A Stone too is Soil

A Novel

By

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

A Stone too is Soil

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Published by:

Risto Stefov Publications
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Toronto, Canada

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Any similarity is by chance

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November 16, 2014

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Chapter 1

The well-built, silver-haired Giorgi stared ahead at the dark, soft fertile soil and took a step forward while transferring the saddlebags filled with wheat from one shoulder to the other. He then, but just for a moment, looked to his left, then to his right, as if measuring the field, and then took a handful of wheat in his right hand. He quietly said a prayer blessing the seed, as it had always been done since ancient times by all seed planting farmers, and took a measured step forward, opened his hand slightly and swung it from left to right sowing the first seeds. It was very quiet in the early morning hours and the only noises heard were those of the grain falling on the soil and those of Giorgi breathing. Step by measured step, Giorgi continued to spread the wheat seeds moving forward and then, at the limit of his field, turning back. When he turned around a third time and half of his field had been planted, Kiro arrived and climbed on the harrow pulled by a pair of oxen and began to trace Giorgi's footsteps.

At noon they sat under an oak tree. Kiro turned and looked at the green turf where the oxen were grazing and with a bleak voice said: "We plowed and planted the new field but I don't know if the place was a salty marsh or just a swamp… We will see when it rains… Even though this place is dry now, I know it used to be a swamp and that over there at the ridge is clay…"

Kiro broke off a stalk of the dry grass twirling in the wind by his canteen and after he chewed it a bit, he echoed nasally: "We did what we could… whatever happens, happens… right?"

"The old," replied Giorgi, lifting his eyes, "always used to say you reap what you sow…"

Kiro reached for his canteen and before taking a drink said: "That's right… but not always. In these bad times you don't know what the next dawn will bring, what our foe is going to bring, so you never know what you will reap... Well, we planted the seeds and believe me I am not that pleased… I did not feel right… I did not feel like we planted something living… I could feel it in me…" Then, after

a short silence, Kiro quietly continued: “We sowed the field with reddish six-awned seeds here and black-awned there…”

“You talk like it’s the plague… and like it will last forever…” retorted Giorgi.

“The days are getting short and the nights are black like a charred log is all I am saying… In no time at all it will be cold again… and this is our second plowing… You remember what it was like last year after plowing when we returned home, eh?” replied Kiro.

How could Giorgi forget? Last fall when they were returning home from Virovi they remembered running into a cow herder who led the village cattle home along the dusty brook. While following one another they exchanged a few words and when they came close to the village spring they saw a number of young ladies filling jugs full of water. They were touched by the songs they were singing and amused by their giggling. There were also bachelors present among them, wearing their hats askew, while teasing the girls and spraying them with water. The grass along the road was full of crickets and tiny little birds, which could also be found in every hedge and compost pile. The birds were cheerfully chirping away uninterrupted and flying from tree to tree. The men had noticed the northern wind blowing bringing fresh northern air and reminding them that fall was just around the corner. Kiro remembered crossing over the stream and saying to one of the girls: “Hey beautiful, can I have a drink of water?”

Without hesitation and with a big smile on her face, Kiro remembered the young lady handing him a jug. Kiro took it, placed it under his big tobacco-stained moustache and began to gulp the cool and thirst quenching liquid. The jug made a boiling sound as the water ran down his throat, spilling down his chin, neck and chest. Kiro’s Adam’s apple danced up and down with each gulp, making the young lady laugh.

“Old man Kiro… be careful you don’t drown…” remarked one of the bachelors.

Kiro tore the jug from his mouth, looked at the bachelor with a grimacing look and said: “Mind your own business… you louse…” He then handed Giorgi the jug, turned back to the bachelor and, while looking at him with the same grimacing look, said: “When a man drinks water not even a snake interrupts him… and you… who do you think you are… you scoundrel? Instead of being out there working you are here teasing the beautiful girls…”

“Well, Grandpa Kiro,” remarked the same bachelor, “you were like that too. Everyone in Kostur knows about you and how you got Grandma Mara at a spring.”

All the girls broke out laughing. Kiro then turned to them and said: “Quiet you!”

“He told you good, hey Grandpa Kiro?” one of them remarked with a mocking tone of voice.

“He told me nothing! Yes, I took her, but not like these guys here, having fun and teasing the girls… I stole her and took her with me…” retorted Kiro.

“Ooh!” remarked a brunette amongst the girls when she noticed that her long and thick black braided hair was steeping in the water. She quickly stood up and her braid sprayed Kiro in the face.

Surprised, Kiro blinked several times and for a moment stood there with his mouth open. He felt like something had pierced his heart. Giorgi gave him a nudge and, without saying a word, the men left and took the road up towards the village. Kiro could not bear the silence and, quietly, barely audibly, with a sense of sweetness and with the flavour of wine in his mouth, said: “Oh, those braids…”

“I know, I know...” interrupted Giorgi in a quiet voice, “you want to tell me that Mara’s braid tied you forever…”

“Yes it did! Yes that little devil tied me forever!” replied Kiro, feeling unusually nervous. The incident with the brunette girl made him feel anxious and wanting to think about the old days of his youth, wanting to feel the warmth of bygone days. But every time he

thought of his past, of his youth, of memorable moments he wanted to remember, he felt tremors in his heart. They were indeed memorable moments worth remembering.

In Kiro's old age such memories of his youth were rare but when they appeared it was like listening to an old song, like tasting something wonderful that he had tasted in the past, it was like being caressed and warmed all over, like stepping barefoot on thick woolen carpet... Unfortunately, life for Kiro after that was fierce and rigid. Like he used to say, God did not give him children, he gave him poverty which chased him out of his father's home and sent him away beyond the great waters from where he sent Mara cheques. Later when he returned and lived under a different roof, he still was not blessed with children. Unfortunately he returned at a bad time when the world was upside down. Even before he had a chance to warm his new bed he was taken to Solun and the next day they sent him into forced labour. In 1939 both he and Giorgi were deployed to cut wood. Oak trees as thick as a man's grasp were cut down by hatchet. After removing the branches the oak trunks were carried to the top of the hills to cover the deep and wide trenches being excavated. They were building bunkers with rows of timber, stone and soil.

When the war was over in 1933, the villagers took back some of those oak tree trunks to rebuild their damaged, burned and destroyed homes. The villagers were particular not to cut live trees, not like the Serbian, French and British troops who cut the forest in half even before the Solun front was broken in World War I. Then, before the Italians invaded, the Greeks drafted many of our local people and made them clear cut the entire forest down to the last tree. They made them build bunkers where many armies spilled their blood. All the armies were cutting trees in this forest and the trees, as if to spite them, grew new tendrils. New oak trees sprung up where the old ones were cut, even the ones Giorgi and Kiro cut. They grew and grew as the years passed and as life became more and more difficult for Giorgi and Kiro.

A gunshot was heard coming from the direction of the water spring and moments later more shots were heard coming from beyond the village. The young men and women who were gathered at the spring

quickly ran back to the village and behind them followed soldiers. When Kiro and Giorgi reached the first houses in the village they saw the soldiers rounding up the villagers and taking them to the village square.

They collected the entire village in the small yard in front of the church. The commander of the gendarmerie, a short, fat man with puffy cheeks, stood on top of the rung of the church stairs with a whip in his hand pointing at people he wanted to enter the church. When he was done he ordered his soldiers to lock the church door. He then said: “I hope you still remember me from last year when, while standing on this very spot, I told you I wanted to hear nothing from you, not a word, not a song, unless it was spoken or sung in Greek. And what have you done? You continued business as usual. And not only that, the guns that you were asked to return to the government, you took out and began to shoot at the peaceful people who you disrespectfully and irresponsibly call “Madzhiri” (referring to the Christian Turkish colonists and settlers deposited in Greek occupied Macedonia by the Greek government in the 1920’s). It is true that some of them were misled and went on to rob some villages but they have already been punished for that...”

“It is not true, sir,” yelled out Kolio stepping into the circle. “We sent a letter to the prefect and the whole thing remained only a promise...”

“Which?!” interrupted the commander, “Has already been fulfilled. But I,” he continued, “did not come here with my people just to remind you to speak the language with which the sacred letter was written, of which our fatherland is proud. I came here to remind you that some of you have yet to hand over the guns and today you will do that. And you old man don’t stand there looking like an ass, go back to your people.”

“Commander, sir!” a meek voice was heard speaking. It belonged to Kuze, better known as Kuze the lizard in his village. “Those who were shooting are not from our village. People say they are partisans,” he added.

Kiro turned to face Giorgi and spoke quietly into his ear: “He always exaggerates.”

“Bandits!” yelled the gendarme lieutenant from the top of the stairs.

“Okay, bandits it is, Commander, Sir,” Kuze agreed meekly, “but they are not from our village,” he added.

The lieutenant quickly ran down the stairs, grabbed Kuze and dragged him away from the crowd into an open space and, while looking at him with a grimacing look, said: “You say they are not from your village? How do you know they are not? Where are they from then?” he demanded to know.

Kuze pulled down his head into his shoulders and began to quietly curse the moment he had thought of uttering those words. He wanted to say something but the lieutenant’s right fist met his nose. Kuze took a step back and fell down. Blood gushed from his lips. While he was down the lieutenant kicked him several times and then hit him on the back and head with his whip and then returned back to the top of the stairs. At his signal, several gendarmes threw themselves on the crowd and began hitting the people with sticks and pushed them under the wall.

The kmet (head of the village), a grkoman (supporter of the Greek cause) through his grandfather, came closer to the lieutenant and began to whisper something into his ear.

“People!” yelled the lieutenant. “Until a new order is given, no one can leave the village. Anyone who disobeys will be shot on sight. Now go home and stay there until I call you.”

The lieutenant entered the church, took out a piece of paper and read out a number of names among whom was Vasil, Giorgi’s son.

“Those who did not hear their name can go home. And you,” speaking to one of the gendarmes, “go and bring me the one I beat up. And you,” pointing at the men still left in the church, “I will talk to you tomorrow,” ordered the lieutenant.

The hearing began at dawn the next day. “Let us start with you,” said the lieutenant while pointing to Vasil. “Come closer. Do you have a gun?”

“No, no I don’t,” replied Vasil.

“Who from the villagers has a gun?” inquired the lieutenant.

“I don’t know,” replied Vasil.

The lieutenant became angry and slapped Vasil on the face then whipped him on the back and then hit him on the head with his baton.

“Is it true that you helped the bandits or the Slavo-phone partisans, as you call them?”

“No I did not! That’s a lie!” replied Vasil.

Without hesitation the lieutenant raised his fist and hit Vasil hard on the head sending him flying under the church altar doors. When he came to the lieutenant asked him: “What are you, Greek or Bulgarian?”

“I am neither,” replied Vasil while wiping the blood gushing from his cut lower lip with his sleeve. He then said: “There were never any Greeks or Bulgarians living in our village. There is the occasional Grkoman. Only Macedonians live here…”

But before Vasil had a chance to finish talking the lieutenant hit him in the stomach with the butt of a rifle, rendering him mute.

The lieutenant then turned to the two gendarmes standing beside him and said: “It’s your turn now.”

The two slowly got closer to Vasil and started undressing him until he was completely naked. They then got him upright and tied him on the column near the alter door. Then they poured water in the baptismal font and began to wet a pair of short, thick ropes. When the ropes were well-soaked, they began to beat Vasil on the

shoulders. Water was splashing everywhere. Vasil's shoulders began to exhibit thick, bleeding red lines. Vasil fell to his knees. The only sound heard in the church was the thud of the water ropes and Vasil's moaning. There was delight in their faces as they continued to beat him. Vasil cried out in pain, eyes filled with horror, exhausted, leaned his head on his shoulder and slumped over. They poured a bucket of water on him and when he came to, the lieutenant asked: "Are you going to talk or shall we continue, eh?"

"I don't know anything…" Vasil said quietly in a pleading tone of voice.

"You said you are not Greek?" asked the lieutenant.

"I am not Greek or Bulgarian…" replied Vasil.

"You're a fool then!" said the lieutenant.

"I am not a fool either!" replied Vasil quietly.

"Continue then!" the lieutenant ordered the gendarmes.

Vasil could not endure the blows that followed and fainted. The commander was sure he had broken him and that he would beg him to stop hitting him. But the only thing that came out of Vasil's mouth was groaning, moaning and cursing. His muscles began to pulse. One of the gendarmes quickly pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his own sweat from his forehead.

"Enough!" ordered the commander and went near Kuze. "And you, what do you have to say?" he said in a serious voice while looking at Kuze's frightened and tearful eyes. "Talk!" he ordered.

Frightened, Kuze lost his voice and only managed to squeak the words: "I don't know anything…"

"Follow the same procedure!" yelled the lieutenant.

Kuze, not waiting to be embarrassed, began to take his own clothes off. He took off his shirt and T-shirt.

“Pants, the pants too… take them off!” ordered the commander.

“But, sir...?” pleaded Kuze.

“And you? Are you like him?” asked the commander while pointing at Vasil.

“I, commander, sir, if you allow me, I am… I am Kuze… Kuze okay... the one the villagers sometimes mockingly call Kuze the lizard…” replied Kuze with a shaky tone of voice. “Well, if you allow me, Sir,” speaking slowly to buy himself some time, “if you let me I will tell you that in our village there are...”

“You, Kuze...” interrupted the commander, “that is your name, right? Tell me what are you, Bulgarian or Greek?”

“I am sure I am not Bulgarian… but if you allow me, sir, I can, with your permission, swear that I am not Bulgarian…” replied Kuze.

“Bravo! Then you are Greek!” snapped the commander.

Kuze swallowed hard and looked over at the altar where the icon of the Virgin Mary hung and quietly said: “Sir, if I say that I am not Greek, then those standing beside the baptismal fountain,” pointing at the gendarmes with his head, “with your permission, sir, with the wet ropes will turn me into a Greek...”

“Are you or are you not a Greek?” demanded the commander.

“With your permission, sir, I Kuze, Kuze the lizard, am Greek...”

Suddenly Kuze saw stars before his eyes. He did not expect or see the fist that came down on him. When he came to and saw the two men holding the wet ropes coming for him, with a shaky voice he asked: “Your Worship, was it not enough what I got in front of the church? Is it necessary for them to flog me with the ropes?”

“If you answer my questions then you can go home without being flogged,” replied the commander.

The commander then took out a piece of paper and showed it to him. Written beside Kuze's name were the words: "In 1942 he went to Bitola to welcome the Bulgarians."

"And you say you are not Bulgarian, eh?" yelled the lieutenant in Kuze's face

"What… it was not me..." replied Kuze in a soft voice.

"Who then went to Bitola to welcome the Bulgarians?" asked the lieutenant.

"Ah, that kmet (village head), that bastard, his mother's…" Kuze swore and cursed very quietly.

Kuze then swallowed hard and thought how far he had had to go from Bitola to meet the Bulgarian patrol and, because he had an old Greek personal identification card in his pocket, he was beaten by the Bulgarians and tossed in jail in Bitola.

Kuze looked up at the lieutenant, who was looking down at him with a mocking smile and with contempt in his eyes, and said: "I, sir, went to Bitola to purchase pigs, not to meet with the Bulgarians…"

"And why did the Italians beat you in 1943? I heard that you were helping the communists then… is that right?" asked the lieutenant.

"The Italians beat me because I sold them a sick chicken..." replied Kuze but before he was finished talking the lieutenant punched him in the face causing him to lose consciousness. When he came to the lieutenant punched him a second time. With his swollen tongue Kuze first licked his bleeding lip and then rolled his tongue in his mouth and spit out a couple of his teeth in front of the lieutenant's feet.

"What do you generally do in the village?" asked the lieutenant.

Kuze slowly recovered from the blows and with the voice of a hermit said: "I? Well, that, according to the grace of God, I am

appointed sexton in our church… I dig graves. And besides that, I, sir, I am familiar with the Greek letters and I read the government newspapers and letters with government orders to the peasants...”

“And do you also read communist leaflets...” interrupted the lieutenant and continued. “Have you read them the government order to urgently surrender their arms?”

“Of course I have… twice!” replied Kuze and continued. “But I am not very familiar with letters written in Katharevoussa. Whatever I know I explained, the rest the kmet further explained...”

“Is that right Mr. Kmet?” asked the lieutenant who was standing next to the kmet.

The kmet looked at the altar, then at the ceiling and then adjusted himself.

“Are you asking him? He doesn’t read Greek. He is totally illiterate…” replied Kuze with a pleading tone of voice.

The lieutenant stared at the kmet’s face and quietly said: “You are all vermin. You too Kmet! There is word about you that you were inciting the peasants.”

“Who? Me? Dear Lord I can’t believe what I am hearing?” replied the kmet.

“Yes, yes you! They say while riding your black donkey you called on the peasants to beat the Madzhiri. Isn’t that how it was?” asked the lieutenant.

“Yes, that’s how it was, I was yelling very loud. You would have yelled out loud too if thieves broke into your home, right? But I know nothing about any guns…”

The gendarmes took out the beaten men and tossed them in front of the church. Their relatives collected them and took them home. Giorgi and Kiro put the badly beaten Vasil in a rag and brought him home. It seemed like there was no life left in him. Giorgevitsa,

crying, was hovering over him, washing his wounds and praying to the Virgin Mother, begging her to save him.

“Enough, woman!” yelled Giorgi. “Start cutting and crushing onions. I will go to the pasture and grab a ram. We need to wrap him in a skin.”

Giorgi remembered, and so did all the people in the village, the bitterness they experienced last fall.

Three weeks into the fall and terror started in the middle of the night. Armed people came knocking at his gate. Giorgi picked up the heavy lever, put it aside and when he opened the door shiny sharp bayonets pointed at him.

They took everyone to the front of the church and then one of the armed men asked Giorgi: “Is anyone else, a stranger staying in your house?”

“No, only my family, no one else.” replied Giorgi.

“Then go back home and bring everyone here… and hurry!” ordered the armed man.

The church bell began to ring and continued to ring to no end. A burst of automatic rifle fire was heard coming from the lower neighbourhood. A woman was heard screaming. Rockets were fired above the grove in the village and the entire sky lit up. A voice was heard yelling: “There he is running away!” And then bursts of gunfire.

Soldiers armed with machine guns stood on each side of the church porch. A crowd was gathering inside the church. Beatings could be seen taking place inside. One woman broke away from the crowd and quickly rushed towards the church door. It was Mitrovitsa, Vane’s mother. A sergeant stood up in front of her. She grabbed him by the shoulders and began to shake him while yelling: “No! Do not beat him! Do not beat him! His father was lost in Asia Minor fighting for you! Ali Veran’s bones will rot! Don’t beat my Vane! He is the son of a major! I received a medal from the government

for my husband's death, killed for you, for Greece… do you understand?"

Ignoring her pleas, the sergeant took a wide swing at her, pounded her on the head and sent her tumbling towards the stairs. The church doors then swung open and two soldiers grabbed her by the arms and took her away. They dropped her at the bottom of the stairs and went back inside the church. Droplets of blood were dripping from the woman's head and rolling on the step and down into the dirt. Her blood dripped, pooled and flowed down the step, expanding, stretching and contracting on the step and then dripping down and forming a puddle in the dirt below. Someone shouted: "They killed Tinka!"

The villagers, walking side by side, silently gathered on the stairs. Their faces were full of hatred and they were thirsting for revenge. The sergeant raised his arm and the soldiers immediately began to fire bullets above the crowd. The two machine guns also joined in. Moments later there was silence and the place stunk of gunpowder. Moaning and groaning could be heard coming through the open church door. Shaken up and bent over, Donka came out and quickly went down the stairs. One of the soldiers pointed his bayonet at her chest. She paused but only for a moment, while looking directly into his eyes. She then took a strong swing at him and slapped him on the face. The enraged soldiers pushed her down the stairs and began to kick her with their military shoes and hit her with their rifle butts until she was dead. They killed her and tossed her lifeless body in front of the church. Donka, the most beautiful brunette in the village was dead. By the afternoon the terror was over, leaving five people dead. The oldest was Stavro. Stavro's wife cried at the top of her voice and endured being beaten as she held Stavro in her arms. Then two soldiers came over and violently tore her away from him and tossed her into a ditch. She lay there kneeling on her hands and knees begging them to stop torturing him but they would not...

Stavro slowly lifted his head up but only for a moment, turned and looked into the crowd. He saw his Lenka and Pande. They were not crying. They had dirty eyebrows and slightly moist and shiny eyes. Stavro then took a quick gaze at his wife and said: "Look after Lenka and Pande…" that's all he managed to say. This was the only

legacy he left her before departing. After that his voice was never heard again.

The next day, at dawn, the village cow herder ran into the village and told everyone that the Madzhiri and the army had slaughtered five people and buried them in the open space at the end of the road near the old church.

Not far from the three-hundred year old oak grove near the meadow, next to the old church, lay five piles of soil and stone… freshly dug graves marked with the footprints of military shoes and with Madzhiri village footwear. Stavro lay under one of those piles. The villagers gathered around and cried and lit candles. Five graves, five circles of lit candles… that's all they were going to get. That's all the slaughtered uneducated peasants, lying at the edge of the thick oak shadows buried near the old rural church, were going to get… There would be no more whips, no more wet ropes and no bullets for them now… only eternal serenity...

Stavrovitsa lit many candles, praying in front of a pile of black stones and soil for the tranquility of Stavro's soul. Kneeling, she continued to bow until the sun set and its last rays disappeared above the horizon. She continued to light the candles whose flames were blown off by gusts of wind and prayed under the silver light of the full moon. The dim light emanating from the candles betrayed her constant flow of tears dripping from her tired eyes. With an exhausted and frail voice she continued to cry and whine, calling on her departed husband… a beloved husband and good father… a good man and a good provider…

It was daylight the next day. Heads down, looking ragged, sick and tired, people began to return to the village. They left the five piles of fresh soil, stones and burned candles behind. On their way they were greeted by Vasil, the old, grey and feeble village priest who, during the entire time, repeatedly rang the church bell saying farewell to the dead, according to an old custom… and helped the living endure the pain and grief...

Then, during the night before Mitrovden, the men unearthed their rifles and in the morning before the roosters crowed, they cleaned

and counted their bullets. Giorgevitsa, passing the oil to Vasil, in a begging voice, said: “My son, you are the only son I have left… only you… I am begging you not to go, even though you will not listen to me. But please hear me out about one thing: please look after yourself… please be careful…”

Vasil looked at her and with a tiny smile on his face and, without saying a word, gave her a great big hug. They both began to cry, which made Giorgevitsa feel uneasy. It was difficult for her to let him go. She hugged him back for a long time and slowly and quietly let him go. Then, while wiping her tears, she said: “After you go my son there will be no one here to take me to the cemetery. Your father and I will be left alone…” She then slowly stood up and went down to the cold storage room and got something that was wrapped in a cloth. She came close to Vasil and, while standing directly in front of him, barely audibly said: “My father, your grandfather lost his life at Lokvata. This is the only thing that remains left of him.” She then opened the cloth and his father, Giorgi, took the item out, handed it to Vasil and said: “This is what is left from your grandfather and please do not be embarrassed by it… and may it be God’s will that you never leave such a thing to your descendents…”

“The Lokvata?!” Vasil repeated the word in a trembling voice. “The Lokvata you said?” he asked again. He knew about the battle in Lokvata and Viniari from stories he had heard from the older people. Three years ago he had attended a great memorial service in Kostur where a lot of people had gathered. The old people were kissing the stones, and the young people cursed with clenched hearts. They also sang the songs that were sung just before the courageous battle in Lokvata and Viniari began.

Giorgevitsa turned towards the icon that hung in the corner, crossed herself and began to whisper a prayer. No one left her house without being blessed and no one shamed this family. That is how it always was.

At dawn six men with guns hanging over their shoulders left the village and headed for the mountains.

Giorgi remembered 1946 well. He sat there with legs crossed, smoking bitter tobacco that caused his eyes to tear and tried to forget last year's bitter incidents.

Kiro looked up at him and then looking at the young forest, slowly, as if it was an everyday thing, said: "Well brother, this place is trampled by soldiers every sunrise and every sunset…"

Then, from the young forest, a column of parisans appeared and headed straight for the planted field. Their military shoes trampled the newly planted soil. Then a section of the column broke off and headed for the Faltsata.

"Well, that's that! Our field is ruined!" Kiro said casually. "Tomorrow more men will trample through and it will be ruined for good…"

"Look, the larger part of the column is turning towards the village," added Kiro. "I can see that…" commented Giorgi, "so let us go and finish planting."

"For who?" inquired Kiro. "This is the second fall that we have been at war and somehow I feel it will not be over soon. In the spring they took all the men and even children who were not ready to carry rifles. The only ones left here are us, the older men and the women. That is why I am asking you, who are we planting for Giorgi?"

"We are planting for us." replied Giorgi without looking at Kiro. "You asked me the same question last fall but we went ahead and planted the fields anyway."

Giorgi took his place in the field and, with a wide swing of his arm and measured steps, continued to spread the seeds one step at a time. He followed the furrows and, with handfuls of seeds and the same uniform motion, from left to right, spread them widely apart letting them fly like solar beams and fall on the ground.

"For Who!?" Giorgi heard Kiro muttering to himself.

Again, without turning, Giorgi said out loud: “If not for the living brother, then let there be wheat for the souls of the dead!...”

In the evening when they returned to the village, they heard some singing. They were partisan songs. The partisans had gathered in front of the church and were singing and dancing. During the night the partisan detachment conducted another, a second mobilization. This time they took young women. Mothers standing on the side wept as their daughters were taken and so did the young women who were mobilized. Donka, the most beautiful brunette in the village, also cried. This was the young woman who, last fall at the spring, with her thick black braid, had sprayed Kiro in the face with water and sent his memories back to his youth.

The village welcomed the next morning without any youth. All that remained now were widows, nursing mothers, the elders and children.

Chapter 2

Giorgi, leaning on his pillow filled with straw, sat beside the fireplace in his home and stared at the fire. He watched the red flames dance and lick the dry wood, embracing it and releasing it, repeating the motion until the wood turned from black to red and then fell into the ashes as coals. The heat from the fireplace slowly spread throughout the room. The teapot full of water hanging on a hook over the fire began to boil. The quiet bubbling sound and pleasant heat emanating from the fireplace slowly spread warmth all throughout the house. Everyone felt relaxed and ready to fall asleep. Giorgi took out the tobacco pouch from his pocket and slowly, with a slow movement of his fingers, untied it and pulled out his smoke pipe. With two of his left fingers he stuffed the pipe full of tobacco. He then took the tongs hanging over the fireplace, reached into the fire, picked up a small burning coal and placed it on top of the tobacco in his pipe. Smoke began to come out, first barely visible then intense as Giorgi took a puff and then let it out of his mouth and nose in a circle. The smoke was soothing and made Giorgi feel relief. He reclined comfortably on his pillow, put his hands over his head and stretched out his legs. He was lost in thought. As he took the occasional puff he thought of the beautiful days of summer and fall and how the north winds had intensified. He heard the occasional drop of rain fall on his window. “It was a good thing we planted today,” he said quietly. But in every moment of time his mind was far from the wind and fields. Even now, in quiet moments like this, he could not divert his mind from thinking of the one issue which began and ended his days. An issue which hung over everything, an issue for which he had no answers: “Where is Vasil?” This question was always in his mind and occupied every moment of his life. Because of that his life was in turmoil. It seemed to him that nothing was worth anything because he did not know what was happening with his son.

“What do you think… Where do you think our Vasil is right now?” he blurted out.

Giorgevitsa adjusted herself and set her knitting aside. Her ball of yarn rolled onto the floor. The cat, resting under Giorgi’s feet, jumped out and began to play with it. Giorgevitsa crossed her arms

and bowed her head. And, instead of answering, silently, very quietly she began to weep. Giorgi did not notice her, but when he heard her sniffing he adjusted himself. His own question now made him feel pain. He raised his head up and looked at his wife. He noticed two shiny droplets slowly rolling down Lina's cheeks, leaving a thin wet trail of tears behind.

"You!" Giorgi blurted out in a loud angry voice which startled Lina and made her tremble and quickly wipe her tears with the corner of her black head kerchief. "You foolish woman!" he added, "I just wanted to make conversation to alleviate my troubles and ease my soul and what do you do? You sob!"

Lina looked at him with a guilty look on her face and lowered her eyes. Giorgi felt bad for what he had said because he thought he upset her. He had scolded her for being human; because she felt the same way he did. Whatever he felt she felt. They both felt the same thing… had the same experience; it was as hard for her as it was for him. That's what he thought. Lina, on the other hand, thought "okay husband, it might be easier for you because you are a man, but it is difficult for me and that's why my tears constantly flow." He was sure he had offended her and made her feel worse and he knew very well that her tears were tears of pain and for that reason he decided to say something.

He mustered up enough courage and, in a soft voice, said: "Stop crying woman. It is not good. Surely our child is well and will soon return to us. He will come and visit us, just like he did before. I am sure of that. Do you remember what the winter was like last year? The wind was blowing and piles of snow had fallen. And before that," old Giorgi began to recount old memories and string them one after another like pearls on a string, "when the leaves were falling and he came back to us after leaving for the first time. You remember that? The grapevine still had grapes…You know, woman, this time when he comes back it will be even better. I am sure it will be soon, I believe that. I heard some shooting taking place in the mountains and in the fields of Kostur. They say that they are fighting there. I am sure our son will return before the New Year. Then we will invite all our neighbours and we will celebrate with a great feast... the table will be covered with your best white

tablecloth. Don't forget to cover it with your best white tablecloth… You can also use your gilded wine glasses. And then you will see… I will even sing the best patriotic song of all before dinner… If I don't? I may turn to stone…" concluded Giorgi with a hardy long laugh. In times like these people believe in spells, magic and even in happy endings. They need to...

Unfortunately Giorgevitsa was stuck in her own dreamy thoughts and heard nothing. She thought of her own way, of how she was going to meet her son. But for now her hands were tied, she did not know anything about his status; there was not a word about him; if he was alive and well or not… She stood up, went to the window, opened it and looked into the darkness outside. It was windy and droplets of rain were falling

Giorgi, thinking that Lina was going to start crying again, stood up and went beside her. He leaned on the wall with one hand and he too began to stare outside the window into the darkness. Both of them stood there looking out of the window, feeling uneasy about their unclear future and thinking of how much more pain they would have to endure…

Standing by the window looking outside into the dark, Giorgi was reminded of another time, an earlier time when he had stood by this very same window and watched the weather turn for the worse. The north winds had picked up and moaned mercilessly. Snow was falling; big snowflakes covered the footsteps on the ground and turned everything white. The wind raged on for several hours seeming like it was never going to end. Clouds of snow were angrily picked up from the roofs, spun around and thrown against the walls of the village houses. The darkness grew denser. The dry branches of the pear tree, planted by Giorgi in the garden when he was still a child, creaked and cracked in the blizzard. No one could predict how long the storm was going to last. A column of horses loaded with boxes was passing through the village street. The people were turning their heads away from the weaving wind which blew snow in their faces. A village dog began to bark. Someone yelled loudly in the darkness. The column of horses moved on and the snow quickly covered the footsteps. The barking became lost in the storm. The wind moaned, hugging the village chimneys. One moment it

subsided another it intensified. Only late at night it became a little calmer. Giorgi stood there with his forehead leaning against the glass. He fogged up the window and made it wet with his warm breath. Giorgi opened it, but only for a moment. The cool air blew in and mixed with the warm, clouding up the entire window. The smell of tobacco was disappearing being replaced with cooler and clean outdoor freshness. Giorgi was unable to leave the window, as if he was nailed to it. The blowing wind reminded him of when he had been in Canada and had traveled by train across the Canadian vastness. It was much colder in Canada. You could not see anything from the windows. There was a thick layer of ice covering it, with snow glued on top of it.

