bundle of leeks over his shoulder. Vangel approached him and first pointed to his belly and then to the leeks. The man understood what Vangel wanted so he pulled out one leek and gave it to him. When we saw Vangel with the leek in his hand we all ran across the street. But before we could catch up to the man, mother Evgenia called us back and we all sat on the grass by the road. Mother Evgenia then took off her apron, placed it on the grass, took out her knife and cut the leek into small equal sized portions. When she was done she asked all the

children from our village to come over. She then asked Vangel to turn around and look the other way. She again said: 'Belio, turn around!' We called him Belio (the white one) because he had blond hair and his eyelashes were white.

After Vangel turned around, she picked up a piece of leek and asked: 'Who is this piece for?'

'That one is for me!' shouted Vangel.

After she handed Vangel his piece, she picked up another one and asked: 'Who is this one for?'

'That one is for Kosta,' Vangel replied.

And as such, sixty children got to taste a bit of leek. Mother Evgenia, a widowed woman wearing a black head kerchief tied under her chin, patted each child on the head as they picked up their piece of leek and then left without saying a word. I watched her as she smiled at each child and observed her shoulders vibrate ever so slightly. I and everyone else could tell that while she was smiling on the outside she was crying deep inside. The sight was too sad for me to watch so I went a bit further back, buried my head in the grass and began to cry uncontrollably, calling on my own mother who was too far to hear me. I wept and wept and wept until I felt a touch on my shoulder. I then stopped and turned around. Squatting beside me was my own sister who had also been crying. Then, after swallowing her tears, she said: 'Don't cry Kirche, mother Evgenia just came back and said we are leaving tomorrow... we are going home'..."

At that point of telling his story, Kirche fell silent and stared at the hill that swept over Prenies. Two tears, glinting like pearls in the sun, hung from his eyelashes and broke off and rolled down his cheeks.

Pando grabbed Kirche by the shoulder and said: "Son, you are wearing a military uniform, it doesn't look good on you when you have tears in your eyes. Soldiers don't cry you know, right?"

"No they don't!" said Kirche while wiping his tears with the broad sleeve of his shirt. "They certainly don't cry... I don't know what came over me..."

At that point Numo gave Kirche his half-smoked lit cigarette and said: "Here Kirche, take a drag of this, it will knock off whatever ails you... Then you can tell us more... Please continue..."

"We were awakened early the next morning. What joy, what happiness, we were jumping up and down... we were going home... so we thought. They lined us up in two's, told us to hold hands and off we went on foot marching along the road. I turned my head and looked back, it was a long line. Only now I noticed that my clothes were in tatters and my knees were bare and exposed, my little brothers pants were so dirty and slick they reflected the sun and my sisters dress was torn in two places and so worn out it looked like a rag. The mothers could not catch up with the mending, there were too many of us.

We walked and walked and walked, baking in the sun. It was early May but still it was very hot. By afternoon we arrived at the outskirts of a city. The people passing us by were bewildered by how we looked. We were tired and thirsty. The little ones were crying. We entered the city via a long cobblestone road, turned along a narrow alley and stopped in front of about a dozen or so houses. The houses were low, wide and each had at least six rooms. The yards were beautiful with all sorts of plants and flowers growing in them. Only two of the dozen laneways had water fountains. They divided us in the street and moved us into the houses. We were so tired we did not move until the next day.

The next day we were informed that we were free to move around and visit the city but under the condition that we behave ourselves and not steal. We all agreed and day after day we roamed around town returning back to the houses only for meals and sleep. Unfortunately our promises did not last long and some of the children began to misbehave. Some relived themselves in the bushes, some stole fruit from the street vendors and others raided the gardens in the neighbouring houses. The Albanian people complained to the Committee and the Committee's response to the problem was to erect a barbed wire fence all around the compound and fence us in.

After the fence was erected there was no way out. The two fountains did not have sufficient water for all of us to drink, let alone bath and wash our clothing. Life suddenly turned sour and we were not happy. The place was too small to house us all, there were more than one thousand children, so we took our frustration out on the gardens and parks. We began to relieve ourselves on the street, in the gardens and in the front yards. The place began to stink to high heaven, yet no one seemed to mind. On top of that we got lice, the weather was very hot and no one wanted to wait in line.

The situation became desperate and caught the attention of the Committee when children began to defecate blood. When the Committee found out that twelve children had died they decided to move us to another place. No child from my village became sick. Mother Evgenia was vigilant in keeping us clean. She and the older girls were busy day and night, without interruption, bathing the small children and boiling our clothes during the night to kill the lice. About a month later they moved us to larger facilities.

The new facilities were a row of large houses located outside of the city, close to the sea. Only the road divided our houses from the sea. Behind our houses there were beautiful two storey white houses surrounded by high iron railings. Inside their yards grew orange, lemon, fig and palm trees. The children from the villages Krchishta, Ezerets, Grache, Chuka, Shak, Rebani, Galishta Ianoveni, Dolno Papratsko and Zhelegozhe lived in one house. Next to the road, beside the barracks of the

Albanian sailors, lived the Madzhiri (Asia Minor colonist) children. They were already living there when we arrived. The latrines in this place were wooden sheds located near the seawater. There was no indoor plumbing in the houses and we got our water from the yard. On the east side of our compound there was a cigarette and leather factory and on the north side there was a wide road leading to the king's palace. There was a park on both sides of the road with many red flowers and rose bushes.

A few days after we were moved to the new compound they sent two more young women to look after us. One was a Madzhir (a colonist from Asia Minor) named Marianthi and the other was a Macedonian from Rupishta named Evdoxia. Marianthi immediately put herself in charge after she said that she was sent there by General Markos himself. Marianthi's arrival put an end to our freedom. The first thing she did was ask the Albanian authorities to surround the compound with barbed wire. The older children were ordered to participate and wire the three entrances. There was no way in or out of the compound without permission. The place looked like a prison.

After we finished wiring the gates Marianthi put us to work inside the compound. In the centre of the circle of houses was an older, neglected and abandoned house. Its roof had collapsed and its windows were all broken. Marianthi wanted it removed and replaced with a playground so she ordered all the children to demolish it and remove it piece by piece, by hand. One thousand five hundred children were deployed to remove the house brick by brick, stone by stone and pick up every piece of broken glass by hand. She then ordered us to clear all the debris and level the ground. When we were done we made a nice playground. We were given two flat footballs as reward for our hard work, which we had to patch up before we could play with them. Then she ordered us to clear the grounds under the willow tree. When we were done with that she took some of the older boys and made them clean the basement where she lived.

When we were finished with the cleanup she assembled us in a line in front of the mess hall, young and old children together, and announced that from today forward we were going to start a new life. She said: 'From now on you will get up at six o'clock in the morning, you will eat breakfast at seven, lunch at one and dinner at seven. Before each meal you will assemble here under the willow tree and wait for me'. From that day forward we became a battalion and the children from each village became a unit within the battalion. From that day forward our greeting became 'forward with Markos'.

And thus began our new life, wherever we went we marched in a column of four and always with a song. Before and after each meal we had to wait for Marianthi to inspect us and dismiss us. Nobody was allowed to touch anything without her permission. We stood in line and waited for her. She tirelessly went around scolding, welcoming and dismissing

children; always in Greek and always with the greeting ‘forward with Markos’. I don’t know how we endured the abuse but somehow we did. The most difficult part about this was morning gymnastics. Marianthi always admired the Albanian sailors who began their exercises at exactly six o’clock in the morning and practiced for ten minutes with their guns. One day during our meetings she said: ‘Tomorrow we will compete with the sailors. We will get up at five o’clock in the morning and begin exercising at six sharp. We will march in fours and maintain straight lines and equal distance between each other. I will watch you and all I want to see from you is a single temple on every line and to hear a single step each time the line takes a step! I want our marches to be flawless. You will run up to the palace iron gates, along the road, pass by my house and end the exercises here. I will watch you from my balcony. The unit that performs best in all exercises will be rewarded with lining up first in front of the mess hall! Understood?’ We lived like that day in and day out.

One day, during our morning gymnastics, she noticed that one of our four columns was not in a straight line and that our marching was slightly out of step. Our punishment for not being perfect was more grueling exercises. She made us run the uphill course three times and ordered our commanders to physically beat those who performed poorly. Oh how painful it was to run the course. We were unable to catch our breath. When we were done and lined up under the willow tree, Marianthi came over. She climbed on the stage and began to castigate us saying that we were worthless and that we had dishonoured the Partisans and our fathers, brothers and sisters who were struggling in Gramos. Then she ordered us to march again calling out ‘halt’, ‘at ease’, ‘left’, ‘right’, as she watched the line and listened to our steps. When she was satisfied that our march was perfect she ordered us to sing battle songs. There was no breakfast for us that morning... I guess we were not worthy of our allowance of corn bread and our cube of dry marmalade.

The place where we regularly met we called ‘Under the Willow’. We gathered there at least three times a day. The most boring and difficult gathering was the one in the afternoon. This gathering began during the Gramos offensive when Marianthi asked the Albanian sailors to mount a speaker on one of the branches of the willow tree. After that every day at eleven o’clock we were summoned to line up under the willow. The signal to line up was delivered by a lame guard, a Greek man from Northern Epirus. At precisely eleven o’clock he would start banging on the metal fence with a metallic rod. As soon as we heard that sound we all dashed outside to line up. Not because we wanted to but because those who arrived first got to stand under the shade of the willow. The rest stood under the burning sun. Marianthi, as I said, enjoyed tormenting the children. I can still hear her slightly hoarse voice, with her Madzhir accent, constantly ordering the children around: ‘halt’, ‘at ease’, ‘left’, ‘right’, etc.,

for over half an hour. Then exactly at twelve noon the box hanging from the willow branch would begin to crackle, sizzle and blare sounds that sounded like a rockslide in a forest during a windstorm. It was painful to listen to. Following that came a melody of what sounded like ‘Embros ELAS gia tin Elada’ (Forward ELAS for Greece). (This was ELAS’s anthem with which radio station “Free Greece” began its broadcast).

We stood still while we listened to the news. Most of us Macedonians did not speak much Greek so we hardly understood what was said but we stood there quietly anyway for fear of Marianthi’s watchful eye. And there on the stage stood Marianthi with her half unbuttoned English Khaki shirt, wearing military boots with socks folded over them and a short skirt, listening dreamily to the broadcast. The children lined up in the sun were baking in the heat. No one dared speak, laugh, or, heaven forbid, wipe the sweat off their drowning eyes. A child falling down from heat stroke meant nothing for her. The only relief for us was the crackling melody signifying the end of the broadcast. At that point Marianthi would dismiss us and quickly dash into the mess hall while the rest of us lined up outside.

One day we had to wait for Marianthi for a long time. She had gathered all the mothers in the mess hall and had asked them to support her in dismissing mother Evgenia and another mother from Breshteni. As we found out later, mother Evgenia had had a word with Marianthi and had told her to stop tormenting the children with these military exercises. ‘They are children, not soldiers,’ Evgenia said, ‘so stop treating them like soldiers!’ Marianthi did not like that and wanted to get rid of Evgenia but none of the mothers would support her. Mother Evgenia got to stay but after that refused to speak to Marianthi. Marianthi, on the other hand, continued with business as usual and extended her torment.

In late June they decided to send us to work. There was a huge field near Duress, planted with wheat. A rain and wind storm had flattened sections of the wheat and it was impossible for the machine harvesters to collect it. So, here is where we came in. Our job, or at least that’s what Marianthi called it, was to pick each wheat plant by hand and place it on a pile. After the piles were large enough, the older children fed them to the harvesters. There were two harvesters in the field. We did this for fifteen days. Marianthi made it into a game by asking children to compete against each other to see who could make the biggest pile in the shortest time. It was fun when the weather was cool but a nightmare when it was really hot. We did not have sufficient drinking water so during the hot days children slipped under Marianthi’s radar and went for a drink in the neighbouring gardens and drank from the wells. Beyond the gardens was a beautiful white house from which we could hear sad melodies.”

“Was it a madhouse, Kirche?” interrupted Numo.

“Yes, it was!” replied Kirche, “that’s what our quartermaster, the only Albanian in the camp, told us. One day Marianthi caught a bunch of

children returning from having left to drink water. She searched them and found wild plums in their pockets. When we all returned to the compound and lined up under the willow, she invited those children to come up on the stage. She then scolded them and when she was done she locked them up in a shed. Their punishment, one day's food deprivation. She then ordered all the children to go and spit on them while they cried and begged for forgiveness...

After our work was done in the wheat field, Marianthi told us that we now needed to help the Partisans in the hospitals. Our job was to go out to the fields and collect flowers and grasses for making medicines. We had to walk long distances and collect petals from flowers that were taller than us. We had to fill baskets. They told us that they boiled the flowers and used the juice to wash the wounds of the partisans...

After lunch they usually took us to see a movie. The entire theater was reserved just for us. We would enter the theater at two o'clock in the afternoon and they would close the doors behind us. The film would start about two or three hours later. What did we do in the meantime? We slept, talked, went to the washroom... What else could we do being locked inside? They only showed us Russian military movies. The first time, before we realized that the movie was a projection on a cloth screen, we thought that everything was real and we ran and hid under the chairs when we saw the images appear, especially when a locomotive was rushing straight for us or when soldiers pointed their gun toward us. Many of the children were crying and screaming as they fled to hide.

Even after we found out that the images were not real, the sound of the aircraft, the guns, and the machine guns still terrified us. We found it hard to watch the films.

One time, while watching a Russian story, huge tables loaded with grapes, baked bread, roasted chickens, piglets, ducks... appeared on the screen. Stacks of meat and bread appeared before our eyes. I could hear whispering behind me, children saying: 'You watch that no one sees me and I will go up there and pick up some of that food!' Then I heard another one say: 'Go! Go! Go!' But as soon as the boy reached for the food all he could see was the shadow of his hand on the screen...

We marched with a single step in a straight line and after about twenty minutes we were back lined up under the willow tree. After that we were given a plate of pasta which we ate quickly and then off to bed.

We slept 15 to 20 children per room on a concrete floor with one blanket over and one blanket under us. This is how we lived, lying next to one other until five o'clock in the morning when we were awakened for gymnastics. While we slept we dreamt of guns, aircraft, of wounded and killed, of Marianthi's cursing, of our mothers and of bread. And if any one of us were awake we would hear heavy sighs, quiet sobbing and calling for mothers. There was no time for sorrow or grieving. We grieved during the

night when we slept. We grieved silently while staring at an invisible spot on the ceiling in the dark of night. We saw what we wanted to see; the faces of our loved ones and the places where we would rather be. But that too would be stolen from us by the crying of a child who had just awakened from a nightmare. Then mother Evgenia from the other room, where she slept with the younger children, would come in and lie there among us, caressing each one of us and kissing us on the eyes. She kept the room doors wide open. That's how she wanted it. We also liked the doors wide open. When we heard her voice in the night we felt safe and at peace. We each, in our own way, craved a moment of her time, of her gentle touch and of her breath gently blowing on our faces. We all loved mother Evgenia. She often told us stories and taught us Macedonian songs. She talked to us about our village, about our people and about older times. Most of us had never heard the stories she told us about Marko Krале (king Marko). We loved those stories the best. The evenings and nights were ours.

The days unfortunately belonged to Marianthi and to Markos. During the day we were shaped for Markos; we sang for him, we collected wheat for him, we ran uphill for him, we competed with the sailors for him, we marched barefoot on the hot asphalt for him, we baked in the hot sun for him,... And he, Markos, standing there on the stage, wearing his dirty boots with his left leg slightly bent, his right hand hidden behind his hip where he hanged his gun, leaning on a stick, with a wide belt tight against his waist and two other belts crossing his chest, was frowning under his mustache telling us to: 'Behave you little bastards and pay attention to Marianthi!'...

We could smell the sea day and night. When the winds were strong, especially in the morning, we could feel the dampness and salty droplets fall on our faces. From that we knew that sea water was really salty. We lived about one hundred metres away from the sea but were not allowed to go near it. One morning when we were lined up under the willow, I don't know what came over Marianthi, but she, with a solemn voice, announced that we were going on an excursion. After breakfast we all got together and off we went. We marched along a cobblestone road with the sea on our left side. The water was very calm that day. And on our right was the slope of a mountain dotted with vineyards. When the cobblestone road ended we continued our march on some fine yellow sand that looked like corn flour.

There was an immense field of sand in front of us. It was a wasteland. Only small white waves repeatedly washed the sand and retreated again. The sand was fine and parted slightly as we stepped on it with our bare feet. 'Halt!' commanded Marianthi and climbed on a stone. We all turned our heads in her direction. She placed her hands on her waist, raised her chin and looked at us. Then she looked into the distance, gazing far behind

us into the big water. Everyone went silent. All we could hear was the barely audible waves splashing on the seashore. We all had our backs turned to the water so we continued to stare at the green slopes of the mountain in front of us.

‘Stop!’ screamed Marianthi. ‘When I blow the whistle once,’ she said, ‘it means stop and when I blow it twice it means march.’ We began to march on the sand, and all she did was constantly blow the whistle. She then waved her hand and gathered us together again ordering the boys to go to one side, the girls to another. She then asked us to strip naked!

We all got undressed. And then suddenly there was one whistle. We stopped and stood at attention. She asked us to stretch our arms down and start slapping our legs with our hands all in unison making only a single sound. If there was a delay she started us again from the beginning. After we mastered the craft of slapping ourselves in unison, Marianthi went to the girls. She said something to them and came back to us. ‘This time a short whistle,’ she said, ‘means get into the water. A long whistle means get out of the water. The person who does not come out on time will not be eating lunch and supper today! Is that clear?’

‘Clear!’ we all said in a single voice.

‘Simioton!’ she yelled out instead of march and we started to march on the sand with our bare feet.

She blew a short whistle so we all ran frantically into the water.

The water was shallow. We ran, fell down, laughed, splashed each other and spit a lot. The water was very salty. Then there was a long whistle which took away all our joy... We all rushed out of the water like mad dogs and put on our clothes. Then there was the whistle to stop. As soon as we lined up there were two sharp penetrating whistles to march. Forward, left, right, left, right, left, right...

About half an hour of marching and singing military songs, our unit arrived at its destination without any faults. Then after enduring the box that hung on the branch of the willow tree and after listening to the latest news about our struggle at Gramos, we went ‘forward with Markos’ to a plate of macaroni. Several of us who failed to get out of the water fast enough, in accordance with Marianthi’s instructions, went ‘forward with Markos’ without any lunch or dinner.

The next day, after morning gymnastics, we stood on the roadside waiting for Marianthi to arrive but she was nowhere to be found. The ‘Major’ who conducted the exercises went to look for her but came back with a frown on his face. He would not tell us what had happened. We later found out from the old Greek night watchman from Epirus that she was sleeping with the Albanian man. The only Albanian man in the camp was Alia, the man responsible for purchasing goods for us. There were no other Albanian men living inside our compound.

No sooner had we found out what she was up to than we began a campaign of shaming her into leaving. One by one we secretly ran under her window and yelled out 'leave the compound!', 'get lost'... But she would not come out of her room. We were so preoccupied with shaming her into leaving, many of us continued to chant obscenities, forgetting to go to breakfast that day. Still, she refused to come out.

We continued our chanting campaign for several days until one day we saw her with two suitcases in her hands, leaving the camp and heading for the city. The Madzhiri children among us began to cry. They loved her. We, on the other hand, were ecstatic at seeing her go but we pretended to be sorry that she was leaving. Soon afterwards they also fired the Albanian man. For us it was important that Marianthi left. A day later Evdoxia cancelled the grueling, early morning exercises for the little ones and shortened them for the older children to ten minutes. The quality of food also improved. We were allowed to go to the beach every day and to the stadium to watch soccer matches. They also purchased a few soccer balls for us so that we could form our own teams and play. They bought us each a pair of shoes, a shirt and a pair of pants. The guards guarding the front gates were all gone and so were their guns. Soon afterwards the barbed wire also disappeared and we were allowed to go out to the city in groups.

When fall came the wind started to pick up and the weather turned cold. As I mentioned earlier, there was a leather factory near the camp where skins were processed. Well, the byproduct, or whatever was left over at the end of the day, they used to throw out near the sea. So, early in the morning we went there and lit it on fire. It would erupt into yellow flames and burn practically the entire day. We watched the mountain peaks turn white with snow with each passing day. We were cold and did not go to morning exercises. We lay in our beds next to each other keeping warm.

During those days Russian ships began to arrive in Durres on a weekly basis. We watched one ship spend more than a week out in the sea some distance from the port. They said it was a Romanian ship. Smaller boats floated back and forth unloading boxes from the big ship. Then when the ship was lighter it floated into the harbour. One night, after Evdoxia visited all the houses we were staying in, she summoned all the children to gather under the willow. We gathered there but we did not line up. When Evdoxia arrived she climbed on the stage and said: 'Children, did you see the big ships in the harbour?'

'Yes!' we said in unison out of habit.

'And do you know why they have been waiting there for so long?' she asked.

'No!' we again said in unison.

'They have been waiting there a long time because there is no one to unload them,' she said. 'The Albanian youth was sent to help build the Durres to Tirana railway. There is plenty of wheat, rye and other things to

be unloaded but there is no one to unload it. All those goods are for our partisans. Are there any volunteers who want to help unload the ships?’ asked Evdoxia, and then came down from the stage, went beyond the playground and yelled out: ‘All those who want to volunteer, please line up in two rows beside me.’

Even before she was finished talking, the entire group of children, boys and girls, young and old, had joined the two lines. Evdoxia then went in front of the line and said: ‘Let us now march onto the ships and get instructions from the people there as to what they want us to do. And you know, the sooner we unload those ships, the sooner we can get bread to Gramos and Vicho.’

We left. This was the first time I had ever walked with my group without having to march in a straight line and sing a fighting song.

We returned from the ships at dawn, all loaded up with wheat. Our pockets, folded sleeves, socks, shoes and all other creases in our clothing were full of wheat. We did not waste it, we collected it to the last grain and boiled it. We built fires by the seaside and boiled the Russian wheat in rusty Italian helmets and sardine cans. We shared it of course. We gave some to the little ones who crouched around the fires watching and waiting, wiping their tears and noses with their dirty little hands. Only their eyes glimmered in the presence of the open fires. There were little fires everywhere, the entire coastline was smoking. We ate the wheat grain by grain, hot, sometimes before it was fully boiled. It was as sweet as honey! This is how it was every day until we unloaded all the ships. After they sailed away, we were left on the shore with our empty sardine cans and empty rusty Italian helmets. This was the first time in a long time that we felt full and did not dream of bread.

About two weeks later they started giving us rye bread, a bun the size of a couple of fists for breakfast and dinner and macaroni for lunch. The food was better than before. During the evenings we gathered together under the willow tree and danced. Before bedtime mother Eugenia used to collect us in the hallway, sit us down on the concrete floor and ask us simple questions like what is the name of our mother, father, grandparents, etc., starting with the youngest children first.

We all answered her questions every time, it was therapeutic for us. She also would ask us for the names of our brothers and sisters, our family name and the name of our village. She would then ask the older girls to sing a song for us. The older girls knew many songs which they learned from their grandparents. We all sang the same songs even though we were far away from home; they comforted us and gave us hope. After that we would huddle close together and mother Eugenia would tell us stories about the village, about the meadows, the vineyards, the water fountains, about everything she could think of that related to our village. She did this every night so that we wouldn’t forget our roots and who we were. Then

she would caress each child on the head and send them off to bed. She was always kind and never scolded anyone. She was everything to us. That was our mother Evgenia.

One day two trucks entered the camp and offloaded heaps of military shirts. They gave us one each. There was not much to choose from in terms of size. Hey, they were military shirts and we were thrilled to have them, especially the little children. We had to either cut or fold the sleeves because they were too long. The shirts were too long for the little ones but they did not mind and wore them like a dress dragging on the ground. We couldn't button them because they were too wide so we folded them around our small bodies and tied them with fine telephone wire that we found in the dumpsters by the seaside. The shirts had not been washed and most were dirty and blood-stained, some even had personal items in them. In the shirt pockets we found letters and pictures of the fighters, their family, their children, their wives, their women, etc. The letters were written in Greek but most of the children could not read Greek so they took them to those who could. Almost all the letters were sad, full of bitterness; only a few were cheerful and full of jokes. We cried most of the time as we read them and sometimes we laughed..."

Kirche suddenly went silent. He sighed deeply, unbuttoned his right military shirt pocket and removed a number of sheets of paper and began to unfold them.

"The military shirts they gave us belonged to the soldiers who died in the Albanian mountains during the Greco-Italian War... Can you read Greek?" asked Kirche and handed Pando the letters. "Read them for me if you can read Greek."

Pando took the first letter, looked at it, put his cigarette down on a stone and said: "Yes, this one is written in Greek. Let's see what it says." He then began to read:

"My dearest,

A week ago I sent you a letter; I hope it reached your hands. I wanted to let you know right away that a while ago the everyday struggles we have been experiencing have now escalated. I am standing here by a burning fire and while the other soldiers from my unit are daydreaming in front of the dancing flames, I am writing you this letter by the light of the fire. Believe me, every word written here is life having lived because one can rarely avoid death in this hell. Today I am still alive only because I thought of you all day... Standing behind me are very tall pine trees which in the dark seem like they are touching the sky. Above, between their peaks, the wind howls, shakes off the snow, breaks branches and groans among the thick trees. It seems that everything here is wrong. The only real and normal thing is you... In this twisted place, under the insane howling of the wind, in these wild mountains that lie beneath the thick

snow, under the steady rain of cannon, mortar and machine gun fire, continuously crackling, today I am still alive.

My only one, there, in the warm room, please kneel down before the icon of the Virgin Mary and pray for my return. I don't know why but I often imagine myself face down crying, my face stuck in the snow, frozen and... and I think; will I remain here, like this, and will someone take my love away? I wonder if you still have those dried rose petals.

The flame flickers in my tired eyes and my eyelids are getting heavy. I need to get some sleep. I need to lie down, because I don't know what the night will be like and how the next day will end... Many warm kisses... Tomorrow I will deliver this letter. Good night my love, good night my Life..."

Pando paused for a moment, took another letter, looked at Kirche, slowly raised his eyebrows and thoughtfully said: "And this letter too, the soldier never mailed... It was written on November 22, 1940, at the position where he was stationed." Pando then began to read:

"Dear and respected professor,

By the knife and by sword, Ivan Mountain fell beneath our feet. We overcame the enemy. Unfortunately, many of our people from Lerin, Voden and Kostur Regions will remain here forever.

Now that we came out victorious I often ask myself for whose fatherland, for which country, did we heroically fight? I wonder about this because a week ago about two dozen of our boys were arrested just because they spoke our language (Macedonian) in the trenches. Today we celebrate a great victory, the same day our troops invade Korcha. I have to go now, my Sergeant just ordered me to dig...

We have been transferred to Dzevezda and have been digging bunkers and trenches all night. They just told us that tomorrow we will be launching an attack. It's been like this every day. I am very tired today and I have not shaved. The night is clear and frost is falling on top of the snow making it glisten in the moonlight. My fingers are rigid from the cold. They told us that fifty of our boys (Macedonians) attacked the Italian batteries during the night and no one returned... That's all for now... I will post this letter tomorrow. I will send you more news in my next letter. Give my regards to your loved ones.

Best regards and forever yours..."

"This letter was written using the Greek alphabet but the words are in Macedonian. I have read this letter many times," said Kirche and handed it to Pando.

Pando took it and began to read with a hoarse voice:

"My dear husband. We received your letter and we are all happy that you are alive and well. We constantly receive news in the village of people being wounded and killed. May God protect us all from evil and may he bring you home safe and soon. Two days after Mitrovden (St. Dimitar

Day), two policemen came here and took father to Kostur. There they beat him badly because he spoke our language (Macedonian). Uncle Done went and complained but they told him to mind his own business.

Father was brought back on a horse and we had to put crushed onions all over his body and wrap him in a skin. He is okay now but he will not go to church. He sits at home all day, swears a lot, holds his chest and coughs a lot.

Our son Riste constantly asks about you. He often goes to the balcony and waits for you. The Ristev and Petrev families are begging you to inquire about their boys and please let us know how they are doing. The families have not received letters for a long time and are worried.

Greetings from your entire family. Every day mother and I pray to God for your safe return. Take care. We all love you.”

“And this letter,” Kirche interrupted, “I found inside the right pocket of my shirt. The entire pocket was covered with black blood. I also found these pictures in my other shirt pocket...”

Numo took the pictures and looked at them for a long time. Written on the back of the larger picture, with the image of a beautiful young woman on whose knees sat a little boy, was: “To our father, we wish your safe return to us.”

Beautifully hand-written on the back of another picture was: “To our dear and respected teacher who fought heroically against that stupid Mussolini and his followers.” Dated: December 20th, 1940.

Pando looked at the pictures and then, without saying a word, slowly began to read: “Sorovich, November 16, 1940. The formation of a new division began here. There were many, many of our people (Macedonians). We left on foot during the night and headed for Korcha. My battalion received orders to hold positions between Trebezina and Bubezi...

December 9, 1940. For days now our Western Macedonian Army has occupied the position between Pogradets and Mount Kamia. Every day it's the same thing, they appear and we shoot at them then we watch with our binoculars to see how many dead and wounded they pick up. When we go out to cut trees for building bunkers and for firewood, they thunder at us with their cannons and in place of bringing back wood, we bring back our dead and wounded. We bury our dead at night. They killed Stavro today. He was an older man. A neighbour of his from Turie, a village in Lerin Region, keeps saying in bad Greek ‘Oh, his poor six children... Oh, his poor six children...’

Today I can tell you what happened in the past few weeks. We fought against the black shirts from December 29 to January 25, in a continuous battle and finally we occupied the peak of Trebezina. We scored a goal. They are thundering at us now as we dig trenches. It's windy and blowing snow is coming down hard, we can't see anything, even in front of us. It is

very cold and my hands stick to the metal parts of my weapon. We dug small bunkers, big enough to kneel inside. We sit side by side to keep warm. My hands and my feet are numb. We are slowly weakening. We have no hot food to keep us warm.

It seems that the Lord showed some mercy. Today we were ordered to withdraw and regroup on the eastern slopes of the hill. We were attacked by mountain climbers this morning. We held our position resiliently but they overpowered us. But in the evening we charged forward, broke their defense through the deep snow and escaped. We did not bury our dead. They will have to lie frozen under the deep snow. This is how it's been in this hell...

We greeted the dawn frozen and crouching inside the bunkers. What I saw in front of me that morning was a fairy tale. The day was awakening in silence. I looked to the east and there, far at the top of the mountain, the world slowly began to whiten, darkness was slowly disappearing, being replaced by a whitish-yellowish shy color. I looked up and watched the sky slowly turn reddish as the view of the hills became stronger, sharper. The world was changing before my eyes, turning red then silver and then there it was, the big bright disk rising up from behind the cliffs. The sight gave me an outburst of joy deep inside, it was like a beautiful inspiring song, the sight of the rising sun gave me an insatiable desire to live...

My daydream was interrupted by the voice of my Sergeant who ordered us to prepare for the attack...

It is now noon and it's snowing again. Sleet this time. I am tired, exhausted. We had to break through the frozen ground in order to bury those who were killed during the attack. We had to bury them in the frozen ground and cover them with soil mixed with snow. Their stiff bodies will never warm up, not with the sad sound of a soldier's trumpet and not by the tears of those of us crazy people who stood over their graves crying..."

Numo raised his hand and saluted, silently staring at the hills beyond the river, seeming like he was hearing the sad sound of a soldier's trumpet, seeming like he was feeling the men's pain as they struggled and suffered in the cold. Seeming like their pain was gripping him by his heart.

Pando turned the page but Numo raised his hand signaling that he had had enough. Numo's chin trembled and his cheek muscles vibrated. His forehead was wrinkled and fine beads of sweat were formed, glistening in the sun like tiny pearls, rolling down and disappearing in his thick eyebrows. He felt shivers up and down his spine...

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 14

There was a loud ringing noise coming from upstairs, from the administration office. It was sharp and fast with a cutting ring tone. Numo was startled, as if awakened from a long tormenting nightmare, and with a strained voice said: "It's too early for repast... too early to listen to the news on the radio," then he turned his head towards the meeting place and said: "Let's go. It sounds like something important needs to be communicated..."

"Stay!" replied Pando in a quiet voice. "Whatever it is it will not be for you or for me. All is already known about you and me..."

"Even if it is not for us, let's go and see what the commotion is about..." said Numo. "Let's go... And you Kirche don't forget us, come back again and don't forget to bring those letters and photographs. When you see us again, please come back and tell us more of your stories... Come on Pando, look the people are gathering..." concluded Numo.

On their way to the gathering place Numo and Pando saw the man with the clean boots get off a jeep and talk to some elderly men who had gathered there but Numo and Pando could not hear what he was saying. The first to break away from the crowd was Kuze. He walked very carefully as if stepping on thorns with bare feet, and the farther he moved the more his pace hastened.

"Mobilization!" Kuze whispered to his wife. "Mass mobilization! They will collect us all! They will take everyone; all those who can carry a gun, all those who can dig and also those who can lead a donkey or a mule. We are all going to the front! I don't know what to do? Should I hide? But where can I hide? They want us all to come here tomorrow!"

Kuze's wife was a calm and capable woman and not so easily excitable. She looked into her bag (purse), took something out, mixed it with water on a small plate, added some spoiled flour to it and gave it to Kuze. Then in a calm voice she said: "Eat this and take off your sash."

Before midnight Kuze was heard rushing out of his cabin but he never did make it to the lavatory. He quickly snuck between two horse stables and remained there crouched until dawn. But as soon as he returned and went to bed, he remembered he had forgotten something very important. He quickly got up and, like a hopping rabbit carrying raw eggs in his pockets, went outside. He sat down a few steps away from the gate, around the corner from his cabin and quietly said: "That damn flour!" Then, as he heard the night guard approaching, he sighed loudly, adjusted himself and, like a mad man, began to yell out: "Shoo! Shoo! Shoo!..."

"What is it Kuze?" inquired the guard.

"A rat! A huge mother of a devilish rat!" replied Kuze in a voice full of pain, pointing twice to the wall with his hand. "Very big!" he said while holding onto his pants with his other hand. And so the stage was set...

After reaching the gathering place and seeing Kuze sneaking away, Numo and Pando decided to go to the road.

Unlucky, Numo again failed to get to the trucks and make contact with his truck driver friend.

Numo decided to stand in the middle of the road, spread his legs, lift one of his crutches into the air in hopes of stopping the convoy, but without success. The trucks veered off, blinding him with their headlights and left a cloud of dust behind. One, two, three... ten, one by one the trucks passed him by. Numo became furious and threw himself into the ditch on top of the densely growing grass and watched the last truck meander around the bend and make its way up the hill. It was getting dark as the trucks made their way over the mountain crest and disappeared. The sky was clear and stars were beginning to appear.

When the trucks were gone, Numo turned his attention to the barracks and horse stables and watched the flicker of candles and lamps being lit in the cabins. The tiny lights glimmered gently, appearing and disappearing, rising and sinking in the dark creating strange shades and patterns on the leaves of the trees and on the road. There was something spiritual about the tiny lights in the dark. Just watching them gave him a feeling of hope. Then, just for a moment, life was good and it did not matter that he was lame and missing a leg. In that split moment, while watching the little flames dance in the dark, he felt peaceful, serene and whole again. He had no regrets about what he had done and what he would do again if he had to. During his moment of clarity in the starry night, he prayed and his prayers were about him getting back in a bunker (dying with dignity fighting) because that's what he wanted.

His clarity vanished like a puff of smoke in the wind and now he began to feel the loneliness in the silence all around him. Circumstances may have led him here but whatever he was supposed to do, he realized, he was no good at it. He had always been independent and he could not imagine anything but always being independent. He never needed anyone's help and had never bowed his head before anyone. He had never committed any wrongs or dirty deeds and had kept his conscious clear.

His thoughts now turned to his own body, remembering the names of the prison camps and jails he had carved on his own flesh, now healed scars, which at the time were black and swollen. The wounds may have healed but the tragic memories of being in those camps had not. He was a man forged, woven and fashioned by the times, by the passing centuries during which his people had spent mourning and in darkness. He had been uprooted from his home and humiliated. And now he was like a stone, uprooted from its own place, moved around so that no grass could grow around it. So, the one legged lame man was now lying in the ditch on the side of the road, being cast aside but not abandoned. He still had faith, he still believed, he still saw and he still stared into the night. He was all

alone in the dark, in the bottomless dust; he was all alone, only with his hopes and desires.

“I will wrest myself from this darkness! I will shake off the road dust that settled on my coat! I will find my way to an open space! And there I will wait patiently to get to the place where my friends are waiting for me. Not in the food line like a greedy eater, but in the front line of a raging battle...” Numo promised himself.