Giorgi stood by the window for a long time but now he was tired and felt sleepy. He rubbed his eyes as his eyelids became heavy. Giorgi slowly moved away and went to his bedroom. Just as he was about to lie down he heard shouting and banging at his door.

“Giorgi… Giorgi... Open up!” he heard someone yelling.

After Giorgi asked Giorgevitsa to light the lamp, he started walking towards the yard to open the door. The unknown person impatiently kept knocking and calling for him to open up.

Giorgi came close to the gate, raised the oak lever and asked: “Who is it?”

“Open the door… don’t be afraid…” replied the unknown person.

Giorgi put down the lever and unlocked the door opening it partially, enough to stick his head out and see who it was. When he looked he saw several men dressed in military uniforms. They were unshaven and looked tired and cold in the knee-deep snow. Giorgi felt the cold wind hit him in the face. A little further back a couple of soldiers were carrying someone on a stretcher, covered with an army blanket.

“What do you want?” Giorgi asked with a tone of nervousness in his voice.

One of them pointed at the stretcher with his head.

“What is that?” asked Giorgi.

“Well sir?” the same man spoke, “It’s Naum, your son, we brought him to you…”

Giorgi knew that Naum was fighting on the Albanian front but didn’t think things would go this way. He also knew that tough battles were fought and all sorts of news circulated about the many casualties. So when he heard that his oldest son Naum lay on the stretcher, he was shaken. But after he overcame his initial shock, he asked: “Sick or injured?”

There was silence. The soldiers could feel his pain coming on like a storm.

“Is he wounded?” Giorgi yelled with a broken voice.

“Yes... that’s what he was… but on the way…” said the same man, barely audibly.

Giorgi gasped. His legs gave away at the knees. He tried to step forward but had no strength. He was about to collapse. One of the soldiers grabbed him. Giorgi composed himself, took a few steps and threw himself on the stretcher. He started weeping. The soldiers took off their hats. They stayed, but only for a moment, then they left.

When Giorgevitsa, who had just now lit the lamp, heard Giorgi cry outside, she realized that something terrible had happened. She quickly rushed outside where she too dropped on top of the body of her dead son.

In no time at all the snow not only covered the tracks of those who had brought Naum’s body home, but they also covered Giorgi and Giorgevitsa who, for a long time, lamented over their dead son’s body. Many people heard the bad news and in the morning, the next day, gathered in front of the house. None of them was without tears. They all wept and thought of their own loved ones fighting the

Italians in the Albanian mountains. Heavy grey clouds appeared from the east and dropped more snow on the village. Naum's frozen body was brought inside the house. Giorgi, sitting on his right, tried to fill his pipe with tobacco but his hands shook and he spilled most of it on the floor. Many people came in the house, lit candles and put them in a large bowl placed on the floor. They crossed themselves and moved on making space for others who wanted to pay their respects. The older people took a sip of rakia and said "May God rest his soul". Giorgevitsa sat beside Naum's head and wept and wept and wept until she had no more tears. When she first entered the room she brought a large lit candle and before sitting down, knelt and, with tears in her eyes, placed it in Naum's broken hands. Until yesterday she had saved this candle for him, her first born. She was hoping and dreaming of using it to bless his marriage, when he carried his bride over the threshold. Giorgevitsa would now never get to meet that bride. The aroma of the candles filled the room.

The family mourned the slain Naum for two days and two nights. Kiro, in an attempt to encourage Giorgi, often said: "My dear stepbrother may God rest his soul and forgive his sins. Thank the all mighty for not leaving his body lying somewhere in the mountains. Thank the Lord for returning him to us. Don't despair; you have two more sons, Done and Vasil. Pray to God that they be well…"

Giorgi looked lifeless at the funeral. His sons had to hold him up. Both he and Giorgevitsa could not be torn from Naum's grave.

But, like everything else, time cures all. With help from their friends and relatives Giorgi and Lina, slowly but surely, began to recover from their traumatic ordeal. But no sooner had the Italians and Germans left the mountains, than the partisans began to take them over.

The newcomers unfortunately did not feel as free as those of earlier days. This fear in them however quickly passed and they felt like new kindled spirits. In the spring of 1942 when Giorgi was busy with things around the fields and gardens and when he finally started to feel like himself again, he son Done was about to leave for the mountains. Giorgi did not want to interfere in Done's affairs but before Done left he told his father he was leaving and going to fight

at the front, to avenge his brother. That's when Giorgi grabbed him by the collar, looked into his eyes and said: "I did not bring you up to be a revenge seeker. Revenge is best left to the savages. We are not like that… think about it. Are you sure this is what you want to do in these desperate times?"

But before Done had a chance to respond, Giorgi continued: "This is not a place for strangers. This is our place and every time we aspire to do something we end up with pools of blood. Think about it son, nothing can be done with a single step or with a single drop of blood. It is easy to say: 'I am going!' But why are you going, have you really thought about it? You know that this kind of storm took both your maternal and paternal grandfathers? And all that's left of my father is his name engraved on the trunk of a thick beech tree. Remember? Like your grandfather Kiro said, Naum my son, your brother, lucky for us, was not left in the Albanian mountains. Fate wanted him to be returned to us so that we can lay him to rest under our skies. Our kind, my son, never wanted anyone with bad intentions to enter our yard. The gun that hangs on the wall there from the time of our great-great grandfathers, hangs there to prevent strangers with bad intentions from entering our yard. It was used the most when the Andarts came to our village. My grandfather Naum used it to drive them out. Any stranger that dared enter was met with a shot in the head… I don't want to hear any more about any revenge… I will tell you again… nothing is solved with a single step, a single drop of blood or a single sigh. Never forger that…"

Done left anyway… without a rifle. He ran into the Greek army when it was retreating from the front. One of the Greek soldiers asked him: "Hey, you, villager, which way to Greece?" Without delay Done said: "You see those mountains in the distance, well once you pass them you will see more, after you pass those then you will find Greece behind them." The soldiers then dropped their rifles and ammunition and rushed to climb over the mountains that Done had pointed out. Done knew about those mountains from his grandfather Kiro who one time slyly said: "From here to there the land is ours. Beyond there it is foreign. You must never fight for what is not ours. And you must never allow a stranger to move in, into what is ours."

Done, now with a gun over his shoulder, roamed throughout Macedonia, Epirus and Thessaly on foot, mostly barefoot, hungry and full of lice. He was helping the wounded and weak soldiers who were at the front return to their homes. He chose his friends carefully, he befriended only those who carried weapons and who fought against the foreigners. He often used to say: "Any person who fights against the foreigners with me is my brother." And during his hungry and cold marches in Macedonia and Epirus, Done, while returning those from the battlefields to their homes in Thessaly, the Peloponnese and Rumeli, often slept in cold wet basements. Among the many wounded he met in the battle fields, he recognized a few who some time ago had come to his village. Some insulted him by calling him a stinking Bulgarian. He remembers one of them saying: "You are a stinking Bulgarian! Shut up and never speak that filthy language again." But when Done found them on the battlefield, mutilated and barely alive, he helped them without question, without asking why they had insulted him. One of those who recognized Done and who remembered insulting him said: "Sorry, friend, they lied to us, they sowed hatred in us against you because you did not speak our language. We trusted them blindly and believed everything they told us. We were convinced that you were wild animals." One day Done picked up a wounded Thracian out of the trenches and, to make him feel a bit better, decided to speak to him in Macedonian. The Thracian became visibly irritated and accused him of being a filthy Bulgarian so Done left without him. The Thracian kept yelling: "Help! Help! Help!" But Done refused to take him. After that, during a military company meeting, Done was charged and found guilty of abandoning a wounded soldier in the battlefield.

Later there were rumours circulating in the Kostur villages that Done had been appointed commissar of a battalion. Some of his friends were wondering why he still hung around in ELAS and did not join the Macedonian brigade. It appears Done was located far away from Koreshtata and did not know what Markos was up to. Markos, in place of sending the Macedonian divisions to Athens to fight against the English, he deployed them at the northern border. Markos wanted trusted people to protect the Greek state, which, at the time, fell under the English sphere of influence. Some people

were even saying: “Oh, if Done only knew, he would have left with the Brigade.” But he didn’t.

Unfortunately, Done never returned home and died somewhere in Kozheni Region.

Giorgi was devastated by the terrible news and completely shut down. He became a hermit. He spoke to no one, even at home, and left his fields and gardens unattended. Wild grass grew everywhere, even in his yard. He never left the house. Rumours began to spread around the village that he had become mute from an illness that he contracted and that he had also lost his mind. His grey beard had grown long and turned white making him look a lot older than he was. On the fortieth days after Done had died, Giorgi trimmed his beard, got dressed in proper clothes and set off to look for Done’s grave. He endured torment but did not break down. The one loyal supporter that he had was Lina, his wife. She understood how he felt and the meaning of family. And, in spite of being insulted in small and great measures, she remained true to her husband because that was how she was brought up to be by her mother; to be a good wife, to be proud of her family and to live with dignity. “If you do that,” the old people used to say, “then your family will stay strong and your home will endure anything that comes along.” The Macedonian home, as the older generations used to say, is kept strong only by the noblest of pure hearts. And Giorgi, being well taught by his father, always used to say that there needs to be at least one pure heart in the family.

Giorgi wanted his two sons to rest side by side, one beside the other, “in the eternal home”, as the old priest Vasil used to say. And when his turn came, “when God wanted him”, like he used to say, he too wanted to lie down beside them.

Giorgi left his village and went to Kozhani where he visited every village and looked everywhere, in village cemeteries, on hills, in fields, in brooks, in gullies and in every other place where battles were fought. He left no stone unturned. He spoke to everyone that gave him the time of day and described for them the man he was looking for but no luck. Then, the day he was thinking of giving up, he spoke to a man who said he knew many of the soldiers who

fought there. The man recognized his son both by his name and by the description Giorgi gave him. This man personally knew Done and told his father everything that he knew about him; the kind of fighter Done was, where they fought and where he was killed. But he did not know where Giorgi could find Done's remains. The man told Giorgi that Done had been killed by a cannon shell. The shell exploded on top of him and blew him to pieces and that he and his mates had had no time to gather the fragments of his body to bury them in a grave.

Giorgi went in search and found the spot where the battle was fought. He spent a long time searching for remains. He scoured the entire area looking for human bones; he even dug in several places sorting through the soil but without success. Being unable to find his son's remains, Giorgi decided to take back some of the soil where Done had fallen. The next day Giorgi took a bag and filled it with soil from the hillside.

When Giorgi returned to the village he summoned all his relatives and the village priest to the cemetery and they performed a proper funeral for Done. Giorgi personally dug a grave next to Naum's and buried the bag full of soil. The entire village attended the funeral and almost everyone cried. When they returned home everyone sat around the table and, according to custom, thought of Done and his life.

Giorgi was startled when Giorgevitsa touched his hand. Her gentle touch brought him back to the present. He slowly turned and looked at her.

"Come…" she said in a gentle voice while rubbing his hand. "Stop staring into the dark… It has brought us nothing but hardship…"

Giorgi followed her to the table, wiped his moist forehead and said: "Yes you are right. Staring into the dark has been a great pain for us… but we still stare at it…"

The two sat at the table, one at each end, and silently swallowed their pain in silence. And, even though they had been together for many years, they always felt alone. This is because after losing their

two sons and after Vasil left, their home felt empty and full of pain ruled by hardship, disappointment and despair. At least that's how they felt. From the time he was a child, Giorgi was tough and relied on his work to keep him tough. He trusted his grandfather and remembered everything he taught him. One of the things he taught him was that misfortune would fall upon a house where no fire was burning in the fireplace, no smoke was coming out of the chimney and wild grass and weeds grew in the yard. When misfortune comes evil takes over and life begins to shrivel and die.

After dinner Giorgi sat down beside the fireplace, tossed a couple of logs into the fire and watched them burn. The dry wood caught fire fast and the room became illuminated. Giorgi stretched his legs, took out his pipe and some tobacco and lit it. The smell of the burning tobacco overpowered the aroma emanating from the burning logs. Giorgi felt sleepy. The glittering fire, the lively flame, the glow of the coals, the warmth of the fire… banished his loneliness and gave him a new desire to live. The glow of flames emitted by the fire in the semi-lit room exaggerated Giorgevitsa's shadow as she busied herself preparing the bed.

"Come to bed…" she said.

Giorgi knocked his pipe on the stone beside the fireplace and then got up. He got undressed and then went to the icon, crossed himself and quietly whispered: "God, if you exist, be merciful. Have mercy on Vane and protect my Vasil… almighty God..."

"Amen!" he heard Giorgevitsa say in a quiet voice. She too was also praying.

The wind outside was blowing and it was raining like crazy. The branches of the old pear tree in the yard groaned and strained under its force. Large drops of water were hitting the window and the loose metal sheet on the wall was shaking and hitting the wall wildly. The coals in the fireplace glowed red with each blast of wind and then quickly disappeared in the ashes. The old man stood there motionless, quiet, thinking. He was tired and his heart beat in his chest painfully. He was wondering: "Who knows where he is now, where he is freezing? If the wind and rain are beating on him,

whether he has eaten or is he hungry? Whether he is barefoot or he has shoes? His Vasil?"

Unable to shake the bad thoughts from his mind, Giorgi decided to roll into bed. He leaned on both of his hands and swung around violently. Lina, not being able to sleep herself, asked: "Are you not asleep?"

"No! I can't sleep!" confessed Giorgi.

The old man then got up, lit a cigarette, walked around the room and a little later went back to bed. Then, sigh after long sigh, after hearing the first rooster crow, he fell asleep.

Chapter 3

Kolio Shurdov, Giorgi's closest neighbour, was taken to Kostur during an attack on the village by a unit of royal troops. After the village was surrounded by the royalists, a patrol led by the village kmet (head) arrested Kolio. The kmet himself pointed him out. Kolio was then turned over to the police who accused him of committing crimes against the state and according to a report Kolio's guilt was not a small matter. His father had fought in the Macedonian Ilinden uprising in 1903, in 1924 he refused to leave when he was expelled to Bulgaria, he was accused of being an autonomist, in 1936 his son Iane did not want to enroll in the Metaxa fascist youth organization EON (Greek Organization of Youth). These are some of the reasons why Kolio was sent to the prison camps in Aegina. Not to mention that during the December events in Athens he was a platoon commander when he fought against General Scobey's English Expeditionary Corps units and against the royalists. Then, towards the end of 1946, he was one of the first partisans to leave for the mountains. The indictment also charged him with not learning to speak Greek. In all this time that Macedonia was under Greek rule, Kolio Shurdov did not learn to speak Greek and he did not want to be called Kolios Sourdos, only Kolio Shurdov. The police chief was stunned by all this and quite naively asked: "Why are you bothered so much by an 's' at the beginning and end of your last name?"

Kolio persistently kept silent because he knew that no matter what answers he gave it would be wrong for them and his guilt would increase. This had happened to him before. This was not his first sentence or his first beating. Previously he had been beaten in the mouth and cursed because he wanted to be called Kolio and not Kolios. Parousis, the investigative judge, refused to accept that or the idea that it was an insult for Kolio to be called "Kolios" against his will.

The judge opened Kolio's file and said: "It is written here that you, Kolios, have been wearing a Greek uniform for six years and that you have participated in the Asia Minor campaign… All those six years you were in the service of Greece and for that many years you

have been fighting under the shadow of the sacred Greek flag… is that right?"

Kolio kept his mouth shut and said nothing. Once in a while he raised his thick and dense eyebrows and held onto his side, which hurt a lot from yesterday's beating. His entire lifetime he had been in pain but so far he had survived. Unfortunately only those who have suffered the same fate can understand his pain. Only those who have been in his position can understand his sorrow, grief, bitterness, the hoarseness in his voice and the look in his eyes.

Parousis took out another folder with papers, opened it and read: "We are bringing our complaints against various hostile authorities in Greece..." Parousis stopped reading, swallowed and, after a momentary pause, said: "Nonsense!" He then skipped a few lines and continued: "In 1912 we went from Turkish to Greek rule. In 1915 we, together with the Greeks, went to shed our blood in Doiran and Belasitsa and stayed there until 1918. After that the Greek state took us east to Asia Minor where many of us died. We also died in the Albanian mountains in 1940 while fighting the Italians for Greece and Greece cracked down on us and forbade us from speaking our Macedonian language. And now they are still penalizing us for speaking our Macedonian language. When the Italians came they had no problem with us speaking Macedonian. When the Germans came they too had no problem with us speaking our Macedonian language. When the Greeks rose up to fight against the Italians and Germans we did too and together we drove them out. When the Greeks came back, the Greek government again forbade us from speaking Macedonian but refused to punish the Madzhiri for robbing us and looting our homes. Then, when we tried to defend ourselves with farm tools and sticks, they sent the gendarmerie to beat us for whole days and nights..." concluded Parousis and stopped reading.

After a short pause he turned to Kolio and said: "I am not going to read any more but I will tell you this, Kolios; there is another piece of paper here that says that you wrote all this. And you know something, Kolios, a person can be charged for just thinking of such things let alone sitting down and writing them. And you wonder why the state is finding you guilty with loads of crimes and why you

are an enemy of the state! Hey, Kolios, Kolios, you are a thick-headed idiot!"

The police chief pressed a button under the desk in his office and a young policeman opened the door and came in.

"Take the old man away!" ordered the police chief.

After Kolio left the police chief said: "They went over my head with their complaints. And what did these Slavo-phones think they would accomplish by lodging such complaints?"

"Are you asking me, Chief?" asked Parousis.

"I am asking you and myself!" replied the chief with a bitter tone of voice. "It was our luck," he continued, "that Greece lost the war with Turkey. We should be raising a monument of appreciation to Ataturk and then we should be blowing it up as a sign of hatred for the shame the Greeks suffered because of those savages. Oh, my dear sir, if it wasn't for those who came here from Asia Minor, more precisely those that the Turks drove out of Turkey," the chief raised his fist, "we would have had to deal with these peasants... They, sir, the Madzhiri, those kicked out of Turkey, homeless and uprooted from their homes are creating new homes and sprouting new roots here. If it was not for them we would have remained on our bare rocks and would have celebrated the likes of Melas, Petropoulakos and other captains and former revelers. And do you think that my boys and I would go out and insult them by asking them why they robbed the Slavo-phone villages and investigate who raped the Slavo-phone women? What these people are doing, as far as I am concerned, is justice… I personally support that. Don't get me wrong, I did not put them up to this. I am convinced they know what they are doing. It is simple: they only want to get back here what they lost in Asia Minor…"

"Yes, yes, I understand, all this is done with the blessing of the Greek authorities, especially the police," replied Parousis with a sarcastic tone of voice.

“You can think what you like, Sir. I think for us and for the Greek state and its ideals for a Greater Greece, the Madzhiri from Asia Minor are more useful to us than the Slavo-phones who have good properties and fertile soil,” replied the chief who was then interrupted by Parousis who said: “The supporters of Greater Greece and...” but before he was able to complete his sentence he was interrupted by the chief who said: “Please don’t interrupt me, Sir, allow me to finish my sentence. All I am saying is that for them, for the Madzhiri, this is a chance to make up for their losses…”

The chief was again interrupted by Parousis who said: “By plundering?!...”

“I am not interested by what means they use,” replied the chief, “all I am saying, as a Greek and as a police officer, is that I am responsible for achieving some aims. This is the most important thing for me… and for you, Sir…”

Someone was knocking on the door. A moment later the same young police officer entered the office.

“Chief, Sir, Captain Peter Rogers is here to see you,” said the young police officer.

“He is back again… his mother’s… he is like a flea jumping here, jumping there, jumping everywhere. Let him in...” replied the chief.

Even before entering the room the English captain yelled out: “Hello Chief.”

The chief wanted to respond to him in English but refrained because, according to the spirit of his upbringing, he did not tolerate the English, but in his service as a police chief he had been instructed by his superiors, in Athens and in Solun, to be polite to his English ally and patron.

“My deepest respects, Captain, Sir… please sit down... Something to drink?” replied the chief.

“No!” the captain replied indifferently and sat in the armchair. “Am I interrupting something, gentlemen?” the captain asked in Greek. “Please, continue your conversation if, of course, it is not secret… I would be interested to hear what you are discussing…” concluded the captain.

“No, Sir, you are not interrupting anything,” replied the chief. “You are not interrupting anything at all. And we would be happy to share our thoughts with you.”

The chief then turned to Parousis and continued: “I will repeat, Sir, the most important thing for me is to achieve my objectives…”

“By plunder?” Parousis again asked.

“By plunder and by any other means possible, all that can be done to move them out, to push them out, to uproot them and make them have nothing to do with Greece; to erase everything about them, everything physical and spiritual. Their minds need to be molded to feel Greek. We need to instill in their children our sense of grandeur and dignity so that they can think the way we think and do what we do. Time is on our side...”

“Not right now, dear Sir…” the Englishman weighed in. “Not right now.”

The chief reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver cigarette case, then came close to the captain, opened it and said: “Cigarette, captain?”

“No, thanks.” said the Englishman and looked at him. The chief had a strange and insulting smile on his face.

The Englishman also did not fail to notice the engraved German eagle, the swastika and the inscription “For great success” under the chief’s cigarette box. The chief quickly closed his box and put it back into the inner pocket of his short coat.

“Gentlemen, I feel that our conversation is very interesting but I am a busy man and unfortunately I must go. I hope you don’t mind?” said the captain with a slight smile on his face.

“You mean turn them into janissaries?” Parousis yelled after the Englishman had left.

“Everything is acceptable for greater Greece!” exclaimed the chief.

“It is not exactly like that!” retorted Parousis. “Only one old song, a few words spoken in their language, even the sound of a word, a legend or a story once heard, one sad song… are all sufficient to awaken them again... for them to become a volcano, a fury, a whirlwind... Like they are now in the mountains… And what is this now in the mountains? And what did Metaxas do with their young? Many people thought and believed that they could turn them into Greeks with threats and with what not… They thought by making them wear the EON blue uniforms or by sending them to fight the Italians and Mussolini in the Albanian mountains, they could turn them into Greeks, but they failed. They changed their minds, even the ones in the EON ranks. They later hung new symbols on their hats...”

“Maybe it was like that,” agreed the chief, “but many dire mistakes were also made. Here is an example of a mistake that the Greeks made. If we Greeks had not migrated and stayed here on our lands like the Germans have done today, we would have been one of the greatest nations on earth.”

Parousis laughed but did not say a word.

“Why are you laughing, Sir, I will prove it you,” the chief interjected and continued. “In the fifth century BC the number of Greeks was around twenty million. With an increase of about one and a half percent, today their number would have been four hundred and ninety million. That’s one hell of a number, eh?!”

“Since I was a young man, my dear chief, everywhere I went and everyone I met tried to poison me with this Greater Greece stench. Now you are doing it... What you are telling me is that you want a

homeland that works against the world and not a world that works with our homeland..."

"Okay, okay!" retorted the chief. "If we were such a nation we would have been masters everywhere, not only here, in this dried up world of ours…"

Parousis turned towards the little window and looked outside. A moment later he saw an English sergeant come out of the store on the opposite side of the street. Without turning his head Parousis said: "Chief, look outside, over there in front of the store. Like you said, they are now the masters of our dried up world. Today, by the will of our King, a Greek general is expected to stand at attention in front of this half-drunken English sergeant."

The police chief went to the window and stood there for a long time, watching the English sergeant. When he disappeared from view, the chief cursed him in German.

The same evening sitting in a café, Rogers, speaking to Parousis, said: "I cannot stand braggarts like the police chief. And to think that he was educated in Berlin where he completed his police academy?"

"No, I did not know that," Parousis quietly replied.

"Don't be naïve. You knew that! How could you not know? I told you myself a while ago. He was a Gestapo collaborator..." said Rogers.

The next day Peter Rogers came to the Chief's office early in the morning and asked: "Will you be trying the old man? Please go and ask Parousis."

When Parousis arrived Rogers said to him mockingly: "Parousis, what the hell does this old man know? Listen to me; what you all need to understand is one basic thing! You need to get all these people to go to the mountains... Think about it..."

“So that we can wage war against them with two or three poorly armed battalions?” interrupted Parousis.

“Yes, today battalions… tomorrow divisions and corps! The weapons are on their way. The ships have already left the ports,” replied Rogers.

“Yes of course Captain! I have heard that our government has already thanked the government of His Royal Majesty and that the American ships loaded with weapons will soon be arriving in Piraeus,” confirmed Parousis.

“Our Montgomery, Sir,” said Rogers while walking towards the window, “was once asked what he thought of the personal characteristics of officers and their capabilities. He identified four types and recommended they be arranged as follows: the talented and industrious be placed in the first row, the wise and diligent be placed in the second row, the smart and lazy in the third row and the stupid and diligent in the fourth row... And when we asked which group or category was most dangerous when placed in positions of responsibility, he said ‘the stupid and diligent’.”

Rogers turned around. Thick smoke came out of his mouth when he exhaled after taking a long puff from his tobacco pipe. He took the pipe out of his mouth and, after knocking on the top of the desk with it, said: “So, my dear Chief, according to my assessment, you fall into the last category. You are stupid but diligent. You are stupid because,” at that very moment Rogers noticed the chief’s angry face so he raised his index finger to show the chief that he was not finished talking and continued with the same tone of voice, “you do not think, you act automatically, like an ordinary soldier who only hears orders and performs them unconditionally. You are diligent because you are stupid… Who works as much as you?”

The chief rose from his chair and, while leaning with both hands on his desk, said: “Sir, you just crossed the borders of what is allowed…”

“What is allowed?” Rogers interrupted sharply, cutting off the chief and continued: “I know perfectly well what is allowed that’s why I

am here. Well, look," Rogers pointed to a newspaper he had taken out of his pocket, "right here it says that we should expel the Slavophones from here and send them back to where they came from... Why expel them, why not let them leave on their own?"

The chief opened his eyes widely and then closed them again. He did this several times and then asked: "Leave on their own?! How do you figure that, Captain?"

"Look here… How can I prove this to you? I told you that you are industrious but you do not think. Why? Because you are convinced that others will think for you. And you do not want to think. A person who does not think is stupid. It makes sense, right? Don't sweat it chief, I am not asking you to give me an answer. I myself am clever enough to know how you are going to answer my question. But do you understand why it is better that they leave on their own? You don't understand, do you? You Greeks went up against them like the Turkish Bashibuzuks (irregular army). You harassed them, persecuted them, arrested them, beat them... and then you don't want them to go to mountains and to the forests. Why? Let them go. And take your time, don't rush to end the war as soon as possible. Yes, it's a war, Sir, and you need to realize that. It's a war even if it's a bunch of bandits with guns, as your newspapers and radio calls them. Let the war last, let it continue... And don't try and stop them from going into the mountains and forests..."

"Yes, but," interrupted the chief, "the mountains and forests are so vast..."

"Today they are vast… tomorrow they won't be…" replied Rogers.

"Do you think they will be defeated?" asked the chief.

"Sure. They have no chance. Those who instigated the war know how it is going to end, but they are not here, they are far away. Of course Greece alone cannot think about such things. Others have thought and are still thinking for Greece... Well, my good chief, for now it's good that you remember that Greece belongs to the Greeks. Greece belongs to the West and the West will think and decide what happens to Greece. Today someone else is scolded and still Greece

cries... But, well, I really overreacted... Sir ... But don't forget why I am here!"

This was a bitter pill for the captain but he remained calm and cool, even though something in him was boiling. He then calmly said: "See those mountains up there? Push them to go there and don't send them to the islands where you must feed them. Make them go there. In a year or two this little war will achieve great results. Now let the old man go. He is useless to us. He is incapable of doing anything, no matter who or what he is. Take my advice."

The chief took a puff from his cigarette and, after exhaling, said: "Yes… I will let him go not because of your advice but because that's what I want. But before I let him go, I will force him to sign a declaration of loyalty. That way if he survives the war and is still alive he will always be mine to hold by the throat."

The chief put down his cigarette and pressed the button under his desk. When the duty policeman entered he ordered him to bring the old man to him.

"Do you want to go home?" the chief said to Kolio just as he entered the office. "I am wondering if you want to go home?" repeated the chief.

Kolio was holding his chin and blood was running down between his fingers. "Look at the poor man, he can't even talk," murmured the captain in a slow voice. "You beat them too much. This is not something our journalists would appreciate, even less the American journalists."

The chief wrote something on a piece of paper, looked at Kolio, pointed to it and asked him to sign it. Kolio, in broken Greek said: "I am not signing anything. I have served the Greek state for many years. My ancestors served the Turks and they were never asked to commit to such shame like the kind the Greek state requires of me. I will not sign!"

The captain laughed out loud and said: "All the waters in the world were ours when we had subjects just like him. Right Chief?!"

“Get lost you bastard!” the chief yelled at Kolio and slapped him on the head.

“Are your nerves shattered Chief?” Rogers asked tauntingly. “Light yourself a cigarette. It’s soothing. Or better still, take a shot of cognac…” said Rogers and, after a short pause, continued. “We have more respect for our elderly.”

“For who, for the Irish?” the chief asked sarcastically.

“Sometimes even for the Irish. Why not? When a man knows how to act smartly. Parousis will be ecstatic when he finds out how you handled the prisoner. Did you not realize that from the discussions we had here yesterday that he is somewhat sympathetic to the Communists?”

From the days he was a young man, Peter Rogers had been a snitch and a provocateur. He spied for many years and instigated mutual hatred and slaughter between the people in India, Afghanistan and Egypt and during the war. As an English spy and adviser to Greece, he instigated the Greeks to fight one another. While they were killing each other he, with nails well-cleaned and cut short, a smoothly shaven face, trimmed moustache and with a smile on his face, reaped the fruits of his denunciations. He was an Englishman, born in a small town in southern England, had good manners and Byzantine methods: slander, lies, sowing discord, poison. He did not tolerate beatings and the use of knives.

Chapter 4

Beaten up like many times before Kolio was on his way home, walking along the dusty dirt road leading to his house. From time to time a military truck carrying soldiers to Grleni passed him by leaving a trail of dust behind. Long bursts of machine gun fire were heard coming from Grleni and cannon fire was coming from Chetirok. The cannons were firing one by one and the shells were exploding on top of the hill in Sveti Ilia. A cloud of greyish dust was seen followed by an explosion sounding like thunder in the distance.