The sky was turning pale gray. The forested peak of the hill on the other side was becoming visible as the darkness slowly faded away. Dew drops had settled on Numo’s wooden leg. The first rays of the morning sun began to appear making the liquid droplets sparkle like pearls.

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 15

After breakfast the loud ringing noise was again heard coming from the administration office. There were two lines forming at the gathering place, one with women and the other with men. Everyone was quiet.

The tall man with the clean boots was observing the situation. Kuze, with his head crouched between his narrow shoulders, looking grumpy and stunted, stood in front of the tall man.

“You! What is your problem and why are you so pale?” asked the tall man.

“It’s my stomach, my abdomen, Comrade...” whispered Kuze and at that moment his intestines gurgled violently.

“What’s bothering you?” asked the tall man.

“Dysentery...” whispered Kuze shyly, looking sideways up at the tall man.

“March, get lost asshole!” I don’t need fighters who shit on themselves!

Kuze fled in a flash while holding his belly and disappeared into his cabin. There he lay on his straw mat, covered by skin covers and, as loud as he could, complained about his pain.

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 16

A trembling, quiet, sad and pious song could be heard coming out from one of the cabins in the horse stables:

“Tsnei goro, tsnei sestro, (Blackened forest, blackened sister),
Zaedno da tsneeme... (Let us blacken together...).

The sound came out strong and then faded away like it was passing through the leaves of a dense forest. It climbed and fell, deep then shallow with harmonies leaping out and fading, so sad, so lonely and so full of tears...

“Tvoite lisia, goro sestro, (Your leaves, forest sister),
Pak ke ti se vratat, (Will again return),
A moita mladost, goro sestro, (But my youth, my forest sister),
Nema da se vrati... (Will never return...).

A gust of wind that blew just then carried the song all throughout the barracks, the horse stables and beyond. Rarely anyone sang in Prenies. The only songs we heard here were those coming out of the speakers, coming from somewhere far away. The songs were broken, crackling like they were scraping the mountain peaks and whirling in the valleys, dried by the winds and sounding somewhat sinister, because after the speakers went silent all you heard was crying in the barracks and in the horse stables:

“Tvoite lisia, goro sestro, (Your leaves, forest sister),
Pak ke ti se vratat, (Will again return),

These songs are especially touching for the wretched here in Prenies, which reminds them of their pain and sorrow and of all the people they had lost. The tenor would raise the last word and then stop singing, but only for a brief moment, for only a heartbeat, so that the sound can flutter in the wind and the chest can be filled with new air.

A moita mladost, goro sestro, (But my youth, my forest sister),
Nema da se vrati... (Will never return...).

The sound is transmitted and the song spreads deep and wide bringing sadness to the hearts and minds of those listening to it. There are deep and long sighs surfacing from inside the barracks and horse stables. The pain comes in waves sparing no one, not even the elderly men holding the lit cigarettes between their fingers, sitting on the doorstep, looking at the starry sky... There is momentary silence, long enough to hear the sighs, long enough for the tenor to fill his lungs with air before the words:

“Nema da se vrati...” (Will never return...) are sung.

There was passionate longing in those words for the youth lost in the rocks, in the hills, in the gullies, in the brooks, in the caves, in the forests and in the Macedonian snow. Passionate longing came out and could be heard in the hoarse and hungry throats of the wretched.

The night smelled of dust lifted before sunset when the trucks drove by and the people ran behind them. The air was still but seemed like it was filled with the yelling, screaming and crying that went on earlier. Fresh dew was starting to form in tiny droplets on the trampled, dried grass and on the cobblestones. There, beyond the river, a nocturnal bird took flight. The screeching of flying bats could be heard coming from the narrow alleyways between barracks. The moon was full. And, unlike down here in Prenies where the atmosphere was full of sorrow, pain and bitterness, the sky above Prenies was clear and serene. And the song, sometimes close, sometimes far, sometimes deep and sometimes trembling, sometimes unharmonious and intermittent, was scattered in the silent murky night, appearing and disappearing, a constant reminder of time lost, of time stolen, of spilled blood and of dark times...

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 17

Pando and Numo were sitting at the side of the meadow and, while puffing hot, bitter smoke from their home-made cigarettes, watched young fighters exercise.

“Turn Left!” commanded a young man wearing long military trousers and a wide shirt with sleeves torn at the elbows. They turned smoothly and marched perfectly with a single step. Dust was raised, puffing through their torn boots, as they each took a step forward. They stood straight and looked ahead, marching in unison like they were in a trance. Echelon behind echelon, in straight rows, moving forward and stomping harder with each step.

Further below, down by the tunnel over the road there was a cloud of dust. A few moments later, a jeep appeared from behind the curve. It rolled down to the meadow and stopped. Its engine was still rattling.

A tall, thin man got off from the passenger side, stood as straight and as high as he could, and while bracing himself on the jeep’s front windshield with one hand, said: “Greetings!”

Those marching in the line swiftly turned their heads toward the jeep. They marched with their arms straight, stretched down to their legs and with their eyes staring at the two DAG officers in the jeep. The driver, leaning on the steering wheel with his right elbow and swinging his left foot hanging outside of the jeep door, attempted to hit a stone three metres away with his spit. He plucked another reed of grass and began to chew it. After his mouth was filled with saliva, he stretched his neck like a goose swallowing hard, puckered his lips and spit hard through his teeth.

The tall, thin man addressed the other officer in the jeep without looking at him and said: “They look great, don’t they? There are one thousand, two hundred of them, right?”

“Right!” said the man.

“Who was the idiot then who ordered them to return here? This is an entire brigade, right? And now, when we need them the most out there to fight, someone, someone insane ordered them to march back here and exercise in this meadow,” remarked the tall, thin man.

The driver spat through his teeth again and slowly said: “The Leader, Comrade... the Leader ordered it...”

The tall, thin man turned his head, looked at the driver and said: “You know everything, don’t you...”

“I know that because I was there,” replied the driver.

Four new echelons arrived at the meadow. They marched right up to the jeep. Immediately behind them more echelons appeared. At that point they began to sing. The tall, thin man then asked: “And what is this?”

“A song!” replied the driver.

“I know it’s a song. I’m not deaf. What kind of a song is it?” asked the tall, thin man.

“A military song, the kind they sing in a parade...” replied the driver. Numo leaned toward Pando and quietly said: “They are singing, do you hear them singing?”

“Of course I hear them...” replied Pando.

“This is a march the 18th Brigade sings...” said Numo.

“The brigade that has many of our people (Macedonians) in it?” asked Pando.

“Yes that one!” confirmed Numo.

“Thump-thump-thump!” the fighters marched looking straight ahead. The commander, marching alongside them, greeted everyone. The tall, thin man stood at attention and saluted the fighters, giving them a military welcome.

“Excellent! Excellent! Excellent!” said the tall, thin man in admiration of the marching men. “I sent these men to Vicho just today. Today... An entire brigade... Excellent! Bravo!... And what is this?” the tall, thin man asked the man standing next to him.

“What?” asked the man next to him, covering his mouth with his hand and giggling.

“Did you see that?” said the tall, thin man.

“I saw it..., the young fighter just tripped, what can you do?” said the man standing next to the tall, thin man.

“He must not trip or stumble. This is a line, right? He must, I say, not trip and stumble. I want the commander of the squad to report to me tonight. How can that idiot let his troops stumble in a march and take no action, ah?” said the tall, thin man.

“With our commander in battle, with our Macedonian spirit, spirit, spirit! ...” roared the 18th DAG Brigade while marching along. The tall, thin man raised his eyebrows and addressed the driver: “Run over there and relay my order to stop singing.”

“The driver stirred lazily and at that instantly the battalion commander yelled out: “Battalion! Halt! Turn left!”

“Should I go?” asked the driver.

“No need to!” said the tall, thin man, lazily walking away from the jeep. He walked with a slight limp from his left foot because his boots were too tight. He then muttered: “Again, that lazy bastard driver didn’t soak my boots in lard like I asked him to.”

At the same time Numo said to Pando: “Let’s get out of here. I am sick of listening to this louse complaining!”

The tall, thin man turned around and signaled the driver to follow him with the jeep. He then stopped and waited for the vehicle to reach him. He got on and said: “It would be more effective if I can say a few words to them from up here rather than from down there”.

“Of course!” said the driver. “A voice can be heard further away from higher... and the wind will carry it even further...”

The tall, thin man could not contain his anger and yelled out: “Listen, Kosta. You are getting on my nerves already with your stupid heckling. Am I making myself clear or not? You were assigned to me by Command to be my driver, were you not?”

“Yes I was, as your driver, but not as your servant... Sir” replied the driver.

“As my adjutant and not as my servant...” said the tall, thin man.

“Forget about this adjutant business!” said the driver, spitting on the side, slowing the vehicle and adding: “I’ve had enough of this driving from hospital to hospital, from kitchen to kitchen and...”

“Should I be considering this as disobedience?” interrupted the tall, thin man. “Should I? If so, then today I will send you to the front with the first column that leaves here. You should know that since my hand gun disappeared, you are not as gracious as you used to be. Imagine,” he addressed the passenger in the jeep, “taking your hand gun away and this guy here thinks I had the gun because it looked good on me... Stop here by the stone, do you hear?” ordered the tall, thin man.

“I hear you... I’m not deaf...” replied the driver, stopping the jeep.

Kosta was assigned to this person (the tall, thin man) for four months. The tall, thin man knows nothing of the front other than what he reads about it in the newspapers and learns from those who return from there. He is always clean and shaven, probably because he thinks it is easier to establish contact with people. He uses his rich vocabulary and star-like status to influence people. That’s why they turned him into a politician. The previous driver, it was said, did not even last a month with him. The first opportunity he got, he boarded a truck carrying fighters returning from a hospital in Suk and went to the front. When Kosta found out from the commander of the second mechanized column in Korcha that he would be driving a DAG officer, he said: “Comrade, commander! Please don’t do this to me. My friends will laugh at me...”

“Why? Why would your friends be laughing at you?” asked the commander.

“Because I am the driver of a ten ton truck which transports cannon shells, land mines, anti-tank mines, grenades, tens of thousands of rifle shells and who knows what other kinds of dangerous stuff. I don’t want to drive and wander around from camp to camp, from hospital to hospital and listen to the sniveling of someone who has not been outside of their office... Please commander, don’t do this to me... What have I done to you, to shame me like this? And believe me when I say this, I don’t know how to drive a jeep. The steering wheel slips from my fingers... Who ever heard of Kosta, I mean me, driving around some sniveler, eh?” pleaded Kosta.

“The order is already signed, Kosta, don’t argue with me. It is done!” replied the commander.

“I understand!” said Kosta, raising his hand to wave goodbye, and after standing there for a moment said: “I understand, but I want to let you know, Comrade Commander, that I will not be a good driver...”

“It’s a military order, do you understand?” asked the commander.

“I understand perfectly but I am telling you that I am not that kind of a driver. Comrade Commander, do you know why Sotir is in jail?” and without waiting for an answer Kosta continued: “Because he could not stand the sniveler he was driving. He turned him into a servant. Polish my boots Sotir, polish my belt Sotir, gel this Sotir, get that Sotir, boil me some eggs Sotir, I told you I wanted them soft boiled not hard boiled. Sotir had had enough of the idiot so he dumped boiling water onto his lap when the tea kettle accidentally fell out of his hand... That sniveler did this to Sotir and now I hear he is in prison in Nivitsi emptying buckets of shit from the prison lavatories. Is this my destiny too Commander?”

“If you are a fool like him, you can go even further. Be smart, that way you won’t have to deal with any buckets...” replied the commander.

“I may not have to carry bucket loads of shit but I will have to drive a giant asshole around. Iovan, my dear commander, we are both from the same village and we are friends. Why are you are sending me there against my will? Of all the drivers out there, why pick me? How have I wronged you, eh?” pleaded Kosta.

Iovan, Kosta’s commander, came up to Kosta, tapped him on the shoulder, looked him in the eye and said: “My dear Kosta, please hear me out and you won’t be disappointed. By taking this job you will not have to drive that stupid, dangerous ten ton truck during the dark of night on dangerous roads. You have already done your part, it is now time for you to take a rest, sit in the shade once in a while and sleep in a clean bed...”

“And you think you are rewarding me by doing this? How many times did I beg you to send me to the front line in battle, and you kept telling me to be quiet because I was needed here and that drivers were needed and that the struggle needed more drivers...” said Kosta, pausing for a moment, and then resumed talking: “And now you are re-assigning me to that beleaguered jeep to roam the Albanian roads so that people can make fun of me? Do you know what one of the wounded fighters said to me while leaving the hospital and returning to the front? I will tell you what he said. He said, ‘You with the truck, going tut-tut here, tut-tut there watch out you don’t kill a chicken somewhere on the road and eat its feathers and all and let your ass grow some more.’ He said, ‘I want to see how you will fair up there, up there at the front and not driving from Korcha to the border and from the border back to Korcha. All you drivers have are hands, a fat ass and not a gram of brain in your heads’. He said, ‘Your asses are tired from sitting down and your hands are deformed and look

like the hands of monkeys, from turning your steering wheels'. This, my friend, to me was equivalent to spitting on my face and now you are telling me that I deserve to drive a jeep? That I need to fart around driving some louse? This is how you care for me, eh? This is how you reward me? Well, you know that I pulled you out of a burning bunker, right? And you were quick to commit me to becoming a driver and now here I am! Stuck in this situation! And do you know, every day I feel my intestines in my throat from the shaking? You sit here, commander, sharpen your pencil and write orders about who should be transferred where!" concluded Kosta.

Iovan sat down on his chair, lit a cigarette and said: "You are fatigued Kosta, and I also think you are insane."

"Oh, now I am insane, am I...?" replied Kosta.

"Stop talking! You have your orders! Do your duty as ordered! Goodbye." ordered the Commander.

"Will we see each other again?" asked Kosta.

"Who knows... It is war... I, myself will be going to the front soon. I managed to get myself transferred there. In fact I am being shifted out from this duty. They suggested that I stay with the column, but I asked to be sent to the front line. They approved it. I am going tonight with the first group of trucks. That's why I am sending you there... Stay a few months and then ask to be transferred. And don't go nuts; you never know who you will be driving. He may be of low rank or possibly of high rank... Watch out... Now say goodbye and go." ordered the commander.

They hugged each other, shook hands with a strong hand grip and saluted each other military style. Before closing the door behind him, Kosta heard: "Wait, I almost forgot!"

"What is it?" asked Kosta.

"Do you know how to soft boil an egg?" jokingly replied the commander.

They both laughed out loud and Kosta left. One week later Kosta and Iovan met again at the hospital in Elbasan. Kosta, as the driver of the tall, thin man and Iovan as a wounded patient in a hospital bed.

"Well," whispered Iovan, "I got here."

"Is it a bad wound?" asked Kosta.

"I have a deep gash in my large muscle. Good thing the bone was not hit. I will be here about a month and then I will be going back. And you how are you?" inquired Iovan.

"Well, I am driving a sniveler..." replied Kosta.

"Belt, boots, eggs?..." laughed Iovan with a look of pain on his face.

"For God's sake, enough... I do that too... but in a lousy way. I do everything wrong. He started flipping out and one of these days he will have a nervous breakdown. I am on the money with this guy. Just hang on there and soon I will be joining you at the frontline. Today I am taking him

to Suk. Tomorrow, on our return, I will talk him into coming back here. I will bring you some cigarettes or tobacco,” replied Kosta.

“Listen, Kosta. Last week, when we passed by Prenies, guess who I saw?” interrupted Iovan and before giving Kosta a chance to ask who he saw, he continued: “I saw Numo, I couldn’t believe it. I saw Numo!”

“Numo Who?. Wait, wait... Was it Numo from the Damov family?” asked Kosta.

“Yes, that Numo!” replied Iovan.

“Come on, don’t toy with me now?!” remarked Kosta.

“I am telling you, I saw him from the truck. He was limping and carrying a crutch. The truck drove right by him and I heard him yell. I recognized his voice. It was him, I am sure. You know how loud his voice is... And he was singing!...” replied Iovan.

“Wait a minute, Iovan. I often go to Prenies and I would like to see Numo. So, how do I recognize him? You say he has one leg? It seems to me that I have seen a one-legged man many times. He is the one that hates him (the tall, thin man) and wants no part of him. See that man over there, talking to the nurse? Well, if he manages to convince her to have a date with him, we will be here for most of the night. Once he sets his sights on someone, he is like a dog with a bone, he won’t let go. Well, take care of yourself my friend... And frankly, to tell you the truth, they should have shot your head off, not just your thick ass muscle... for doing this to me. Goodbye Iovan. Now I will go and look for Numo,” said Kosta before leaving.

While driving past the lined up echelons, Kosta kept thinking about Numo Damovski, about him being alive and close by in Prenies. How was he going to approach him given that his superior (the tall, thin man) was not at all fond of him. He needed at least half an hour of free time, but as of now he had no idea how he was going to manage it.

“Drive like you are in a parade!” commanded the tall, thin man.

“Yes Comrade...” replied Kosta, adding, “I have never driven in a parade before, so how should I drive?”

“Raise and straighten your ugly head, look ahead, look dignified and stop shaking the jeep!” replied the tall, thin man.

“Kosta raised himself up and began to push and relax the accelerator causing the jeep to hop and jerk to a point where the tall, thin man could no longer maintain his balance and composure.

“Stop!” the tall, thin man ordered Kosta, getting off the jeep. After walking away about ten metres Kosta asked: “Does this mean you won’t need me for an hour or two?”

“No! You are not going anywhere!” replied the tall, thin man and added: “We are leaving for Elbasan right now!”

Kosta leaned his right hand on the steering wheel while waving with his left foot hanging out of his jeep. He sat there quietly listening to the

tall, thin man giving a speech which to him sounded like: “And so on and so on... a lame rooster singing and scratching in the same old compost pile... and so on and so on... Amen!”

When he was done, the tall, thin man and the other passenger climbed into the jeep, at which point Kosta said: “Your speech was tops!”

“I can do better,” replied the tall, thin man, “but what do you say to a bunch of idiot kids?”

“Idiot kids? Did you say idiot kids?” asked Kosta, adding, “a little earlier you admired them, like the soldiers they are, and wanted to send them back to the front line...”

“Skasmos re pusti! (Shut up you homo!) If I hear you talk to me like that again, it will not be the front line for you, it will be the madhouse! Katalaves? (Do you understand?) Skazmos! (Shut up!). Now, start the engine and drive back to Elbasan,” the tall, thin man angrily interrupted.