Concerned about the gunfire and explosions all around him, Kolio picked up the pace and moved faster along the dusty road. His existence, which scorched his entire life, dragged on. He took careful steps and each step took him back in time, to earlier times when he felt bitterness and humiliation. These were painful times but he did not want to forget them because if he did they would cease to exist. He felt silent shivers in his heart when he thought of the dark times he had experienced as he peeled off layer after layer from the memories of his tangled destiny. He felt torrents of despair flow out of him… They took away everything from him except his sense of dignity, something that was deeply rooted in his being. His restless thirst to survive all storms, to not allow the fire in his fireplace to be extinguished and to maintain his fields plowed and grains planted, encouraged him to get moving.

Days gone by, one by one, unfolded before his eyes and in them he watched the beatings and abuses in the camps, he watched the four cut off heads of the unknown plowman from Popole hanging in front of a café in Kostur. They said they were “bandits” and made the people hate them and spit on them. He watched the gendarmes beat and murder people. He watched the punitive expeditions of the royal army and the police beat and kill people for practically nothing. All of them, everywhere from Crete to Macedonia, day and night, were sowing fear into the hearts of the people. Many people went into shock and yet no one, not the King and not the government, did anything to stop it. So many people all across Greece began to lose their lives, their sense of purpose and their will to live.

“Stop!” he heard someone yell out loud. Kolio stopped. Moments later a couple of men arrived and pointed their gun barrels at him. Kolio instantly recognized one of them. His name was Ianis, son of Avram, a newcomer from Asia Minor.

“I am Kolio. Returning from Kostur,” said Kolio.

“Uncle Kolio,” said Ianis, “what are you doing out here at this time, especially you? Don’t you know what happened? Where are you going? You are lucky you appeared in front of my gun. You know, nowadays they hunt down those like you.”

“Why are you talking to that Slavo-phone, Ianis?!” the second armed man yelled loudly.

“Stay out of this and shut your mouth!” Ianis yelled ominously.

Kolio was happy to have run into Ianis whom he had known since he was a child. He also knew his father Avram who lived in Memet’s house. Memet was a Torbash (a Macedonian Christian who had converted to Islam). His family had lived in that house for many generations before the Memet family was expelled, together with the Turks, to Asia Minor by the Greek government.

Moments later Ianis turned to the other armed man and said: “You go to the village and I will take this old man to the police station.”

After they were out of sight of the other man, Ianis asked Kolio: “Your son, Uncle Kolio, the one my age, has he left for the mountains?”

“Everyone takes to the road they think will take them where they want to go. And I see that you have picked up a rifle...” replied Kolio.

“I sure did!” replied Ianis interrupting Kolio, “I sure did!” “They shoved it into my hands and here it is. There were also those in our village who said no; some did not last the night, others are breaking stones now. Father was very angry and yelled at me, but what could I do? They incited us and now we will point guns at each other,

shoot each other and kill each other… Uncle Kolio. Let's go home. Father has been waiting a long time for you and has been asking about you. He heard about your son. He has not said anything bad, he only said: "If they endure it will be easier for them in time."

That night, sometime after midnight, Avram took Kolio to the slope of Stenite. When he returned to Sveta Helena, two police officers were waiting for him at his home. Someone had reported to the police that Avram had secretly escorted some unknown person to the Stenite. Nothing more needed to be said. The next morning they took him to Kostur.

"Who would have thought," said the chief angrily," "that a Madzhir would have helped him? When I sent him home I was sure that somewhere along the way would have killed him and tossed his body into the ditch." The chief then spat and said: "What insolence! I have long maintained that no good was going to come out of these Asians. They are nothing but snakes!"

"That's what I thought too!" said Peter Rogers with a comforting smile on his face. "But, dear Sir, let us get back to our conversation. What you said is quite interesting; very interesting in fact!"

"Sirs, I will read you something from today's 'Eleftheria'. Listen to this," said the chief: "World War III is destined to begin at the northern borders of Greece. It will be started by the Slavo-Macedonians. World War III will start at the Greek border if Greece does not soon get rid of them. They all must go! Well," he continued while knocking on the paper with his finger, "there it is in the editorial. These people don't just sit there and write what they want. As far as I am concerned they are smart people because they can see into the distance and are immediately able to provide us with clear solutions."

Parousis turned to him and quietly said: "As far as I am concerned all they do is sow hatred and fear... But I suppose that's the way it is. However, there is the whole country, not just the Slavo-Macedonians. I would like to ask you Chief and you, dear Peter, as our ally: Why in July of this year, just over one night, all across this country we arrested ten thousand people and sent them to the dry

islands?" Parousis paused for a moment, looked at the two and said: "Gentlemen, there has never been a darker night than this in this country. Everyone is talking about the people left crippled, mad and killed... Don't you think, gentlemen, that this might be about something else and not just about the Slavo-Macedonians?" Parousis then looked at Rogers and said: "Gentlemen, Greece is going downhill…"

The chief turned to Parousis and said: "Sir, I have had my eyes on you for a long time. You speak of our state, fatherland and race like they are your enemy. Do you not realize that I have the power to take you down after making such statements? I am sure a place can be found even for you in those dry islands you speak off, say in Giura, Ai Strati, Trikeri, Makronisos... You see, we have quite a lot of them, right?"

The English officer stood up, walked around the office and, after lighting a cigarette, broke the silence by saying: "Gentlemen, you need to be on the same page in these difficult times your country is facing. Mutual accusations will lead to nothing. I believe, in those accusations of yours lies a deep concern for the fate of your country. I have to admit that our conversation took a different form of expression and veered off from its previous course. But that's too bad. You both made very interesting arguments and I am glad to have listened to them. I believe you will find a way out of this unpleasant situation. Chief, what is going to happen to the one they brought in today? The one that helped the old man escape?"

"You want to see him?" asked the chief.

"I am more interested in his motives," replied Rogers.

The chief pressed the button under his desk. A young sergeant appeared at the door. He asked the sergeant to bring Avram to the office. He then turned to Parousis and said: "You, Sir, did you write a letter to the Minister in which you put forward many lies. Yes, only lies… Did you get an answer?"

Parousis lit a cigarette and through the exhaling smoke said: "Unfortunately, not yet!"

“And you won’t get one,” answered the chief and pulled an envelope out of his drawer. “Is this it?” he then asked. “As you can see, I have my fingers everywhere. I also sent a letter with my opinions of you to the Minister of State Security. But it looks like I will not have to wait for his opinion,” concluded the chief.

The door opened and Avram entered the office. He had been beaten. His face was black and blue and one of his eyes was swollen. Without a sense of care he looked at the chief and, without waiting to be asked, he sat down on a chair beside the Englishman.

“If the stranger can sit here, so can I,” Avram thought to himself and adjusted his seat. He then pulled a pouch of tobacco and paper out of his pocket. The moment that he began to roll a cigarette the chief loudly said: “You are in the police station, you’re not at home, the least you can do is ask for permission!” and then looked at Rogers. The Englishman, staring at a picture of King George, pretended he did not hear. The chief then looked at Avram and said: “I read your confession and I must say that generally I am not pleased.” He paused for a moment and then asked: “Is this how you repay your fatherland for all it has done for all of you who came here from Asia Minor?”

Avram looked at the chief with a stern look and said: “We did not come here… we were brought here. We did not know where they were taking us, Sir. And how did Kolio wrong me to have him killed? Or did you want his head too to hang in front of some café in Kostur? Why not! Add another head to the heads of the slaughtered plowmen, shepherds, or herdsmen and put it on display as the head of a bandit?”

Avram paused for a moment and continued: “We crossed over, mountains, rivers and wastelands, we left many of our relatives dead on the road in unknown lands while getting here and then when we got here they were the first to extend their hand to us. Their grip was warm and strong. Their bread was delicious. Their place of rest was soft. It was better to receive a rag from their hands than something new bestowed with contempt and abuse from the Greek state. We came here to their country homeless and they took care of us... But

you, you turned our homelessness into discord and created divisions among them and us. You broke our friendship and forced us to loathe them…"

Avram paused, took a deep breath and continued: "They felt sorry for us and you, I mean the Greek authorities, planted seeds of fear and hatred in us… which led to this… Which led to the road we have taken today… to driving them out of their homes… and eventually to their demise… that's what you made us do… Chief…" concluded Avram and looked away.

"Man distancing himself from man. You made us do that…" Avram resumed talking. "Hate them in order to make you happy…. We came to their country as newcomers and we found peace, bread and water here. We learned their language because it was easier and sweeter for us. And now you ask me to betray them?"

Avram paused again and after a moment of silence said: "That is it from me! I have nothing more to say. Take my head off and hang it in front of some café or put it on a pole and carry it around like a flag…"

Fourteen days later, Avram and Parousis and thirty other men were taken and loaded onto a truck which took them to Solun. In Solun they were loaded onto a ship which sailed the same evening. The next day at noon, they found themselves walking on the hot rocks of Aegina.

Chapter 5

After a long Gypsy summer in the fall of 1947 the weather turned foggy and rainy. The people who during the months of September and October had fled to the forests, where they had dug bunkers and hid from the frequent attacks by government troops and from the almost daily bombings, began to return to their homes. The first strong rains in the fall convinced both warring sides to slow down and less machine gun fire was heard in the first days of November. DAG units began to descend on the liberated villages during the night and leave for the hills early in the morning before the crack of dawn. Royal troops concentrated in garrisons. In the foggy and rainy days they used cannon and artillery fire to attack DAG positions and infantry attacks on low hills and other positions near important roads, bridges and communication corridors.

Then, when it became known that large DAG units were about to cross over from Vicho to Gramos, troops from the Royal army began to be trucked into an area called Bei-bunar from where they carried out infantry attacks. While the artillery from Chetirok and Nestram pounded the enemy at the Stenite with cannon fire, the infantry moved in with a slow step, then, when the artillery stopped firing, the infantry charged enemy positions and occupied low lying hills. In this way the Royal army occupied Kosintsko and Karchitsko Pole all the way to Telok. Concentrated mortar fire was used against DAG units traveling along the brook, considered a front line between the two warring sides.

For a day or two, for as long as there was no movement, the Royal army was returned to the barracks. Sounds of battles taking place were heard coming from positions in Gorusha and Odreto but mostly from Kopanche. And that was during the day. Heavy night fighting was heard coming from positions in Popole. Then at dawn the wounded, loaded on mules, horses, donkeys, carts, stretchers and blankets, began to arrive. The lightly wounded were taken to V'mbel. The heavily wounded were taken to Albania. They were left in a clearing inside the Albanian border where they were picked up at night by trucks with headlights off and taken to Korcha. Those who did not survive the trek to the clearing were buried on the side of the road.

People experienced much suffering, crying and hardships by the time the Greek Civil War entered its second year. All one had to do was look at people's faces to understand how they felt. Even speaking simple words was difficult and painful for them. They felt constricted in their throats and tightness on their lips. There was not a single day that left joy behind. Misery followed people everywhere, day and night, anticipating bad news; the worst news one could receive from the battlefields. They all hoped and prayed for good news but anticipated the worst. More and more young wives were widowed, some with one, two, or three children. They dressed in black and walked silently, carrying within them the darkness of the day. There was not a song sung anywhere. They often gathered at night to pray and pay their respects to the dead. In these weary days people were learning to live under difficult circumstances.

"Send the village crier," Lazo said to Kuze, "to invite the men to the village square so that we can tell them what those from above want."

"The village crier was mobilized a couple of days ago," replied Kuze. "You were not here and did not hear the women and the old swearing and cursing. It's not right..."

"And what is right?" asked Lazo.

"It is not right that they took all the boys and girls... And you know what the man responsible for the mobilization said when people were telling him the children were too young? He said: 'So what if they are too young. They will grow up...' That's what the bastard said," replied Kuze.

"Kuze, you watch what you are saying," scolded Lazo. "By calling the man in charge a bastard you are cursing our struggle. Did you know that? The man responsible for recruitment was right, they will grow up, that's for sure..."

Kuze looked at Lazo and said: "I want you to know that I did not give him my Nikolche. One of his associates came to my house, looked at my Nikolche and said: 'Stand there by the door.' He

looked at him several times as if measuring him and said: 'Come with me.' I yelled out loud 'NO!' and said 'Comrade can't you see that the boy is too young?' I then grabbed his baptismal certificate and said, 'Look, he is not even fourteen years old!' He said his age did not matter because my boy was tall. I begged him not to take him. I was prepared to go on my knees in front of him... And while he was distracted with me, Nikolche ran off. He returned home when they were gone..."

Kuze paused for a moment, looked at Lazo and said: "Lazo is this how we are going to conduct our struggle, eh? Many people rejoice at the idea of their children growing up. But growing up how? Beside their mother and father and not in the mountains with a gun in their hands… hey Lazo, stop telling me what to say and what not to say."

Lazo never expected words like those coming out of Kuze and felt a bit offended. He then again asked Kuze to gather all the men in the village. He said: "Kuze, please call on everyone in the village to come to our meeting. Ring the church bell if you have to."

Kuze went and immediately returned before leaving the yard and said: "It's raining outside, Lazo."

"Then tell them to come to the school!" replied Lazo with a stern tone of voice.

"It will be just as bad in the school because there is a hole in the roof," explained Kuze.

"Then ask them to gather at the church!" Lazo yelled.

"That is if they want to come…" added Kuze quietly.

"What do you mean 'if they want to come?' you go to their homes and bring them to the church one by one if you have to! Do you understand?" explained Lazo.

"I understand very well but will they understand?" said Kuze and stepped out while lifting his shirt collar to cover his neck.

Kuze went to the church and began to ring the church bell. Old man Mitre, whose house was closest to the church, put his spoon down, left the table, looked out the window and shouted: “Mitrovitsa, Mitrovitsa! Go and see who is ringing the church bell and why.”

“Kuze the lizard is ringing the church bell, calling the people to a meeting,” replied Mitrovtsa after she returned home. “I said they are calling the people to an assembly… Kuze the lizard is ringing the bell calling all men to an assembly!” Mitrovitsa shouted again because Mitre was hard of hearing.

“At the church?” yelled Mitre, surprised and started walking towards the door.

“Where are you going?” asked Mitrovitsa.

Mitre nodded towards the door with his head and picked up his cane from the corner.

“Do you think they can’t have a meeting without you?” asked Mitrovitsa.

“It’s not up to you to decide if they can or can’t have a meeting without me,” replied Mitre somewhat offended. “If I am late returning I will be at Kiro’s having a conversation.”

“Okay people let’s get a move on…” Lazo was heard saying. “Good evening Mitre, please go into the church you are getting soaked out here!”

“What’s going on Lazo?” asked Mitre.

“Get in, get in. Let us all gather, I will tell you inside,” replied Lazo.

By now the people were used to attending meetings such as this one so this time they rallied faster than Lazo expected.

Kuze went from house to house calling on the people and was now approaching the last few houses in the village.

Lazo entered the church, went towards the back and stopped in front of the altar. Pop Vasil stood beside him. Everyone was looking at him anxiously but saw no urgency in his eyes and no disrespect for the church. Lazo raised his hand and when the voices quieted down he said: “We have gathered you all here to tell you that our struggle is becoming more extensive. We have created a free territory and a democratic government...”

“Temporary…” a voice was heard saying in the back.

Lazo stopped talking, raised himself on his toes to see who had spoken and continued: “That’s right, comrade, a provisional democratic government and other organizations. We now have a national board and soon we will have a people’s court. Two months ago you elected comrade Kuze as president of the national board, right?”

“We know all those things, Lazo. Why have you called us here this time?” asked someone in the back.

“I did not call you; it is the struggle that is calling you. The struggle, comrades, will call on you until we are all free... Remember that... Our struggle needs help and where does that help come from… comrades? From us, only from us, comrades! You should know that we are stretched across a wide territory and we are fighting under heavy and very difficult conditions. Our fighters need warm clothes, warm wool socks and... food. And by calling on ‘all to arms and everything for victory’, we mean to gather our forces and fight even harder... Now, as I said, we need food. Therefore, those who have several cattle should donate at least one.”

“Please, Lazo!” shouted someone standing in the middle. “A month and a half ago we gave you two sheep for every ten we owned, after that one for every five... Now you want to collect our oxen?”

“What does it mean ‘collect your oxen’…” shouted Lazo. “We are not going to collect anyone’s oxen, comrades? Those who don’t want to donate, they don’t have to, but remember this; when the people come to power they will remember this for a long time...”

“Okay, okay, Lazo, you don’t need to yell… Don’t get yourself upset…” Mitre said to him quietly. “We will donate something… a calf, a cow, an ox…”

“That’s right, Mitre, that’s right!” Lazo interrupted with a satisfied tone of voice.

“This year everything is plowed and sown... But with what are we going to plow the fields next spring?” someone in the back asked.

Lazo had asked his comrades at the leadership office the same question and all he had to do here was repeat their answer. He said: “Tomorrow, when we win our freedom, friends, we will not bother with plowing and with oxen...”

Someone sighed, another coughed and a moment later conversations erupted everywhere on the floor, disrupting the meeting.

“Silence!” Lazo yelled and continued. “Friends please stop your talking. Please understand that there will always be plowing...”

“But with what, Lazo?” asked Mitre.

“With tractors, my dear Mitre, with tractors!” Lazo proudly declared.

Mitre tugged at his ear, not believing that he had heard right and asked: “What did you say?”

“Tractors... Tractors, Mitre...” replied Lazo loudly so that even Mitre could hear him.

“And what is that?” inquired Mitre.

Unfortunately Lazo never did ask his friends at the leadership office what a tractor was and did not know how to answer Mitre. He was hoping that the question would get lost in the noise. Lazo wanted to skip over that part and continue with the next but Mitre brought it up again. He said: “Lazo, you did not tell us what a tractor is…”

Lazo was a practical person and, through the logic behind such a thing, was able to quickly formulate an answer.

“Well, it should be clear to you Mitre, that it is something you use for plowing… You understand…” Lazo replied.

Mitre clicked with his tongue and audibly thought to himself: “I understand nothing… It is clear to me that it’s not a bull. If it was a bull then the interim government would not be taking our oxen...”

Kuze, who had seen tractors before the war when he worked in Thessaly, explained: “People, a tractor is a machine with two large and two small wheels. Behind it, it pulls two or more plows and in two to five days can plow half the fields in our village.”

Lazo, now satisfied, addressed Mitre: “It is clear to you now Grandpa Mitre, right?”

“Does our National government have such machines?” someone else asked.

“For now it hasn’t, but soon it will...” replied Lazo.

“And where is it going to get them from, Lazo?” asked Fidan, a short compact man who always liked to ask questions but never wanted to answer any. “From where, Lazo? I am asking you…”

“From Russia of course… from Russia, Fidan…” replied Lazo who instantly remembered being given this answer by his comrades in the leadership office.

Kuze turned around and faced those who stood behind him and boasted to them that he had seen tractors plow. He said: “It seems to me that the tractors I saw in Thessaly were English or French made…”

“If Russia has so many tractors to give away, why has it not given us any so far?” asked Mitre.

“Russia, Grandpa Mitre, is far away,” replied Lazo. “Who knows, maybe they have sent us some, maybe they are on their way now, but, as I said, Russia is very faraway and it will take a long time for the tractors to get here.”

Mitre turned to Giorgi and quietly said: “They will take and eat all our oxen…”

The meeting turned into a long argument. Few were those who did not want to give up their oxen and none said they would voluntarily give them up.

The villagers then dispersed and went home. Grandpa Mitre and Giorgi went to Kiro’s place; who in those days was utterly frail. When Mitre told Kiro what had transpired at the rally, Kiro sarcastically said: “I would love to see Lazo plow with a tractor…”

Kiro then added: “Dear Mitre, I have never seen Lazo plow, have you? All I have seen Lazo do is lie around in the shade and wait for the leaves to start turning so that he can say ‘summer is over at last’… You know, Mitre, when the leaves first start budding, Lazo starts with his pains here and there, holding his side or his back… Lazo will plow with a tractor? Never! Even if I see it I will not believe it…”

Kirovitsa, who usually kept out of the men’s conversations, could not stand it anymore and said: “Who, Lazo, that flee bitten corpse… plow? This year he did not even collect firewood. He did not bring a single log into his yard. Not even a stick. May God strike me dead if I am lying… A couple of days ago when I was at the spring I saw Lazovitsa breaking pieces of wood from the Mitrashkov hedge and stuffing them in her bag.”

“Why?” asked Mitre.

“Why?” she replied with a surprised tone of voice. “So that she can bake Lazo a zelnik… that’s why! She pulled out a whole pile of sticks…”

Chapter 6

"Giorgi, hey Giorgi," Kuze kept on yelling while kicking Giorgi's gate with his foot. "The old man must be sleeping if he still has not stirred," Kuze said to the man standing next to him. Kuze then left the gate, stood under the window and yelled even harder: "Hey Giorgi, Giorgi, come to the door!"

"I hear you, I hear you… Who is it?" Giorgevitsa's quiet voice was heard saying from inside the yard. They listened to her footsteps along the cobblestones as she approached the gate. She again asked: "Who is it?"

"It is me, Giorgevitsa, me Kuze, who else?" Kuze replied angrily and again kicked the gate with his foot.

Giorgevitsa pulled out the lever from the door and popped her head out through the door opening.

"What's going on, are you alive or dead Giorgevitsa? Does one need to break your gate to wake you up? Open the door and let us in, open it I said!" Kuze said angrily and forced the gate open with his shoulder. "Get in teacher…" he addressed the man who stood beside him.

Giorgevitsa went ahead and lit a lamp. Kuze asked: "Are you burning gas? The other day when I told your husband it was his turn to bring the gas, he said he did not have any. Now I see you walking in the yard with a lit lamp, right?"

"The gas is for use in our home and not for gatherings and idle chitchat," replied Giorgevitsa and, just as she extended her arm to open the door into the room that led to the balcony, Kuze interrupted and said: "Is your husband sleeping or pretending to be sleeping?"

"He is sleeping..." Giorgevitsa assured him.

"He should not be sleeping…" said Kuze shaking his finger in front of her face. "These are not times for sleeping, right teacher?" Kuze addressed the man who was walking behind him. Kuze then

knocked on the door with his foot and shouted: “Giorgi, hey Giorgi! Are you home or not?”

Giorgi came out from his chamber in half darkness and shook Kuze’s hand.

“The man here,” said Kuze pointing at the man, “is our teacher. He arrived this afternoon and until now has been with me, and before that he was with Lazo. And so we on the board have decided that he should eat supper and sleep here at your place...”

Giorgi extended his hand, shook the teacher’s hand and said: “Welcome to our home.” He then pointed to a chair and said: “Please sit down.”

They all sat around the lit fireplace. Giorgevitsa hung the lamp over the fireplace and left the room.

Giorgi adjusted himself, opened his bag of tobacco and, while pointing it at the teacher, said: “Do you speak our language or only understand it?”

“Come on, Giorgi, he is one of us, he is not Greek…” replied Kuze.

Giorgevitsa, who at that moment entered the room and heard what Kuze had said, loudly proclaimed: “Oh, Kuze, Kuze, if he is a teacher he is Greek for sure…”

“I swear to you, Giorgevitsa, he is one of us… he is not Greek,” insisted Kuze.

“No, I am not Greek,” replied the teacher, “my name is Kole, I am from the Lerin villages and I was sent here to teach the children.”

“And you are a teacher?!” asked Giorgi surprised.

Kuze smiled and then said: “Giorgi, Giorgi… You learned many things today. Both Lazo and I spoke for three or four hours with him and we learned a few things. You too, Giorgi, you will also learn things. That’s why we and Lazo, I mean we of the board, have

decided that it is best that the teacher stay with you; eat and sleep here and not have to go from one family to another. You have enough rooms, right?"

"We have plenty of space… but…" replied Giorgi but before he finished his sentence Kuze interrupted him and said: "But what? Whatever there is for two people can be enough for three. You can see that the young man is thin… If he was a huge man then you could say that you don't have enough to feed him. Look at him, his is thin because he hardly eats anything…" Kuze then broke into laughter.

Kole the teacher felt uneasy. He looked at Kuze and then at Giorgi and shyly said: "Comrades, I am a teacher and a soldier. You should know that I was ordered by General Headquarters to come here. The village is obligated to support me by every means possible, including providing food for me. I am not being paid a salary. My salary is the food I receive from your village. I, Comrade Kuze, already gave you a letter from General Headquarters and from the NOF board."

Kuze quickly reached into his pocket, pulled out a folded piece of paper, unfolded it, went closer to the lamp and read it to himself.

"Yes, you are right, that's what it says here… it is written in Greek..." replied Kuze and continued: "And why Kole have those from above, from the leadership, not learned the kind of lettering that you know?"

"Leave the man alone!" interrupted Giorgi. "Those from the leadership write the only way they know how to write. That's how they were taught. Okay? Now let's get on to the matter of providing food for the teacher. I never said that I had nothing to feed him with. You said that, Kuze. He is not the only person that has visited this house who we had to look after. Kole," Giorgi turned to the teacher, "you can stay here with me and leave Kuze to do his work… he is very busy with other things…"

"That's right… That's right..." boasted Kuze. "Starting tomorrow, what am I saying tomorrow…" Kuze corrected himself "Starting

tonight I have to look for a house in which to establish the 'sholio' (school in Greek) because the roof of the existing 'sholio' has a hole in it..."

"Uchilishte (school in Macedonian) Comrade Kuze," the teacher corrected Kuze.

"That's right… uchilishte… that's what I meant to say…" replied Kuze.

"Uchilishte…" repeated the teacher.

"That's right… what you said!" replied Kuze to the teacher and then turned his attention to Giorgi and said: "Hey Giorgi, Giorgi. You think it's easy to be in the government… You think you can come out in front of the people, say something to them and everything will be okay? Not everything Giorgi. If you are in the government you have to have," Kuze pointed to the side of his forehead with his finger, "something in here. Yes, in here! If you are smart, Giorgi, let me ask you this; which house should we turn into a 'sh…', what did the teacher call it?"

"Uchilishte…" replied Giorgi.

"Turn it into an uchilishte (school), Giorgi, eh?" added Kuze.

"Well, how about you take the Mitrashkov house? It is empty. Tina Mitrashkova lives alone..." suggested Giorgi.

"The Mitrashkov house? Please be serious Giorgi… Don't you know that the roof rafters are rotting in that house? I was there today and saw them with my own eyes... rotting... the rafters are rotting," explained Kuze and then asked: "What do you say to taking Kiro's house… what do you say to that?"

"Well... Kuze... why not ask Kiro?" suggested Giorgi.

"Well, good idea… I am glad you thought of it, Giorgi… I should ask Kiro…" said Kuze, reached for Kole's cigarettes, took one, took

a burning coal from the fireplace with the tongs, lit the cigarette and yelled: 'Giorgevitsa, Giorgevitsa!'..."

Giorgevitsa entered the room, looked at Giorgi then at Kuze and asked: "What is it Kuze, what do you want?"

"Please do me a favour, please go and get Kiro... tell him it is important that we see him. Go and do not forget to tell him we have something very important to ask him," ordered Kuze.

"Why have you not taken Lazo's house?" asked Giorgi, half asking and half suggesting.

"Lazo's house? Lazo who?" asked Kuze.

"Lazo, your neighbour," replied Giorgi.

"Lazo, the Party Secretary? Confiscate Lazo's house? Don't even think about it! Not another word… Do you know what that means? No! We will turn Kiro's house into a school. No one from his family is involved in the war..." said Kuze.

"Lazo doesn't have anyone from his family involved in the war either!" snapped Giorgi.

"Lazo may not, but Lazo himself is involved in the fight... He is involved on the regional political leadership side and on the local side, you know? Not a word Giorgi, not a word about Lazo! Don't create problems for me because if I make a mistake in my job it would be worse for me than…" Kuze stopped abruptly. He did not want to say what had happened to him in the past but most people remembered Kuze was beaten and why he was beaten. They also remember why they called him Kuze the lizard.

Kiro noisily entered the room and, after shaking hands with Giorgi, turned to Kuze and said: "Kuze, Kuze… you pop up everywhere, even where you are not expected. You are everywhere. I come here and here you are. I go there and there you are… But I don't recognize this man," Kiro pointed at the teacher.

Kuze stood up, pulled away a little and with a wide sweep of his arm pointed at the teacher and, with a solemn voice, said: “Let me introduce you to our teacher. His name is Kole.” Kuze then turned to the teacher and said: “This man here is Kiro, whose house we are going to turn into a school…”

Giorgi began to laugh while looking at Kiro and said: “It looks like Kuze has already decided Kiro, from tomorrow…”

But before Giorgi had a chance to finish saying what he wanted to say, Kuze interrupted him and said: “Not from tomorrow, but a few days after tomorrow you Kiro will be ringing the school bell… ding, ding, ding, ding…”

“Are you kidding me? What are you thinking, you… you… you…” retorted Kiro angrily, holding back the angry words he had for Kuze out of respect for the teacher.

Realizing the situation he was in, Kiro then calmly shook hands with the teacher and jokingly said: “I don’t have one… I don’t have a bell…”

Kiro paused for a moment, turned to Kuze and said: “Sorry Kuze, I can’t give you my house. I can’t give it to you because it is being used by those Party people who go from village to village. What do they call them in Prespa? Ah, yes ‘iaichari’ (egg eaters). Those egg eaters from the Party often visit my house and eat, drink and sleep there. If my house was a hotel it would not be used as much as it has been used by these Party people. Where would these Party egg eaters go if we were to turn my house into a school? Whose food are they going to eat? Whose wine and rakia are they going to down…”

Kiro pause for a moment, looked directly at Kuze and said: “You know what one of them said to me the other day? Are you listening? He said: ‘You have given a lot to the struggle. I have also heard about you from others. People high up in the Party know about you. One day the people’s government will repay you.’ He then took out a pencil and a piece of paper from his officer’s briefcase, wrote something on it and gave it to me. At the top of the paper it said ‘confirmation’ for what I was doing for the struggle. I looked at the

man straight in the eyes and asked him: 'Are you giving everyone pieces of paper like this one?' He said: 'Yes to everyone!' I then took the piece of paper, tossed it in the fire and said to him: 'Comrade, if you eat and drink like this when the people's government is in power, there will be nothing left to repay us with. It will be better if don't make such promises because some people might believe you.' And you know what that flee bitten egg eater said to me? He said: "You are against our struggle!" You see, Kuze, what kind of respect I got for my contribution?"

Kuze took another cigarette from the teacher, lit it and, while blowing the smoke towards the ceiling, angrily said: "We all know that you have a big mouth, Kiro. Is this how you speak to a person in authority? Have you ever said a word like this to a person in power in the old system? You never have. And now you are badmouthing the people's system… If this was not a people's government I am sure you would not have said a word to me. It would have been the dry salted cod and castor oil for you… You've never tried those have you? Well, I have! Not only did I try them but…"

"You also filled your pants with diarrhea... Right?" interrupted Kiro and laughed. "Stop, Kuze, you are making me laugh…" said Kiro while repeatedly tapping Kuze on the forehead with his index finger. "Kuze, do you remember the time when you were trying to teach your oxen to understand commands in Greek?"