Kosta turned the key and the engine started coughing and stopped. He turned the key again and the same thing happened.

“What’s wrong with you? You were working fine a minute ago!” Kosta remarked, talking to the jeep.

“I told those idiots in Grazhdano (a village in Prespa where DAG Headquarters was located) that we can’t win the war with old American jeeps. I told them twice!” said the tall, thin man and turned towards the soldiers he had just called kids. But the lines were already dismissed and they had left the meadows and were heading for their tents. “Eh, pedia! Pedia! (Hey, boys! boys!) he yelled out loud but no one turned. The tall, thin man yelled several more time but without success. Then he turned and screamed at Kosta: “How many times have I told you to look after the jeep, eh?”

Kosta shrugged his shoulders and quietly said: “Well, a little push may get it started again...”

Both officers got off the jeep and started pushing it. The jeep slowly moved forward, jumped over some bumps and Kosta turned the key. The engine turned, coughed several times and quit again.

“Push harder, harder...” yelled Kosta while keeping his feet under the seat. “A little harder, push harder, we need more speed, more speed! Faster! Faster!” At that moment he turned the key and shifted into second gear, and just as the engine began to hum Kosta turned it off. “I told you comrades to push harder, we need to go faster. You heard the engine start when you pushed hard, right? Now do it again and this time push even harder...”

The jeep rolled onto the road and they stopped pushing. The tall, thin man brushed the dust off his hat, wiped the sweat off his brows, spit to the side and began to curse and swear. He then said: “I should have transferred you yesterday like I thought, but then I said to myself ‘let him stay’. The moment we arrive in Elbasan I will telephone the Second Column

commander and ask him to send me another driver. And you, Kosta, are going to the front!”

Kosta turned, spread his arms wide open and slowly, squeezing every word, said: “Screw UNDRRA for sending us this junk... Why are they enslaving our people, I don’t know. This is a tin can and not a jeep worthy of officers!”

“What are we going to do now, eh?” asked the tall, thin man.

“Come back and try pushing again,” said Kosta. “Push the jeep up the hill and then we will turn it around let it roll downhill and pick up speed on its own...”

“You want us to push you all the way up there?” asked the other officer whose name Kosta had not heard, and whose face he had only seen for the first time yesterday in the Elbasan hospital.

“You have fattened your asses here in Albania, you parasites, it’s about time you do some real work,” Kosta said to himself, getting upset while watching the two wiping their sweat with clean, white handkerchiefs. “All you do is travel, eat and lie to people with your stupid slogans. My wish is to see how you would do at the front...” Kosta said to himself again.

“Come comrades; push if you want to get to Elbasan during daytime today. I am sure the engine will start. Let us get some height and the jeep will roll down on its own. Ready? Push now!” Kosta called out and then stepped on the brake. “Again, a little bit more!” But as soon as Kosta released the brake the jeep rolled back to its original position on the road and stopped. They pushed again but Kosta had to lean on the brake so that the jeep would not roll back. They pushed hard but all they did was make marks on the road with their sliding boots.

The other officer stopped pushing, stood up and said: “Screw this! I just split my pants, look!”

The tall, thin man wiped his hands and, as if it was nothing, said: “Don’t worry; you will get new pants in Elbasan. Come and push a bit more now, maybe this devil will start.”

Step by step, they pushed hard and the jeep inched its way uphill on the Prevol hillside.

“Now let us turn the jeep around and attack the downhill comrades!!!” shouted Kosta, holding his feet under the seat. “A little more, a little more and victory will be ours...” said Kosta while laughing quietly.

“Enough!” said the tall, thin man. “Kosta, get off the jeep, come down here and see if you can repair the engine. My comrade here and I will go and see the commander in Prenies. After you repair it, come and pick us up. Do it as soon as possible!”

“Go comrades, I will do my best to fix it as soon as possible,” replied Kosta.

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 18

“Good day...” Kirche greeted the men. “I was running, that’s why I am like this...”

Are you tired?” asked Pando, and before Kirche had a chance to answer he added: “Let us sit then. What do say Numo?”

“Let us sit...” replied Numo as they looked for a place to sit on the rocks.

“I see you all the time. You usually sit down at the side of the meadow right? And I thought, once the exercises were completed I would come and join you. I saw you early this morning but I did not notice when you left. Then I thought to myself, who knows when I will see them again,” concluded Kirche.

After they sat down, Numo put his crutch down and asked Kirche: “What did those guys in the jeep tell you?”

“The tall guy boasted a lot. He said that we were like eagles, falcons and some other kinds of birds and that we were ready to go to the front and surpass our fathers and brothers who sacrificed their lives in Gramos and Vicho. He also said that he had received strict orders not to send us back even though, with great pleasure, he had performed another great job for the revolution in not sending us to the battlefields. However, he said we needed to be educated. And did you know that yesterday they sent teachers? They came from Suk. One has one eye and is partially deaf and the other is missing a leg. They gave us reading material from ‘Nepokoren’ and ‘Nova Makedonija’. They said that we will soon start learning to read and write and each one of us will receive half a pencil in a notebook, like they gave us when we were in Romania...” concluded Kirche.

“What? What did you say?” asked Pando. “What were you doing in Romania?”

“Didn’t I tell you that we were in Romania?” responded Kirche with a surprised look on his face.

Pando patted him on the head and said: “No, son, you have not told us about that...”

Kirche adjusted himself. His eyes were gleaming like those of a child, not of a soldier. His face was bare and pale with no beard stubble. He looked lost in his shabby uniform, too large for his body frame. He broke a piece of cornbread and for a long time picked at it with his long fingers. “I did tell you about how Marianthi left the place, right?”

“Yes! That you did tell us,” replied Pando.

“And about Giorgi? I never did tell you about Giorgi? Did I?” inquired Kirche.

Pando indicated “no” with his head.

“I told you about the ‘sands’ outside of Durres, right? Giorgi was there. A skinny, pale, exhausted looking boy. He was from Kostur Region but I don’t know from which village. He had a large head and his hair was cut short down to the skin. He constantly wore woolen home-made socks torn up at the feet with his toes sticking out. Wherever he went he was always alone. He walked around with his fists under his chin. He had wide eyes, wet with tears and he sobbed a lot. His lips constantly trembled and he was afraid of everything. No one ever saw him laugh. He never ran like the others to greet the locomotive and the train cars on the railway. He was always alone and there was always fear in his eyes and face. He never laughed and was never mischievous like his peers and the other children. It was not good that such a person was among us. We teased him, pushed him around and laughed and made fun of him. He sat there leaning against the wall and cried and cried: ‘Mamo! Mamo! They will beat me...’

He always kept pebbles in his pocket. When someone came close he quickly pulled out one, raised his arm and loudly, while crying, threatened to throw it at them saying: ‘Go away! Go away or I will hit you with this...’ Most of the time he defended himself by spitting at the kids who teased him. When Marianthi first saw him doing this she said: ‘This boy is crazy and should be sent to a sanatorium.’

Oh, how Giorgi cried when they dragged him to a wagon to take him away. He kept yelling, ‘I don’t want to go, I don’t want to go!’ and then they slammed the door on him. Then when they opened the big barbed wire doors for the wagon to leave, hundreds of children came out and waited, leaning on the barbed wire fence. Poor Giorgi was crying and screaming as loud as he could. Then we heard the slow steps of horse hooves clapping on the uneven cobblestone road and he was gone.

We almost forgot about Giorgi, until late November when we were told that we were leaving for Romania. One afternoon a wagon arrived in the big yard and stopped in the middle of the square. I heard someone yell out: ‘crazy Giorgi is back’. We then all ran and gathered around the carriage but Giorgi did not want to come out. The wagon driver had to drag him out. He grabbed him firmly by the shoulders and pulled him out kicking and screaming. He kept yelling: ‘No! I don’t want to be here! I don’t want to be here!’ And who can blame him after how we treated him. It seems he was treated better where Marianthi had sent him,” concluded Kirche.

At this point Kirche stopped talking, bent his head forward and stared at the long grass in front of him. He then pulled up his socks to his knees and remained silent and expressionless, his face changed and he looked angry and cold. Pando and Numo looked at each other.

After a few moments of silence, Kirche continued. “Well, who knows? The way we lived with Marianthi, we could have been the ones living in a madhouse and not Giorgi.

After Giorgi was pulled out of the wagon, one of the ‘mothers’ approached him and managed to calm him down. The next day when we climbed into the trucks, an Albanian driver took Giorgi into his cab. While we endured the cold and wind in the open back of the trucks, Giorgi traveled in the closed, warm and comfortable cab with the driver. We arrive in Elbasan in the evening. The entire truckload of us slept in one room, some on the floor and others on benches. There were no beds. We left at dawn the next day and after some distance from the city the trucks stopped. There were many, many people standing on the road and many others were arriving from the top of the hill from several houses. Many were lame with only one leg braced on crutches or leaning on one another. Some had bandages on their heads and bodies. Some had empty sleeves... The road was filling with people. They went from truck to truck, shouting and crying. We were crying too... Did you know that?” concluded Kirche.

“Yes, Kirche! I know that!” replied Numo. “Those people were our people, wounded partisans in the hospital...”

“Then a lame man came down and started yelling and cursing at the people in an attempt to get them off the road,” continued Kirche. “But still the people limped their way there and continued to cry, yell and gather on the road all around us shouting: ‘Goodbye! Have a safe trip!’ and so on.

After the trucks had left and went around the bend, I counted twenty five of them. And then after exiting a tunnel, even before we had a chance to wipe our tears and stop sobbing, we heard a woman’s voice screaming: ‘They are coming!!! They are coming!!!’

Then suddenly the entire road was mobbed with people. It was like a wild torrent, a flood of women wearing black yelling, screaming, crying, calling out names, raising a cloud of dust while running, attempting to overtake the trucks. It was madness. All we could hear was ‘e-e-e-e-e’ and intermittent sounds of names.

It was names, names, names, names, being called out with crying, love, hope, pain, passion and eyes filled with tears. There was no joy in any of the voices.

‘E-e-e-e-e!!!’ is all that was heard, rising and falling as the trucks sped by the women, but all my ears could hear was: ‘Kirche-e-e-e-e!!!’

Some children inside the trucks started crying and yelling. I heard a boy in the truck ahead of us call out: ‘Mamo!’ Then we heard a reply from one of the women yelling: ‘Mitre! Is that you?’ Then we all started yelling ‘Mamo! Mamo! Mamo!’ We stood up and started yelling, shouting and waving our arms around: ‘Mamo!!! Mamo!!!...’ But all I could see were strangers. My sister grabbed me by my shirt and, while in tears, asked: ‘Kirche, do you see our mother? Do you see her? Call her Kirche, call her...’ I made a funnel with my hands and called out: ‘Mamo! Mamo! Mamo!’ again and again as I watched the women run and jostle their way

past one another shoving and pushing. But in the storm of cries I did not hear my mother's reply. My sister begged me again to do it so I did. Then she grabbed me by my waist and said: 'Kirche, our mother is not here is she?!'

I climbed onto the roof of the cab and again I made a funnel with my hands and started screaming at the top of my voice: 'Mamo! Mamo! Mamo!' Then I stopped and carefully looked into the madly dashing crowd of women that looked like a forest of black, but still I could not see my mother..."

Kirche's voice suddenly broke. He placed his hand in front of his eyes, seeming like he was blocking the light, bowed his head down slowly and began to snuffle. When Pando heard him swallow hard he gently grabbed Kirche's chin, looked him in the eyes and said: "Raise you head soldier..."

Kirche took a long time to recover. While doing so, he dug a ditch in the soil with his foot, knocking the soil to the side and angrily crushing the dried up clumps. He sighed and sniffled a few times and then suddenly raised his head, turned, looked at the top of Prenies, raised his arm, pointed and, through a sob, whispered: "The bend, on the road up there. Do you see it?"

"Yes!" replied Pando.

"Well, that's where they separated the people from trucks and... and us from the people... We were driven uphill while the women and elders were left behind on the road... They were all going nuts. The women were waving their black head kerchiefs and the elderly men were waving their hats at us. Some people covered their eyes with their hands so the others would not see their tears. The trucks passed by fast without stopping and continued to travel fast around the sharp turns while many of us were standing, weeping and shouting for our mothers. Unfortunately, those down there could not hear us because our screaming and crying was overpowered by the roar of the truck engines climbing the hill... When we climbed to the top of the hill, I noticed that all the surrounding mountains and hills were covered in snow. There was snow on the road and on the meadow where the trucks stopped. They told us not to talk so we kept quiet. Men in military uniforms kept pacing back and forth. Someone said this was the border. The uniformed men were carrying Russian and German made weapons. Further over in the woods I saw freshly dug trenches. More and more trucks kept arriving and parking in the meadows. Two officers were talking to each other and showing something with their hands. Then I heard someone say in Macedonian: "Turn around and take the children!"

The trucks began to move, turning left then right, backwards and then forward. A cold wind blew from the other side of the hill and snow began to fall. The wind blew snow in our eyes and entered our bodies through the wide shirt sleeves and collars.

We all stood in line as each truck approached and stopped. 'One, two, three...' and when twenty were counted the officer yelled: 'Go!'

The last child left to climb onto the Yugoslav truck was my brother Kosta. He yelled, started crying and extended his arms toward me, but before I could reach him, two soldiers raised the lift gate, shut it and the truck left.

'Wait, wait!' I yelled out, but no one could hear me. The falling snow obstructed my view and I was separated from my brother fairly quickly. I had no idea where they were taking us. And as such, they transferred us from the Albanian to the Yugoslavian trucks and we immediately left. Snow kept falling like thick blankets, the wind picked up and it became very cold. I held my sister Lenka in my lap and covered half of her with my wide shirt. She kept hanging on to me tight with her head snuggled under my chin, shivering and trembling in the cold. At one point she broke the silence and asked: 'Kirche, why was our mother not with the other mothers?' but before I had a chance to reply she asked: 'Why did they take Kosta away from us? And what are we going to tell mother about Kosta when we see her?' I had no answers for her so I said nothing but she continued to ask questions until she fell asleep.

As the trucks moved downhill I noticed the snowfall had subsided but the wind had become fiercer. The children huddled together for warmth and kept blowing on their fingers and rubbing their hands to keep them from freezing. I noticed we had arrived at the bottom of a hill and were driving horizontally. Soon we passed through a town and immediately we began to follow the lakeside. We were in another town. The truck suddenly turned and took a straight road but then shortly after that it started going uphill, driving over snow. The forest was covered in snow. At the top of the hill two trucks had stopped by the side of the road. The drivers were walking around looking at their vehicles. We slowly passed by them and I saw a pile of children sitting stiff in the corner of one of the broken down trucks. I noticed Kosta was among them. I called out but nothing. He could not hear me and I could not hear him even if he replied. The road was full of dangerous curves and snow was piling high. We too were covered in snow but we did not shake it off. It somehow felt warm, being blanketed by the snow. We passed by another town but we did not stop. We started going uphill again and now we could see the grey clouds above us. Then after descending down the next hill and taking a sharp curve we suddenly stopped. I brushed the snow off my face, raised my head and looked. I saw two men wearing black uniforms, armed with machine guns and side arms, speak to the driver. One looked inside the truck and quickly called the other. The other looked too and I heard him say to the driver: 'Get out!'

The driver got out. A boy that was crouching near me raised his head and immediately whispered: 'Kirche, they are policemen and they speak Macedonian!'

‘Children!’ one of the policemen yelled out. ‘Are you cold?’

‘Yeah?’ several of them were heard saying in shaky voices.

‘You idiot!’ we heard one of the policemen say and then ‘slap’ the driver. ‘I am asking you, you idiot, why did you have to freeze the children, eh? Couldn’t you at least cover the truck with a tarp? Now you ox, march and cover the truck quickly and drive the children to the Bitola train station!’

The drivers quickly covered the back of the truck with a tarp. But before it was completely covered I stuck my head out and saw a sign which read ‘Kazani’. We were off again as the truck bounced along a cobblestone road. The boy who was sitting next to me adjusted himself and again whispered: ‘You heard them. Policemen speaking Macedonian! Wow!’

Finally we were free from the freezing wind but it was still cold. The snow that fell on us began to freeze... It was dark when we entered the city and drove on the narrow streets. In the distance we could see smoke rising. We took a turn and stopped. The driver opened the lift gate on the back of the truck and said: ‘Children! Get off the truck and go straight into the railcar!’

I could barely stand. My legs were stiff. Men and women came over and carried us to the railcar. It was warm there. I sat by the window and Lenka sat next to me. Two young women dressed in white entered the compartment. They were carrying large pitchers from which they poured hot milk in mugs and stuck them under our noses to warm us.

‘Milk, young man, milk. It’s warm. Take it...’ one of them said to me. I was so tired that I was neither thirsty nor hungry; all I wanted to do was sleep. I looked at the other children and they too looked very sleepy. The young ladies in white finally left. Then I heard a voice say: ‘Did you feed them?’

‘They didn’t want any milk. They wanted to sleep...’ replied one of the young women in white.

I must have fallen asleep because after that all I remember is hearing a voice and when I opened my eyes it was daytime and the sun was shining. I got up and wanted to open the window but it was stuck. I tried the door but it was locked. I went to the other side of the car and looked outside. I saw a sign reading ‘SKOPJE’.

They soon switched us to another track and after they had sprinkled us with DDT on the chest, shoulders, pants and everywhere else the train started moving. Where were we going? Nobody told us. We spent the longest time waiting in stations. The train stopped before sunset. We were told to get off and cross to the other side of the tracks. Before long we boarded another train. The sign on the low white building above the door read ‘Vranie’. I remember the names of all the places we had been. We boarded a train with Red Cross markings on the cars. Everyone was given

a bed and as such every day and every night we spent traveling was in luxury. Most of the time we spent waiting and watching trains pass us by..." concluded Kirche.

"And your brother Kosta?" asked Numo.

"I don't know what happened to him... We traveled a long time. One night, after a long wait at a train station, whose name I did not catch, they transferred us to cars with wooden seats. After the train pulled out of the station, the men and women looking after us asked: 'Shti romaneshti? Kunti kiama?' (Do you understand Romanian? What is your name?)," replied Kirche.

"So, they took you to Romania?" remarked Pando.