Kiro paused for a moment, looked at Kuze, smiled and said: "Kuze, Kuze, you soiled their language… What is true is true. They beat you and shamed you but you were not the only one who spoke Macedonian and was punished for it… That's the way it was… And now we have gone off topic and forgot about our guest…"

Before Kiro had a chance to speak with the teacher, Kuze interjected and said: "He is a teacher sent to us from high above from the Party to teach our children."

"So you are a teacher, eh? Like those in Labanitsa, Smrdesh and Breznitsa, right?" asked Kiro.

"Yes!" confirmed Kuze.

Kiro looked at Kuze with a frown and then addressed the teacher directly: “So it’s true. Congratulations… We are grateful to have you… Now stand up so I can have a better look at you… teacher. A week or so ago I was in Breznitsa to buy salt…”

At that very moment Giorgevitsa’s voice was heard from the other room asking: “Was that you, Kiro, who brought the salt that was divided the other day?”

“Yes, that was me, Giorgevitsa,” replied Kiro.

Giorgevitsa then came to the door and mockingly said: “There was more mud and sand in that bag than there was salt!”

“Whatever it was it was... It was the people’s salt… right, Kuze?” said Kiro sarcastically. He then said: “I complained about that to the people’s government in Breznitsa and you know what they said to me? ‘It’s from the people’s government.’ Then a tall, bald man who was giving out the salt said to me: ‘Here is some salt for now but when we win…’ …”

“Then we will give you milk and honey…” interrupted Giorgevitsa.

“Milk, honey and all kinds of other things like they have in the people’s republics, if you want to know, Giorgevitsa,” added Kuze with a positive tone of voice.

“And you Kuze, have you been to those people’s republics you speak of? Have you eaten and drunk all those things? Because you seem to know an awful lot, right?” Giorgevitsa asked sarcastically.

Kiro lifted his hand signaling that it was time to end the idle chatter and start paying attention to their guest. He then turned towards the teacher and said: “Your name is Kole, right. Allow me to again welcome you to our village. We are happy to have you here and to be the teacher of our young…” Kiro then took out his pouch full of tobacco, untied it and said: “May I offer you some tobacco?”

At the same time Kole opened his cigarette box and said: “Uncle Kiro, cigarette?”

“Oh, you have cigarettes, son... Where did you get them?” asked Kiro while taking the cigarette case in his hand.

Kuze reached out to take one but Kiro quickly closed the box and stuffed it into the teacher’s shirt pocket.

“Don’t leave your cigarette case out,” said Kiro, “because Kuze will smoke all your cigarettes. He will stay with you until they are all gone. That’s the kind of person our Kuze is…” said Kiro and gently slapped Kuze on the shoulder. “Don’t frown at old Kiro, Kuze… You know I am joking, right,” explained Kiro. “Here, light one of mine,” said Kiro and handed Kuze his tobacco pouch. “It is not from my tobacco, it was given to me by some people passing through. They were headed for Gramos. One of them said: ‘I beg you grandpa, please bring us some bread and cheese… we will give you this tobacco for it. So I did…”

“Did you know, Kiro,” Kuze exclaimed, “that such things are strictly forbidden? Just a few days ago Lazo...”

“Lazo who?” interrupted Kiro.

“Lazo, our Party secretary! Which Lazo do you think I was talking about!” snapped Kuze.

“Well, what did Lazo say?” inquired Kiro.

“He said that we should never do such things and those caught doing them will be judged by the people’s court. Well, now if you want, go ahead, do that...” replied Kuze.

At the same time Giorgevitsa came into the room, brought a tray of glasses full of rakia and offered them to her guests. She then signaled Giorgi to follow her. He followed her to the next room and asked: “What is it?”

“Ask Kuze to leave so that I can give the teacher his dinner,” she said, “I don’t want him going to bed hungry. I prepared the small room for him.”

“Good. Put some extra covers in the room in case he gets cold. Also leave him some bread and cheese. He is a young man and he may get hungry in the night…” ordered Giorgi.

“He is indeed young,” agreed Giorgevitsa, “he is our Vasil’s age... dear Mother of God…” said Giorgevitsa and then turned to the icon, crossed herself and muttered: “Please dear Mother of God, keep my child safe...”

Giorgi went back to the room and heard Kiro explaining something to Kuze in a calm voice. He said: “You can’t turn my house into a school. But there is an alternative. If we all donate some time, within a week we can patch up the hole in the old school’s roof and turn it into a Macedonian school. Do you understand?”

“What do you mean, ‘Macedonian school’, Kiro?” asked Kuze. “You mean the children will not be learning Greek? Lazo said that they will be learning Greek! What do you say about that, teacher?”

“Comrades, let me tell you one more time. I am a teacher and a DAG soldier. A month ago Pando Shiperkov said to me: ‘Kole, put down your machine gun and go to Zhelevo and learn to be a Macedonian teacher.’...” explained Kole.

“What education do you have, son?” asked Kiro.

“Elementary in Greek. That’s all… Pando Shiperkov said to me: ‘Make sure you learn Macedonian well because you and the others here who will be appointed as teachers will be at the forefront of our struggle. When we need you, I will bring you back. Go,’ said Shiperkov, ‘and work hard like you are fighting in the front line.’ That’s what Shiperkov said...” replied Kole.

Kiro filled his pipe with tobacco, took a lit stick of wood from the fireplace, swirled it around a couple of times to put out the flame and, with the glowing part, lit his pipe. He then took a couple of

puffs with his eyes closed while rocking back and forth on the chair. Grey smoke bellowed out of his mouth and nose and covered his face. The thickly crushed tobacco emitted an overpowering smell that began to filter into the entire room. Kiro took another puff and let the smoke out in a circle above his head.

"Y-e-s…" muttered Kiro in a stretched out tone of voice while looking at the smoke rising. He then turned to Kole and said: "Ten days or so ago, when Shiperkov passed by here he spent the night at my place... He said: "When the children play they want to be partisans? We need to open schools and teach them. They can learn in no time." I didn't believe him much then, but something made me think that he was sincere and something was in the works. Why else would he say something like that? You said Shiperkov told you all these things?... At this very moment he must be at Gorusha... A lot of gunfire is heard coming from there. I would like to see him again and say: 'Pando, Pando, together with your eagles and with our egg eaters here it would be excellent to open a school, to bring the children together to teach them important things, and not to be partisans?' I also want to say: 'Pando, thank you for the teacher.'..."

Kiro shook his tobacco pipe and stood up and, while squeezing the teacher's hand, said: "Tomorrow come and visit me… You will be looked after well here at Giorgi's place but please you are welcome to come and spend some time at my place. You can teach me a few things. I studied the Macedonian alphabet a bit when I was in America and learned to read books and magazines… Please do come and visit me, son… And good luck with your job. These are great times for us… to have Macedonian teachers. Do you have any books?" Kiro asked.

"I have only three books. The rest, including those for the children, notebooks and pencils, will be arriving later… in a week perhaps. First we need to open a school, find out how many students we will have and then we will order the books," replied Kole.

"And about what Kuze said? About the children having to learn Greek? It is best to ask their parents… if they want their children learning Greek. Don't listen to what Kuze and Lazo tell you…" said Kiro, went towards the door and, as if he had forgotten something,

stopped, turned to Kuze and said: “What are you waiting for Kuze, it’s time to go home. Leave the teacher so he can rest. He has a big job ahead of him, eh, Kuze? Are you listening? Let’s go, follow me, let’s go home… Good night Giorgevitsa and stay in good health…” concluded Kiro.

“Good night Kiro and you too stay in good health,” replied Giorgevitsa.

“Good night, good night,” added Giorgi sending off his guests.

“Good night Kole… and please do come and visit me… I will be expecting you son…” Kiro said to the teacher.

“Good night Uncle Kiro, and thank you. I will be there. Say hello to everyone at home...” replied Kole.

Kuze did not go straight home. He went to Lazo’s place. He told Lazo everything that was said at Giorgi’s place, word for word.

“That Kiro!” said Lazo. “It is best that he keep his mouth shut. What does he think; the Party and the people’s government will shut their eyes and ears to his hostile propaganda? The things he is saying, Comrade Kuze, are propaganda and will open eyes and ears. I will speak to him…”

“You will speak to him, but then I will be seen as the bad guy for having told you everything…” complained Kuze. “Do what you want, tell him what you want, but do it so that he does not suspect me of having told you. Do that for me, Lazo…” pleaded Kuze.

Lazo spat to the side, looked at Kuze and said: “I recommended you for president of the national council, did I not?”

“Yes you did Lazo, yes you did…” replied Kuze.

“So, listen to me carefully,” Lazo said. “If I recommended you then I can un-recommend you and then send you to build bunkers in Mali-Madi or carry ammunition to Gramos. Is that what you want? Just say that’s what you want and it will be done! Okay? Now, we

don't know anything about that teacher fellow, who he is, so you need to keep an eye on him. Tomorrow I will send word up to the Second Bureau and check him out... You said he is one of Shiperkov's men, right? Shiperkov came here from Yugoslavia, right? Yes... The other day I spoke with Stathis and you know what he said? He said: 'Lazo, those people who were with the brigade in Bitola wanted some kind of Macedonia and last year when the commanders got together in Bapchor to choose a Headquarters for Vicho, those who came from Bitola, when they heard that the commander was going to be a Greek, got up and left. They did not want to hear anything about any Greek commander.' Stathis also told me that they said if the commander is not Macedonian, they will take their units and will form a Macedonian army, just like Goche did in 1944. Kuze, we need to lead the struggle together with the Greeks, that's what the Party says and wants and today the Party is the law. We will do what the Party tells us to do. Well, today Shiperkov is commander of Vicho. How do you know that he won't detach Macedonia from Greece? And then what will Greece do without Macedonia, eh? A few days ago I had a similar conversation with Kiro and so I asked him: 'What will Greece do, Kiro, without Macedonia?' And you know what that, what shall I call him? I don't want to give him a label… said to me? He said: 'Let them die!' Let them die? Doesn't he know that if the Party hears him saying such a thing he will end up in our jail in Nivitsi? What kind of people are we, Kuze, I don't know. But that Kiro, also Giorgi… what are they thinking? Starting Ilinden again? Maybe they need to be charged and put in jail for a while… to set their heads straight…" said Lazo and called for his wife. When Lazovitsa entered the room Lazo said: "Make us something to eat."

"What should I make for you?" asked Lazovitsa.

"Something from what we have, what else?" replied Lazo.

Lazo's house was loaded with everything he had collected for DAG in this and other villages. In the cold storage they had wheat, wheat flour, preserved sheep and goat meat, cheese, butter, salted meat, pasta, sausages, etc.

Lazovitsa brought a roll of sausages, untied them and, while showing them to Lazo, asked: “Shall I cut you some of these from here to here?” pointing with a knife.

When Lazo saw how much sausage she wanted to cut, he approved by shaking his head, went towards the fire and said: “Bring a couple of pieces here and make sure there is plenty of oil in the pan…”

Lazo stirred the fire with the prong and, while looking at the soaring heat, said: “Kuze, I think we should not be taking Kiro’s house…”

“Why?” asked Kuze.

“Why... because we will need it... Where, Kuze, are you going to take the people from the leadership office to eat, drink and sleep when they come to our village? Do you have a better place than Kiro’s house? No you don’t! That is precisely why… so keep your mouth shut…” replied Lazo.

Chapter 7

The official opening of the school was left for Monday. Lazo had insisted.

“People, this is not usual work. A school is opening here, do you understand? Don’t you remember when a school opened in Kostur? An inspector had to be there. One time even a district chief attended a school opening… Opening a school is a big deal, people... We need someone to say a word or two. That’s how it’s done... The national anthem also needs to be sung… Do you understand?” said Lazo and looked around. Kuze in the meantime covered his mouth with his hand to hide the fact that he was laughing but he could do nothing about his shoulders shaking. People noticed that.

“Lazo, hey Lazo?” a voice was heard calling. It was old man Mitre. “What are you talking about Lazo? Are you thinking normally or not? What national anthem are we going to sing? The Greek national anthem?! Why do you think our children have gone to the mountains… answer my question? So that you can sing the Greek national anthem… like Kuze?” old man Mitre yelled.

“Mitre, Mitre, why are you yelling at me? There are others here, why don’t you ask them if they want to sing or not? That’s the way it is… if you don’t want to sing then don’t sing! Nobody is forcing you to sing!” replied Lazo.

“I for one say we should not be singing the Greek national anthem…” insisted Mitre.

“And what?” yelled Lazo, “I suppose you want us to sing some freedom fighting song from your days, eh?”

“And why not?” replied Mitre. “Is that a shameful thing to do? If you don’t like it then don’t sing… But let the people sing from the heart and not by coercion. Enough! We will sing like we did in the old days... And there is nothing better from the old days than an Ilinden song, Okay? said Mitre with a shaky voice and then yelled out: “What, people, have you forgotten how to sing the Ilinden sings?”

“Yes we can sing…” interjected Kuze, “but how do we know that we won’t be beaten and thrown in prison for the kind of song we sing? Think about it, people?”

“Yes it’s true… and it’s not…” replied Mitre and hit the ground with his cane. “We can also be beaten and sent to jail for opening a Macedonian school, not a Greek school. Think about that Kuze,” concluded Mitre as he turned to the teacher and asked: “Is it like that or not teacher?”

“Don’t bring the teacher into this!” retorted Lazo, “His task is to teach…”

“To teach and to sing with the children… to teach the children to sing…” insisted Mitre.

Kiro, who until now was among a circle of people, stepped out of the circle and, having looked at every person around him and having carefully weighed every word he was about to say, said: “People, as you know, I have no children of my own to send to school. But I do have nieces and nephews and I look forward to them learning our letters and our words. It is true what Lazo said that a school for us is a big deal. But he was mistaken when he said that only in earlier times important people came… that’s the way it was then… but why can’t important people come now?”

“Kiro, Kiro…” said Kuze and laughed out loud. “I suppose you want a bishop from Kostur to come here?”

“No, I don’t want a Bishop from Kostur to come here,” replied Kiro and continued, “Lazo came to my house yesterday and said: ‘Kiro, important people from up high are coming here tomorrow and it is important that you provide accommodations for them.’ ‘Okay,’ I said and asked him: “what are they coming here for?’ Now I will ask Lazo himself to tell you what he said to me. Tell them Lazo.”

“They are coming here to open the school. To make speeches...” replied Lazo.

“Well,” Kiro yelled, “they will make speeches… it is not like we don’t have anyone to say a of couple words? Okay, let it be that way... In other words, important people will come the same way important people came in the past. We don’t need a bishop Kuze, we have our own priest Vasil who will be there... Vasil will bless the school... Right people?”

Lazo and Kuze looked at each other and then looked around. Mitre lifted his hand and yelled out: “That’s right! The priest Vasil will consecrate the school!”

“No!” said Lazo, “It’s not like that at all. Let the priest Vasil look after the church and the teacher will look after the school. It is better that way! Am I right or not, people?”

“It’s good and it’s not good!” interjected Kiro. “Let us not argue and waste too much time on this because this thing can quickly get out of hand. When the leadership people from high above come we will let them decide how they want to open the school. They will give speeches… right Lazo? They are coming here to speak to us about the school, right?” concluded Kiro.

Unfortunately this was not the end of the discussion. People went on talking until it was dark when they finally dispersed and went home. Nothing was finalized, not even what was to be sung at the opening of the school. Mitre came home very upset because Lazo, in front of everyone, had said to him to forget that he had once been a freedom fighter, fighting under the leadership of Vangel Chakalarov and Mitre Vlao and that those times had now long passed…

“That idiot Lazo is going to tell me that those times have passed?” Mitre angrily protested to Mitrevitsa. “Those days are gone? Lazo is not only a fool, he is also blind. That idiot! Those times have passed? Like hell they have passed! Who have they passed for? That man is also deaf! I swear to you he is deaf… Has he not heard? Our boys are singing Macedonian songs even in battle! Our people are singing Macedonian songs in battle, in battle I tell you…”

After he calmed down a bit Mitrevitsa asked him: “Mitre should I set the table?”

“Get out of my sight with your table!” Mitre yelled at her as if she was at fault for the pain and frustration he was feeling because of Lazo’s hurtful and damning comments.

Mitrevitsa sat in the corner by the fireplace, took her knitting and began to knit as if nothing had been said. Mitre smoked his pipe, emptied the ashes, filled the tobacco pipe with a second helping, lit it and then quietly said: “What about dinner? Are we going to eat?”

“Let us eat then…” said Mitrevitsa and scurried to set the table. She then placed a bowl full of bean soup in front of Mitre. Mitre hungrily grabbed the spoon and shoved a spoon full of beans into his mouth. He then opened his eyes widely, spit the beans into the fire and yelled: “How many time have I told you that I don’t like my soup hot! And what do you do? You shove it in front of my face straight from the fire! This is not soup… this is fire!”

Mitrevitsa, ignoring Mitre’s complaint, cut a large piece of bread, handed it to him and said: “Mitre, soup is eaten hot, not cold. What kind of food would it be if it was not hot?”

Mitre took the bread, broke it into small chunks, added it to his bean soup and hastily spooned it into his mouth. He then got up and said: “I am going to Kiro’s. Don’t wait for me. Go to bed.”

The light was still on in the room on the south side of Kiro’s house.

“Kiro must have guests…” Mitre murmured quietly to himself. Then, after standing below the low fence in front of Kiro’s house for several moments, he decided to leave and pay a visit to Giorgi’s house. On his way, banging the bottom of his cane against the cobblestone pavement, he mumbled: “That lowlife… that bastard… that sold soul… he is reducing me to nothing? I was right to have told Chakalarov to get rid of all those lowlifes… And those leaders,” Mitre raised his voice, “were wrong for starting a rebellion when the people were not yet ready to fight… And they said they were? They were ready for what? To make a mess of things… eh? They allowed the supremacists to take control, to start the rebellion early and kill us all... And where were our leaders then? Why did they not break

the heads of those bastards, eh? Where were they? And now we have these idiots, the likes of Lazo and Kuze, who have pushed our people into a new mess… Let's see how far they will take us... One good thing about them is that they want to open Macedonian schools... this might open the eyes of our children… Unfortunately there is no hope of opening the eyes of the likes of Kuze and Lazo. Lazo is useless at doing anything. He doesn't know right from wrong. He can't help himself let alone help our people in dire times like this. And now he is boasting to me about his great Party and the great work it does…"

Still muttering, Mitre arrived at Giorgi's front gate and knocked on the thick wooden door with his cane and yelled: "Giorgi… Giorgi… are you home?"

"Of course we are at home… where the devil do you think we would be at this ungodly hour of the night?" he heard a female voice say. It was Giorgevitsa. She pulled the lever, opened the door and with a surprised look on her face asked: "Is that you Mitre?"

"It is me… Is Giorgi home?" he asked.

"Come in! Come in! Yes, he is home!" replied Giorgevitsa.

"Are you alone?" inquired Mitre.

"We are alone. Why do you ask?" asked Giorgevitsa.

"Well, you never know. I passed by Kiro's place and the light was on… It appears he has guests so I decided to come and visit Giorgi… I am asking to be sure you don't have any guests…" replied Mitre.

"Well Mitre, you should know that Kiro always has guests… but this time it must be those from high up. Giorgi said that they are important people... they came here for tomorrow... why did they come today and not tomorrow, I don't know?" added Giorgevitsa.

By now Giorgi had arrived at the front gate and escorted Mitre inside. “It’s nice to see you again Mitre,” Giorgi said, shook Mitre’s hand continued, “what do I hear? You had a fight with Lazo?”

“Had a fight with Lazo? Why? Who the hell is Lazo for me to be having a fight with him? Not only is he an idiot, he is also deaf and blind, that’s who Lazo is. A fool! He has no brains… Not to say that he thinks he knows everything… and sees everything…” replied Mitre.

“Giorgevitsa, please bring some pumpkin sweets and something to drink here,” asked Giorgi.

“Please, have some, Mitre,” offered Giorgevitsa.

“Thank you, Giorgevitsa,” replied Mitre and slowly ate the sweet. He then licked his lips and said: “It was delicious Giorgevitsa…but my lips are slightly burned. I burned them with Mitrevitsa’s bean soup. That woman… She took the soup out of the fire and handed it to me… And, I, without blowing on it, slurped it into my mouth and burned my lips. Look…” Giorgevtsa looked but all she could see was a row of healthy white teeth.

“Dear Mitre, you will live… You are so lucky to have such healthy teeth,” replied Giorgevitsa.

“To this day I have not had a single toothache... It’s in my genes… what can I say?” laughed Mitre. “But let me ask you Giorgi... do you still have that old book?”

“What book?” asked Giorgi.

“The one your grandfather took from the church and hid. Do you remember? The one with Macedonian letters...” replied Mitre.

Giorgi raised his eyebrows and said: “Why?”

“I figured that while the Greek justice system and police are away, I would come here, get the book and have a little chat with the teacher… you understand?” replied Mitre.

“The book is hidden in the Sveti Vrach church, tomorrow or the day after I will go and get it. Okay?” asked Giorgi.

“And where in the church is the book hidden, Giorgi?” asked Mitre.

“Why? Are you thinking of going to get it right now?” inquired Giorgi.

“May God protect and defend us all! You think I would go without you?” replied Mitre.

“You Mitre?” said Giorgevitsa. “When you get something into your head, you are prepared to go to hell and get it. I know you very well…”

“You are making a big deal of it…” replied Mitre.

Giorgi looked Mitre in the eyes and asked: “Why are you so interested in that book?”

“Well, how do I say this? I am feeling something here!” Mitre pointed at his chest and then continued: “Right here… and then I keep asking myself; will the teacher teach the children using the Macedonian alphabet or… You say you have the book hidden in the Sveti Drach church? Well, okay then. I never thought of digging there. I hope the mice have not eaten it? What do you think, Giorgi?”

“I have it secured in a metal box, Mitre, don’t worry,” replied Giorgi.

“That’s great!” said Mitre and then stood up. “I would like to go home now. And you… don’t forget to come and get me. I want to go with you to get the book… Should we give it to Pop Vasil? What do you say? He can read it…” concluded Mitre.

And while Mitre was returning home Kuze was cutting his son’s hair and saying: “Listen to me well Nikolche my son and remember tomorrow morning when you arrive at school you will say ‘good

morning' to the teacher (in Greek). Then when you are leaving you will say 'goodbye' (in Greek). When you pass him by you will say 'Hello Sir' (in Greek)... When he reads the names in class you will say 'present' (in Greek). And make sure I never hear anything bad about you. I don't want people to say: 'Look at Kuze's son and what kind of a bad boy he is…' Also, you must be first in everything… Nikolche my son…" Kuze then turned to his little daughter and said: "You Tsotsa, you need to grow up, and when you grow up daddy is going to send you to Istanbul…"

Chapter 8

Pop Vasil said to Stefo: “Go ring the bell… after that go and make sure that the teacher is in the school.”

“Should I say something to him, father?” asked Stefo.

“Right now there is nothing special to say. Just tell him I want to see him later. That’s all,” replied Pop Vasil.

After morning prayer, which most women attend, the people went to the school. They were all dressed in their best clothing and had gathered in the school yard. Running around in the circle among the men were the younger children, the older ones were standing on the side.

“Why are the comrades not here?” asked Lazo.

“Because they are not…” Mitre responded. “They are probably still sleeping or Kirevitsa is making coffee for them...”

The men laughed out loud. Lazo turned to Kuze and said: “Go and see what’s going on. Tell them to hurry up.”

Kuze soon returned and was followed by Kiro.

“What’s going on Kuze?” asked Lazo.

“Wait… Kiro will tell you,” replied Kuze while panting.

“Okay Kiro, tell us, don’t keep us waiting!” demanded Lazo with a raised tone of voice. “What’s going on? Where are our comrades?”

As soon as Kiro arrived, he greeted Giorgi and reached out and shook Mitre’s hand. He then looked at everyone present and said: “The comrades, comrade Lazo, are gone, where they went they did not say. A number of people came here late last night and asked them to come outside. A tall man spoke to them quietly and after that they packed up and left in the dark. A woman who was with them said: ‘Greet Lazo for me. We need to quickly get back up

there…' Where 'up there' is they did not say. Lazo, maybe you know?" asked Kiro.

Mitre came close to Lazo, grabbed him by the sleeve and, while shaking his arm, with a hoarse voice said: "If I was in your place, Lazo, I would not have let them go. What are we going to do now? We will not be opening the school!"

The teacher came out, faced the crowd and raised his hand signaling that he wanted to say something. When the voices subsided he said: "People, the most important thing is not the presence of the comrades. Right now, the most important thing is to open the school so that I can start teaching, right? Comrade Lazo, you and Kuze need to say a few words first then I will let the children in… Please start."

Lazo looked at Kuze and Kuze at Lazo.

"Let's go, let's go…" said Mitre gesturing with his hand for them to get going, "one after the other… don't be shy..."

Lazo went up the stairs and stood on the top step. From there he looked at the schoolyard. It was packed with people.

"Dear people!" he yelled. "Many of you were asking yourselves why we were repairing the roof of the school. Now you all know. Some of you learned when you were repairing the roof…" Lazo paused. His throat felt dry and he began to lose his voice. He had never stood in front of a crowd and made a speech before; this was his first time speaking publicly. He looked around, flapped his arms and continued: "I, people, don't know how to speak well. The public speaking was left to our comrades who came here last night but it appears some urgent matter led them away. So now that we are gathered here, I can say only this: Let this first school bell be good for us and for our children… and you, teacher, our teacher, go ahead, be the first to take the children in. Go ahead!" said Lazo and with a wide swing of his arm pointed at the school door.

The teacher, who at the time stood beside Lazo, shook Lazo's hand, turned towards the crowd and said: "Children, first I want to say a

few words to you. I want you to know and to remember that this day is your day. Today you will be stepping over the threshold of the school and it will be like stepping into a new life. You will be stepping into a world of letters and books, books that will take you to new places and new worlds. But never forget that this is your world. This is where your loved ones, your neighbours and all the people in your village live. This is your world of fields, meadows, forests, blue sky and that sun shining upon us... I also want you to know and to remember that this day is the day of your fathers, older brothers and sisters who are now on the battlefield armed and ready to fight for you so that you can have this… what is ours… a Macedonian school... in which you will learn the language of your grandparents, your mothers and fathers and no one will scold you, beat you, belittle you or shame you because you speak Macedonian. Let me also tell you… today, just two hours ago, school bells rang out all throughout Macedonia inviting all the Macedonian children to go to Macedonian schools... We here are a bit late... And when I say all Macedonian children, I also think of those in the Vardar and Pirin parts of Macedonia..."

The teacher paused for a moment, looked at everyone in front of him and continued: "I also want to tell everyone gathered here that this is the first school year in Macedonia, in spite of being divided, that Macedonian students are learning their own… our Macedonian language. You, dear children, be good students, smart and bold because many people including your parents will be depending on you to lead us to a better future. You are Macedonia's future. Macedonia will be what you want it to be, what you imagine it to be... And I will teach you to read and write... After me, someone who knows more than me will come and teach you more and more until you know more than all your teachers... and now I will give one primer for every three children to share... That's all I have... One day everyone of you will have your own primer and many notebooks and pencils..." concluded the teacher and, with his hand, invited the students to pass by him. He then handed out the primers, entered the school and a moment later came out holding a school bell in his hand, raised it above his head and began to ring it.

After the children went inside the people began to slowly disperse all excited about finally hearing a school bell ring in their village.

Several older people still lingered on in the school yard sucking on their tobacco pipes, releasing tiny clouds of smoke into the air and leaning of their canes. First to separate from the group was old man Mitre, who stuck his nose and moustache against the glass window and looked inside the school. The others stood behind him and looked and listened to hear what the teacher was saying. Kiro, the shortest of them all, stood behind everyone and could not see a thing, even after he raised himself on his toes. Lenka's Pando, that's what the other old men called him, who stood in front of Kiro, turned around and angrily said to Kiro: "Stop pushing, Kiro. What do you think they are doing in there, selling alva and none will be left for you?"

"Move, move over you… let me see what's going on in there…" whispered Kiro, not wanting to speak out loud and disturb the teacher. "Move, move I said…" said Kiro and shoved his head under Pando's arm and with his mouth wide open and with watery eyes, looked inside. The teacher was walking between the desks touching the children on their heads and when he came to the blackboard said: "Children, that's all for today…"

"Oh, damn it!" whispered Kiro and excitedly slapped Lenka's Pando on the back. Pando, startled, swore at Kiro but in a very happy tone of voice.

"What the hell!!!" Kiro yelled out. "Why are you swearing at me, all I did was ask you to move...?"

Nikolche came home offended and threw the bag that contained several Greek books on the floor and said to his father: "Daddy, none of your 'calimera' (good morning in Greek), 'jasas' (goodbye in Greek), 'paron' (present in Greek) and 'kirie' (sir in Greek) were acceptable in the school today. The teacher told us to greet each other in the morning with the words 'dobro utro', during the entire day with the words 'dobar den' and during the evening with the words 'dobro vecher'. When we departed he told us to use the words 'doviduvanie' or 'dogledanie', and when we meet each other to use the word 'zdravo'.

A week or so later, the old men were sitting on the porch of the church carrying on a conversation. They were discussing the teacher. One of them, hitting the floor tiles with his cane, said: “He is some teacher, eh? He wears no eye glasses and no brimmed hat, has no part in the middle or side of his head and wears no pomade gel in his hair… And look at how he is dressed? Boots, military pants and a military hat and belt. No! I say he is not a teacher. He sees an old person and what does he say? Good day Grandpa, good day Grandma... all he does is say good morning, good day, good evening, how are you, how are you doing…? He will ask you if you want ‘tobacco’ or a ‘cigarette’ and he will give you one. He does not speak Greek and will not scold anyone who speaks our language. He never scolds the children. And they, the little rascals, pay attention to him and praise him. He does not beat them like the Greek teachers did for speaking Macedonian… He is not like the teachers before in front of whom we had to bow and be the first to welcome him and say ‘kalimera’ (good day in Greek), ‘kirie’ (sir in Greek), zito i Elas (long live Greece)...” concluded the man, pausing for a moment, looked up and then said: “Can you believe it… He then went to church, lit a candle in front of an icon, crossed himself and said: ‘Thank you, thank you, Mother.’ in Macedonian…?”

Talking about Kiro, they were saying that he spent his youth and ruined his health far away from the boundary of his village. Immediately after his “problem” occurred he fled through Serbia, Austria and Italy and went to America. He left five family members behind; his father Nakie, mother Dina, brother Nikola, sister-in-law Sofa and, two years before he married her, his fiancée Mara. Before the Balkan wars he took his brother to America and his brother then brought his wife Sofa. After the Great War, Kiro tried to return to the village but the Greek authorities refused to allow him entry because he had a Turkish passport. By then the Greek authorities had also confiscated his property because he was considered a Turkish subject, not a Greek. In order to allow him to return to his home, Greece asked him to give up being a Turkish subject and become a Greek. They took him from office to office until they finally found someone who advised him to quickly become a Greek citizen because: “If you do not receive a Greek citizenship soon, you will be expelled to Bulgaria as a Bulgarian... And not only you, but your entire family...”

Kiro had no choice but to become a Greek subject if he wanted to return home. He had a lot of photographs of himself, in some wearing a fez on his head looking like a Turk and in others wearing a brimmed hat looking like an American.

During the time when the Greeks were changing the names of the villages and towns by law from Macedonian to Greek, Kiro took Giorgi and again went to America. This time as a Greek subject. In America they worked for three years before the "big economic crisis" put them out of work. Kiro again had no choice but to return home and face a greater crisis.

When he returned he found only Mara and his mother Dina at home. His father Nakie had been lying in a grave for almost a year. Then, when he learned that the factories in America were opening their doors again, he applied to go but by then new regulations were brought into effect and Kiro was amongst the first to be affected by them.

Kiro spoke no Greek and he hardly spoke any Turkish or English or any acceptable languages required by the authorities. So he decided to speak Macedonian to them, which almost landed him in jail where for sure he would have been beaten and forced to drink castor oil and eat dry salted cod. But he was lucky they did not nab him because Kiro was a well-traveled person and knew how to keep his mouth shut. Immediately he began to speak English to them, which fortunately for him they did not understand… But because he spoke English, they decided to let him go… but watched him. When Kiro went to Kostur, Rupishta or any other town, he always took Giorgi with him. Giorgi was his closest neighbour and best friend and spoke enough Greek to keep them from getting lost in the cities and from being nabbed by the authorities for not speaking Greek.

Kiro always had money and sent plenty of it to his wife at home but was left without children. His wife Mara suffered the most from that. But that's not what people saw in her, especially the woman in the urban centres like Kostur, who marveled at her with envy when they saw her in her "American" dresses. They called her the "American" woman and watched her do her rounds in the

marketplace and then dash over to the Kostur post office to see if a cheque or a package from America had arrived in the mail.

When Kirevitsa (Mara) went to Kostur alone she often brought American footwear with her and, before entering the city, would hide in the bushes, remove her village slippers and socks and put on her American stockings and high heeled shoes with straps and wear them on the streets to spite the jealous and envious women that gawked at her. It was truly cold but it was female jealousy fought with female defiance.

And so, once a week, Mara took her morning stroll in Kostur as a sophisticated American woman and by afternoon returned home to her village. The moment she came out of Kostur, she threw her American stocking and high heeled shoes into her bag and walked home barefoot.

She was never happier than when she heard Kiro say he no longer wanted to go to America. A year or so later, her mother-in-law died. While mourning his mother, Kiro thought a great deal of his own youth and the years gone by. He also thought a great deal about Mara's loneliness and her evaporated youth. He decided to make things right.

He wrote to his brother Nikola in America and asked him to use the money Kiro had left in a joint bank account and secure him an architectural plan for a house, never before seen in his or any other of the surrounding villages. Kiro then found a company in Solun through which he purchased all the materials needed and, with the blessings of Pop Vasil and the masterful hands of the builders from the village Nestram, built a home of stone and covered it with French tiles. He did not build the usual kind of yard with a high wall. He built a low wall and added an iron fence on top of it with an iron gate at the front. At Mara's insistence, he reinforced the gate and added the old wooden lever from the old house. The biggest impression left by this project was the two tall and wide verandas fenced in by carved posts of oak wood. Now, in his old age, Kiro divided his time, spending some time in the lower and some time in the upper veranda. The lower veranda allowed access to the front

door and the upper veranda housed the icon of Sveti Nikola. They both faced west in the direction of the sunset.

From here, from his verandas, Kiro could see a large part of his world. In the bright sunlight he could see Stenite, a grey rocky hill extending from south to north. Beyond there were the Kostur fields and then the lake. To the left was Pretselo. That's what the place with all the fields and forests beyond them was called. Over there was Lobanitsko, a large pine grove and past that, was the tall and treeless hill Mali-Madi. Under Mali-Madi was Kosinets, behind that was Labanitsa. These were villages that were burned during the Ilinden Uprising but which had recovered. Shining under the southern sun were the white walls of the houses located on the hills and mountains made of stone, bleached by the baking sun and washed by the rain. Further to the left of Lobanitsko were Trstenik, Kapeshchitsa and Bilishcha. They were located beyond the River Telok which ran under them and which, in earlier times, divided the people who spoke Macedonian from those who spoke Turkish and now speak Albanian. Located to the west was Krlevitsa or Kralevitsa. When the people were plowing there they found broken bricks, thick pieces of ceramics, pots and shards of clay pipes. Over there was the Sveti Giorgi Church and below that where the brook flows, near Turska Niva, was the border and from there to Dolno Paprasko was Karchitska Reka. Beyond it was Novoseleni and located on the same hill over there were Shak and Revani, now populated by Madzhari. Past our view was Aliavitsa. To the south was Mount Gorusha. Located under Gorusha was Gorno Papratsko and on top of that were Odreto and Orleto. Located under them was Ezerets and the chestnut forests. Hence all the surrounding villages together with the forests, meadows and vineyards were called Kostenaria; a name derived from the many chestnut trees that grow there.

From his verandas Kiro could also hear all the church bells from the surrounding villages. Unfortunately the church bells rarely chimed these days. In fact the church bells in Grleni and Gorno Papratsko had gone completely silent. The ones in Kosinets and Labanitsa were heard chiming once in a while but they chimed differently, sometimes fast, sometimes short chimes and sometimes a mix. They were calling something but what? An alert? A gathering…? Up until

last year, in Krchishta before the grape harvest, the church bell was ringing to warn people of approaching Madziri coming to rob their homes. The Madziri were plundering entire villagers. People were leaving their jobs with pitchforks, shovels, hatchets and axes in their hands and running home to save their houses. They defended themselves. The young people who now are in the mountains and forests responded to the call of the bells. Even when they were being mobilized by DAG the recruiters used the church bells to assemble them. All that's left now are the old people who have no need of bells. They all know what three rings mean… someone has died. Now there are rarely any happy rings… of birth, baptism, marriage, or holidays...

From his verandas Kiro, during the day, could see the partisan units passing through the meadows of Nova Cheshma. Sometimes he would call Mara so that she too could watch them marching by. Sometimes Mara would call out to her neighbours and tell them what she was watching. The village women would often grab their basket full of food and run over to the Sveti Giorgi church to greet the fighters. They knew that the partisans would be passing by the church so they ran over to offer them pieces of freshly baked homemade bread, boiled wheat, buns, apples, a jug of wine, or a bottle of rakia. And those who looked like their own sons; they gave them pears, warm woolen socks and sweaters. All the others received boiled wheat and bread. They also offered food for the souls of the dead and for God to look after the living.

The only church bells Kiro hears nowadays are those of Gprno Papratsko and Grleni. The Madzhiri have fled to Rupishta, Maniak, or Dupiak and now spend their time close to the barracks where they are stationed and in front of the stores where they receive their daily government donated food of bread and salt and canned meats and fish donated by UNRA (United Nations Relief Agency). Their bells are silent.

From his veranda Kiro looked to the right and there, under Mount Gorusha, he saw Gorno Papratsko and Grleni and in the grey mist he saw Ezerets and high above it were Odreto and Orleto. Under them were Lovrade and Snicheni. There are no Madzhiri living there now but the surrounding villages are mixed. Kiro remembers the times

when the bells went silent and when they again began to ring in Gorno Papratsko and Grleni. It was during the Greco-Turkish war. It was then that they (the Madzhiri) came here, barefoot and almost naked, from the desolate Madzhiri lands located beyond the White Sea. After the Turks left many Muslim Macedonians were expelled to Turkey.

It was during that time that a man from the Greek government pulled the rope (rung the church bell) to inform the people that the empty villages would be again filled but not with Greeks, with new people, foreigners, because at that time even before the Madzhiri occupied the homes of the exiled people they were referred to as Turko-phones. Even before they were settled here they too became victims of Greek ridicule by being called "Turko-phones". The Greeks used every opportunity to put them down and put them in their place by making fun of them and by embracing them by every means possible.

In spite of that, the Greek state gave them its support and helped the Madzhiri build schools, restore old churches and destroy mosques. The newcomer women deposited in the villages Gorno Papratsko, Grleni, Revani, Shak, Popole, Osheni, Sveta Nedela, Galishcha, Dobrolishta, Chetirok and other villages wore baggy pants, colorful aprons, and white head kerchiefs to hide their faces from the men. The newcomers did not speak a word of Greek. They spoke Turkish, Armenian and other languages. Because of that, the Greek state viewed them as dirty, wild and filthy Turko-phones. They planted tobacco, corn and pumpkins and nothing else. They were not familiar with harvesting grains. During the fall they took to the hills and filled bags full of wild pears with which they made jam. The best jam the people of Kostur had ever tasted. And because they already lived among Macedonians and interacted with them in the market place and in other places, they quickly learned to speak Macedonian and not Greek. Kiro remembers the conversation he had with the priest in Galishcha. They met at the Rupishta market. Kiro spoke in Macedonian and the priest looked into his eyes and in Turkish said: "I don't understand you Christian…"

"Do you speak our language?" asked Kiro.

The priest again answered in Turkish: “Iok! (No!)”

Giorgi, who was then with Kiro, addressed him in Greek and asked: “My friend is asking how you, a priest, don’t know Macedonian?”

The priest did not reply.

“Ask him of he understands Greek?” said Kiro.

“I speak some Greek,” said the priest. “But I understand more than I speak.”

Kiro, through Giorgi, asked: “In what language do you communicate with your people?”

“In Turkish…” replied the priest.

“In Turkish?!” asked Kiro. “How come, Father, Turkish?” asked Kiro in Turkish.

“Do you know Turkish?” asked the priest.

“Do I know Turkish? Like a true Turk…” answered Kiro. “Please, Father, join us in the café for a coffee and we will have a conversation in Turkish. Please joins us, it’s my treat.”

This is how Kiro met Pop Panaioti who came from Asia Minor and who spoke Turkish with his flock.

“Father Panaioti,” said Kiro, “let me ask you, do your people understand you in church when you read to them from the church books?”

“Iok, my friend... I don’t understand, let alone them,” replied the priest.

“How come you don’t understand? You are a Greek priest, how can you not understand? You do read to them, don’t you?” asked Kiro.

“I read to them...” replied the priest.

“And what you are reading, you say, you don’t understand?” asked Kiro.

“I have learned to read the words but I don’t understand what they mean... By now I have learned a few of the pages in the book by heart and that’s what I use in my liturgy… When I cross myself the people cross themselves too...” replied the priest.

“Poor Father Panaioti, you wear the frock and hat but the words you preach have no meaning for you...” added Kiro.

Pop Panaioti smiled, but barely noticeably, tapped Kiro on the shoulder and said: “Kiro, if it was only because of the frock and hat, here they are, they are yours, put them on and see if you can understand, eh?” replied the priest.

Kiro was not expecting such a comment and laughed out loud, knowing that Pop Panaioti was just joking.

Before leaving, Pop Panaioti asked: “Kiro, Kiro, you devil, let me ask you this; Pop Vasil is a priest in your village, right?”

“Yes he is!” replied Kiro.

“So, when you see him ask him if he understands what he reads... and if the people understand him?” suggested Pop Panaioti.

“Please father Panaioti, in the Lord’s name… The people understanding…?” said Kiro, crossed himself and continued: “They don’t understand what ‘kalimera’ (good day in Greek) means, let alone what Pop Vasil preaches to them in church in Greek… Please don’t make me laugh again like earlier...”

In the old days, under Ottoman rule, people spoke in all languages in Kostur and no one bothered them. But later, after 1912, they spoke less and less and not so much in public until all languages, outside of Greek, were banned. People only spoke Greek in public. Turkish was spoken in private and in secret and so was Macedonian. Pop Panaioti had to learn Greek, some Greek at least, to get him by…

But he could count on Kiro to keep his secret and, in private, converse with him in his native Turkish language and share his grief with him.

Pop Panaioti once said: “Kiro, we came here from far away, from where the sun rises. We faced a lot of hardship on the way before we reached here. This place is nice. It is thriving with green vegetation, has fertile soil and plenty of water. We came from a desolate place but we loved it and suffered for it. We left our departed ancestors there… and our childhood and youth. It seems to me that it would be best for me if I had died there, where I was born… I would be at peace there. See this stone? I took it with me when I left and brought it here. I kept it warm near my heart and brought it here. This is from my fatherland, from my country. It’s a stone, Kiro, you may say it is something inanimate; it is dead… it does not speak, laugh, mourn and has no regrets... it’s a stone that someone might toss at you or you might toss at someone… It’s a stone... but...”

“A stone too is soil… soil from your homeland… a part of you…” said Kiro with a sober tone of voice and continued: “Even if you throw it here, bury it in this country, it will not do because it is not from here and no grass will ever grow around it... It will roll, someone will move it, someone will kick it... everything has its own roots and needs to be rooted where it belongs...”

“Dear Kiro, they uprooted us and we have no peace in our hearts and souls. Even though your country is tame and calm, we feel like strangers here... we feel like strangers in this country because we have no stones of our own here... I always think of the stones I left behind, there over the White Sea...” said Pop Panaioti.

The old people were able to distinguish between the various tastes of the water and the tenderness of the various morning winds. They passed their time mostly in solitude and, from time to time, spent many nights having conversations about their past and about the future. Dearest to them were the conversations about tomorrow and what was to come. The young, those who already wore the Greek uniform and buried an occasional person from their kind in the new habitats, slowly began to put root there. Kiro, not once but many times in conversation with Giorgi, said: “When you bury someone

close to you in some place, then you start to feel like that place belongs to you…"

And so they (the Madzhiri) began to bury their loved ones in their new places and the places felt like they belonged to them. And the more they felt the places belonged to them, the more they hated the people with whom they were destined to live. Some of the people who were brought from the southern parts of Greece to serve in these regions of Macedonia, according to discussions they had with the more affluent Madzhiri, were told: "Mother Greece brought you here from hell and gave you shelter over your heads and a country; which is now yours... If you know how to protect it, it will always be yours. And you can have more of it, if you drive these Slav barbarians out..."

And just after the war ended and ELAS was demobilized, the Madzhiri began to slowly emerge from their habitats and reach out to the Macedonian villages, ruthlessly cutting down their forests. And before a tree was about to fall, they yelled: "pese Vulgare" (fall down Bulgarian in Greek). "Vulgare" was an insulting and derogatory term referring to a Macedonian person.

Many Macedonian people complained to the authorities but all the Greek government did was make all kinds of promises. The Madzhiri, in the meantime, kept cutting Macedonian forests. Then in the spring of 1943 they took their ox carts, donkeys, mules, horses, guns and Italian made grenades and began to pillage the Kostur Region villages. They attacked at dawn or at times when the people were at work. In villages where they encountered resistance, or heard the occasional burst of gunfire, they backed off and waited for the police or the gendarmerie to enter the village first, then they followed... And when the words "In combat, in combat, in combat Macedonian nation..." were heard in the forests, mountains and village squares, they abandoned the villages. They packed their bags and took to the road and went east, but no further than Kostur and Rupishta and the larger surrounding villages which had gendarmerie or military garrisons.

The truth is, not all of them were like that. Many followed the same path as the Macedonians, which led them into the mountains and

forests from where they fought against the government troops… from the same ditches… and died along with many Macedonians... Kiro knew the people, their families and their children who were killed in Gorusha, Kopanche, Mali-Madi, and beyond Aliavitsa.

There was a bitter taste of disappointment left in Kiro's mouth with regards to the pillaging and the attacks conducted by some of the Madzhiri. There were also moments when he had doubts about the slogans of "brotherhood and unity" that were often heard from the likes of Lazo and Kuze. Kiro was also disappointed in those who roamed the villages and informed the people about what "tomorrow" would be like, if they sacrificed their lives today.

From his veranda, in the meantime, Kiro observed the battles taking shape in Gorusha and Aliavitsa and the flashes and thunder of shells exploding. He often watched a grey or black puff of cloud appear over Orleto and Odreto and a few seconds later "boom" the sound of an explosion. And when two, three, four, five… puffs of smoke appeared it was as if the place had been hit by a wild thunderstorm.

Chapter 9

The airplane flew over the forest. It was flying quite low when it passed over the village and seemed like once it had flown beyond the vineyards it would never return. The local defense guard reached out for his old maliher (gun) and took a couple of shots. Kiro went outside to his veranda, looked around and the moment he stepped back in, he heard a noise. He quickly turned and looked around. He spotted the aircraft in the distance. The dark spot he identified in the sky approached fast and grew in front of his eyes. He watched two round objects separate from the airplane and fall to the ground. He heard a thunderous explosion come from the lower neighborhood of his village followed by bellowing white smoke. The bombs hit the Mitrashkovtsi barn and set it on fire. The noise from the explosions traveled beyond the village, hit the nearest rocks, echoed back, moved down the valley and went across the river. Bullets fell over the houses dislodging and knocking out ceramic tiles. Falling tiles broke to pieces on the cobblestone pavement and scattered around. The airplane circled around over the village and kept on firing its machine guns. Horses were heard crying loudly adding to the existing noises. An old sick dog was heard crying as it passed by and continued along the road and behind the houses at the end of the street. The moment the airplane disappeared and the noise it made subsided, the children ran out of the school and dispersed in the yard, and from there they ran into the area beyond... Kiro was stunned to see the airplane circle around like a vulture, running its engine to the maximum as it swooped down on the village and rained shells and machine gun fire. Standing on his upper veranda, Kiro watched the children in horror. Running, falling, turning back… they were all crying… After falling down, some stood up and staggered along crying and panicking. Some ran for the first houses, others fell and remained down, flat on the ground. The plane flew over them firing at them with its guns and then flew towards Stenite and disappeared. When the noise subsided the people ran frantically in all directions, shouting.

Kiro took off his overcoat, placed it on the ground and put Kosta's torn up body into it. A dozen or so steps away from him Iane's body was lying on the ground, flinching and squirming. His legs were moving, digging, marking the ground. Iane was 23 years old. He

was quiet. His eyes were wide open and he stared at the sky. Kiro watched Iane from the corner of his eye and noticed his face going pale, his body tightening and shivering. Kiro turned towards him, ran for him and watched him trying to lift his chest in an attempt to turn over. He opened his mouth as if wanting to cry out, but no sound came out. He closed his eyes tight seeming as if he was praying and then died quietly. His blood spilled all around him in the green grass and autumn leaves and quickly coagulated. A short distance away stood Mare, a young blonde girl, holding her hip with one hand and leaning on the trunk of an almond tree with the other. With a voice filled with pain, she was calling out in spurts… begging: "Mother, mother! Where are you mother?!" She took a step, turned around and fell flat on her face. Her face hit the soft ground and was buried in it. She did not move after that. The wind was flipping and playing with the pages of the primer she had dropped from under her arm. The pages were fluttering and caressing Mare's blonde hair.

"Riste-e-e-e!" Mitrevitsa was heard calling with a voice full of pain as she squatted over the lifeless body of her child. Riste had been struck by a large piece of iron and one could hardly recognize him. Mitrevitsa had already been struck by tragedy and was wearing a black head kerchief with which she now covered the torn up body of her child. Her cries echoed to the sky.

At nightfall when the cattle were returning home from the pasture they sensed the blood. They gathered together in the grass where blood had been spilled and began to dig with their hooves and toss the bloodied soil behind them while mooing loudly, sometimes in long extended moos, other times in short repetitive squeaky moos. A bull named Tsrnish stopped in front of the Stoikov house and with his left hoof began to dig at the threshold of the door while mooing long and extended moos and covering the soil with the foam dripping out of his mouth. The bull's loud and frantic moos filled the air down the streets, in the gullies and shattered on the rocks beyond the village.

In the evening, nine wounded boys and girls were loaded on horses and mules and were taken to the partisan hospital in Vmbel. The wounded children were accompanied by their mothers who painfully

wept quietly. The children too wept, suffering from their painful wounds and constantly begging for relief...

The only carpenter in the village, a man of age, gathered a number of men in Luki's yard and they began to pull out hardwood planks from last year's pile of wood to make the coffins. They built seven coffins before sunrise and lined them standing up under the eaves. Among them was one made for Kosta. Kiro took that one under his arm, but before leaving the yard he felt a tightness in him that grabbed him, hugged him and squeezed his trembling old chest. He lowered his head and tightened his face. He did not wipe the tear that hung under his eye. His pain pressed on his shoulders making them shake and forcing him to shrug them. He remained motionless for a moment and then moved on, trampling on the muddy cobblestones...

Kiro placed Kosta's coffin in the visitor's room in his house. It was a beautiful room painted all white. Mara Dicheva, a relative of the Stoikov family, placed Kosta's body, wrapped in white linen sheets, into the coffin and after covering him with her black head kerchief, knelt at the side of the coffin and began to sob and cry out: "What are you dreaming, what dreams are you dreaming my sweet, sweet child? A black vulture struck you my dear and put your mother in black! What dreams are you dreaming my dear Kosta, oh, my sweet Kosta?"

She paused just to take a breath, reached into the bowl, put out the smouldering candle and lit another one. Tina Mitrashkova knelt on the other side of the coffin and she too began to sob and cry out: "Kosta-a-a-a, eh Kosta, aunt's beautiful boy… rest in peace… rest in peace aunt's beautiful boy…"

Next to her, reeling in pain, knelt Kosta's mother. She was a young widow and until yesterday, Kosta was the only love in her life. Now, with her face tightly covered with a black head kerchief, she was a prematurely aged woman. With her face covered in tears she moaned the words: "Wake up, Kosta my son… make your mother happy…"

Tina Mitrashkova's voice filled the room. The women standing in the room and those kneeling on both sides of the coffin were sobbing, crossing themselves, wiping their tears with their black head kerchiefs and quietly cursing those who had done this. Old men and women kept coming in through the widely open gates in the yard, crossing themselves, climbing up the stairs while banging the wooden steps with their canes, lighting candles, staying for a moment and then moving on to light a candle in the other houses that suffered a loss.

Pop Vasil came at midnight. One by one he visited all the departed. The church bell, which could be heard in nearby villages, rang all night long marking the tragedy.

The next morning the old people gathered in front of the church and together with Pop Vasil decided to hold the funeral at night.

"The damned airplanes might return," said Mitre, "and drop more bombs on us during the day. Anything is possible..."

"If you want to do them at night," said Pop Vasil, "then we will do them at night."

After sunset they brought the coffins and put them inside the church. The only ones that were not opened were those of Kosta and Riste. They lined them up in two's. Kosta's coffin was placed nearest to the altar. The church became brighter and brighter as more people entered with lit candles. The candle flames flickered and spread warmth and the aroma of burnt wick and wax all throughout the church. The people stood in silence, crossed themselves and looked at the icons. High above the royal doors was the braid of vines with red and white grapes and leaves hanging from it. It was masterfully carved out of walnut wood and looked very realistic. On the left, half visible under the thick vine, carved in the same wood was a woman holding a basket full of grapes. She looked very realistic as if nature would transform all her sorrow and pain into joy once she left the church. She was not weeping with the women and she was not feeling their pain... She had been there; carved high above, for a long time and for many years she had watched the joys of weddings and christenings and the sorrows of death... Well, even now, nailed

on the spot, she carelessly looked down on the seven white coffins. To some she looked like she was waving her basket as if wanting to say: “Come, people, come with me to the vineyard… to the vineyard to pick some grapes… grapes to make some wine...”

Those who created her, have created the eternal human aspiration that life must continue no matter what kind of life it is…

The royal doors opened and Pop Vasil appeared from behind them. He was a short round man, a bit of a hunchback and completely grey on his head. After giving the people an amiable look, he looked at the coffins. His left hand trembled as he held on to his holy book. He gently swung his incense burner and spread the aroma of incense among the people. There was complete silence in the church. All eyes were gazing at him as he stood there swinging the incense burner looking back at them. They were all wondering when he was going to start the funeral. Time dragged on and the silence persisted. Pop Vasil could feel the anticipation, the weight and burden of those looking at him.

“Start the funeral, start the funeral… Father…” whispered Giorgi who stood closest to him.

Pop Vasil turned around and entered the altar. Giorgi followed him.

“What is it Pop Vasil, what is it?” asked Giorgi with a worried look in his eyes.

“You want me to start the funeral, you say? To do it in the language of those who killed our children, eh?” retorted Pop Vasil.

Giorgi crossed his arms, shrugged his shoulders and looked at Pop Vasil with pleading eyes.

“Go and tell them to start ringing the church bell,” ordered Pop Vasil.

Giorgi came out from the left side of the altar and whispered to Kiro: “Ring the bell…”

The church bell began to ring. After the first few rings, Pop Vasil came out from behind the royal gate. With his hands down he listened to the bell ring; which caused him to cry. He looked up and slowly pointed his gaze at the ceiling where a mortar shell had made a hole in the roof of the church. Luckily it had not exploded. But now there was a gaping hole in the roof. Pop Vasil focused his eyes on the hole, raised his arms up, hands high above his head and, while stretching towards the sky, muttered: "Gospodi, s skorbi raspostranil nia iesi…"

The very moment he said those words the bell stopped ringing. After hearing the words Pop Vasil spoke, Kiro was stunned for a moment but when he realized what the first words meant, he felt a cold sweat flow all over him. Bewildered, he dropped the rope and ran down the stairs where the women were gathered. Seeing him run fast through the corridor the women became petrified. Pop Vasil standing in front of the royal doors raised his hands, looked up at the sky, stretched out his arms and yelled out: "Ushtedri mia I uslishi molitvu moiu...?"

And suddenly the old people who remembered what these forbidden words meant… spoken only in darkness and only in front of flames fueled by oil, spoken away from preying ears, spoken as prayers which in burdensome times were like ointment on an open wound, said "… I uslishi molitvi moiu…"

Then someone quietly said: "Amin!"

Kiro took a deep breath and wiped the sweat off his forehead and neck with his sleeve. He was trembling. His throat was dry. After years of silence and fear, after years of these kinds of prayers being silenced in this church, along with the books, the books that were expelled from this country, along with the painted inscriptions that were removed from the icons… Well, now in this inclement climate, the prayers were back again. At least for now... Now in these bad times, which have brought nothing but tears and suffering, times in which many young disappeared and much of life's joy has been taken, the church began to look like what it was meant to be; designed to be, built to be. It was no small feat for the people to have heard words thought long forgotten. They were truly captivated

by the words and by Pop Vasil's voice. Reawakened in them was their past and they, in dismay, felt relief; a strange, eerie and warm feeling had overtaken them… a familiar feeling which they secretly, every day, carried deep inside them, at the bottom of their hearts… a feeling about which they could not openly speak for so many years...

Kiro turned suddenly and began to whisper: "Gospodi, v skorbi rasprostranil mia iesi…" He then grabbed the rope and with all his strength pulled it down. The bronze voice of the church bell exploded sending its ring far and wide. The silence was broken. The wind picked up the ring and carried it far away to the mountains. It shattered it against the rocks releasing its echo, mixing it with the next ring and making it stronger and louder. And with every hard pull and strong ring Kiro made, he said: "Ushtedri mia i uslishi molitvu moiu…"

Kiro pulled the rope down hard and repeated the words "ushtedri mia i" and then "boom" the bell exploded sending a wave of sound outwards into the distance… Kiro kept pulling the rope again and again in sequence and with every pull he filled his chest with air and with a heavy sigh, released it… "Uslishi molitvu moiu…" then again he pulled on the rope hard causing the bell to ring loud. He felt that the further the sound traveled, the further it would carry the old Macedonian words.

Pop Vasil interrupted. He nodded with his beard and pointed at the bell tower with his eyebrows. Giorgi seemed to have understood. He made his way through the people and went up the bell tower.

"Bang – bang – bang – bang..." Kiro kept hearing the bell ring inside his own head as he took wide swings at it. He was reluctantly interrupted when he felt someone grab him by his arm.

"What are you doing, Kiro?" Giorgi yelled at him.

"Uslishi molitvi moiu… Uslishi molitvi moiu…" repeated Kiro.

"Kiro, it is not Easter… Stop ringing the bell like it was Easter. Ring it gently; one long ring followed by a short quiet ring," said Giorgi, who took the rope in his hands, pulled it and said: "Like this!"

“Oh... like that?” Kiro agreed genuinely. “Give me back the rope... I know how to do it, I just forgot. Sorry! Please forgive me oh Lord God,” said Kiro, quickly crossed himself and began to tug on the rope gently. Between rings Kiro could hear Pop Vasil’s touching, exciting, fluttering, delicate and gentle voice emanating from below, from in front of the royal doors, saying: “Glagoli moia vnushi, razumei Gospod zvanie moie…”

A while later Pop Vasil put his hands down, bowed his head, closed his eyes and, what seemed to everyone as if at any moment he would drop in front of Kosta’s coffin, suddenly raised his head, spread his arms wide open and, pointing his finger to the sky, in a hoarse voice yelled out: “Sudi im, Bozhe, da otpadut od mislei svoiuh…”

His voice rang like a bell and reverberated under the church ceiling before entering the people’s ears. No one moved… Those looking up were looking outside, at the bit of heaven coming through the hole in the roof; the others were looking at Pop Vasil.

The candle in Giorgi’s hand was smouldering. Its tiny flame, protected by the palm of his hand, was flickering and slowly diminishing. Giorgi wet his finger and thumb on his lips and gently squeezed the wick and put the flame out. He lit a new candle and, when he placed it in the candle holder that stood in front of him, heard Pop Vasil’s voice, now strong and angry, say: “Da skonchatsia dzsloba greshih…”

Kiro, it seems lost his desire to ring the bell... He took a few steps and went down to the balcony and looked down towards the altar. But the moment Pop Vasil stopped hearing the bell, he signaled Giorgi with his eyebrows to intervene. Giorgi looked up and met Kiro’s gaze looking down. Kiro gave him a sign with his hand to come up and when Giorgi did Kiro said: “Please Giorgi, take over for me, let me listen to the psalms for a while. Let me listen to Pop Vasil for a while… Go Giorgi, go!”

Kiro rushed to get down and stand in front of the altar where Giorgi was standing but before he reached the place, he heard Pop Vasil's voice thunder, which made him stop in his tracks…

"Sokrushi mishtsi greshnomu p lubovomu…" thundered Pop Vasil.

"Amen!" said a few voices followed by the rest.

"Amen!" said Kiro loudly and crossed himself three times.

The relenting silence was broken, but only for a moment. Someone sighed loudly and from the sigh they felt relief, but no one took their eyes off of Pop Vasil. He stood there with his hands still raised in the air and his eyes still fixed on the sky. He quietly, barely audibly coughed and in a low, tender, deep voice proudly said: "Lord save us…"

After that a number of voices belonging to women and older people were heard whispering: "Lord, save us..."

Pop Vasil slowly lowered his hands and, while his arms were slowly being covered by the sleeves of his frock sliding down, without interruption repeated the words: "Lord, save us..." The people repeated the same words right after him.

The last few words spoken were quietly spoken and everyone felt as if Pop Vasil was losing his strength. And those who listened to him were feeble from their unhappiness that took them like a storm and from listening to Pop Vasil's liturgy. The eyes of the old people were filled with tears and many of them had moist cheeks. No one raised a hand to wipe a tear, nobody looked away from the priest because they did not want to miss a word. They understood almost everything their ears captured, every word the priest uttered.