"Yes, to Oradea. We stayed there in a hotel for two months. Four to six children slept on one bed. We were not allowed to go outside. The women looking after us, our 'mothers' were with us, of course. Only one of the mothers left the children and went to Skopje, where she stayed with some relatives. The other 'mothers' said to her:

'One day, when all this is over, what are you going to say to the mothers and fathers of these children you have abandoned? They trusted you when they put their children in your hands so that they could fight in the front, risking their lives for your freedom...' That's what the other women were saying to her but she left anyway. Mother Evgenia took over her children. And there was no day when mother Evgenia did not gather us together. She gathered us all together usually after dinner in the hallway of the hotel, away from the noise and taught us things we needed to learn and remember. She also made sure that we were healthy and free of lice. She often asked each one of us questions: 'Kole, who are the people in our village who live at Dolnoto Malo?'

And Kole would go off like a gun: 'Nanovtsi, Damovtsi, Ristovtsi, Shishkovtsi...'

Then mother Evgenia would ask Riste: 'Riste, who lives in Gornoto Malo?' and Riste would rhyme off: 'Pandovtsi, Petrevtsi, Nakovtsi...'

'Mare, tell us the names of the fountains in our village' she would ask and Mare, without pausing would say: 'Nova cheshma, Labrova cheshma... Izvorcheto, Kochanka, Pod lipkite...'

'Okay, enough Mare. Now it's Kirche's turn. Kirche tell us...' and as such we kept alive in our memories all the places in our village; the fields, vineyards, etc., who from our village joined DAG, the names of the old people, what trees and flowers grow there, etc. After that she would tell us stories about the old times in our village and in Kostur Region. She told us everything she knew and had learned from the old people. After telling us stories like that, which warmed our hearts and made us feel good inside, it was hard separating us from her. Being told such stories just before bedtime made us think of our parents, of the various places in our village

and we couldn't help but watch the faces of our people in the dark of night and in our dreams.

In January they moved us into a large monastery. It was located outside of town. It would appear that they had expelled the monks and nuns and placed us in large rooms with bunk beds, accommodating over twenty children per room. Here we continued to learn, but just Macedonian. Our teacher was a tall man wearing eye glasses. His name was Kosta. He had an old typewriter and spent his nights copying information from an old book containing Macedonian folk songs. Four children had to share one copy of a page. We learned to read from those pages.

While we were there they gutted the church belonging to the monastery and turned it into a club. In place of the altar they put a stage with red curtains. First to do plays were the Greek children. We followed. And while they went on stage, making fools of themselves, I stared up at the ceiling. And high up there... there was an entire world; living things which I had never seen before. The teacher told me they were lions, elephants, tigers, camels, etc. The painting was very well drawn with living colours. The sky, the clouds, the empty space, the soldiers, the man carrying the cross on his back, the trees, the rocks, and a variety of plants and flowers were all drawn beautifully. The scene looked nice, very nice, especially when the sun was setting. The sun's rays illuminated the great scene, bringing life to the colours. The painting was a miracle. It seems it survived the gutting because it was high up on the ceiling out of reach. All other paintings on the walls of the church were destroyed.

When it warmed up a little we started going out to visit the large monastery garden and walk in the park. We used to go far down as far as the monastery cemetery. The first day we went out I heard a locomotive whistle. So one day, while the others were playing ball, I snuck through the fence and, by listening for the train whistle, I found the train station. I then realized this must be the track that brought us here. So if I were to follow these rails I would end up in Bitola. We did come from Bitola to Oradea on rail. So, if I followed the trucks I would eventually end up in Bitola. There, in Bitola, I would ask how to get home. And off I went..." concluded Kirche.

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 19

“Not you again!” Numo yelled at Kuze when he saw him sneaking up on him.

“Hold your horses man, don’t jump to conclusions... I came here to tell you that someone is looking for you. He asked me if I knew a one-legged man named Numo Damovski, so I kept thinking to myself... I am sure it’s the guy who told me off and called me an idiot when I told him not to give that child tobacco... So I immediately rushed here to help out the man...” replied Kuze.

“What man?” asked Numo in a casual tone of voice.

Kuze turned, looked towards the upper part of Prenies and said: “The driver of those comrades...”

“Get lost asshole!” Numo yelled and raised his crutch threatening to hit Kuze with it.

“Don’t call me an asshole and lower your crutch. If it wasn’t the driver of those comrades I wouldn’t have looked for you!” Kuze replied angrily, clinching his fingers and making a fist.

“You are saying the driver of your comrades is looking for me? Why? Do you know?” inquired Numo.

“He didn’t tell me why. He just asked me politely: ‘Find Numo Damovski and bring him to me dead or alive!’ that’s what he said. And here, as you can see, I am kindly telling you that he is looking for you. Why? It seems that only he knows,” replied Kuze.

Numo stood up, pressed his crutch under his arm, shook the grass off his pants and said: “Let’s go, lead the way to the driver of your comrades...”

They left. Kuze led and Numo followed tapping with his crutch on the cobblestone road with each step. Kosta, the driver, appeared from the opposite side carrying rolls of paper and a few steps later they came face to face. They looked at each other in silence. Kosta dropped the rolls of paper in front of Kuze’s feet and said: “Take these and quickly nail them, glue them and hang them on the walls. Ask others to help you. Now go!”

“Kosta, is that you?” Numo asked quietly after Kuze left.

“Numo?” replied Kosta quietly, putting his fingers to his lips, and said: “Pretend you don’t know me. You are alive, you are alive, Numo! Iovan told me you were here. He is in the hospital. Do you remember Iovan?”

“Of course I do!” replied Numo as memories of the man in uniform, with whom he had spent years, began to flood his mind. He remembered Iovan well, how could he not remember him, they were friends since childhood.

“Kosta?” Numo asked again quietly. “You are alive too. And what has happened to Iovan, which hospital is he in?”

“He is in Elbasan, in the hospital there... But don’t worry about him Numo, he is okay. Calm down but don’t extend your hand to me, just listen and do what I tell you. That tall guy over there thinks you stole his hand gun. He asked for permission from the Prenies commander to search you. If you have the gun, please get rid of it, throw it in the bushes. Right now they are watching us from the window. Go in the bush, toss the gun and I will take it from there. The tall guy is constantly threatening. He said if he found a gun on you, he would court-martial you and send you to the madhouse. So, please, do as I tell you and walk in front of me...” advised Kosta.

Numo did as he was asked and then asked: “How are the boys from our squad?”

“Only a few of us are left. Some were killed, some were wounded and are now lying in hospital beds in Suk... Our commander, the one who boasted a lot, was killed by a grenade. So many young men and women lost their lives, Numo... It is so unfair... Toss the gun now...” ordered Kosta.

Numo slowed his pace, turned his head and said:

“Don’t think that I am afraid of the tall guy and that I tremble in fear if I have to go in front of a military court or to the madhouse. I am not afraid of any of that. I have another gun hidden in the straw in the horse stables. But please tell me, is it true that they are forming positional battalions and accepting lame people like me?” asked Numo.

“Go slow, Numo... Yes, it is true... They are recruiting one-eyed and one-legged people who can shoot... Are you thinking of enlisting?” asked Kosta.

“That’s why I am asking. But how do I get there, to the designated place? How do I contact the recruiters?” asked Numo.

“The tall guy is in charge of those matters...” replied Kosta.

“Oh yeah? He is, eh?” whispered Numo. “In that case, I am not tossing the gun...”

“Stop, stop your nonsense!” Kosta interrupted, grabbed Numo by the hand and said: “Please stop and listen... Do you really want to go to the front line?”

Numo slowed his pace, turned his head and said: “What else would you expect me to do? Sit here and rot in these barracks and horse stables? Sit here, breathe the red dust and burn in this heat? What do you think I should do? Maybe you think it suits me to wander around in Prenies or maybe you think I belong in a madhouse? Or do you think it is my destiny to limp around like this on one leg? You did tell me they recruit one-legged men who can shoot, right? Did you forget that I can hold a gun? Let me say this, Kosta, I have been pacing up and down these cobblestones mornings and evenings hoping that one day one of these drivers that pass

by here would stop and take me away. You are doing okay driving a jeep. It doesn't rain on you, you sleep indoors, you don't have to freeze and your portion of food is always full... You are almost like a dog, Kosta..."

"Stop! Enough! That's enough!" interrupted Kosta. "We each struggle in our own way..."

"Catering to the tall guy? Of course! Someone has to do that job too... but I couldn't picture it would be you? I knew you as a different person. I knew you as a fearless person who would run up and toss a grenade into a bunker. I knew you as a person who would run first in the front line and jump over barbed wires... And now I see Kosta the servant, serving a..." but before Numo could finish his sentence, Kosta interrupted violently and said: "I am no one's servant! Least of all that sniveler's. It's not the way you think. Those orders were given to me against my will... I had no choice in the matter..."

"No choice?" interrupted Numo. "You always have a choice!" and continued to walk ahead with difficulty, but surefooted.

"Why are you so angry at me and blame me for all these things, Numo?" asked Kosta.

"Forgive me Kosta. My anger is making me stupid. I have some unfinished business with the tall guy and it kills me to see you with him. His presence here disgusts me. Should this not be the fruit of our dreams, our desires and beliefs? But what freedom have we brought to these people here? And who here can assure me that tomorrow our people will return to their ancestral homes happy and free? Why did this happen to us? No, I don't need an answer from you or from those who occupy high positions. In these times those who ask questions and those who answer them equally respond to betrayal. So it is easier not to respond... Look!" Numo pointed with his crutch. "Look, Kuze is putting up posters. Let's see what they say."

"You go ahead and look," said Kosta. "I have seen enough of them. They are plastered all over Koreshtata in Prespa, on the walls in hospitals, on beech tree trunks and on oaks and pines on Vicho. I have seen enough of them..."

"They are aimed at whom?" Numo interrupted.

"...at those who dig, carry stones, logs and build bunkers to..." but before Kosta could finish telling him, Numo interrupted and whispered: "Wait!"

The two men stood in front of a large red poster and stared at a young man and woman in DAG uniforms with automatic rifles in their hands and behind them stood mountains, bunkers and explosions, and under them and over them, written in big letters, was the slogan: "The enemy will never take Vicho!"

Kuze stood to the side and marveled at the poster. He then said: "Look at them! They are heroes!"

“The only thing that’s missing, Kuze, is you between them!” replied Numo.

“Oh, come on Numo! Can’t you say anything good? Can’t you see that I am doing what I can? Look!” Kuze extended his fingers, “I hit myself with the hammer putting up these posters. Those in the administration must be idiots. You can’t hammer these tiny nails with such a large hammer. Those fools gave me a hammer for large nails. They think a nail is a nail and you can nail it with any hammer... But the posters are beautiful, aren’t they? A while ago, when an old man asked me what they were and I explained, he said: “We had no such things in my time during the Ilinden Uprising. Is this some sort of flag, eh?” That stupid old man thinks the poster is a flag. Just look at it man... are you blind?...” concluded Kuze.

“Come on Kuze, keep nailing,” said Numo. “They are calling us to go to battle. And you, Kuze, by doing this, you are calling us to go to battle, understand?”

Kuze went to the next barrack and began to nail another poster. An old man went over to him and asked: “What is this?”

“It’s a call to battle,” replied Kuze while holding several nails in his lips. “It’s a call to battle and I am calling you to go to battle. Do you understand?”

Numo and Kosta turned around and headed towards the administration office. When they arrived at the office door they heard the tall guy’s voice. He said: “Too bad! Too bad we didn’t think of it before. I would personally have made arrangements with our Albanian colleagues. They would have certainly provided us with complete instruments. What a pity... Imagine a brass band playing marches here in Prenies... and not only in Prenies. I would have taken it to the hospitals and to Suk... and wherever we have refugee camps.”

Kosta knocked on the office door and, without waiting for an answer, opened it and walked in. Numo followed behind.

The tall guy adjusted himself and said: “What a surprise. Instead of us looking for you, you came to us. Did he come on his own or did you have to drag him here Kosta?”

Numo hit the floor with his crutch, stood straight, raised his head and looked ahead, and in military style said: “Machine gunner Numo Damovski reporting for duty Sir! I want to volunteer for the front line Sir!” Numo paused for a second to swallow and clear his throat when everyone in the office stood up. Numo pressed his crutch firmly, leaned on it and said: “I want to be transferred to the positional battalions... When should I report to the designated place, Sir?”

The silence was disturbed only by a fly pounding on the glass window trying to get out. The tall guy stood up, took a step forward and said: “Machine gunner, go to your cabin and wait for us to call you. Bravo,

palikari! Levendi! I will send you with the first group. And you, Kosta, what have you done with the jeep? Have you fixed it?"

"I had it fixed an hour ago. If you are ready, we can go," replied Kosta.

Numo left the office. There was no wavering in his step which is typical of people with one leg. He was surefooted. His wooden leg somehow beat the cobblestones a little harder today. When he came close to the barracks he looked around. All the walls were covered with red posters. They were all calling him to battle. And down in the meadow near the ovens, two squads were forming. The men marched on the grass, on the dusty road and on the cobblestone alleys. Their footsteps were thunderous and youthful: "To battle, to battle, to battle, Macedonians we will go!..."

The young people in the posters are beckoning us to go to battle in our old, worn, torn, long and wide pre-war Czech uniforms. We are going to battle!

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 20

Numo and Pando met after sunset. They sat under the eaves of the horse stables and stared up at the bare and rocky hill. From there they could hear the shouting of people running after the trucks. This was the first time they stayed away from the road.

“You said you are going?” Pando said, breaking the silence.

“Well, I wasn’t joking, if that’s what you mean? I am going... What other choices are there for me? There at least I know what I will be doing. I spent my entire afternoon with Kosta and I learned a lot of things. What are we doing sitting around here Pando? Nothing! Kosta said if they don’t destroy us after this Gramos offensive they will launch another one. Then they will also attack Vicho. This is because those up high on our side decided to fight on fronts. Now they need more fighters. That is why they plastered all those posters everywhere. They say, “The enemy will never take Vicho!” But what if the enemy does take Vicho? You know that that will mean the end for us Macedonians, Pando...” concluded Numo.

Pando kept silent while he puffed on his cigarette and looked high in the sky, turning his head to look at the mountains. Above them shone a pale, sliver of the moon. As he looked at the hill where the road curves, he noticed beams of lights appear. A column of trucks was approaching. Pando counted the lights as they passed.

“What number was the last one?” Pando quietly asked.

“What did you say?” inquired Numo.

“Look up at the curve... How many times have we counted these trucks by their lights? And always at the same curve in the road... Now I am beginning to question on what kind of curve in the road are we finding ourselves? And, as you said, if they take Vicho then on what kind of curve in the road will we be standing? And where will this road lead us?” said Pando, putting down his cigarette on a stone and asking: “Isn’t it time for you to prepare for the road?”

“What is there to prepare? I just have to strap and tighten the belts on my leg, grab my crutch under my arm and I will be ready to go. I don’t need a coat, a hat, or a blanket...” replied Numo.

“I have two coats and some undergarments. Take something,” offered Pando.

“Where did you get them?” asked Numo.

“They were left behind by those lying up there.” pointing to the cemetery, “I took them before others had a chance to snap them up. I will go get them and bring them here. You wait here,” said Pando, leaving.

A few minutes later Pando was back with a bag in his hand. He put the bag down and after he sat down, he said: “Here I have two coats and some undergarments. I also have some clothes belonging to my son who died in the hospital in Elbasan. Take them, Numo, you will need them.”

“Thank you, Pando, but I will not be taking anything with me. Didn't I tell you I won't need anything other than a bunker, a machine gun, two or three boxes of ammunition, some bread and a pitcher of water? And now you are giving me clothes. Why?...” asked Numo.

“At least take the sweater. It's made of wool and it belonged to my son. Take it!” replied Pando, removing the sweater from the bag and holding it in his trembling hands while looking at it. “Take it... as if you were my own son... it will keep you warm and it will ease my pain, maybe. Every time I look at it I am reminded of my son not coming back... and I know he will not be coming back, so please take it... If you don't need it then give it to someone who does. I have seen so many in the Elbasan hospital walking around barefoot and naked. Some of the young fighters used to tell me that they went to battle in winter like that..., barefoot and naked... Take it.”

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 21

Before dawn Numo entered the cabin where Pando was sleeping. He quietly passed by the people sleeping there and gently touched Pando on the shoulder with his crutch. He said: “Pando, hey Pando... wake up...”

Pando uncovered his head, looked at Numo, barely recognizing him in the dark, got up and they went outside.

“What’s up?” Pando asked.

“It’s time...” replied Numo. “About half an hour ago they came to my cabin, woke me up and asked me to report to the designated place where a truck is waiting to take me away.”

There was a visible sign of bitterness, helplessness, pain, anxiety, suffering and torture in Pando’s tear-filled eyes. “So, you’re really going, eh...” Pando blurted, stretching out his words, followed by a long silence. “What can I say...” Pando again blurted out. “Nothing that I can say matters... The burden you accepted you must carry alone. The abuse too, Numo. They grow like moss in all of us... We have said so many farewells, Numo, that we have worn out our mouths. We constantly say goodbye and we constantly send people away... Well, goodbye Numo... Have a safe trip and be careful out there.”

“Oh, stop with the ‘goodbye’, the ‘thank you’ and the ‘be careful’...” replied Numo.

They hugged and Pando’s shoulders began to tremble. Someone passing by whispered: “Let’s go, they are waiting for us. We must go now before the people wake up.”

Hunched slightly forward, leaning hard on his crutch and limping, Numo walked away. At that very moment, as Pando watched Numo walk away, he got a deep feeling of uneasiness. He watched his own fate, Numo’s fate and the fate of all the Macedonian people unfold before his eyes. He saw them all cut down by a sickle and smashed by a hammer. It gave him a bitter feeling deep inside and burdened him with heavy sorrow. Numo took a few steps and stopped. He then turned. And for the first time, since he had come here to Prenies, he smiled. It was a sight Pando had not seen for a long, long time. And for the first time he noticed the wrinkles on Numo’s cheeks and forehead and how much he had aged in such a short time. Behind the smile Pando could sense a serenity in Numo he had never seen before, which sparkled like an explosion and disappeared like the flask of a firefly suddenly lost in the roadside bushes.

Then, as Numo turned away, something new began to grip, squeeze and stab Pando’s chest, something hard and cold. Numo leaned on his crutch and, barely visibly, waved goodbye with his left hand as he walked away. Pando responded by gently nodding his head. Pando then went to the side of the road and waited and watched the trucks disappear behind the second curve. The noise was soon gone too as Pando kept staring into

the distance, watching the dust settle on the trees and on the cobblestone road. Over the hill behind which the trucks had disappeared, the grey colour of the sky began to turn white and come alive with colour. A moment later Prenies assumed its familiar reddish tinge. As Pando was witnessing the birth of a new day he noticed something hanging between two strands of tall grass. It was a cobweb moist with fresh morning dew, shimmering like a string of pearls in the first rays of the morning sun.