Pop Vasil, again looking up at the circle in the sky, stretched out his arms and said: "Ti, Gospodi, sohranishi ni i sobliudeshi ni od roda segio I vo biek…"

"Amen!" the people in the church said in unison… then followed individual whispers of prayers: "Ti, Gospodi, sohranishi ni i

sobliudeshi ni od roda sego I vo biek… Ti, Gospodi, sohranishi ni i sobliudeshi ni od roda sego I vo biek…" some repeating the prayers while others saying "Amen" in confirmation.

Pop Vasil raised his right hand in the air and made a cross. He repeated making the cross three times and then entered the altar and, for as long as he was inside, the people lit new candles adding more light to the church to further illuminate the smoky icons. After Pop Vasil came out he started the funeral in accordance with church canons.

By the end of the last funeral service Pop Vasil had lost his voice. He had never before done so many funeral services at one time. The funeral service was done with open coffins, except for Kosta and Riste's coffins, they remained closed. The closest relatives said goodbye to their children with hugs and kisses; hugging and kissing the cold, unfinished boards of the coffins and bidding farewell not to the bodies, but to the pieces of their children's bodies.

Pop Vasil gave the signal to take the coffins out. Kiro was first to come out of the church. He was carrying the large icon of the Virgin Mary. Walking in front of him, in fine steps, were two young boys each holding a large lit candle. Pop Vasil walked behind Kiro and behind him followed the coffins. Each coffin was carried by four people and they followed one behind the other. Behind them walked the people holding lit candles.

The procession left the church and made its way toward the cemetery. The candle flames flickered in the evening's northern breeze. Everyone in the procession was sad and cried while Pop Vasil, with a crackling voice, did his best to continue the service. And on the way to the cemetery he repeated the prayer: "Ti, Gospodi, sohranish ne i sobliudeshi od roda sego I vo viek!"

And when they arrived at the open graves, Pop Vasil blessed them. They then lowered the coffins and Pop Vasil threw a handful of soil three times on top of each coffin. Everyone else did the same after that; some silently while others crying and praying: "Ti, Gospodi, sohranish ne i sobliudeshi od roda sego I vo viek…"

The women, holding their basket with one hand, went from person to person and gave each some food and drink for the souls of the dead. Pop Vasil took a bite of the bread and a sip of the wine and rakia and, while looking up high at the stary sky, quietly asked: “Oh dear Lord, what kind of monster would do this to their children? Who would harbour so much hatred and cruelty?”

The lit candles on top of the seven graves burned all night until dawn; their flames fluttering in the open air and their melted wax dripping into the freshly dug soil. With time each went out and left behind its aroma of burned wick and wax.

Three days later the women came back to the front of the church and to the cemetery and again brought their baskets and went from person to person giving each some food and drink for the souls of the dead. Pop Vasil, after saying a prayer, gave the teacher the signal to come over. When he did Vasil said: “Kole, don’t leave by yourself, wait for me son, I will come with you.”

Kole remained in front of the church until Pop Vasil came out of the cemetery. The two then got off the main road and took a different path.

“We are going to Sveti Ilia,” said Pop Vasil without looking at Kole. They continued to walk in silence. When they crossed the creek they turned and took the path that led directly to Sveti Ilia.

“A lot of trouble and pain… all at once, Father…” Kole broke the silence. Pop Vasil did not respond. He walked in front of Kole on the uphill and often stopped to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his forehead.

They climbed to the top of the hill and there, under the thick and bushy oak trees, they came upon a large pile of bricks and tiles. Pop Vasil pointed at the heap and said: “This, in the old days, my son, was a large church. The foundations stretched from here to there. When it was built and who built it, no one knows. And it is unknown when it was destroyed. But as you can see, here are its remains, untouched by human traces. These oaks have been growing for centuries and when their time comes they lose their strength and

dry up. The wind breaks their branches and no person will harvest them for firewood or whatever else. This place is holy... and fantastic... one can see the entire Kostur valley from here... And the lake... And Vicho too. Look at that panorama. I told the people to bury the children here so that they can have all this wide view and be the first to see the sun and feel its warmth at dawn. And they will not be alone... Come here and look… Look over there, under the three thick oaks. Do you see them? Where the little flat space is… where the green is? There lie six souls. Come; let us go down there... Here lies Sterio Sidovski. He was thirty-five years old when he left this world and left his children Ziso, Kosta Risa and Tana fatherless. Beside him is Sterio Fotovichin, a young unmarried man. On that side is Petro Nikolov, he never had any children. Over there is Sterio Liochovski. There lies Stavre Stavrovski and beside him is Gele Shomovski. I also wanted the children to be here..." concluded Pop Vasil.

"When were these men buried here?" asked Kole.

Pop Vasil thought for a moment and said: "On March 18, 1905. That year the Andartes (Greek armed bands) dressed Kostur in black. Karavangelis the executioner, holding a cross in one hand and a dagger in the other, sponsored the Andartes… these Greek murderers and cutthroats came from southern Greece. They said they were here to free us from Ottoman bondage but instead they cut our throats and burned our homes. In Zagorichani they beheaded eighty-five souls... Young and old… children and babies… everyone passed under the Greek dagger..."

Pop Vasil got emotional and paused for a moment. He continued: "It was Friday March 17th, 1905 when they came to our village looking for the leaders of the rebellion but they were not so keen in finding them because they knew that they had either been killed or had escaped. But still under the pretense that they were looking for these men, they went from house to house beating the people and robbing them. They were looking for gold and demanded that they be given all the gold. In the meantime they waved the Greek flag in the middle of the village. When they found no gold some abducted the men that are lying here and others stood under the walnut tree and shot at those trying to go home on the other side of the brook. The

men they abducted they took to Klopotarei, over there, along that path, and from there to a clearing in Brezeto behind Sveti Ilia, from that side, under the Polenik hill over there. That's where they beat them until sunset. And while the sun was setting behind Kopanche, the Andartes removed the kneecaps of their captives with their knives. The villagers could hear their cries and feel their pain... but did not know how to help them. The Andartes had guards stationed at Sveti Ilia and anyone approaching was shot at."

Pop Vasil continued: "Before nightfall the Andartes cut their necks and left the men to slowly bleed to death while they withdrew to Orleto. They left guards at Stanitsa to keep the people away from helping the dying men... So they slowly bled to death. It was not until the next day, after the Andartes withdrew from Orleto and went towards the Naselets villages to pillage them, that they collected the bodies and buried them here... And remember this place is holy… It is also holy because ever since then, both young and old come here to light candles. Only they knew and would not tell anyone where these men were buried."

Pop Vasil continued: "More Andartes came later, as far as Urieto, to remove the traces of the crimes they had committed. They came back again, after they dismembered Macedonia when Greece and Bulgaria were exchanging people like sheep… They came back again when Metaxas came to power and again when we expelled the Italians and the Germans came... again when the Greek King returned a year ago... They came inquiring but the people would not tell them anything... the graves may have been covered by the grass but the people who witnessed the crime remembered everything and made sure that that knowledge was passed on to their offspring so that nothing was forgotten. And they, my son, came here to erase everything that had happened… to dig the bones of the dead and destroy them."

Pop Vasil continued: "But the soil that covered them knows, my son, to remain silent, and the people need to remember... everything is passed on from generation to generation quietly, like a prayer, silently... and no one muddies their tormenting dream. And you, my son, I am telling you all this because you are a teacher and to be careful how you pass it on to your students. Maybe tomorrow one of

them will be educated and will become wiser than us and will tell those who succeed us... Now let us go and leave them to rest in peace."

They returned to the village at noon. Kiro, who came from the opposite side, stretched his arms wide open, as if wanting to embrace and hug both of them, and said: "I would like to invite you to come to my home, what do you think?"

"Thank you, Kiro for the invitation," replied Pop Vasil, "visiting your home has always been a pleasure for me, and I pray to God that it continues to be that way for everyone..."

"Thank you Pop Vasil… For everyone?" asked Kiro watching the priest raise his eyebrows.

"Yes, for everyone…" replied Pop Vasil, "for all those with pure hearts and good thoughts..." he added.

"Amen, Pop Vasil, Amen..." said Kiro and went ahead to open the iron gate in the front yard. Kiro did not wait for Pop Vasil to enter, he went ahead to open the door of the house. He quickly climbed the broad wooden stairs that led to the wide veranda.

"Welcome, welcome, please come in," said Kiro by turning his hand.

"Thank you… Thank you…" said Pop Vasil, crossed himself and asked: "Where is Kirevitsa, is she at home?"

"She is here, at home…" said Kiro and was immediately interrupted by Kirevitsa who yelled from the other room and suddenly appeared on the threshold wiping her hands on her apron. "Please, please, do come in… I am here, Father…" she joyfully said and bent forward to kiss his hand. Then after she kissed it Pop Vasil offered her his cross to kiss and then touched her on her face three times with it. She then said: "Please come this way" and took them straight to the room where they entertain guests.

“Kirevitsa, please bring us each some quince sweets and a glass of water,” ordered Kiro.

“Thank you, Kirevitsa and may your house always be full...” said Pop Vasil.

“Amen, Father, and may the Lord give you good health and a long life…” replied Kirevitsa.

“And may the Lord keep you safe and healthy too, my son…” said Kirevitsa to the teacher not knowing who he was.

“I did not tell you, Mare,” that’s what Kiro called his wife when he was in a good mood, “the young man is a teacher...”

“Ah...” mumbled Mara not understanding what Kiro had said to her.

Someone was knocking on the door and Kiro called his wife: “Mara, Mara, go and see who is knocking on the door.” A moment later they heard Kuze’s voice asking: “Mara, is Kiro home?”

“Please come in, the door is open. Welcome… He is home, come on in,” replied Mara.

Kiro got up and went out to the corridor where he heard Lazo’s voice say: “Hello Kiro, it’s a good thing that you are home. Kuze and I came are here to discuss important business with you. Both Party and People’s business…”

“That’s fine, please come on in,” replied Kiro and told them that Pop Vasil and the teacher were also here.

“It is good that the teacher is also here,” said Lazo.

Kuze extended his hand and shook hands first with Pop Vasil and then with the teacher.

“I, Kiro,” began Lazo while hastily eating the sweet and licking the spoon, “came here with Comrade Kuze on behalf of the national committee and on behalf of the Party to tell you that we will be

opening a school in your house. Is that not so, Kuze? What do you say, teacher? We are not going to ask the priest because he, according to Kuze, said…"

Kuze looked up at the ceiling, then at the corner and, without taking his eyes from there, while coughing, said: "I did not say that, Lazo, someone from the people said it…"

"Okay, okay, then just tell what that someone from the people said," insisted Lazo.

"But, what can I tell you… someone amongst the people said that Pop Vasil…" Kuze coughed loudly, a long cough, and continued. "This damn cough is tearing me inside here," he banged his chest with his fist and continued: "Pop Vasil said that he wanted to turn our church into some kind of Bulgarian or Serbian church... he did not perform the funeral service in Greek but..."

"In our language (Macedonian)!" interrupted the teacher. "This is how services were conducted in the old days from a long time ago before any Serbia or Bulgaria existed…"

"Teacher!" Lazo interrupted. "We, during a Party meeting, will figure out if that was indeed 'our language'… And for what you said teacher, here Kuze is my witness, I will report it high up, I want you to know that. I will be brief, Kiro, like I said, we will turn your house into a school." (Lazo used broken Greek words to refer to "Party meeting" and to "school".)

Kiro adjusted himself and in a calm tone of voice said: "It would be an honour for me if this house is turned into a school or a church… if you like… But what happened with the idea of using the old school…?" asked Kiro.

"Well you know, right?" Kuze butted into the conversation, "The roof is leaking, right? You don't want rain to fall on the children's heads, do you?"

"We will fix it again!" interrupted the teacher.

“We will fix it again?” replied Lazo in a mocking tone of voice mocking the teacher. “With what? Where are you going to find the ceramic tiles needed to fix it, eh?”

“We will take them from the houses that have fallen... I saw several fallen houses in the upper neighborhood. We will collect tiles from there and we will cover the school, right Kiro?” said the teacher.

“Right! If it were up to me, teacher, I would ask the men to roll up their sleeves and do it. Unless, of course the Party and the people’s government want to do it themselves or choose a different solution...?” remarked Kiro.

Lazo first looked at Kiro then immediately shifted his eyes at Kuze and said: “Should I be thinking about these things, Kuze, or should the national committee? The teacher is right in what he said. Well said… Take action and cover the roof… I will report this to the higher ups, to the central leadership, tomorrow and tell them that we will be opening the school on our own… This is also what the people’s democratic government wants… for us to find our own solutions… right Kuze? You need to pay more attention to the books they give us from above. Don’t let me forget to remind you of that, Kuze…”

Lazo thought for a moment while tapping his mouth with his index finger, turned to Kuze and said: “We need to sit down today and write a report, a detailed report, and describe how the Monarcho-Fascists sent five airplanes… no ten airplanes… and how they attacked and killed seven children. And before you seal the report I want you to give it to me so that I can see it and sign it. You should definitely write that the airplanes attacked the children and fired their guns at them. And when those high above find out about this, they will talk about it on the radio and write about it in the newspapers. The whole world will know what the Monarcho-Fascists did with the airplanes the American and British imperialists gave them… Killing our children… That is a great shame which the whole world must know about… a great shame on King George and Queen Frederica who raised a hand against our children… Shame… Shame…” yelled Lazo and spat on his feet.

Pop Vasil coughed lightly, a sign that he wanted to interrupt someone. Immediately after that he raised his hand. Everyone in the village knows what that meant. It meant that everyone must stop talking. He kept it up only for a moment while he moved his fingers and lowered it again. This was the sign for everyone to stop coughing and take a deep breath. This time too, raising his hand meant that Pop Vasil wanted to say something important or he wanted someone else to say something important. When he got everyone's attention, he looked at everyone and, in a tame and quiet voice, said: "No, Lazo… They did not specifically attack the children this time… Maybe another time they will severely attack the children, but a of couple days ago they did not… This time they attacked our letters, our words, our books, our language… They attacked everything that is Macedonian…"

Chapter 10

"If the teacher hadn't come here, there would have been no need to open the school and our children would have not been killed…" people were saying throughout the village. When the teacher first heard of this he did not pay attention to it and avoided talking about it. But then, when it started coming from the dead children's closest relatives, he began to worry. He began to feel the weight of the evil glances, the whispers and being rudely interrupted in conversations. Now he was preoccupied with it. He often locked himself in his room and begged Giorgi and Giorgevitsa to leave him alone so that he could rest because he felt very tired and exhausted.

At first Giorgi thought it was the separation from his loved ones and the uncertainty of their safety and well-being that was overwhelming Kole. Then one day when Kole did not finish his dinner, Giorgi asked him: "Kole, son, is something troubling you…? Did you receive bad news from home? Talk to Kuze, he will give you some time off. Go home and see your relatives… Or is it difficult for you being here with us? I have watched you now for some time… you are not in a good mood anymore. You don't smile like you did before."

Kole lifted his eyes and looked into Giorgi's worried face.

"Uncle Giorgi, I want you to know that it is very hard for me. Before I went on the course in Zhelevo to become a teacher, I fought in many battles and I saw many wounded and dead. At first I was afraid, I even dreamt about them at night, but then somehow I became hard... and now..." he suddenly stopped talking and silently stared into the fire.

"What's bothering you, Kole?" asked Giorgi.

"You know what, Uncle Giorgi, I am thinking of leaving..." said Kole in a sad voice.

"Leaving? Why? Where will you be going? You don't like it here, with us… in this house?" asked Giorgi.

“No, no, don’t misunderstand me, everything is fine here with you but, well, it’s the bad talk... They say I am guilty of...” said Kole.

“What you are guilty of, what Kole?” asked Giorgi.

“I feel like leaving all this behind and going back to my unit...” replied Kole.

At that very moment Giorgevitsa, with hands all white from flour, entered the room, turned to Giorgi and said: “Giorgi, Giorgi, go and see who is knocking on the door?”

“Just a minute, Kole, I will go and see who it is and what they want and I will be right back,” replied Giorgi and went to the door.

When Giorgi returned he was accompanied by Pop Vasil and old man Mitre and they all went back to the room where the teacher was.

“Ah, good evening teacher…” said Pop Vasil with a smile on his face and shook the teacher’s hand. “I did not know you were here. I thought you had gone somewhere with Lazo, that’s why I took the opportunity to visit Giorgi and on the way I met Mitre and here we both are. How are you? Are you well? What are you so sullen about?” asked Pop Vasil.

Mitre knocked on Pop Vasil’s frock and said: “Move over so that I too can greet the young teacher… Are you okay, young man? I haven’t seen you nowadays taking strolls in the village square… Are you angry at us…? Why?” asked old man Mitre.

“He says he is very tired…” interjected Giorgi. “I advised him to go home, visit his family and come back. ‘And I will tell you this and I want you to remember it.’ Giorgi said to the teacher, ‘the Greek teachers lived here with us for a whole year without seeing their relatives’. Isn’t that right, Mitre?”

“Yes, that’s how it was; they could not leave the village without permission; like they were soldiers. They visited from house to

house and spoke with people more often… in Greek of course," replied Mitre.

Giorgi interrupted them and asked them to sit down. Mitre continued: "The Greek teachers were told: 'You are to be with the people at all times and as such they will be afraid to speak in their native language and will be forced to learn to speak Greek.'…"

The footsteps of a horse were heard outside on the cobblestone road followed by a voice calling: "Is this Giorgi's house and is the teacher staying here?"

The man got off his horse. He was armed. After entering the house he asked: "Is the teacher here?"

"Yes, I am the teacher," answered Kole and went in front of the man.

"I am one of Shiperkov's couriers. Shiperkov sent me to bring you this letter," said the man and then opened his leather pouch, took out a white envelope, gave it to him and said: "Shiperkov instructed me not to wait for a response. Goodbye!" and was about to leave.

"Is that it, young man?" interrupted Mitre. "You drop off a letter and goodbye you're gone? Sit down; spend a minute or two with us. Take a break… How is Shiperkov, how are the men? How are our boys and girls doing up there?"

Giorgi, who for a short time had gone out, returned and was holding something wrapped in his hands. He said: "Take this…" to the courier.

"What is it?" asked the courier.

"Take it, take it... it's some bread and cheese... you can eat it on your way… but if you decide to stay and eat with us you can give it to someone else..." said Giorgevitsa sobbing and then asked: "Did you happen to know anyone named Vasil?"

“Vasil?” the courier wondered out loud. “Vasil? We have several men that go by that name... Where is he from?” he asked.

“From here... he is my son,” explained Giorgevitsa. “Please ask around and if you do find him, tell him that his father and I are well. Ask him to write us a letter or…” Giorgevitsa broke out crying and then wiped her tears with the corner of her black head kerchief. The courier thanked her, said goodbye and went out. Right after that the rumble of horse hooves were heard on the village cobblestone road.

Pop Vasil turned to Kole and said: “Do you remember me asking that I wanted to see you and have a conversation with you? Well we haven’t done that yet… I know, I know you did not have the time. Your work as a teacher is very important… time consuming. But please let us make the time and get together for that talk. Now let me ask you: ‘There on the course, did they teach you how to read very old church books?’…”

“No Pop Vasil,” replied Kole. “The first thing we learned there, above all, was our alphabet, a little Macedonian history and geography... some stories and some songs... How much can one learn in twenty days?”

“In other words you learned az, buki, vedi… right?” asked Pop Vasil.

“I don’t think so…” replied Kole.

“What?” asked Pop Vasil surprised.

“This is what we learned: a, b, v...” replied Kole.

“You were taught quickly... I was taught like this: az, buki, vedi, glagoli… That is why I wanted to talk with you... and other things too... I will teach you something you will teach me something... if you want...” said Pop Vasil.

Mitre, whose tongue was getting itchy and who was burning with curiosity, wanted to ask Kole what the letter from Shiperkov was about. It must have been something very important for Shiperkov to

send him a letter by courier from so far way. With his cane Mitre hit the floor to get Kole's attention and then pointed at the white envelope and said: "When are you going to read the letter, Kole?"

Kole opened the envelope, went closer to the lamp and read to himself. He first blushed and then began to cover his face. Mitre noticed this and asked: "Is it bad news?"

"I did not expect this…" said Kole quietly and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Mitre came closer and patted him on the back. "Hey, don't worry about it…" he said in an attempt to cheer him up, "all commanders are like that… Their day does not pass if they don't yell at someone or have a fight with someone… What did your commander say? Will you tell us?"

Kole opened the sheet of paper, put it closer to the lamp, turned around, looked at Pop Vasil first, then Mitre and then Giorgi, who he noticed had sparkling moisture in his eye, and said: "I have nothing to hide. Here's what my commander wrote me:

'Your letter has reached me. And so that you don't forget what you wrote me, I will repeat your words. You said: "I do not feel brave enough Commander, especially after they killed the children. Some people whisper and they defile with their whispers. But let us skip over that. The thing that torments me the most and discourages me from doing my job are the countless questions from the students and from their parents. So many questions and so very few answers. I feel like tossing the chalk and the primers and returning to my unit..." This is what you said and my answer to you Kole is: "Remember and never forget this, not even for a moment, you are in a far more forward position than the front line. You hold one of the largest bunkers and have one of the most powerful weapons. You need to be bold, solid and above all clever and good with the children and the people. Kole, you are asking me this: "Commander, if I come back to my unit, will you scold me in front of the fighters?" Here's my answer: "Kole, I will not scold you in front of the fighters but I will execute you like a deserter"...'

Kole took the letter away from the lamp and whispered: “There is no more… That’s all the commander wrote…”

There was a long silence. Then Mitre interrupted: “I swear to you, nobody could have written you a better letter…” he said.

There was long tedious silence. It was only interrupted by the crackling of the firewood burning in the fireplace. They all stood there and no one dared move. The flame of the lamp was slowly diminishing and darkness began to cover the room. The tiny flame flickered and trembled...

“Maybe it’s running out of gas…” Pop Vasil quietly remarked as he kept staring at it. “Take a look at it, Giorgi, does it have kerosene?” added the priest.

Giorgi raised the lamp to eye level. The wick was curled inside it like a snake lying on the bottom. He shook it, it was empty. The flame was sucking out the last drops of kerosene and spreading its diminishing light throughout the room...

Chapter 11

During the meeting it was decided not to go to school during the day.

“It is enough for now,” Lazo said, “for them to learn to read and write. They can welcome our victory with that, and after we have our victory they will learn everything else, right teacher? Gather at the school after sunset...”

Someone sitting mid way down the classroom asked: “You mean after dark?”

Everyone turned their eyes to the teacher. They looked at him and expected a reply from him. Kole went near Lazo and said: “Four kerosene lamps will do the job. People, you decide about your turns to supply them and the kerosene. We will place dark covers on the windows so that light does not escape and it will look dark inside from the outside. You need to collect those too. It will be dark outside and light inside.”

“And that’s the way it will be done, teacher…” yelled old man Mitre. “Do they think we will leave our children uneducated? No! They will be learning in the dark...”

It was snowing when they came outside. Old man Mitre slid down on one of the steps and took Kuze with him. Kuze waved his arms frantically and fell into Mitre’s lap.

“Kuze, Kuze,” whispered Mitre. “You’re such a klutz. Get off me. Why couldn’t you fall that way…?” he added while rubbing his backside. After being helped up, the old man had difficulty walking but eventually made it home. He was greeted on the threshold of his door by his daughter-in-law Sofka and grandson Kire. Shaking the snow off Mitre said: “Oh, my, oh my, it is snowing hard…” as if wanting to blame his difficulty walking on the falling snow!

His daughter-in-law helped him take off his shoes. He then sat down by the fire and quietly said to Mitrevitsa: “Well, winter is here and many sons and daughters are gone… gone... Kosta and Kolio were

killed…" he took a deep breath and then said: "Two more widows and more fatherless children… With Kosta and Kolio… nine have been killed from our village."

Mitrevitsa got up, opened the cupboard door, took the bottle of oil out and with trembling hands added oil to the oil lamp and lit it. The gentle dim light illuminated the face of the Virgin Mary on the icon behind it. Her daughter-in-law entered the room and with concern on her face asked: "For who?"

"Kosta and Kolio were killed..." she muttered quietly. "May God forgive their sins and bless their souls..." she added and then crossed herself several times. She then said to her daughter-in-law: "Please go out and get the children. They have played long enough in the snow. Go get them…"

Sofka went to the veranda and yelled: "Kire, Lenche, Kosta, enough playing. Come home now! And Kire, where is Kire?" she asked Lenche and Kosta when they came to the door, shaking the snow off their clothes.

"Kire ran off with the other boys toward the church," replied Lenche. "Vane Kirov said some soldiers had come... our soldiers."

"Why that boy… wait until he comes home..." said Sofka angrily.

Mitre finished drinking his warm rakia and asked: "Sofka are we ready for dinner?"

"We are ready father, but Kire is not here," replied Sofka.

"Kosta!" said Mitre addressing his grandson. "Go out on the balcony and call him to come inside. He has played long enough."

Kosta ran to the balcony and began shouting Kire's name repeatedly, without waiting for Kire to reply. He then ran back inside.

"Grandpa," said Lenka. "Should I go and look for him?"

“No, don’t go, he will come home on his own... Sofka, please set the table,” replied Mitre.

Mitre crossed himself, broke chunks of bread from the loaf and put a piece in front of everyone. They ate in silence.

“Mitre, oh, Mitre,” Kuze’s voice was heard coming from the yard, “are you home, Mitre?”

Sofka quickly ran to the balcony, went outside and promptly came back and said: “Father, Kuze and about a dozen soldiers are waiting in the yard…”

“Don’t clear the table…” said Mitre and went outside.

The room suddenly became cold. Kirevitsa and Sofka cleaned the snow from the soldiers with their brooms. After being cleaned, one by one they stomped their feet on the ground and entered the room. They leaned their weapons on the wall and then took their coats and dirty boots off. The smell of sweat and dirty socks permeated throughout the house. Following the last soldier, Kire, Mitre’s grandson, entered carrying a machine gun on his shoulder. He had rosy cheeks and beaming eyes.

“Hey you… the little guy…” one of the DAG soldiers addressed Kire. “Lean it over here,” and while caressing his face said: “You should never play with toys like that.” He then asked: “Are you a good student in school?”

Kire hit himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand and loudly said: “Lenche! Lenche! Quickly! We are late!”

“And where do you think you are going now?” asked his mother.

“To school, mom…” he replied.

“School now, in the night? Get back here!” she ordered.

Mitre interrupted his daughter-in-law and said: “Dear Sofka, it is true. From today on the children will be going to school at night. We

decided it is better that way. The airplanes don't fly at night and it will be safer for them… That's why they will be going to school at night… Kire go… and you Lenche, you go too …"

"What about me?" asked Kosta sobbing.

"You finish your dinner, sit down over there, beside your grandmother and grow," replied his grandpa, Mitre.

"You look after him. I have to go and help Sofka serve dinner to the soldiers," Mitrevitsa interjected and left the room.

The fighters sat around the fireplace. Mitre threw a few more logs into the fire and raised the wick on the lamp to give the room more light. When he turned around he noticed two women soldiers were sitting among the fighters. One was sleeping and the other was sitting next to her mending her overcoat. Mitre bent over towards the fighter that was closest to him and, while gesturing towards the women, quietly asked: "Are they ours (Macedonian)?"

The corporal shook his head gesturing yes.

Mitre could not contain himself and went over. "Where are you from?" he asked.

The woman cut the string with her teeth, put her overcoat to the side and, without looking at Mitre, barely audibly whispered: "From Mokreni, Grandpa, do you know where it is?"

"I sure do!" he said. "It's under Klisura, in the valley, right?"

"Yes, have you been there?" she asked.

"I have been to all the surrounding villages… with Chakalarov…" underlined Mitre.

At that moment Mitrevitsa and Sofka came into the room. "Dinner is ready," Mitrevitsa announced. The big table was set up in the dining room. In the middle of it was a huge pan full of kachamak (maize porridge), next to it were a jug of milk and a large loaf of bread.

Mitre invited everyone to dinner and gestured to the woman to wake the other woman who was still sleeping. “To your good health,” said Mitre after everyone took their seat.

Mitrevitsa, with a heavy heart, stood to the side and watched everyone eat. She was thinking of her son Gligor. Does he have something to eat? Is he out in the snow? Is he wearing warm clothes? Is he with others at someone’s home like these fighters? She wondered and secretly wiped her tears.

Cannon fire and rumbling was heard coming from Gorusha. The corporal stepped out on the balcony for a moment. When he returned Mitre asked: “And you, who is your voivoda (leader)?”

“Nowadays, Grandpa, we don’t have ‘voivodi’... we have commanders,” replied the corporal.

“I see…” said Mitre and, while pointing at the corporal’s hat, said: “I see you don’t have any symbols on your hats... Son, when we were fighting we had no machine made clothing and no machine guns. All we had were malinkerki (rifles) and bombs...”

“When was that, Grandpa?” asked the corporal.

“During the Ilinden Uprising son, during the Ilinden Uprising!” replied Mitre with a raised tone of voice.

Cannon fire was heard again.

“Did you hear that?” yelled Mitrevitsa from the corner. “Did you hear the cannon fire?” She then turned to one of the fighters and said: “You don’t have cannons, do you? You poor dears…”

One of the fighters who was listening but understood nothing, asked in Greek: “What is the old lady saying?”

“She is saying we need to have cannons,” answered the fighter who had been asked, in Greek.

“Tell her,” he continued in Greek, “come with us tomorrow and say this to those in General Headquarters.”

What the man said in Greek was translated into Macedonian to which Mitrevitsa replied: “Am I wrong in telling you this?”

“Don’t concern yourself, Mother, he is not saying this to spite you, he is saying it out of concern. They sent him to our unit a few days ago. He is a Greek from Thessaly,” replied the fighter.

“They came from there too?” asked Mitre.

“From there and from other places,” replied the fighter.

Mitre lit his tobacco pipe, stoked the fire and in a stretched tone of voice said: “After the Ilinden Uprising they were coming here from Greece… the Andartes I mean… and we fought against them. They shot here and there and then fled. They were not good fighters. All they knew how to do was swear, burn and slaughter. They were truly afraid of Mitre Vlao. When they heard his name they ran for the hills and prayed to the Virgin Many. But when they found no freedom fighters in the villages they swore using her name… The moment this guy here entered my house I recognized him by his eyes… that he was not one of us… When they heard a single word from our language they perked up their ears. One time we caught one of them. He was from Crete. We were asking him questions and he pretended to be deaf. Mitre Vlao pulled out his knife and cut off one of his ears. Not only did his voice come back but he was ready to listen... we released him. We said to him, “If you ever came back here again we will send you back without your head”... He came back after 1912 and began to do what he knew best... I heard someone yelling “the Andartes are back”... When I heard that I thought to myself: “Well, here we go again…” When the Andartes are back in the hills it’s hell on earth for us... It’s a good thing I am old... Andartes, Andartes dear boy, they were the worst plague in this place... What a name to call you by, eh? And you have not told me the name of your voivoda… I mean commander...”