People began to quietly come out of their cabins. Soldiers, wearing old Czech khaki uniforms, began to form lines down at the meadow... And so the makings of another working day began to develop in Prenies, full of the usual burdens, bitterness and hardships...

Pando stood at the side of the road with a lump in his throat. He pulled a pouch from his chest pocket, ripped and folded some paper, added some tobacco, roots and herbs to it and curled it into a cigarette. He lit it and took a couple of puffs. He then, at a slow pace, took a stroll uphill. He sat down under a rock near the cemetery, leaned on the rock wall and began to cry...

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 22

The next day Pando met with Kirche.

“I was looking for you yesterday, Sir, but I couldn’t find you anywhere. Where were you?” asked Kirche.

“I sent Numo away and after that I was all alone,” replied Pando.

Kirche did not ask where Numo went... Several of the young men who did volunteer duties during the night saw Numo getting on one of the trucks. One of the young men told Kirche that he saw his one-legged friend leaving.

“And you, Kirche, you never did finish telling me how far you got following the rails? Did you make it to Bitola?” asked Pando.

“Yes I did! I made it all the way to Bitola and a little further, but they caught me and brought me back to the monastery. They did not punish me. Kosta, my teacher, called me into his office and explained to me that we were very far away from home and that I shouldn’t be doing such foolish things. He also said that one day we would be going home but not the way I did it. A week later, in the evening, they gathered us together in the great hall (which earlier was a church). On the stage they had a poster hanging with large letters written in both Macedonian and Greek which read: ‘Oli sta arma, Ola gia ti Niki!’ (All to arms, everything for victory!). Then two men walked in and were followed by a young woman with a disfigured face. The men headed straight for the stage and the woman sat in the second row. One of the men climbed onto the stage and said:

‘Ladies and gentlemen. Here today we have representatives from DAG Headquarters...’ or something like that, I don’t remember the exact words. The woman with the disfigured face then stood up, climbed onto her chair, yelled out a few slogans in honour of DAG and the fighters, and then began to shout: ‘We are ready! We are ready! We are ready!’

The entire hall became excited. We all stood up and started yelling, ‘We are ready! We are ready! We are ready!’ at the top of our voices. The tallest of the three guests then raised his arms and began to wave his hands to stop us from yelling. When we did he said:

‘Dear children of the freedom fighting heroic fathers and mothers...’ He spoke like that for along time, occasionally being interrupted by our yelling ‘We are ready! We are ready! We are ready!’ The woman with the deformed face walked around between the rows and when the man on the stage said something about the struggle or about the leader, she screamed the appropriate slogan and ‘we are ready’ in her screechy voice. ‘Shut up!’ I heard a voice yell from the back of the hall. I turned around and saw one of the mothers, dressed in black, grab the woman with the disfigured face by the shoulders, shove her on a seat, look in her eyes and yell out: ‘Shut up you tramp! Now sit here and don’t stand up again!’ The woman with

the deformed face freed herself from the mother's grip, left the hall, ran up to the front of the stage and shouted:

'Sindrofe! Ego ime prot! Grapse me sindrofe! Ego ime prot!' (Comrade! I am first! Write me up comrade! I am first!)

The tall guy took a ledger from his briefcase, opened it up and set it on the table. He then sharpened a pencil, wrote the disfigured woman's name in the ledger and began to look our way. She, in the meantime, raised her arms up in the air and shouted: 'Boys, boys, what are you waiting for? We are ready!'

We completely disregarded what the mother had done and, one by one, listening to the woman with the disfigured face, we lined up and voluntarily wrote our names in the ledger. In front of us were pictures of Gramos and Vicho, which the tall guy had put there. By watching those images we could hear bombs exploding and machine gun fire. We signed our names shouting slogans and the loudest of them all was 'we are ready to fight now!' We didn't sleep that night. All we did was think about what was said and done in the great hall; the yelling, the yearning to return home and the battle songs. The next day the younger children, the ones two to thirteen years old, found out what had taken place the night before; that the older children would be going to the front!

My sister Lenka ran up to me crying and asked: 'Are you going too, Kirche?' I said: 'Yes! I will be going!' and she said: 'Are you leaving me here alone?' And I said: 'No, you will not be alone. Look how many girls there are here...' She then began to cry even harder, pleading with me not to go: 'Don't go Kirche, don't go. I don't want to be left here alone, without you...'

I didn't know how to calm her down, how to comfort her. I took out my handkerchief and wiped her tears and held her head in my arms. I then undid her hair braids and braided them again three times. I hugged her hard but she still cried until a loud sound came from the speakers: 'Attention! Attention! Volunteers gather in the mess hall! Volunteers gather in the mess hall!'

Lenka put her arms around my neck and would not let go. She held onto me while pleading with me not to go, not with her voice, but by sobbing: 'No Kirche! No my brother! No! Don't go, don't go, don't go...'

But I went anyway... Then, during the night, so the little ones would not see us, all volunteers lined up in four columns. We were all dressed in warm military uniforms and carried our backpacks on our shoulders when we marched on the asphalt. Most of us were from Kostur, Lerin and Voden Regions with a few from Epirus and Thessaly. It seemed like we were pounding the asphalt a little harder with our brand new military boots. My coat was a bit long and I kept stepping on it but I took shorter steps to avoid tripping. I kept up the pace while marching through the city, but then when we suddenly turned I lost my pace and accidentally kicked the

person in front of me. Smarting from the pain he turned, looked at me and said: ‘You bastard, don’t you know how to march, eh?’ And I said: “Why can’t you turn properly, eh?”

We marched to the train station, stopped in front of it and about three minutes later they dismissed the columns one by one and let us board the train. The locomotive was running noisily but we could hear songs coming from the cars. All the children from all Romanian cities were gathered here in Oradea. When they all boarded the train we left.

I heard the tall guy say: ‘We have one thousand, two hundred volunteers and in two days we will be in Berkovitsa (a town in Bulgaria, west of Sofia). There we will pick up more children from Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The Poles, those reactionaries, refused to allow us to recruit volunteers from Poland. A tall, bald Polish guy waving his big hands in front of my eyes said to me...’ I couldn’t hear the rest of what the tall guy said about the bald Polish guy. Also I never saw the young lady with the deformed face, the one that was yelling the loudest about being ready to fight. She was not there with us.

They closed the car doors, the engine blew its whistle and off we went following the tracks which I had followed to Bitola on foot. We continued to travel south at a fast pace. We didn’t have to wait long in stations. Other trains made way for us. We arrived in Berkovitsa on time and spent two days there. After that, in the dark of night, they transferred us from Bulgarian to Yugoslav cars at the border. On our way I saw signs for Kriva Palanka, Kumanovo, Titov Veles, Prilep and... and Bitola. We got off in Bitola. From there it was only an hour’s ride to Kozhani. The same Kozhani I had visited last November.

I remembered the driver and the two policemen. I then looked at myself. I too am now wearing a uniform but it’s not black. The train followed the tracks up and down and around sharp bends over the mountains. The sun was hot and its reflection made the waters shine like mirrors. When we reached the lakeshore the sun was gone. We slowly moved along the tracks, drowning in dust. On our right was the lake and on our left were tall mountains with pointy peaks. We stopped close to the lake.

‘Everyone off the train!’ we heard our leader yell. He was an older man dressed in a military uniform, but without any markings to indicate rank.

We immediately jumped off the cars and took a leak at the side of the road. It was total darkness, you couldn’t see a thing. Our leader was hiding his lit cigarette in the palm of his hand while talking to a senior officer.

We heard someone say, ‘Line up!’ and then he said ‘Quickly!’

We formed a line and waited. The silence was interrupted by waves hitting the lakeshore. There were tall mountains to the left of us and the moon was hiding behind the clouds. We could make out its outline by its

pale light. The reflection of the moon looked like a long, bright tail in the lake, all broken up in bends. The choppy waters were playing tricks with the moon.

‘Attention!’ we heard someone yell.

It seems our leader had forgotten that we were already lined up and standing still. The detachment lined up in front of us began to march. We followed next. At first we marched along a cobblestone road, we then marched along a sandy road and arrived in a field. We then marched uphill and when we entered the forest we were ordered to stop.

‘Gentlemen, we are sleeping here tonight!’ we heard the same voice order.

It was March and the night was cold and wet. I laid half my blanket under me and covered myself with the other half. I lay in the grass and watched the stars until I fell asleep. We were awakened at dawn the next day and gathered inside a church. A young man from Zhelevo yelled out: ‘Hey everyone, we are in Prespa! I know this place. It’s called Goritsa. The mountain on the other side is called Vrba, the mountain to our left is called German Mountain... And the village you see over there is called Rabi, above that is the village German... The village in front of us is called Medovo. Over there are the villages Shtrkovo, Rudari and P’pli ... Gentlemen, we are in Prespa. We have arrived! We have arrived!’

We started training the first day we arrived. We did ordinary exercises like crawling, running, jumping, going under barbed wire fences, tossing pretend grenades and marching. Lots and lots of marching. But they would not let us get near the villages. They wouldn’t let villagers get near us either. We slept in open spaces or in trenches regardless, of whether it was raining or if the weather was good. We also climbed up German mountain and camped there in the outdoors. We usually went there when we practiced with live ammunition. There was no day when enemy aircraft did not fly over us. The airplanes circled over the surrounding villages and over the Prespa Plains, firing their machine guns at anything that moved. Sometime around the middle of April the weather warmed up and in no time at all everything turned green. One evening they lined us up and two DAG officers observed us for a long time. Then they lined us up according to our height. Then they told us that as of today, everyone was to remember their place in line and this is how were to line up from now on...

And, Pando, Sir, we began to do some serious marching, day and night, just marching but at a fast pace.

During the night before April 21st, I remember the date, they gave us new uniforms and automatic rifles. We looked like officers. What joy! Some were even saying that we might see action the next day. That same evening they gave us good food and let us go to bed early. The alarm went off very early the next day! We expected that so none of us undressed or

even removed our shoes before going to bed because we wanted to be ready quickly. The moment the alarm was sounded we formed our lines fast and were ready to march. We passed through Strkovo and then through P'pli where they told us to stop in the woods above the road. We sat there and waited and waited. The sun rose and we could see the surrounding villages. Villagers and DAG fighters passing over Preval were gathering in Orovnik. We watched them assemble in the meadow where a big stage was set up. At about eight o'clock in the morning our leader summoned all the squad commanders and briefly spoke to them. They then assembled us and our leader said:

'Gentlemen! We need to make a special appearance. Today we will go on parade and we will march in front of the leader and the people...'

We heard the squad commanders giving orders. We lined up and waited. Then, suddenly we heard live music roaring with trumpets and drums!

'Echelons forward, march!' we heard the shallow voice of our leader order.

The first few steps we took raised a lot of dust on the road. We started with a free march behind the orchestra, descended down hill and then stopped and formed a new line at the bottom.

'Brigade march!' commanded our leader.

We marched a strong march to the sounds of the DAG Headquarters orchestra. Women wearing black and older men ran over to greet us. We were welcomed as DAG soldiers...

Our leader yelled out: 'Brigade turn, right!'

With our arms clenched around our machine guns we marched exactly as we had been taught. In doing so, we raised a lot of dust on the road and stomped on a lot of grass while keeping our eyes focused on the stage. And there, sitting next to each other, smiling and enthusiastic, applauding and waving were the top leaders...

We completed our march. The orchestra returned, established itself in front of the stage and began to play again. We were ordered 'at ease'. Then the orchestra stopped playing and we heard someone making a speech. Then many others spoke. Only slogans, Pando, Sir, only slogans! The people came over to us, to see this wonderful new DAG army. Then suddenly I heard a woman's voice calling out: 'Kirche!'

I turned around.

'Kirche, my son!' I heard her say again.

'Mamo? Mamo!' I yelled out instinctively.

Oh, Pando, Pando, Sir... Many mothers met their children in Orovnik that day. You would have thought they would be happy to see their sons? No, they were not happy at all. Many started yelling and cursing, Pando, Sir, cursing. They cursed the Party, the leader, our destiny, everything... They threw stones at the officers and at the stage. The old men also cursed

and swore something awful. I wish, Pando, Sir, I had something nice to tell you but there was nothing nice about what happened that day.

I will tell you more about this later, another time. I can't now. My voice is starting to break and I am afraid I might cry... But I will tell you that when my mother asked me where Lenka and Kosta were, I cried. I cried out loudly. And it was not just me who cried, many wept uncontrollably, Pando, Sir... I will tell you more another time, maybe tomorrow or the day after tomorrow..." concluded Kirche.

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 23

Holding the right side of his ass, Iovan limped along the hospital corridor looking through the rooms' open door, winking at the nurses revolving around the wounded.

“Hey, you, holding your ass!” someone yelled from the corner of the room. Iovan looked but there was no one there. Puzzled, Iovan frowned and tightened his lips, wondering where the sound could have come from when suddenly he recognized the voice.

“Kosta! Is that you?” Iovan yelled out. “What are you doing here?”

“What? You don't think I came to visit?” replied Kosta.

“Why are you here, really?” Iovan yelled out.

“Can't you see me? Here I am! Down here! Can you see me now?” said Kosta.

“Yes I can see your ugly mug. Your nose looks like a rotten potato and your face looks like a ball of rags. I can't see your forehead at all. And if there is anything left of you under the covers, I can't see it,” replied Iovan.

“Is there anything under the covers...” replied Kosta, asking the nurse to come over and uncover him. Iovan didn't bother waiting for the nurse and went over and pulled off the blanket. Kosta's entire ribcage was in plaster. His shoulders and left arm were tied with a chain and hanging from the ceiling. The rest of his body was completely naked.

“Is there anything left of me under the covers, eh?” asked Kosta and made an attempt to laugh at his own nakedness.

“How did this happen?” asked Iovan.

“Ask me how I am still alive,” replied Kosta with a tone of concern in his voice. He then asked Iovan to do something for him. He said: “I beg of you, please bring me a bedpan because I will pee myself. I have to pee badly. Please go...”

Iovan came back with the nurse and as the nurse gave Kosta the bedpan she angrily said: “All you do comrade is pee, you should be ashamed of yourself!”

“What?” asked Kosta.

“Never mind her,” Iovan said in a gentle voice and waved the nurse to leave. “Don't worry, I will help you. They wrapped you in so much plaster you can't even find your own...”

“You will help me to pee, but what about other things, eh?” asked Kosta.

“And with whatever else you need,” replied Iovan.

“The tall guy, that bastard, wanted to get to Elbasan fast. So he ordered me to drive as fast as I could and not to worry about wasting fuel. Let the people's government worry about that he said. So, I did as he demanded and then, suddenly, a truck appeared in front of us at a bend. I slammed the brakes and then I saw the tall guy fly over my head. I tried to turn away

but the collision was unavoidable. The truck hit our jeep on the side and turned it over. I was pinned under the steering wheel..." explained Kosta.

"What happened to the tall guy?" asked Iovan.

"He hit his head on a rock and his friend, the other passenger, fell under the front wheel of the truck that hit us," replied Kosta.

"Were they badly injured?" asked Iovan.

"No, they were both killed. They died on impact and they were immediately buried near the road where the accident took place. Now our comrades will remain there forever guarding the road and counting trucks passing by..."

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 24

After Numo's departure Pando was left virtually alone. He spent most of his time on the hill, near the cemetery, and from there he watched the people in the barracks and horse stables roam around and line up in front of the cauldrons. The hardest thing for him to watch was the crowd running down to the road and chase the trucks. During those times Pando covered his ears with his hands so that he couldn't hear the crying, yelling, cursing and loud shrieks. When the trucks left Pando leaned his head on his favoured rock and stared at the sky. More recently he also began to feel Kirche's absence. He could not understand why the boys were not in the meadow doing exercises and why there was no music, songs, or marches. Day by day he became more and more convinced that the boys had been loaded up on trucks and sent to the front to fight. He just could not comprehend how they would be sending children to fight and die, to be torn to pieces by exploding cannon shells and ripped apart by bursts of machine gun fire. When he thought of these things he was afraid to close his eyes because images would flood his mind of trenches with the bodies of the children inside them...

In the last little while Pando and Kirche had become close friends but now that Kirche was gone Pando missed his company, adding to his pain and loneliness. It was hard for Pando to make friends, but when he did make friends, he felt deeply connected to them and protected their friendship. Numo was about the only person in the camp with whom Pando had a deep connection and with whom he was comfortable sharing his troubles. He loved Kirche because Kirche opened his heart and soul to him. Pando often wondered why he cared so much for Kirche? Was it because Kirche was a child who carried the burden of an adult? Or was it because Kirche, from the day they met, sought Pando out as a friend? He also often wondered why, in this huge crowd of people, he did not want to socialize with others who were just as lonely as he was and would have appreciated his company and would have shared their pain and sorrow.

Numo was different. Numo lived in two worlds, in Prenies and in a world where he was inseparable from his friends and loved ones. His thread of the memory was unbreakable and tied far back into his past. In this world Numo felt both pleasure and pain. He was not comfortable living in the world called Prenies and felt himself slowly vanishing as a human.

Pando is now all alone without any friends to comfort him. The only comfort he gets is from his favoured rock on which he leans his head day and night looking at the sky and the mountains. He loses himself watching birds of prey jump off the cracked rocks, located on the mountain peaks, soaring, climbing higher and higher with each circle. He loves watching the eagles fly high and roaming free in the open skies and wide spaces in

total silence. Sitting there thinking of his friends, he envies Numo and loves Kirche.

Someone began to pound on the rail. It was time for dinner. Pando got up on his feet and began to descend down the gentle slope. He noticed the meadow down by the ovens, it was not empty. The boys were back. Pando was in no rush to stand in line in front of the cauldrons. And for the first time in a long time he felt real joy. Kirche was within reach now and Pando was rushing to see him.

Kirche noticed Pando coming and went to intercept him. He then accelerated his pace, jumped over some obstacles and began to run. “Good evening, Pando, Sir” he called out as he got close.

Pando was about to extend his hand and ask Kirche where he had been all this time, but then he remembered that military missions are secret and he did not want to expose Kirche to unwarranted discipline from his commanding officer, especially since Kirche was still wearing his military uniform. “Good evening, Kirche, son” Pando then replied.