Mitre got up and went outside. A little later he came back and gave the corporal the signal to join him. They entered the adjoining room.

“Son, let me ask you something,” said Mitre.

“Go ahead, ask away Grandpa,” replied the corporal.

“Where are you from?” Mitre asked.

“From Konomladi,” replied the corporal.

“Wow, you’re one of us son. Why didn’t you tell me sooner? What is your name?” asked Mitre.

“Iane,” replied the corporal.

“Good to meet you Iane,” said Mitre and opened the door slightly and when he saw no one was behind it, he twisted his long mustache over his ears and whispered: “I too have a son who is a partisan. His name is Gligor. Have you heard of him?”

“Sorry Grandpa, I have not heard of him,” replied the corporal.

“When they took him I told him to be careful and to obey his voivodi… And you are telling me that you have no voivodi? And who is my son Gligor obeying…? Let me ask you my dear son Iane: ‘Who are you fighting for?’…”

“For democracy, Grandpa, for democracy,” replied the corporal.

“Democracy you say?” asked Mitre.

“Yes, democracy...” said Iane.

“Please, let me ask you another question. If you, our boys, Macedonian boys are fighting for democracy, then who is fighting for Macedonia, eh?” asked Mitre.

Iane looked stunned. Mitre looked straight into his eyes… the question seemed to have stunned him.

“You don’t know...?” asked Mitre. “Now if you had voivodi you would have known…” said Mitre. “Now let us go inside and join the others...”

When they entered the room, outside of Mitrevitsa and one of the women fighters, everyone was asleep.

Chapter 12

It was a holiday morning and not a soul was out in the yard, not even in the village streets. There was only snow, a lot of snow, bending down the branches of the trees under its weight. The wind that blew wildly and howled in the windows and around the chimneys during the night had subsided. It was quiet and peaceful everywhere. The smoke from the chimneys was traveling straight up. Up until midnight the entire church was bright from the light of the many burning candles. The people were celebrating Christ's birth but it was a quiet, silent celebration full of reflections, sighs and tears. Thoughts of those out in the snow and cold, of those who had not come home, not even for a visit, were circling around in the people's minds. This was the first Christmas that no carols were sung; no people gathered together to spend the night in celebration, to tell happy stories of old and to sing festive songs. Even the children's stories that the old people told were short. The people simply went silent.

They returned to their homes much earlier than usual that day, went to bed early but could not sleep. This was nothing new; it was a regular routine that they followed nowadays. Come home early, go to bed early but rarely sleep. They sat by the fireplace or by the wood stove for a while and stared at the fire, exchanged a few words just to show their presence and then continued with their heads down and eyes wide open, taking long and quiet sighs and shedding secret tears. They sat at home but their thoughts traveled along the roads, rivers and brooks and made their way through the layers of forests, beyond the hills and into the mountains... they wanted to be with their loved ones even in the worst of times.

For some a year had passed, for others half a year, three months, two months… since their loved ones were taken from them, handed a rifle and sent to fight. In all their thoughts a single question dominated: "Is he alive? Is she alive?" And their greatest desire was: "For their loved ones to return home alive!" They also had many other wishes especially for those currently fighting: To be protected from deadly bullets, to be healthy, to have dry socks and shoes, to have warm sweaters and hats to protect them from the wind, to be warm and not freeze and to have a backpack full of bread and a dish

full of hot home cooked meal. These and many others wishes were turned to hopes and prayers, quietly and sometimes secretly whispered in front of icons. They wished and hoped that their homes would once again be filled with the entire family and bring back the joys of living. A holiday is only a holiday when the entire family is together at home...

The dining table in Mitre's house was never without people. But there was always one place left unoccupied and waiting. Those days, especially during the holidays, it was much more difficult at Giorgi's place. Giorgi and Giorgevitsa were alone and of their three sons only one remained, Vasil, and he now had become their greatest living pain. They had heard nothing from him since he was taken… Giorgi and Giorgevitsa sat in silence facing one another and in their silence they were looking for Vasil, wondering who to ask, which way to go and how to find him. And they were not the only ones… You would be surprised how many like them there were out there…

Giorgi went to the window and stared at the curvy road leading to the water tap. The window fogged up from his breath. This reminded him of another sad time and brought back his old pain...

"Giorgi!" called Giorgevitsa timidly. "It will be 'Vasilitsa' (New Year's Day) in a week. Go out and do what you can to clear the snow from the yard. At least clear a path… we will be receiving guests… to celebrate Vasil's name..."

"Okay, okay… good idea…" replied Giorgi and sighed. "You do some baking and bring out some wine… from last year... Of course we will entertain guests… as always..." he added.

Giorgevitsa sighed and in her silent loneliness, deep down in her heart, all she wanted was for Vasil to be alive and well and to return home…

As the days passed more snow came down along with blizzards and snow drifts. But, as required by old customs, the couple was determined to celebrate 'Vasilitsa', the namesake of their son Vasil…

In Bisera's house where there once was a houseful of people and much ruckus; there was now only one lit candle. The long table was set, as it always was, and on this day, on 'Vasilitsa', it was waiting. Ten chairs, ten plates… Placed in the middle were zelnik, burek, maznik, oriznik, poparnik… And added in each was something; a grain or two of wheat, rye, barley and corn so that the New Year will be fruitful and the barns will be full of grain, and the barrels will be full of wine. An oak leaf to bring good health and make the forests lush and wide, make the trees grow tall and green. A stalk of hay so that the meadows will be green and the yards full of sheep, and bleating lambs. A branch of dogwood so that all the people in this house, their relatives, friends and everyone will be healthy and free of diseases and their bodies will be as strong as the dogwood tree. Hidden somewhere inside one of the pans of pastries was a coin. The one who gets the pastry with the coin will be graced with good fortune... And finally, in the centre of the table rested a jug filled with wine for everyone to sample; to live a long healthy life together as a family under one roof…

Several big dry oak logs were simmering in the fireplace giving off mild heat and gently warming the house. Bisera tossed another log, a smaller one, which suddenly gave the fire more life. The flames began to dance around it creating shadows on the wall. This was an old fireplace which has kept this household warm and living for a long time. For as long as there was a fire and someone to add fuel to it and stoke it, this household would remain alive… was what was going through Bisera's mind...

It was quiet outside. Snow was falling like pieces of torn cotton. A white layer was growing on the window sill and slowly overtaking the window. The north wind was howling in the chimney and clouds of smoke were filling the entire room. Bisera's eyes were burning and quickly filling with tears. Bisera looked outside, her heart felt tight in the silence. Silence was her constant companion. She turned and looked at the table. This 'Vasilitsa', nine places were empty. Evil had touched this house and left much emptiness. Bisera felt bitter and crossed her arms. She looked at each chair and each plate with loving eyes. She then looked at the bounty on her table and her eyes filled with tears. Life in this house was unfurling through her...

The evil came last year and took three persons when the dogwood trees were flowering. They said they had seen them in the snows of Gramos, the three were charging during an attack at night. They said two of them were left there forever... When they were digging the vineyards they said that the owner would not be sending his greetings because a bullet took him down and now he is decomposing somewhere in the beechwood forest under the Prekopanska plain. They arrested the daughter-in-law about three months ago and locked her up in Kostur. The father-in-law passed on in January and the mother-in-law on Mitrovden. There is no letter or word from the oldest son, who is surviving his second year in the Aegean island prisons. No letters are coming out from there. The second born, a daughter, who at age eighteen was taken, armed and sent to fight, lies wounded in Korcha. From last 'Vasiltsa' to this one, the house has been empty...

Bisera was looking at the plates and hugging the table with her looks. It seemed to her that everyone was there and that she was hugging them and warming them with her sighs... Bisera got up, quietly went closer to the fireplace and added more wood to the fire. She again looked through the window. The snow had covered the path and the footsteps left behind by people passing by. She turned around and stood by the table exactly where her husband sat. She turned her eyes towards the icon which, who knows for how long as been hanging in that corner. She sat down and watched the oil lamp flame dance and sway back and forth creating moving shadows on the wall and a great big shadow of her. Two women; Bisera sitting in her husband's chair at the table seeming as if she was resting in her husband's strong arms and the Virgin Mary blackened with soot from burning candles with a child in her arms and with wide, sad eyes, looking at her. And between them a table arranged with nine more spaces… and an oil lamp with a flickering flame. They were waiting and each was feeling her own pain while time was passing in the twilight. The burning wood crackled in the fire. The north wind howled. The snow completely covered the paths. A dog was heard howling somewhere in the lower neighbourhood...

Chapter 13

Towards the end of February in 1948, news came to the village that the children would be collected and sent somewhere where it was more peaceful. However, where it was more peaceful and how far away this peaceful place was, nobody knew. The people, amongst themselves, were asking, even those who for one reason or another were part of the village government, like Lazo and Kuze who found ways to reach out and start conversations, but returned home disappointed. Only the Glirov family, a family with many children, one night quietly left the village and from what was heard from the villagers, moved to Rupishta. From there they sent news that the communists were going to gather the children and exchange them for cannons. This was enough to be bitten by the worm of doubt.

News quickly traveled to the Greek authorities in Kostur. The advice given to the people by the Greek police chief in Kostur, together with the garrison commander, the mayor and the bishop, was to do nothing and wait to be notified by the government in Athens. And hence, a person from Athens soon came, gathered the people together and told them the following: “Her Majesty Queen Frederica started to organize homes that will accept the children of the families who voluntarily want to give them to the state, under their protection, and that of Her Majesty the Queen. These homes will be located in the vicinity of Athens. And as for the communists collecting children; this is of interest to the government. Let them begin to collect the children and when they do start, the government, in front of the whole world, will accuse them of committing genocide. So, ladies and gentlemen, let them gather the children and the whole world will know about it and detest them for it. The government, with help from its allies, knows how to properly use this and inform the world of it. And when they leave, don’t try to stop them. Let them go...”

“We, sir,” said the police chief, “would like to convey to the government that here we will soon know how the communists will do this. We will soon also know where they are going to pass. We have our network. I am very pleased; I am saying that I am very pleased, because the government made such a decision. The communists have seized the opportunity to accuse the government

of killing the children. Therefore I suggest that, in the days when they are leaving, our units stay put. I also suggest that the air force stays put also. If they want them to leave their native place then let them. It would be even better if they take them beyond our borders..."

"Yes," interrupted the government representative, "that's only logical. Let them go. We will gain much by it. As I said, the world will find the communists guilty of genocide. And, on the other hand, it will increase the fighting spirit of our soldiers because every one of them will know that they are abducting our children, and they will fight harder to protect their own children and their brothers and sisters. And gentlemen, one day the war will end and of course in our favour. And what does that mean, gentlemen? It means that we will be the ones who will decide whether to allow them to return or not, and if we allow them to return, we will dictate the terms..."

The consultations ended late in the night and all suggestions made by Athens were accepted without objection. The next day Captain Peter Rogers carefully listened to the police chief while they were having coffee.

The chief said: "Yes, Captain Rogers. You were right when you said to me that we should let them go to the mountains. And now… now they are preparing to take the children somewhere. Let them take them away. And finally, Captain, above all they are primarily the children of Slavo-phone parents who, together with their older brothers and sisters, are fighting against us. There are many reasons to complain about it. But let them get lost... You can be certain that one day they will want to return to see their birthplace, to visit the graves of their ancestors. Well, then that's when, Captain, we will be singing. We will decide whether they will be able to do that and under what conditions."

The chief stopped talking for a moment and imagined how his own voice sounded as he looked at Rogers's face to see the impression he left on him. He continued: "Yes, Captain, we will be setting the conditions... And yes, we will enact laws Captain... Let them, let them get lost. If they go, for them, this country will be closed; and not only the doors but also the windows. And for those who decide

to remain we will make sure that the borders are open for them… but only in one direction… out... and for good. Now we will not bother them. Let them send their children away. We will tell everyone that they will be selling them as slaves, and that they will turn the children into janissaries and we will never see them again, not after we fill their heads with dark thoughts. Let them live in misery and let them never have any peace. The uncertainty that we will instill in them will leave them helpless, vulnerable, hopeless and in constant fear. Day and night...” the chief went silent again, lit a cigarette and then turned to Rogers and, while looking into his eyes, asked: “Captain, do you have children?”

“Yes, I have two...” replied Rogers.

“Where are they?” asked the chief.

“They are with their mother living in a small town in Southern England,” the captain replied.

“So for sure they are safe and living in peace?” asked the chief.

“Yes for sure… but I am not sure that I am safe and living in peace, Chief,” replied Rogers.

Chapter 14

“I don’t know, Comrades…” replied Lazo who sighed deeply and, while looking toward the door behind which his children were sleeping, said thoughtfully: “I don’t know. My mind is not working well. Whatever I say, it will be the wrong thing. And you up there, Comrades, who knows if you’re mistaken... I am not that smart to be able to explain to the parents that they should send their children out to other countries... To take the children away from their mothers... do you know what that means? And then every day we receive news of casualties, of wounded, and for many knowing nothing about their loved ones... Day in and day out, all that is heard around here is crying and weeping... and now I hear from you that you want to take away the children... and, as you said, all children from two to fourteen years old? I don’t know, comrades…” repeated Lazo. “I do not know. I am not that clever...”

“But Comrade Lazo…” said the woman who was accompanied by two men, who came with her to Lazo’s place and who were now being addressed by Vera. “We are not talking about taking the children away. Our goal is to temporarily relocate them to Albania and Yugoslavia and possibly to other democratic countries. There they will stay in warm homes, each will have their own bed and will go to school and learn... and when the fighting ends they will return...”

The bald man who stood next to Lazo opened his leather briefcase, took out a notepad, turned several pages and said: “Here, right here,” he knocked with his finger, “I have written the names of the children from…”

“It is not important from where,” Vera interrupted him. “Nearly all parents are happy to enrol their children. Lazo, you need to explain to them that it is for their own good… and no harm will come to them. We are all in this together and we will make it happen.”

“Go ahead, do it,” muttered Lazo. “If they believe you, then I will enrol my own children…”

“What do you mean and you too will enrol your children?” snapped the bald man. “You need to be first! You need to set an example!”

“Okay, Comrades.” said Vera. “Tomorrow we will call on some of the parents, the more open-minded ones of course, and we will have a talk with them. After that, in the evening, Lazo you call a meeting... I will speak at the meeting. One more thing… I will ask again, why is the teacher not with us today?”

“Comrade Vera, leave him out of this...” replied Lazo. “He befriended some of the old freedom fighters from the Ilinden era and he is somehow suspect. The other day I was passing by the school and I heard Mitre asking him if he knew any Ilinden songs. And the teacher replied yes, of course, I know many of them. Well then Mitre said to him, why don’t you teach the children a song or two; Ilinden freedom fighting songs. Later I called the teacher and asked him to see me, Comrades. I told him to come to talk to me... He didn’t. I want you to replace him. Send us someone else... if you can…” concluded Lazo.

“Right now we can’t,” said the bald man. “In another week or two he will be going to the front. The schools will close because the children will be gone… And you will no longer have to feed the teacher.”

Lazo was stunned when he asked: “The children will be going that soon?”

“Well, what did you think? You thought we were going to leave them so that Queen Frederica can send them to the camps? Haven’t you heard that they are collecting the children?” snapped the bald man.

The next morning when Lazovitsa went to the local water tap to fetch some water, she told all the women she met what tonight’s meeting was going to be about and what had been said at her house the night before. Lazo and Kuze did not have to send anyone to inform the people to come to the meeting because the school was packed with people even before the meeting was called. At the sides of the table, covered with a red tablecloth, located at the back of the

school sat Lazo and Kuze and in the middle behind the table sat Vera, the bald man whose name Lazo did not know and a short man with a burn scar on his face.

Lazo opened the meeting and introduced Vera who stood up and immediately began to speak.

She said: “You people know me and you know that I know you all. I have been to all your homes. Is there a house in which I have not been? I don’t think so, not in this nor in the dozen or so other villages around here. I have sat across from you, ate with you at your dining room tables and slept in your homes. I know you and many of your children… I even know some of their names…”

Vera paused, looked around and continued: “Today we are here to talk to you about your, I mean, about our children... Quiet please, those of you at the door quiet please… You, yourselves are witness to the every day bombings of our free territory. You and your village are constantly being bombed.” She turned to Lazo and quietly asked how many children were killed in this village. “And yes, seven children were lost from the bombing only in your village. I know that there are also many wounded and sick for whom there are no doctors or medicine. I know you hide in the forests when there are attacks, I also know that you don’t sleep well at night; you are not at peace because you are afraid for your children. Your children are exposed to mortal danger...”

Vera paused again, looked around and continued: “Tomorrow, I mean with the arrival of spring, the Athens government will begin a major offensive against our democratic army. Many planes and more guns will beat down on us and on you! What will you do then? Are you going to watch your children get killed? People! Our democratic government has thought long and hard about this, about how to protect the children. My friends the people in our government have spent sleepless nights to figure out a way to save our children. They gave this matter a lot of thought People, and have decided that we send our children to the countries, the democratic countries. There they will have everything they ask for...”

“How do you know? Have you been there?” a woman yelled out from near the window.

“No. I have not been there but the man sitting next to me has been and he will tell you what he knows. Please Comrade, stand up and tell everyone,” replied Vera.

The bald man got up, pulled out a large notebook from his briefcase, opened it and said: “In here I have written everything that I saw when I was there. The children will live together in large homes and will sleep in separate beds covered with white sheets. They will eat three times a day. In the morning they will eat bread with cheese, butter and sweet marmalade. After breakfast they will go to school to learn. They will all be educated and you will see how knowledgeable they will be when they return. At noon for lunch they will have soup and roast chicken or roast lamb... apples or chocolates... After lunch they will sleep and after they sleep they will to go for a walk. They will walk in the meadows and in forests, will play ball and have fun, and sometimes will swim in warm water. They will also eat as many oranges and candy as their hearts desire. Let’s not talk about milk and honey... these countries are rich... they are so rich they feed their pigs oranges... That’s how it is... The children can also go to the theaters and watch movies. Here, I have brought a few photographs, which you can look at to see in what kind of wonderful restaurants your children will eat... They will be served by waiters all dressed in white. You can see that in this photograph. Do you see it?” he lifted up a frame with several photographs attached to it. That’s all from me...” he concluded.

Kiro, who had a whole pile of magazines at home which he had brought from America and often looked at, moved his moustache and whispered in Giorgi’s ear: “I recognize those pictures. That bastard has cut them out of an American magazine!”

Giorgi turned towards Kiro, covered his mouth with his hand and whispered: “Be quiet Kiro, don’t tell anyone about this. Be quiet unless you want to break rocks all your life… Silence!”

“Let me tell you, people,” Vera’s voice was heard saying, “if I had children of my own I would be the first to send them to live in such

a paradise. Don't think about it, just do it… sign them up. All children from ages two to fourteen… sign them up. We told Lazo how we were going to do this. And now I am going to tell you. For every twenty children we need someone to be responsible for them. We will leave it up to you to select who will be responsible for your children. This woman's task, before you, before the Party, before the struggle, will always be to care for the children. Other villages chose widows with children, whose husbands died in battle... We suggest you do the same here... Oh, I almost forgot. The person sitting next to me, recently secretly visited Athens. He secretly visited Queen Frederica's camps where she is keeping the forcibly abducted children. As I said, this man saw terrible things there. Please Comrade, tell the people what you saw?"

The man stood up, coughed and, with a low hoarse voice, began speaking. He said: "It is difficult for me to talk about what I saw. They have children from all over Greece in the camps. From our places too. They have them dressed like soldiers and have them constantly marching in columns hungry. They teach them to spy on their parents, siblings and other relatives. They have turned them into janissaries, worse janissaries than those of Ottoman times. They teach them to hate the democrats and to hang and kill the communists. The children who don't obey are beaten and jailed. They starve them and will not even give them bread and water. And do you want to know what they do with the girls? I'll tell you what they do; they give them to the Americans, the Arabs and the blacks to do whatever they want with them. That's what they do! Do you want your children to have such a fate? If you don't, then sign them up and send them to the democratic countries... I was there too. The Comrade did not tell you that our children will have toys, many toys in those countries. Each girl will have one or two dolls, the kinds that talk. Have you heard of such dolls? No you haven't, right? The girls will also wear new clothes, new socks and new shoes; they will never have to walk barefoot... The children will not only be saved, they will be well looked after and for that you should be grateful to our Party and put your trust in it!"

Lazo, who until now had been sitting with his head tilted on his hand, stood up, went towards Kuze and whispered something in his ear. Kuze shook his head motioning that whatever he had been

asked, he was not going to do it. He then, while squinting his pale brown eyes, raised his eyebrows and said: “No Lazo, I am not saying anything! No, I am not going to say a thing!”

Vera, without checking to see if her colleague had finished talking, butted in and in the same tone of voice continued: “People, you should be happy because our democratic government and the Party, despite the heavy fighting that is taking place, is constantly thinking of the children. So please don’t ignore the Party that has extended its hand to you. That Party cares about you and your children... Comrade Lazo,” she turned towards Lazo, “you can continue this meeting tomorrow. Choose three women that will be responsible and send us the list of children as soon as possible. And you people, thank you for coming and for your understanding. The meeting is now adjourned.”

Shadows left the school and shadows walked the village streets. Silently, with fists clenched and arms crossed, the mothers were returning to their homes. Some were weeping and cursing.

Kiro, walking between Giorgi and Mitre, was muttering sounding as if his mouth was full, like he was chewing on a dry fig. He said: “I am telling you the truth… the photographs are from an American magazine. Come to my place and I will show you. I don’t trust those people even though I have no children of my own. But I wish I had. Something is not right about these people… these people…”

“It does not matter whether you trust them or not,” Giorgi interrupted, “they have decided to collect the children. And who knows where they are going to end up.”

“Wherever they take them,” Mitre weighed in, “it will be our loss! And those comrades over there, they will not be bothered and will bear no burden… It seems to me like something else lies behind all this, but my mind is too feeble to figure it out. I don’t know what is hidden behind it but something is definitely hidden... I am telling you. Do you hear? They feed their pigs with oranges… bah… to see it I will not believe it...”

“Why don’t you believe it?” asked Kiro. “We believe everything the Party tells us, why not believe that too? And why should we now not trust them when they tell us pigs are fattened with oranges? We came to a point of believing that everything that flies is edible. I, you Mitre, and you Giorgi may not believe that a crow can be eaten but Lazo and Kuze the Lizard would have eaten a crow with feathers and all for the Party.”

They continued walking in silence, only Mitre’s cane was heard pounding the cobblestone pavement with each step they took. They stopped at the intersection behind the church. Kiro extended his hand to Mitre and said: “What are you going to do Mitre? Are you going to give up your grandchildren?”

“I don’t know. I guess I will do what everyone else does, Kiro. If my son was here we would have thought about it together, now the decision will be mine alone. If I don’t give them I might make a mistake… if I do give them it will probably be a mistake... What to do? I don’t know! My idea is whatever everyone else does, I will do too. But I am telling you… this place here will become mute… that’s for sure, brothers...”

The next day, in the evening, they assembled again. Lazo presided over the meeting.

“Let us first select the women who will be in charge. After that, whoever wants to enrol their children can with one of the three women. Last night our comrades from the leadership office explained what needs to be done. We don’t want to repeat what they said. So, just to remind you, the women should be widows who have several children or are from families that have a lot of people fighting in the battlefields or locked up in the prisons. Does everyone understand?” concluded Lazo.

Mitre, who this time was sitting in the front row, knocked with his cane on the floor and asked if he could say something.

After being given the floor Mitre said: “What do you people think, one of the women to be Kostovitsa? She was left alone with four children. Let her go. What do you say?”

“Yes… Let her go…” several female voices were heard saying.

Someone from the centre of the classroom, out of turn, yelled out: “Koliovichka! She is a widow… and pregnant… let her go!”

“She is too young…” piped up Kuze. “She is too young and I am afraid she won’t be able to handle twenty children... Okay people. My understanding was that if we selected three women, each would be given twenty children to look after, right? We have sixty children, that is, if they all go, of course.”

“Why shouldn’t she be able to handle the children? Sure she can… and she is pregnant too. What is she going to do here with an infant? Let her go… to those countries,” added Ianovitsa.

“One more and then we will start with the children,” suggested Lazo.

He then said: “What about Olga, Olga Iovanova... It is true that she is young, the youngest of the three, but she has no one to stay with here. Her mother is dead, her sister is in Gramos, if her younger sister goes then Olga will remain here all alone. Let her go...”

Suddenly there was a lot of chatter on the floor which forced Lazo to call for calm.

“People, People! Stop arguing. If someone wants to say something raise you hand and we will give you a turn! Stop talking like you are in the market!”

“Okay, she can go…” replied Petrovitsa out of turn. “But women, what does Olga know about children? She has never given birth or nursed a child. She has never put a diaper on a child let alone wash one. She has never washed or combed a child, stayed with it all night long or looked after one that was sick. I know the young woman is good-hearted, smart, clean and hard working. She knows how to wash clothes and how to cook but she has no experience with children... That’s the truth... Even for her, it will be difficult. That’s all I have to say.”

“Petrovitsa is right,” agreed Mara Kalikovska. “I hope to God that she can do it, but I am afraid she may not be able to... No, she will not be...”

“Ladies, ladies,” Kuze interrupted, pointing at the women with his hands, “why are you being so difficult, from what Vera told me…”

Kalikovska, who could not stand Kuze, jumped into the conversation and said: “You Kuze, stop blabbing… together with Vera!”

Kuze, pretending as if he had not heard a thing, continued: “As I said, Vera told me that in those countries educated people will look after the children; these women will only be responsible for keeping the children together and from wandering off somewhere… I am also telling you to keep in mind to not get in the way of the Party… from doing its job. Isn’t that right, Comrade Lazo?”

“You, Comrades up there, you need to back off a little and stop playing with the lives of other people’s children...” piped up Kalikovska angrily. She then turned towards the crowd and said: “Did they not take all our young men and women? They took them! Did they later not take the older boys and girls? They took them too. They armed them and sent them to fight.” She then turned to Lazo and said: “Tell me Lazo, what size of gun is Kolche Gulevski carrying? He was a child of fourteen when you told them to take him. Why? Because he was tall, you said! Well, Lazo, he was nothing to you! If you cared so much about this damn struggle then why did you not pick up a rifle yourself? You stood here with the women during the first war (WW II) and now again you are standing here with the women. The Party, that damn Party... you have turned it into a baker’s shovel. Turn it this way it will pick up, turn it that way it will collect… all it does is take, take, take…”

“Enough, Mara!” yelled Kuze. “Enough, we don’t want to hear you throwing poison on the struggle!”

“May the sausages you ate with your Comrades two nights ago turn into poison! And the wine you took from the church… may that too turn into poison…” cursed Mara.

Mara Koliakovska was well-known for her frequent cursing. Her curses ran like flowing muddy water.

For as long as the meetings were run by the people from the leadership office, they ended peacefully. But without them, the meetings ended in quarrels. The most common reason for that was Kuze’s philosophizing. The people often dispersed offended and angry. Only the next day, after experiencing a hard sleepless night the night before, after long convincing arguments, the proposed three agreed to accept the responsibilities handed down to them. At the same meeting they also agreed to a week long schedule during which families enroled their children. And so, when the women gathered at the water tap they no longer spoke about any specific child, they spoke about Kostovitsa’s children, Kolovichka’s children, or Olga’s children.

And so, on cold winter afternoons and evenings in February the women gathered together in silence, sighing deeply and eyes filled with tears, and began to prepare for the day when they were going to let their children go.

They brought with them their implements for making clothing and began to work on the wool, spinning it into yarn and weaving it into fabric on the loom. They also knitted socks and sweaters and made all kinds of other clothing.

Then one night, away from Lazo and Kuze’s prying eyes, they took all the wares they had made for their children to Pop Vasil to have them blessed. The women were afraid of being betrayed by Lazo and Kuze, if they were found out. The new democratic government had opened jails in Nivitsi and Drenovo and the women were afraid they may end up in them if they were caught with Pop Vasil, especially after what he had done at the church during the funeral.

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“Kostovitsa, my grandson is only eight months old... and, as you can see I am an old woman… God has forgotten me... I want you to take my grandson… please take him… he is an orphan. He has no father or mother... Kuze, may his own children abandon him, sent both his mother and father to Gramos soon after he was born... They are young, he said, may God dry his tongue and may he remain deaf and dumb all his life, sent them there and now they are both gone… Before the new year they told me they were killed… they are both dead... I asked both Lazo and Kuze to enrol my grandson because he has no one but they both said no they couldn’t because he is too young. What is he going to do if I die? You go ask them... maybe they will listen to you...” pleaded Grandma Mialitsa.

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“Olga I am leaving my children in your care, both Pande and Genche... You know both of them… Genche is a very timid boy and likes to be stroked on the head, to be cuddled in the lap… He is two and a half years old. Please make sure he is washed often. Make sure he is free of lice. I beg of you please look after them, I will pray for you every day. I will burn oil lamps, not just candles, for you in front of the Virgin Mary Mother of God... Please protect them... What else can I tell you? Oh, don’t forget that their father is in prison... and on his behalf and suffering, I beg you Olga. You now will be their mother and father and older sister. Please be warm, gentle and loving with my meek Genche... I will be back again to see you tomorrow so that we can talk and so that I can tell you more...” pleaded a mother of two.

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“Kostovitsa, Riste is my youngest. You know he is thin, a bit sickly and does not eat much. Not because he is a spoiled child... he is not spoiled. And if it is not too embracing, well, here,” the woman pulled out a handkerchief from her chest with something tied in it, “it is a gold coin. Please, for the love of God, take it, don’t push it away… please take it… you may need it… to buy food and warm clothes…”

The woman looked away for a moment, turned to Kostovitsa and said: “He uncovers himself during the night... Check on him regularly… he sweats a lot too… he gets a sore throat with the slightest cold… When you check on him to cover him, check his socks to make sure they are not wet… Now please take the coin… You don’t want to take it? Why not? With what are you going to buy food or clothing if you need them? Who knows when you will be returning... who knows when we will be seeing our children...? And poor me, here I thought I would approach Kostovitsa and give her a gold coin, and you Kostovitsa are embarrassing me by not taking it… Well then I will take it back home, but please know that I will pray for you every day. I will pray for you so that you don’t get sick… so that your eyes are strong and healthy so you can look after our children… so that your feet are strong and healthy so you can run after them when they leave... so that your hands are strong, healthy and gentle to caress them, hug and hold them in your lap, cover them at night, wash and keep them clean, and hold their hands... if you get sick then who will look after them and protect them?”

***

“My Iana wakes up at night and is afraid. Please, don’t leave her alone. She likes to be caressed before bedtime and likes to be told stories and perhaps a song. Will you be able to do that for her?” asked Kolevitsa with a worried look in her eyes. “My Tsanche follows me around all the time and I don’t know how she is going to cope without me there... She does not eat by herself. Her grandmother never taught her… she won’t touch a spoon. You must feed her and not argue with her because she will cry loudly when she gets annoyed. She can’t dress herself either, she needs help to get dressed and with washing and brushing her hair... She has gotten used to that... Well now, all this responsibility will fall on you... I know she is not the only one you will have to look after, but I beg you please don’t let my Iana suffer... help her to learn things and comfort her when she cries... She is like that… she cries a lot… but she will listen to you for sure... And when you write a letter, put a few more words about my Iana and Tsanche, my darlings… just a few more words...”