“Well, here we are. We got back today from campaigning in the mountains. We acquired three new officers and they will now be with us. Did you hear what happened to the tall guy and his comrade?” asked Kirche.

“No,” replied Pando.

“They were killed on the road. Their jeep was hit by a truck. One of the drivers I met yesterday told us,” explained Kirche. Pando looked surprised.

“Will you be lighting one?” asked Pando.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” said Kirche, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. “Here, this is for you, Pando, Sir..., cigarettes. I saved a pack for you. I said to myself, I am saving this pack for Pando. Please take it, Sir...”

“Thank you, Kirche. Where did you get them?” asked Pando.

“From the military,” replied Kirche.

“The military gave you cigarettes?” Pando asked, surprised.

“Our new commander said that from now on we will be DAG reserves and we will be treated like regular DAG fighters... We will be doing exercises and attending school... All the time I was up there campaigning, I thought I would never see you again. I heard rumours up there that they would be sending us back to Prespa again. But as you can see, they did not send us. One of the drivers told us that the reason they didn’t send us is because many of our parents protested. The protests reached DAG General Headquarters. Apparently the rumour was that, if the children were not sent back to the countries they had come from, the parents would go on strike and would not build trenches and bunkers... That’s what I was told...” replied Kirche.

Pando sat down and stared at Kirche's face. You are still a child, my son, you are still a child, he thought to himself. Kirche noticed him staring and asked: "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Well, Kirche, no offense to you, but all I see is a child in front of me. And please don't be offended by me saying this..." replied Pando.

"My own grandfather said the same thing to me when he saw me in Orovnik. He said, 'Kirche you are a child and those who gave you the clothes you are wearing are crazy! They are mad! They brought our children back, dressed them like that and sent them to battle. What are those sons of bitches trying to do, eradicate us all down to our roots?!' he yelled out at the top of his voice," explained Kirche.

"That's what my grandfather said. That's what many others said. And when we met our parents and relatives in Orovnik we stopped being soldiers and became children again. Our mothers ran through the lines looking for their children. And you know something, Pando, Sir, our mothers thought we were in school being educated while we were in the (Eastern European) countries. Oh, you would not believe how angry and disappointed they were. They could have torn the hearts out of those responsible with their bare hands. But quickly they again separated us from our parents. Our commanders assembled us in the woods during the night and returned us to our former camp near Goritsa. During the night we were caught by a bad storm. I knelt down in the corner of a trench and slept, leaning on my automatic rifle. I dreamt I was with my mother and with my grandfather who constantly annoyed me. I heard him curse saying: 'May those bastards too, who are doing this to us, become uprooted and extinct!' My mother looked very tired and her hair, under her black head kerchief, was turning grey. I remember that when we left she was not wearing black, so I asked her: 'Mother, why are you wearing black?' She then began to cry, which soon turned into wailing. She couldn't bring herself to tell me what had happened. My grandfather told me that my father had died.

And you know, Pando, Sir, when I was leaning on my rifle in the wet trench, I thought of every detail I had experienced in Orovnik. I then realized that I would never see my father again. I would never have the chance to share my experiences with him and do the things every growing boy does with his father... And then I blurted out: 'What kind of life am I going to have without a father?!'

In the morning they gathered us in the meadow, lined us up, took attendance and told us to go to the other side of the forest. There they took our automatic rifles and gave us old military uniforms, the ones we are wearing now. People were arriving for two days, some in military uniforms and others in civilian clothes. They had a long meeting in one of the bunkers. When they were done and came out, we were ordered to line up. One of the officers had a large leather briefcase hanging from his

shoulder and a pistol on his belt line. This particular officer came to our line and started asking questions. When he came to me he asked: "What is your name?" I said 'Kiro Kostovski'. 'How old are you?' I said, 'Four... fifteen...' 'Why are you wearing black?' he asked. 'My father died,' I replied.

I was not the only one wearing black... Many of the boys who mourned were wearing black on their hats and coats.

When he was done with the questions he gave a speech.

Among other things he said: 'Today we are leading a bloody struggle...' His entire speech focused on the fighting and on the struggle. He spoke for a long time, then paused for a moment, looked up at the mountains and said: 'Tomorrow a heavy battle will take place behind those mountains. Sadly, you, on whom the Party placed much confidence, will not be there. Why? Because your parents complained! The Party, however, is kindhearted and will send you back to the (Eastern European) countries... We...'

He often said, 'Us this... us that...' so I asked myself: 'Who are they and who are the others? Are we not all the same? Why is my mother from the others? Do they not eat the bread my mother bakes? Do they not sleep on the bed my mother sets? Are they not protected by the trenches my mother digs? Are they not kept safe by the logs and stones my mother carries uphill to build their bunkers? Do they not use the ammunition my mother delivers in the dark of night? Do they not appreciate my mother's help in carrying them out of the battlefields to the field hospitals when they are wounded? Why are they then on one side and my mother on the other?' I wondered...

The one with the big briefcase asked: 'Does anyone want to stay voluntarily?' But before anyone had a chance to reply he said: 'We will send you back to Romania, you jackasses, so you can eat your cornmeal!'

After insulting us several more times, he turned around and left. The others rushed behind him, stepping up their pace and disappeared out of our sight as fast as they could, looking like they were in a hurry to get somewhere.

'Turn left!' we heard our commander order. We turned and faced towards Albania. 'Forward march!' was the next command.

And then off we went marching in four columns, then in two columns and then in columns of three. We passed by the fort and arrived at the Albanian border during the night. I stopped to look behind me when I was approached by a chap named Done. That guy over there, coming this way, you see him?" Kirche asked Pando, while pointing towards Done. "That guy asked me: 'What are you looking at, Kirche?' I pointed towards the mountain with my head. He then urged me to get moving because we were falling behind. 'What do you think, Done?' I asked him. Again he said,

‘Let’s get going’. I asked him again, ‘What do you think about our situation? Will we ever come back home again?’ He never did answer.

Oh, Pando, my friend, Sir, I grew up in this uniform. Will I ever take it off?”

“One day you will, one day you will...” replied Pando, turning his head and then said: “They are calling you Kirche?”

“Yes,” Kirche replied. “I am going.”

Pando left and went towards the other side of the road. Hidden from the road, he heard a bird singing beautifully in the tall grass. He slowed down, turned his head towards the sound and stood there quietly listening to the songbird. It had been a long time since he had heard a bird singing. He remained motionless for a while longer, then he moved his head and took another step. When the bird began to sing again he stopped and remained motionless. He did this several times. He felt good and was delighted by the experience, it warmed his heart. He moved forward again but didn’t know why, he had nowhere to go...

This was how life had been for Pando here in Prenies, always on the go but nowhere to go. If he didn’t dig and bury someone, despite his few conversations and his waiting at the road in the morning and in the evening, he spent most of his day in the ditches and in the tall grass looking for letters, ordinary letters, the kind the soldiers wrote at the front. Folded in four, one end stuck in the other with an address written on it, sometimes only the name of the village... Pando parted the grass in front of him, moved at a slow pace and uncovered the wide leaves of weeds and thorn bushes that grew along the road looking for papers hiding under them. He stopped, bent down and picked up a piece of paper. He opened it and started reading it, but before he was done he stopped. He felt a bitter taste in his mouth as if he had just bit into an apricot seed. He sat down on a stone, wiped his forehead and mumbled: ‘Another one from our village... this makes it twenty-six. Our children are being killed off one by one. Will there be anyone left when all this is over...? Lord, my God!...’

On his way back to the barracks, Pando trampled on the dust; a broken man. He stooped forward looking down, his legs felt like they weighed a ton. He watched the dust puff away from his feet with every step he took. He tried to put on a brave face as he entered his cabin, remaining expressionless and avoiding being seen with moist eyes. He sat down on the side of the straw mat, rolled up a cigarette and lit it, puffing its smoke slowly, deeply, silently trying to make sense of this new revelation. Once in a while he secretly glanced at the women, among whom was Ristana. Her name was Ristana but everyone called her Krstovitsa after Krsto, her husband. The women were talking.

All wrapped up in their black clothing, the women were sitting next to each other in a trance, all thinking something, remembering...

Pando put his cigarette out, leaned on the wall and began to stare at a beam on the ceiling. At first he did not want to snoop on the women's conversation. But the letter he was hiding in his breast pocket was burning him from the inside and the pain was growing all over his body like moss on a rock. He did not know how to hide it from them and felt like the women were watching him.

"I watched him from the small window walking in the yard," Pando heard one of the women say and immediately thought they were talking about him, so he perked up his ears and listened. The woman continued: "He knocked on the door with his foot and straightened himself in a strange way, looked at me, remained silent for long moment, then, in our language (Macedonian – people in the camps were afraid to say Macedonian fearing retribution from the Greeks who were in authority even outside Greece's borders) he said: 'Mother, there are many killed along the cemetery.' There was a battle fought all night around our village graveyard, located on a hill. I knew my daughter was in the squad that was fighting so this man's presence here made me very uneasy. I almost passed out. I leaned on the post. I thought 'God not her too...?' Poor mother's heart, it's always ready to jump for good or for bad... The soldier took me by my arm and said: 'We gathered all the dead near the cemetery. The partisans on one side have not been buried, they are burying the soldiers on the other side right now...' He turned around and went, I followed. The soldiers were digging in the meadow beyond the village cemetery. The captain, or whatever rank he was, approached me and asked me: 'Are you from this village?' I kept quiet. I was quiet because I did not understand his language. The soldier approached the officer and said something. The soldier then said: 'The officer is asking if you are from this village.'

I said, 'Yes.' They spoke again and the soldier said: 'The officer says you should go there,' pointing with his hand, 'and see if you recognize anyone from your village.'

Another soldier grabbed me by my arm and took me to the dead. He pointed at each one as we went from body to body. They were all young... I said, 'I don't recognize any of them...' Then I started crying. I was sad. They were all so young and among the boys were two girls. My daughter was not among them. The soldier took me back to the officer, and after he said something to him, the one who spoke our language (Macedonian) translated for me: 'The officer said we will bury them, you take the mule that is grazing up there, go to the fountain and fill all these barrels with water, load them on the mule and take them to the top of the hill.'

After I loaded the barrels on the mule and began to climb uphill, I turned and looked back at the cemetery. Several soldiers were removing the crosses from all the graves. They collected them into a pile and later loaded them on two horses and took them with them. It started to rain and

then the rain turned to sleet. The terrain became slippery and the horses were sliding all over the place but finally we arrived at the top of the hill. There the wind was fierce, whipping the slush around. The soldiers started a bonfire, broke the crosses and threw them into the fire. They warmed themselves with the burning crosses, smoked cigarettes, spit into the fire and onto the burning crosses and laughed. I turned my head to look and saw Stavro Popov's cross..."

"Wasn't Stavro killed in battle fighting against the Italians?" interrupted another woman.

"Yes, him, who else?" replied the woman. "One of the soldiers started breaking Stavro's cross. I couldn't stand it any more and in our language (Macedonian) I said: 'Son, the man died for your patridata (country in Greek) and you...'

The soldier said something and then called the soldier who spoke our language. The other soldiers began to laugh loudly. The one who spoke our language then said: 'Mother, this guy said that a dog is your son and not him...'

I was very angry so I looked straight into the eyes of the one breaking the cross and stared at him for a long time. He was not at all ashamed; he dropped the axe and, one by one, he tossed the pieces of the cross into the fire. The flames engulfed the entire cross, slowly burning Stavro's name. They will not even leave the dead to rest... They let me go in the evening..."

There was silence in the cabin. Pando heard sighs. One of the women who had her back turned to Pando hurled a curse: "May they too burn by fire and may God give them the eyes of a mother so that they can see what they are doing..."

The silence was broken by another woman who began to talk: "At our place, during listopat (October) the last vine leaf fell off the Petrevtsi vine in Kopanche on Mitovden. And even before the tears of the widow had a chance to dry, there was word that Stavre of the Pandov family was left in the snow in Nikulitsa, at Prechista. Kole of the Donev family was pierced in the knee by a bullet in Bukovik. The roots of the Kolev family were cut in sechko (February), when Iane was lost in Bela Voda. And in Tsvetnitsi (Palm Sunday), when the dogwood tree was flowering, weeping broke out in the Mitrashkov household. A bomb tore their daughter Marika to pieces at Ianova Glava. The Krstov family experienced their ordeal during Sveto Bogoiavlennie (Holy Theophany). We lost people in Giurgevden (St. George) and Spasovden and in Sveti Troitsa (Holy Trinity), we lost our Petre in Krusha. My brother-in-law's son Riste was lost in Polenata. Pande and Mitre of the Lazov family were lost in Kulata and Ramna, two branches from the same tree.

During tsrvenik (June, July) they burned our village and on Sveti Kostandin and Elena (St. Constantine and Helena) my poor father died,

God rest his soul. Kosta and Pande were killed in Vicho in zhetvar (August). Iane was killed in Haro and Vasil in Gorusha both on Mitrovdan (St. Dimitria). Gele was killed on Sveta Nedela (Holy Sunday) and spent his last day alive in Vrbitsa. All these young men were from our neighbourhood. We found out about Pavle's death during the Assumption of the Holy Virgin holiday. They said he was left at Stenite forever. Krsto's death dressed the Ristov family in black. Donka was killed on Krstovden (The Holy Cross) and Vene, from the Ianev family, was killed on Sveto Vozdvizhenie (Holy Elevation).

Seven children from our village were left dead in Aliavitsa, Orle, Polenata, Bigla and Bel Kamen. There was no day without pain, heartbreak and crying... Old man Nachko was ringing the church bell practically every day. Every family was having memorials after three days, nine days, forty days, or three months after the death of a family member... Our priest fled to Kostur because Lazo, the village sniveler, threatened to kill him. So the village was without a priest. When the mothers were mourning the death of their children, Lazo went from house to house telling them to stop crying and be happy that they died for their 'patrida' (country in Greek)... This is what those who came to the village at night to eat, drink and sleep for free, at our expense, told him to say to us and that's what he was telling us. When I ask him if he had information as to what happened to my husband, he raised his head up and turned his back on me... They took my husband to jail together with Lazo but they released Lazo and sent my husband to Makronisos. People in the village said that Lazo signed the papers that they put in front of him and renounced his own kind. Maybe he did, no one knows for sure. And no one knows why one day our people (Macedonian partisans) took him away and he never came back. There were rumours that they hung him in Breznitsa and before that they beat him in Zhelevo... Our people were turning on each other... But someone else was to blame for this..."

The woman suddenly went silent, sighed, wiped her face with her black head kerchief, looked ahead and then she said:

"What am I supposed to think of him now? They pushed him around and yelled at him, he then turned for an instant and looked at me. I can still see the look in his eyes... A week later Lazo was back but I never saw my husband again... And as such, dear ladies, we are now all widows and without children. We gave birth to our children so that they could die in the mountains, so that they could lay lame and disfigured in some hospital and so that we can run after the trucks... Are we being exterminated, eh?"

The answer was in the silence and in the weeping.

"And what about me?" echoed another sad voice from the corner.
"They caught me at my place..."

The woman untied her black head kerchief adjusted herself, moved closer to the women and continued:

“It was at our monastery near the Albanian border. Acorns were falling on our soil and on Albanian soil. The oak tree was divided by the border with the tree trunk on our side and some branches on the Albanian side. This is how our land was divided. Some of our fields were also divided like that with the border passing through them. When I went to collect acorns, they caught me and took me away...”

“And how did you find your way back?” asked the woman sitting closest to her.

“Look outside this window,” replied the woman. “See the place where the sun rises? That’s where we came from, being brought here by the trucks. The sun was always behind us or to our left. Now that you see where the sun rises, look at the mountain to the right, that’s where I went. But first I went to the hospital and asked a young, blond man: ‘My dear boy how did you get here, to Prenies?’ He said: ‘We crossed the border during the night and arrived in Korcha in the morning. From there we went to Bogradets and followed the lakeshore here...’

Then I thought the lake he was talking about must be the great water that can be seen from the top of the hill. So I thought if I follow the lakeshore I can find Bogradets. So, one day I hid in the ditch and during the night I followed the brook uphill and found my way to the top of the mountain. The moon was shining so I could see its reflection on the great water of Lake Ohrid. I went downhill and came out on the road. When I heard a voice or footsteps I jumped into the ditch or hid in a grove. After the third rooster, while dawn was breaking, I arrived near the first yards. I entered a yard. A woman came down from the second floor balcony and asked me something in Albanian. I said: ‘I don’t understand.’ She then spoke to me in our language (Macedonian).

‘Where are you from, sister?’ she asked.

‘I am from Kostur Region,’ I replied.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked.

‘I need help, sister,’ I begged her. ‘Please help me find my way home, so that I can go home, please I beg of you help me...’

She took me inside and gave me food and drink... After a while her husband came in. He also spoke to me in our language (Macedonian). I begged him too to help me. Fortunately for me they turned out to be good people and were willing to do whatever they could to get me home. I stayed with them all day. When the sun set, the trucks passed by heading for Korcha. Before taking me the husband asked: ‘To which Macedonia do you want to go?’

‘To the one with the war,’ I replied.

‘It’s going to be difficult to get you there,’ he said.

The husband and I left the house in the dark of night. They gave me some bread and a canteen full of water. Before we arrived in Bogradets he said: ‘Follow this road and it will take you home.’ He then left.

I was left all alone in the dark. I clenched my teeth and began to walk. Every time I saw a person, heard footsteps, or voices I found my way into the ditch. I spent the next day in a grove of oak trees. I traveled like a bandit, like a thief during the night darting from ditch to ditch, from grove to grove attempting to avoid everything; especially barking dogs. I hid from soldiers, from ordinary people, from shepherds and cow herders... until I finally arrived in Bilishcha where I went to Sulio... The people there were amazed at my gumption; a woman traveling all alone in the night in unfamiliar territory? They were also relieved that nothing bad had happened to me... I too was relieved and felt like a heavy weight was lifted from my chest. So, how do I get to my village from here I thought? I took my bearings again and figured that my village was on the other side of the mountain. When it got dark I took a straight path through the valley, following the road in moonlight and headed for the mountain. On the way I got caught in a storm. It got dark and began to snow hard. There was also a battle raging on in the Stenite. I had gotten this far and I wasn't about to turn back so I mustered some courage, crossed the muddy river and began to walk uphill. It was hard to walk, it was dark and slippery but I continued to climb towards Telok. When I got to the monastery I went inside so that I could thank God and all the saints for bringing me here safely. I knelt on the floor in the dark and began to pray... I was familiar with the icons in the monastery and knew which saint was located where... What I don't remember is how I fell asleep. Perhaps it was God's will or I was extremely tired and passed out. I woke up in the morning when it became light. I opened my eyes, looked up and noticed the saints had no eyes! Someone had shot the eyes of the saints. I began to pray and realized that I was freezing. Then I began to cry and cried and cried and cried... Here I am, I thought to myself, here I am at home and I am crying for the dead. I cried because I was sad and I cried because I was happy to have made it back alive. When I finished crying I went outside. The ground was all white with snow. I got disoriented and instead of going to the left I took the path to the right and entered Albanian territory. Before realizing what I had done, an Albanian soldier grabbed me by my shoulder. He was a border guard. He caught me and without saying a word, took me to their watchtower. From there they took me to Bilishcha and at Bilishcha they put me on a truck and brought me back here... This is how I went back home..."

There was silence for a moment. Pando lit a cigarette. The burning tobacco burned his tongue and parched his throat.

"What about us?" another woman spoke up. Pando turned to look. It was Ristana who spoke this time. "At our place, in our village when they brought the new priest, some villagers didn't want him. It was autumn, thirty-six (1936). He was one of ours (Macedonian) so they said he was no good because he didn't do a good job speaking Greek. My husband got

mad and yelled at the priest's assistant in our language (Macedonian). The next day policemen came to our house and took him to the police station. They kept him there for two days. When he came back he was black and blue and had messed his pants. They beat him and gave him castor oil to drink. We slaughtered our ram and crushed onions and wrapped him in its skin. Five months passed. My son came home from school one day crying. His hands were blue and swollen. His father demanded to know what had happened. He said his teacher beat him with a stick because yesterday he was heard speaking to his grandmother in our language (Macedonian). His grandmother doesn't speak a word of Greek. How was he expected to talk to her? I don't speak much Greek either. How am I expected to speak with my family? What cruel people! Anyway, my husband got out of bed, got dressed and went to the café.

'Teacher!' he called out. 'Come out here!'

And from what the men who were there told me, the teacher, looking proud, came out and started yelling at my husband.

'How dare you allow your son to speak that abhorrent barbaric Slavic language? Do you know why I am here, huh? I will do the same to you, you disgusting...'

My husband grabbed him by the belt with one hand and by the tie with the other, he then picked him up and dropped him in the snow face down. And as he raised his foot to step on him, the men rushed in and pulled him away. Who knows, he probably would have killed him... They almost killed him. My husband was sent to jail in Kozhani for two years. When he returned he said:

'Ristana I want to go to America, alone. Whatever happens, please do not sell any of our land. Not a field, not a meadow, not our garden. This place is ours. It was passed on to us by our grandparents and great grandparents and it must stay ours.' And then he left. He didn't even say goodbye to any of the villagers because no one spoke in his defense in the courts. He went to America and left me alone with my son Risto, who at the time was fifteen years old. My boy was doing fine during the German occupation but then when the Greeks returned he became apprehensive and began to shoulder a rifle. Letters, packages and money began to arrive from America. One day the Madzhiri (Pontian Greeks better known as Christian Turk colonists and settlers from Asia Minor brought to Macedonia during the 1920's) came to the village to rob us but they failed because our people (Macedonians) were strong defenders..."

"They looted us to the last needle!" piped up another women.

"The day before Easter the village mayor went from house to house instructing people that from now on they must fly the Greek flag on their balcony on Sundays and during every holiday. My son Risto and others disagreed: 'If this state is a state and if all the citizens living in this state

are equal then it should punish those who rob and steal from us. If the state does that then we will fly the Greek flag...’

After Easter the police took my son along with seven other men to the police station. When Risto came back he was missing his teeth and was soiled just like his father... The first chance he got, he fled with the first partisans and disappeared into the forest. Since then, two years have passed and I have not heard from him. I know nothing of what happened to him and no one has dropped a letter to let me know. Every day I run behind the trucks asking the wounded if they have heard anything about my Risto... I am waiting for a letter from him but nothing... I can’t even send a letter to my husband Krsto in America to tell him that I am all alone, to tell him that Risto... that I don’t know where Risto is and how he is doing...”

“From here, sister,” said another women, “they don’t send letters out. Be careful and don’t do anything stupid. Sending a letter to America will get you into trouble. They will call you in and interrogate you. And believe me, you don’t need that. Did you not hear about a woman who gave an Albanian man a letter to mail? Did you not hear that they jailed them both? Somehow she came out of the ordeal somewhat unscathed but the Albanian, they say, was severely punished...”

“And I,” continued Ristana, “if I had a chance, this is what I would write to my husband: ‘Dear Krsto, I am well, thank God and’...” She began to cry. After composing herself she continued: “About Risto I will tell him that I do not know where he is. I dream about him every night. When I wake up I talk to myself. When the trucks pass by I run, expecting to find someone who knows something about him, to toss me a piece of paper and to give me some good news about my son, well, there’s nothing for me...”

The ringing of the dinner rail diverted their attention. The women began to fuss around looking in their bags and heading towards the cauldrons. There, a line had already begun to form and to grow as the women in black stood behind each other.

Pando waved at Ristana to wait. The women stopped moving while he stood there silent, looking apprehensive. With a trembling hand he reached into his breast pocket and pulled something out. When he opened his wide sun-baked, cracked hand, the women saw a folded piece of paper, just like those found in the grass and in the ditches on the road. The women stood there unable to move. Each thought it was for her and each felt a tightness in her heart. Their chins began to shake as they stared at the dreaded piece of paper. Their eyes remained wide open and focused. The anticipation was killing them...

Pando extended his hand and, as gently as possible, said: “Krstovitsa (Ristana)... this is for you... and... God rest his soul...”

Suddenly there was a horrified look on Ristana’s face. She manifested several instant horrifying expressions on her face before she began to wail

loudly. She was visibly in pain and the pain could also be heard in her voice. Her body shook violently like it was tossed into freezing water and her eyes were covered in a pool of tears. She felt trapped, the walls and ceiling were closing in on her and began to tighten around her body. Darkness enveloped her eyes and she was unable to see. Her legs became weak and her body felt like it weighed a ton. Her face looked bent and distorted as she tried to look around with a puzzled look on her face. She knelt down, sat on her legs and extended her arms out. She stayed like that for a long time while whispering, praying, crying, swaying from side to side, trying to make sense of her misfortune. She loosened her head kerchief and slowly began to unfold her long and thick hair braid. Her black curly hair covered her shoulders and extended almost down to the floor. After she braided her hair she bent forward and covered her eyes with her palms. Tears began to drip through her fingers. And while still kneeling, she laid her black head kerchief on the floor, spread her arms out and began to wail, calling:

“Risto, Risto, my poor child, please wake up for me!” And as she wailed she looked down and waved her finger as if speaking to his body and instructing it to awaken. It seemed to her like he was lying right there in front of her, in front of her knees. Her hand touched the floor and in a broken, barely audible voice, she summoned him to wake up, calling: “Get up, Risto, my son, get up for your mother...”

Pando’s red and bloodshot eyes, from lack of sleep, became filled with tears which gushed down his cheeks. He bit his lower lips to stop it from vibrating. The experience made his face look even more aged. Filled with his own and her pain, Pando, silently bent over Krstovitsa, grabbed her under the arms and slowly raised her to her feet. She did not object. She obediently went towards her mat where Pando took her. She then turned her head to where her black head kerchief was spread on the floor and quietly, barely audibly said: “Come my son, get up, get up Risto!”

The people watched this poor woman suffer and felt her pain, they watched the wrinkles on her forehead deepen and her eyes shrink from despair...

Pando sat her down and left the cabin. Even now, after the sun hit his face, his eyes were still tearing bitter tears. He refused to wipe them. They run down his cheeks following the same path. He let them fall on the ground, on the dried wormwood leaves that fall around the barracks...

Krstovitsa did not go to the road at sunset. Finding her white piece of paper with good news about Risto ended when Pando gave her the devastating news. The letter read:

“Risto Damov from the village Krchishta died in combat. His body has been buried under an oak tree in Aliavitsa. If his mother is in Prenies, whoever finds this letter, please let her know. I am Paskal Argirov and I am wounded...”

That was all that was written in the note, but enough information to forever wound and darken Krstovitsa's already wretched life.

Krstovitsa put the letter in an envelope that had two Canadian stamps glued on it. This envelope was the only thing that she had saved when her house was burned down and when she was forced to flee her home. That's all she managed to save. That's all she possessed from her past; one letter that she had received from her husband and now this note about her son. She carefully put the note in the envelope and placed it in her chest, near her heart...

And here, anew, Krstovitsa is forced by fate to live among the homeless who, with each passing day lose hope of ever returning to their ancestral homes, among the frail old men and women, among the widows prematurely separated from their husbands by the war, and among the women who cry every day missing their children. She is forced to live in an unfamiliar environment in a foreign country all alone without her family. And no matter how hard she wishes and prays, it seems like there is no end to her vicious cycle of everyday woes and sorrow.

The weight of her pain is too great and she can feel her existence coming to an end. She is all alone! Alone, among many people who share her fate. In the dark, on starlit nights, in the presence of flickering candle light, by the light of the lantern hanging from the beam when one expects to feel calm and serene, she feels all alone. She feels completely alone. Her heart is broken. The feeling leaves her with a bitter taste in her mouth and weak at the knees.

The memory of her son weighs on her heavily and drags her down to the bottom of despair like a heavy stone. As the days go by she feels more and more isolated and with every cry she hears she feels the need to say something, to share her agony with someone.

She sits in the corner of her cabin, at the edge of her straw mat, all alone where no one notices her. The silence is cruel, cold and dark. There was much emptiness and days of solitude in her life. Her encounters with her loved ones were always brief. She married during her twenty-second summer. Her husband, Krsto, spent more of his day being unhappy than being happy. He wanted to provide for her and their son and by doing so, left them alone in misery. She paid for her joy with eternal sorrow, waiting and suffering. And now she had lost her son...

A Bed for the Wretched – Chapter 25

Eight days after she found out about Risto's death, Krstovitsa decided to go to the road. After the running, trampling flood of people passed her by, she noticed the little grove where she and the other women used to collect dry firewood. She noticed the plums were already ripe and stuffed several handfuls into her pocket. She then took the uphill road. Lost in her thoughts she moved slowly until she reached the plateau from where one could see the great blue water. She decided to take a rest. When she was done resting she took the path that led to the side of the hill, occasionally frequented by flocks of birds. She was moving a little faster now because the sun was setting behind the mountain.

She bypassed the thorny landscape and walked through a harvested wheat field. The field had been harvested about a week ago but the harvester had not collected all the wheat. Minute amounts had fallen on the ground. She decided to gather some. She bent forward, turned the bottom of her skirt up and started collecting. When she was done, she sat down, crushed the wheat heads by rolling them between her hands and then cleaned the grain by blowing away the chaff. She then put it in a bag she had borrowed from Pando. After she was done she took the downhill and headed back to her cabin. When she reached the road she ran into Kuze who, at the time, was responsible for guard duty. Leaning on his cane, with a stern voice, he ordered her to stop and asked her: "Where to woman?" By her movements and body language Kuze could sense that she was afraid of something. He was very happy when people showed fear in his presence. A coward himself, he took pleasure watching other people squirm. He loved to torment people, he enjoyed feeling like a hunter in pursuit of prey, preying on helpless ...

"I was up there at the side of the hill..." muttered Krstovitsa and transferred her little bag from her left to her right hand.

"At the side of the hill?! And what were you doing there? I am asking you!" ordered Kuze.

Krstovitsa untied the little bag and showed Kuze what was inside. She then said: "I collected some wheat... I picked it up from the ground... The field had already been harvested..."

"Don't tell me that the field had been harvested!" replied Kuze loudly.

"Well it's not much, only two or three handfuls of grain which I cleaned myself..." she admitted.

"Yeah, but that's still theft!" he said and ordered her to go with him and walk in front of him.

"Where am I expected to go walking in front of you?" asked Krstovitsa.

“Let’s go, move, I am taking you to the administration office and you can explain to the commander what you have done, you understand? Now walk in front of me!” ordered Kuze.

Krstovitsa looked at him with pleading eyes and spoke as softly as she could when she asked: “Please my dear man, please don’t do this to me. I will give you whatever you want, just please let me go. I will give you my gold wedding ring, just let me go.” She then began to cry as she tried to remove her ring off her finger. The ring, unfortunately, from years of wear, was imbedded deep into her finger and refused to come off. She had no reason to remove it; she had always been faithful to her husband and in all the years had never looked at another man. Even after her husband had left for America, she had never allowed another man to touch her. But now, to avoid embarrassment, she was willing to part with her ring. Now she was willing to renounce her past life for the sake of saving herself from embarrassment.

“Move, get going woman!” ordered Kuze. “And because you want to bribe me I will make it harder for you!”

With her head bowed down Krstovitsa walked in front of Kuze and they both entered the administration office. When they reached the Prenies commander, Krstovitsa stood by the door and, with fear in her eyes, she stared at the one-armed man.

“Comrade Vasilopoulos,” said Kuze, “I caught this woman stealing...”

Vasilopoulos threw his cigarette on the floor, stepped on it with his heavy boot and after releasing the smoke through his nose, with a hoarse voice, said:

“So, the stealing has already begun...” And after approaching Krstovitsa he asked: “What’s in the bag?”

“A bit... a bit of wheat... from the field that has already been harvested... I picked it up from the ground... grain by grain... seed by seed... here... I picked it instead of the birds...” replied Kostovitsa timidly.

“A little bit of wheat... hmmm...” said Vasilopoulos, making a face.

“It’s very little... barely a shepa (handful in Macedonian)... it’s all here...” replied Krstovitsa pleadingly.

“Sepa? What is that comrade?” asked Vasilopoulos in Greek. (Note: Greeks can say “sh” so they pronounce “sh” as “s”.)

Comrade Kuze, with his eyes looking like those of a frightened, crying dog took an idolatrous step towards Vasilopoulos and explained.

“Shepa, comrade is hufta (handful in Greek)... hufta,” he explained and made a cup with his little hand looking like a beggar in front of a church.

“I only collected a handful of grain that would have been eaten by the birds anyway and I took it from a field that had already been harvested about a week ago...” pleaded Krstovitsa.

“You mean you stole a handful of wheat!” Vasilopoulos blasted. “Don’t you know that the harvested field is Albanian National property? Don’t you know that Enver Hoxha has received us here like brothers and sisters, and you are stealing from his field, eh?”

Krstovitsa sighed, leaned against the wall and lowered her head. A moment later she lifted her eyes and opened her mouth but before she had a chance to speak, Vasilopoulos looked at her sternly and in Greek said: “Give me the little bag!”

“It is not a big offense, son ... I only collected a handful of wheat. The ravens, the crows and the sparrows would have pecked it anyway. If anything I took it from the birds... If it wasn’t eaten by the birds then it would have sprouted with the next rain anyway... I only took a handful... I also collected some dried sticks of wood to make a fire and borrowed a small pot to boil it in... Today I was going to boil it... It’s our custom...” explained Krstovitsa.

“Are you that hungry?” asked the one-armed Vasilopoulos. He then took the little bag and tossed it on the side and addressed Kuze: “See to which barracks she belongs. She must be punished.”

“I understand comrade. Don’t worry. I will take care of it myself and see that she is punished. I will make an example of her for the others,” he said to Vasilopoulos and grabbed Krstovitsa by the arm and began to pull her towards the door.

“I beg of you, please,” pleaded Krstovitsa. “Have a heart... Please give me back my wheat. I did not steal it. I gathered it from the ground seed by seed... I gathered it for...”

“Get out! Get out you ruffian! Get lost!” Vasilopoulos yelled loudly, showing her the door with his good arm. He then yelled at Kuze, asking him what he was still waiting for.

They did not allow her to keep the wheat, they did not give her a chance to explain why she needed the wheat and they did not listen to her pain. They cruelly kicked her out of the office in the same way they kicked dozens of people out everyday here in Prenies.

Krstovitsa was returned back to the barracks and horse stables. She was made to lay down on her straw mat, a bed for the wretched, feeling sick, wounded and insulted. She greeted dawn with her eyes closed. When the rail rang and the people began to stand in queues in front of the cauldrons, she took the plums she had gathered the day before and, with tears streaming down her cheeks, went from woman to woman and from man to man praying:

“Good people, take some, eat them and may God bless Risto, my son. May he rest in peace...”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Petre Nakovski, a novelist and translator, was born on July 17, 1937 in the village Krchishta, Kostur Region, Aegean (Greek occupied) Macedonia.

Dr. Nakovski studied at the Pedagogical Literary Institute in Poland and at the Faculty of Philology in Skopje. He received his PhD from the Institute of Political Science at the University of Vroclavsk in Poland. He worked as a journalist for the newspapers “Vecher” and “Nova Makedonija”. He also worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was the first Ambassador of the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of Poland.

He has been a member of the Macedonian Writer’s Association (MWA) since 1989.

Dr. Nakovski has authored numerous articles published in Macedonian periodicals as well as a number of books including the books “Postela za Chemernite” (A Bed for the Sorrowful” (novel, 1985), “Makedonski Detsa vo Polska 1948-1968” (Macedonian children in Poland 1948-1968) (doctoral thesis), “I Kamenot e zemija” (And the Stone is Soil) (novel, 1988), “Golemata Udolnitsa” (The Great Decline) (novel, 2003) and “Golemata Izmama” (The Great Lie) (novel, 2007). “Makedonskite Begaltsi vo Polska 1948-1975” (Macedonian Refugees in Poland 1948-1975) (selected papers 2008), “Na Pat so Vremeto” (On the Road of Time) (novel 2010).

Dr. Nakovski has translated and published over 40 literary works and many songs and stories from Polish to Macedonian, written by Macedonian authors in the Polish language. Included among the translations are the drama “Tsrnila” (Darkness) by K. Casule which on 18/7/1971 was staged at the Wyspiańskiego Katowice Theatre in Poland, “Pesni od Ohrid” (Songs of Ohrid), an anthology of Macedonian contemporary poetry published by the Wydawnictwo Literackie Publishing House in Krakow in 1975, a selection of poetry entitled “Tragi na Vremeto” (Traces of Time) by Rade Siljan published by the Adam Marszałek Publishing House in Torunj in 2010.

He is a recipient of the “Golden pen” and “Kiril Pejcinovic” (translation of opus) awards (awards for Polish authors). He was also awarded the Gold Medal of Merit for Polish Culture and the Gold Medal of Command.