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“My children will not give you any trouble. Just make sure they have food to eat. They are obedient and diligent. They know that we are poor. A crust of bread and some cheese will be enough for them for the entire day. They are used to it... About them being a bit restless, I don’t know what to tell you… it’s in their blood. They are number one for doing chores... The older one is a bit of a brawler... but what can I do, it is in his blood, like his grandfather. And don’t separate them from the others… caress them sometimes and frequently check them for lice... you can cut their hair very short… bald… It’s better that way. I don’t have many clothes to give them. One shirt and one pair of socks… I don’t have shoes for them… I will give them a pair of pig skin slippers each. What can I do? I know they will rip them fast but what can I do? They will have to walk barefoot. They walk barefoot here anyway… I have been telling them every day, several times a day, to listen to you. I told my older girl: ‘You are now twelve years old, my child, so pull your sleeves back and help with everything Kostovitsa and the other women ask you. If they ask you to wash clothes, knit, sew, dress the younger children then you do that. Even if they ask you to change and wash diapers you do that too, don’t huff and puff and argue with them. You listen to these women like you listen to me…’ If you need to make bread where you are going, my Linka knows how to… and other baked goods too… My mother taught her… she also taught her how to work… she is diligent and obedient, quiet and shy... If she does something she is not supposed to, please don’t scold her in front of the others. She will not complain but she will take it hard... she has been like that since she was very young...”

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“I have enrolled all four of mine with you... The most I will beg you for is my Mare. She is only two and a half years old. Her sister will look after her, feed her, wash and dress her, but you need to keep an eye on her and teach her things... but please don’t cut her hair... I want her to grow it long. What a beautiful blond braid she has... it’s a miracle. Let her grow it even longer... I don’t know if this is true, but Kuze the Lizard said that they will be taking photographs there. Please send me a big photograph of all four of them. Put Mare first,

behind her Stavre and Vase and Ristanka between them. For each I have prepared a bag with all the clothing I am sending with them. Stavre will carry the food I will prepare for them. I will also give them one bed cover... to cover themselves when they are cold. My children are good... they will not give you any trouble. Only please make sure they eat and are kept clean. And don't forget to tell them stories. Ristanka may want to sing. She knows many songs... I will go now... Do you know when you are leaving? You said you don't know? I will go and visit with them... caress them for a while... warm them..."

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"Please always be nice to my Lenka, she is very sensitive. That's how she is. She doesn't know how to comb her hair... you can't leave her to eat by herself, she will not eat. She needs someone to be beside her when she sleeps. When she wakes up in the night she cries… she is afraid... from what I don't know… perhaps from a bad dream or who knows what... otherwise she is a gentle girl… she likes to talk a lot. She also likes to listen to stories. She got that from her grandfather... What else can I tell you? That this is easy for me? What mother finds it easy to be separated from her child? The one I have in my lap will stay here with me... Oh, oh, he is all wet… I must go and change him..."

Chapter 15

A horseman arrived in the village in the evening before dark. He was wearing a military uniform and carrying a German machine gun and leather bag over his shoulder. A number of children ran with him beside his horse. He asked them to show him where Lazo lived. When he entered Lazo's yard he asked the children to fetch him. He said: "Get Comrade Lazo and hurry!"

Lazovitsa opened the door carefully and looked at the horseman with curiosity. He was a young man and looked tired. The door creaked and opened and Lazovitsa came out.

"Who are you looking for?" she asked.

"Lazo, aunt, Lazo. Does he live here?" the horseman asked.

"Yes he does… he lives here…" Lazovitsa replied when she heard the horseman's tame voice. She then went back inside and moments later both Lazo and Kuze appeared at the threshold of the door.

"I am Lazo. What's the matter?" Lazo asked.

The horseman opened his leather bag and, from the pile of envelopes, separated one, handed it to him and said: "It is urgent, Comrade Lazo."

Lazo, without opening the letter, looked at the horseman from head to toe. He thought he was very young, not much older than his own son. He thought for a moment, fixed the coat that was hanging over his shoulder and said: "Tie the horse over there and come in for a glass of water."

"Thank you Comrade but I must go," replied the horseman, turned his horse around and with a wave of his arm left. They could hear the horse hooves stepping on the cobblestone village road until the horseman went past the threshing fields.

Lazo and Kuze sat down near the fireplace and slowly, without any interest or curiosity, Lazo opened the white envelope, pulled out the

loose paper, raise it in front of the lit oil lamp and began to read. Kuze noticed Lazo's hands shaking. Lazo looked at Kuze and then, with a strange, trembling and frightened voice, called his wife.

While gasping he said: "Lazovitsa, Lazovitsa... bring a cup full of water and put a spoon full of sugar in it."

Kuze went closer to him and, unable to see what was written in the folded letter, quietly asked: "What is it, Lazo?"

Lazo waited until Lazovitsa brought him the sugar water, drank it, opened the letter and handed it to Kuze.

"Did you read it?" Lazo asked after placing his hands on his knees.

"Aha..." muttered Kuze.

"Well, now get up and go out there and call the women that need to go with the children. Tell them to come here right now. And don't tell anyone, we don't want the entire village to know, do you hear me?" said Lazo.

Lazo did not look good. He leaned his head on the wall and finally realized the gravity of the situation.

"I am here Lazovitsa," Lazo heard Kostovitsa saying.

"Please come in!" said Lazovitsa.

Moments later the other two women, accompanied by Kuze, also arrived and sat down. Kuze sat down with them.

"Well, ladies," began Lazo with a stretched out trembling voice, "about an hour ago a courier came here and brought me a letter in which it said that all children that were enroled on Thursday afternoon are to be delivered to Labanitsa. All the children from the surrounding villages are to be gathered there. Further on the letter said that children from the village Kostenariata will be passing through here on Tuesday or Wednesday and that we need to accommodate them... What else can I tell you? Ladies… the time

has come. Now go back to the houses and tell the people to prepare the children for the road... you know what you need to do. Tell the mothers to prepare food for two days… no, no, tell them for three days... Well, go now... And you, Kuze, you go and tell your wife to prepare your children. Good luck to you all… Go now!" ordered Lazo.

When everyone left and Lazo was alone with his wife he said: "What do you think Lazovitsa, should we hide Nase? Only for two or three days, a week at most, then we will bring him back. We will tell them that he ran away from home… What do you say, huh?"

Lazovitsa covered her face with his hands and began to weep.

"Why Lazo?" she cried. "We are going to send three and hide one? Did they not say that the children will be coming back soon? That's what you and the others with whom you were speaking a few nights ago here were saying, right? When the worst is over the children will return... two or three weeks, maybe a month at most, and they will all come back... that's what you all agreed, right? If that is how it's going to be why hide Nase? And the others, don't you care about them? Is it because they are female?"

Lazo paced back and forth in the room with his face hidden in his hands. Five steps ahead, five steps back, all quietly on the bare boards. He paced barely audibly wearing his thick woolen socks. Then suddenly he lowered his arms and in a painful tone of voice he began to speak.

He said: "Well, our children will go wherever the others go Lazovitsa. It would be difficult to separate them and shameful..." but before he finished saying what he was going to say he went outside. All night he walked away from the village. He went as far as Stenite and turned towards Galichnik and Virovite and then went toward Shekaritsa. There he leaned on a stone and waited for the arrival of dawn. Just as the sun was rising he ran his hand over the tender green grass, tilted it and watched the drops of dew sparkle as they dripped off his hand. He ran his hands over his face and then he rubbed his eyes. He looked up and saw a flock of birds fly high above. He watched them until they disappeared beyond a grove.

Beside him was a thicket of hazelnut trees. They were budding and the moist buds looked like golden beads. Further over was a blooming dogwood tree. Its flowers were open and the dew drops collected on them looked like shiny pearls in the morning sun. He got up, broke off a branch from the hazelnut tree next to him and walked downhill to Stara Livada. The weeping willows there had long and thin branches hanging down from them like bridal headpieces. He jumped up and grabbed a branch. He pulled on it until it broke. He removed his knife from the holster hanging on his belt and with its tip raised the bark. His finger became wet from the willow's sap. He cut off a short piece about ten inches long. This reminded him of when he was a young boy looking after the cattle and when, during early spring, he would cut a straight young branch without knots on it. Then, with the flat side of the knife, he would gently tap the branch until the bark was freed from the wood. He would cut bark all around and remove a small chunk from the wood. He would then hold the bark with one hand and the bare wood with the other and carefully twist the tender bark until it came off the wood. He would place the bark back on the wood, cut a small notch on it, remove it, deepen the notch on the wood and put the bark back. And if it was cut properly, the piece of wood would turn into a great whistle. Lazo now, like in the old days, after making all the cuts, put the piece of wood to his lips and blew; first quietly, timidly as if testing it… then hard to test its maximum volume. This whistle worked exactly as expected… which made Lazo happy… but just for a moment. Lazo then partially covered the hole and by moving his finger he made a variety of tones come out. The tones seemed to sadden Lazo.

Suddenly he felt his legs give away at the knees, he was exhausted and could not seem to hold his own weight. He leaned on the trunk of the willow tree and slowly began to slide down to the ground. He half opened his eyes but all he could see was darkness. He tried to grab something but there was nothing to grab. His forehead felt cold. His feet felt numb and when he looked down, in the darkness, he felt the trees, the hills, the rocks on the hills and the wide meadow spin all around him. He again tried to grab something and again there was nothing to grab. He felt like he was falling, falling, falling into a dark abyss and the only sound he heard was his own voice screaming...

A shepherd passing by with his sheep, heading for Nova Cheshma, saw a man bent over lying under the weeping willow. It was Lazo.

Later, while Lazovitsa was sobbing and preparing the clothing for the children, Lazo lay motionless on the straw mattress looking at the ceiling. He was completely oblivious to Lazovitsa's sobbing, crying and deep sighs. The only thing he felt were the warm tears of his children, crouched over him, weeping silent tears warming his wrinkled forehead and pale cheeks...

Chapter 16

“Don’t wait Sofka, roll up your sleeves…” said Mitrevitsa to her daughter-in-law. “The days are passing us by while we continue to wait and cry and cry and cry… Did you say Kostovitsa passed by here and said they are leaving on Thursday?”

“That’s what she said... also to prepare food for three days...” replied Sofka barely audibly, especially the last words, before she began to cry loudly.

“Enough, enough... we are not sending them to be banished. Like they said, the children will be returned to us. Okay, Sofka... go in the other room and do all your crying, just don’t let the children see you. And where are they?” asked Mitrevitsa.

“Lenka and Kosta are in the yard, Kire and father went up Sinadev Rid,” replied Sofka.

“Come, Sofka,” said Mitrevitsa motioning with her hand, “let us have a look one more time at what clothes we put together… Open the chest.”

“The clothes are not in the chest, mother. I have prepared separate clothing for each child and put them in the guest room,” replied Sofka.

They went to the guest room, sat on the bed and examined each pile of clothing.

“Okay Sofka… this is good. You have two pairs of woolen socks for each…. Please put more dresses for Lenka. Have you put a comb? Also put two shirts for each. Not that sweater for Kire, put this thicker one. Hats! Oh, here they are. Go and take the new suits from the chest. Dress them beautifully...” said Mitrevitsa.

Mitrevitsa and Sofka busied themselves with the children’s clothing until noon when they finally placed them in separate bags. They took the clothes one by one and, while silently and secretly dropping

tears on them, gently folded them and put them in the appropriate bag.

In the meantime Mitre and his grandson Kire walked over to the Sveti Drach church and, on their way back, sat under the old elm tree that stood tall on top of Sinadev Rid. From there they could see the entire village and the surrounding area. To the left was Mali Madi and to the right near Aliavitsa were Gorusha, Odreto and Orleto.

"If Stenite were slightly lower, my boy, we could see Kostur from here," remarked Grandpa Mitre, as he raised his cane, made a semicircle and said. "Look over there… from Borovo, Vishomo, Stenite, Lobanitsko, Telok and behind us up to Tumbite, is our border. All that up to there is ours, it belongs to us. Do you see it? It has meadows, flat fields, gardens, forests, boulders… and vineyards... It's a good thing we pruned the grape vines, right? By the time the grapes mature you will be back with us. If by chance you come back late Grandpa will cut entire branches of the best grapes and hang them on the ceiling rafter. They will last until 'Vasilitsa' (New Year's Day), they won't dry… It's a good thing we pruned the apple trees too. What remains to be done are the pear trees… Grandpa will prune those by himself, eh Kire? Now, let me see… what was I going to tell you? Ah, I remember… just a little longer and you will be going… and who knows how far. So please listen to your grandfather… I want to tell you something… You must never forget the road you will travel on… You must not forget our language. If you forget our language my boy, then you will forget the road... Look at Grandpa Kiro for example, he left for America when he was young, but never forgot our language or the road. Wherever he went, whatever he did, he always returned home... That's the way it is… my boy, Kire. Wherever you go you must never forget this place… This is our place." Mitre scratched the ground with his cane, unearthed a stone and said: "You must never forget our country... Do you remember when we were plowing and when the plow hit a rock? Well, Kire my boy, that plow has hit that rock many, many times... but neither my grandfather nor his grandfather, and neither have I broken that rock and taken it out..."

"Why Grandpa?" asked Kire.

“Because, my boy, that stone in our field, that stone too is soil, part of our country... How can we break it? How can we throw it away when it has been with us for generations. This stone too, Kire,” Mitre knocked the stone he had unearthed earlier with his cane and said: ‘This stone too can be soil because it is part of our country. And you should know, when you are there, far away, in those other countries, wherever you find yourself, you sometimes will feel tightness here under your arm, you will feel sad, but do not fret… I want you to be strong and so does your father… You see your mother and grandmother? Is there anyone today stronger than them? Then, in the Ilinden days, if we had such strong people... who knows… those mothers would have created miracles... The other day I was talking with Kole, your teacher... I asked him: ‘Kole, teacher, how many women are in the military? Do they know how to fight? Do they cry and scream?’ You know what he said? He said: ‘Grandpa Mitre there are girls in the army that are tougher than most men. He said: ‘In my unit we had a brunette girl with a long black braid like a goddess.’ So I asked: ‘What was her name?’ He said: ‘Donka, she is from these villages.’ It seems to me she must be from our village, from Donovichini... Even when she was a little girl she was smart and very nimble. The boys ran away when she was angry. That’s how tough she was. I am telling you, my boy, wherever you go you must never forget your language... Now let us go home before Grandma scolds us.”

They returned to the village via the Lower neighbourhood and when they came close to Kiro’s house, they heard Kiro yelling from his veranda: “Not that one, Kirevitsa, the white one… I said the white one… chase it to the corner and catch it… Oh, gee… you let it get away again…”

Mitre knocked on the iron fence with his cane and yelled: “What’s going on Kiro? What are you arguing about from up there?”

“We are trying to catch a chicken, Mitre…” replied Kiro and came down to the yard. “That one there… the white one,” he said and asked: “Are you returning from your walk? I saw you from my veranda when you were going towards Sveti Vrach.” Kiro then turned towards Kire and said: “I see you are always with your

grandpa. But soon, my boy, you will be going and then on whom will we be leaning, eh?" At that very moment the white chicken, sensing danger, flew over them and ran up the street. "Let it go Kirevitsa" said Kiro, "tonight when it returns you can catch it."

"Why are you so obsessed with that chicken, Kiro?" asked Mitre.

"Kirevitsa and I figured we would roast three chickens and donate them to the children… for their trip. We were thinking of giving one to each of the women looking after the children. They can divide them up into small pieces… Kirevitsa will also bake three large loaves of bread... We want to do our part too, right? It doesn't matter that we don't have children of our own… They are all our children and we too want to say goodbye to them? We will be going out to the road too… The white chicken, the one Kirevitsa could not catch; I wanted that one roasted too. We want to give it to Kole the teacher. Yesterday I asked him if he was going with the children... He said no. 'I, Grandpa Kiro,' he said, 'will be returning to my old unit…' The poor boy looked so sad… tears came to my eyes just looking at him… I asked him why he was so sad. He said he was very sorry for the loss of his commander Shiperkov.

Mitre crossed himself and said: "May God rest his soul..."

"Let us go inside?" Kiro invited Mitre and Kire.

"Thank you Kiro but we need to go home. Now that our children are still here we want to be with them as long as we can... spend as much time with them as possible. Goodbye Kiro. Goodbye Kirevitsa! Be well…" yelled Mitre and they left.

"Goodbye Mitre, Kire and say hello to everyone at home," replied Kirevitsa from the distance.

After they ate Mitre asked to see what was prepared for the children for their trip.

"We put in everything that they will need," said Mitrevitsa, "and don't touch the bags." she added.

“Okay, okay…” muttered Mitre, “then you untie them so that I can see… I just want to see...” he added.

And while Mitrevitsa and Sofka were putting the clothes back in the bags, Mitre started giving orders.

He said: “Tomorrow the two of you will sift some of the soft flour with a fine sieve and you will make two large loafs of bread and bake them under a saach (semi spherical iron cover used for baking pastry in the fireplace). Sofka you will fuel the oven and I will roast a lamb for the children to take with them... Mitrevitsa, don’t forget to put some fat, kaurma, dried plums and apples in their bags... and a whole box of cheese and cottage cheese. Eggs, don’t forget to boil some eggs... Wait, wait... First go and ask Pop Vasil if they can be painted red before Easter and if he can bless them... sure why not, our children are Christians... after the Christian ritual is performed by the priest and his blessing is done as was done by our grandfathers, great grandfathers since ancient times…” Mitre stopped talking and quietly coughed, turned his face towards the window and, while pretending he was looking outside, bent forward and with his hands stealthily covered his eyes and wiped his tears and spread them on his face and then dried them off with his sleeve. He then said: “Grandpa would have not given you away if the bad was not as strong as my desire for you to stay alive and healthy… Don’t wait Mitrevitsa, go...” he added.

In the days before the departure every household was folding clothes, making bread, baking goods and cooking all kinds of food. Mothers and grandmothers went out on their verandas and balconies, yards or to the water tap to meet, if only for a moment, with other mothers and grandmothers only to discuss what meals to make and how much would be enough. What clothes would be warm enough and how far the road would take them. They each, in their own way, thought of how soon the children would be returning… And every word they heard, every glance they saw was incorporated into their thoughts along with the anticipation, bitterness and sadness. They all hoped that their children would be returned to them soon. It was an emotional time; a roller coaster of emotions filled them. One word could bring them happiness or send them into total depression. The women went through the clothing

again and again… counting… measuring… no one was sure how quickly the children would be returning… They added more clothing or less depending on how their mood struck them. Would they return soon or… one thing was a constant… the tears that flowed… No one could erase their doubts because no one had any answers… promising words did not help either…

The cherry tree in the Mitrev yard was in full bloom in the warm breath of spring. The white flowers were buzzing with bees. The sour cherry tree next door in the Labrov yard was also white with flowers. The apricot and almond trees in the Nichev yard were loaded with flowers. The meadows in the valley were again turning green after a winter's rest. The roadside thickets were covered with tender green leaves inspiring the birds to cheerfully sing their love songs. The wind, sometimes joyous, sometimes angry, was whispering, calling, begging and complaining while carrying the aroma of mint and thyme from the nearby hills. A large loaf of bread was simmering under the heat of the saach and a lamb was roasting on a spit in the hot oven. A blackbird, refreshed by the evening dew, perched on the highest branch of Giorgi's pear tree, away from the people's daily worries and pains, was sticking its head out, shaking its throat and singing its silvery song, spreading its melody in the yard and beyond, lasting as long as a maiden's breath, a bride's sigh… It paused for a moment, turned its head, listened and again shook its throat and disturbed the peace, clenching the hearts and sending shivers and pain to those listening to it. Thunder, one after another, was heard coming from Gorusha. Long echoes of machinegun bursts were heard coming from Kopanche. The village church bell rang in the evening. Evening prayer was conducted in the mild light of day. People were praying in front of the Virgin Mary and in front of Sveti Ilia and lighting candles for the Virgin Mary to provide light for the long and unfamiliar road and guide the children on their way there and on their way back when they returned… light for all their pain and sorrow… Light for their return… and for hope... The candle light twinkled in their eyes, eyes covered by a veil of mist through which prayer passed prayers for those who were fighting in the war; may God protect them… Prayers for the dead; may God forgive their sins and guide their souls… Prayers for the children; may God keep them safe… and a safe return… soon… May God's eyes look after them and hands

guide them back to their maternal embrace and to their ancestral homes...

After dinner the school bell was heard ringing. There was a vicious battle taking place up in Gorusha. Cannons, mortars, machine gun bursts, one after another, were incessantly firing. Florescent bullets were embroidering the sky. Kole, the teacher, stood in front of the blackboard and watched the students in silence. This was the first time he had felt nervous. His voice trembled and he spoke to them not like a teacher, but like a father.

He said: “My dear children… I wanted to tell you a story, a story that I was saving to tell you at the end of the school year. Another teacher will perhaps tell it to you where you are going... But in case such a teacher does not tell it to you, then you alone, when you grow up, you will remember this day and the days when we were learning together. But then it will be a new story, a story born during the thunderstorms coming from the battlefield... And let it be a story about how we learned together… to read and write and how... you matured to leave and to go far away and how you quickly grew up to carry such a burden on your small shoulders… and that you must never forget… you must never firget who you are and where you come from... you will grow and ripen even more and the more you do the more you will mature and create your own… new story… which you will make sure you tell… You will need to tell your story because it is your mark in the world… our yesterday and today...”

The teacher paused for a moment, looked at the children one by one, and continued: “Today, children, this hour is our last hour together and perhaps the greatest hour of our lives... From now on, a new hour will begin for you, a great hour… from which what you learn will shape your life. I will not take back your primer, you can keep it. You can carry it with you wherever you go. Also take the piece of pencil. Learn how to read and write. You will see how important this will be when you write your first letter to your loved ones… when with the letters (alphabet) you learned you will be able to tell what you feel, what you see, what you experience… and how and who you are. Wherever you are, you will be talking to your loved ones using the letters you learned. You have learned them well. And never forget the thunder that is heard coming from Gorusha and

Kopanche. Remember the storm so that you can be happy in the sun... And I don't want us to separate and say goodbye with tears in our eyes. But with a song..."

All the songs they learned in late autumn and during the long cold winter, songs with hints of rebellion, hatred and vengeance, songs of hope, joy and admiration, were mixed together with the echoes of cannon shells exploding and machine guns firing… and with them the fears, anxieties and moaning cries of mothers...

This was also the first time when songs stopped cradling and bringing happiness to the heart, and when the songs stopped they brought silence to the homes, a silence that spread like water spilled from a broken jug that fell in a room filled with bitterness.

Mitrevitsa and Sofka entered the room, sat next to one another and, while waiting for the children to return from school, hugged each other and began to cry out loud.

Their souls were filled with great pain and there was nothing that could bring them any relief.

Chapter 17

Not a single house had its lights off the night before the children left. Every single parent and relative stayed awake, looking sad and secretly wiping tears...

Sofka called Lenche to the guest room, opened the chest that held her wedding gown, reached inside it and said: “Stay here my dear…” then with hands trembling, Sofka took it out, the one she was married in, and said: “Come closer my child Mommy wants to dress you up in this…” And after she put it on her and the head dress and silver wreath, Sofka said: “Not that your mother does not believe that you will return… I just wanted to see you in a bridal dress… Turn around my child, let me have a look at you… Now walk towards the wall and come back…” Lenche did as she was asked and when she returned Sofka gave her a great big hug. Sofka could not contain herself and her shoulders began to tremble and shake… her heart was breaking from her pain… Lenche, sensing Sofka’s pain, began to cry. “Please don’t cry my dear, don’t cry… you are a big girl… Mommy is going to wait for you…” she then slowly detached herself from her daughter, took off her wedding ring and placed it on Lenche’s centre finger of her left hand and said: “Wear it my dear and every time you look at it remember your mother… and don’t cry… now turn around so Mommy can have a look at you one more time… I can’t wait to see you as a bride…”

Grandpa Mitre, sitting with legs crossed and smoking his tobacco pipe, quietly said to Kire: “My dear boy, I never want to hear anything bad about you, no one in our family has caused us any shame. You come from a good family and you need to protect the honour of this family. Wherever you go you must never forget your roots. You must seek them under ground, under the rocks, in the ashes, on the side of the road… You must remember who you are so that others who come after you will know. Just like the song says. And our nation is not without roots… just like the rock we saw today. Rooted deep inside our soil! Did you see how the great oak trees had their roots growing in the rocks? They are rooted so strongly no thunderbolt can dislodge them and no fire can burn them down. The roots will remain in the soil, in the rocks and in the boulders. This is how it is with our roots too. It is in our veins. This

is how it is, my dear boy, for all those who know their roots. And if you know your roots, you will protect them so that no one will throw them in some compost pile or play with them as if they were toys. This is what I want you to remember… this is my legacy to you..."

Grandpa Mitre got up, straightened himself and went towards the loom.

"Both your grandmother and mother have worked this loom for many years to weave canvases. This unfinished canvas here is a part of their soul and carries their hopes and desires. Many songs have been sung and tears spilled near this loom. This loom is life and incorporated in it are our hopes and dreams." Mitre stopped talking for a moment to catch his breath, bent down, pulled a root from under the loom and said: "This is a piece of root taken from the oak tree growing at Sveti Drach. Put it in your bag. This little branch is from our yard… put it with the root..." Mitre started walking towards the cupboard, opened it, took a key hanging on a nail and said: "My boy, take this key with you. It's the key to our home. Every member of this family when they left this house was given a key. You too… take it Kire... and may God bring you back so that no one from our family is left out..." Grandpa Mitre then turned to the icon crossed himself three times and bowed low.

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Kuze unbuttoned the chain, put his pocket watch in his hand and, while looking at it, said: "Nikolche, my son, I am giving you my pocket watch to remember me by. Your grandfather gave it to me to remember him by… And you dear," he turned to his daughter and said, "your mommy will give you a gold chain with a cross. When you look at them think of us…"

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Mitra called her three daughters, opened a chest, pulled out a box, opened it and said: "This bracelet is for you, Mare. My mother gave it to me when I got married. Wear it in good health my daughter. These earrings are for you, Vase. Come so that I can put them on

your ears. You look beautiful, they fit you beautifully. You are so beautiful. Let mother give you a kiss… This gold chain is for you, Zoie. Come so I can put it around your neck. You are very, very beautiful. Look in the mirror… see how beautiful you look? Isn't that right, children? You are my dear beautiful doves…"

***

Grandpa Nakie took a puff from his tobacco pipe and, with the handle of his knife, kept tapping on the willow rod he was holding on top of his knees. With semi-open lips, while holding his pipe in his mouth, he mumbled: "Peel, peel you little stick… so I can turn you into a whistle… a whistle for my grandson Riste…"

"No!" said Riste, "I want you to make me a flute."

"Okay, lie down now and go to sleep. When you wake up, Grandpa will have it made..." replied Nakie.

"But Grandpa…" I want it made now…" said Riste with a whiny tone of voice.

"Riste, please listen to your grandpa. As you can see we have a guest… Grandpa Kiro is here," said Nakie, called his daughter-in-law and asked her to take the children.

Nakie and Kiro were now alone.

"This is how we are going to remain… Alone, Kiro!" said Nakie.

"I hope they will return soon. We have left in the past and gone far away but we always came back, right?" replied Kiro.

"It was different for us, Kiro. This kind of departure, to me looks more like banishment… The people have become disillusioned, Kiro… because they have not been given much choice… that's what has ruined them… And who are those smart people who thought separating us from our children was a good idea? How are we going to relate to these children after they are separated from us for some time… and who knows how long we will be separated? And when

they return, how will they fit into our society? Will they know how to plow and sow, prune the vineyards, make wine… without our guidance? And will they want to, after being exposed to so much more? This is a bad, bad idea, Kiro… God help me I don't even want to think about this… but what if they don't return? This place will be empty! And what do you think will happen if this place becomes empty? This place has never been empty of our people! Who thought of this, tell me? Did they truly think this was good for us?"

Kiro could not find the words to respond. After being silent for a while he said: "Nakie, Kirevitsa and I brought some things for the children, to take with them."

"Thank you!" replied Nakie and then said: "Why are you keeping quiet, say something. I asked Pop Vasil, the older people and the oldest people in the village and not one of them said this was a good thing…"

"It is not a good thing, Nakie!" replied Kiro quietly. "It is good when the children are at home... I remember last year when a cat climbed up a ladder and, one by one, killed the chicks of a swallow. The mother, the poor thing, kept flying around, flying back and forth and squeaking, desperately flapping its wings... for a moment it would fly at the edge of the porch, look down at the ruined nest, and squeak and squeak and squeak... as I watched the poor thing, I swear to you it sounded to me like it was crying. I thought to myself: What will the mothers be doing tomorrow and the days after… what will we all be doing? Well Nakie, you said you wanted me to say something? I say this whole thing has been well thought out... No good will come of it! That's what I think…"

Kirevitsa came to the house, entered the room and after greeting Nakie said: "I hope the children will have a safe trip, Nakie, and may they come back to us very soon."

"Thank you, Kirevitsa, and may God keep you and Kiro well and healthy for many, many years," replied Nakie.

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Donovitsa has been a widow for five years. She has seven children and has enrolled all of them. She sat them around her as she took boiled potatoes out of the kettle and, one by one, began to peel them.

She said: “Here my dears eat. This is for you. Today you get to fill your bellies….” She paused for a moment and then said: “I have made some things for you...” Tears filled her eyes. She wiped them with the corner of her black head kerchief, reached out, grabbed a bag, pulled some things out and said: “I made these for you. A scarf for you my daughter… I knit socks and crafted pig skin slippers… for you. I also washed and patched up your old socks… Gele, you make sure you look after your pants. You don’t have another pair. I have prepared two bags with some bread and cheese and some cottage cheese for you. You have two loaves of bread, three eggs each and some raw onions…. I don’t have anything more to give you… Ristana, I am giving you my dress, the one I wear to church. Don’t wear it every day. Wear it on weekends and holidays… so that you will be well dressed. You are the oldest so make sure you look after the others. I put thread and a needle in your bag. If you see something torn, patch it up... You must also be well behaved my children… and never forget me… your mother. Ristana, you know how to write so when letters are sent out you also send a letter. So I will know about you. With what else can mother send you on the road, eh? With tears, my children, mother will send you with many tears!

Chapter 18

The sun was rising over Siniachka. The red rays of dawn were visible and flaming. The cloud on top of the mountain looked ruddy from the bottom and silvery on the sides in the morning light. Its shadow shortened over the surrounding hills with every passing moment.

Kuze was on his way visiting the houses.

“It’s time, let’s go, go to the front of the church where everyone is gathering...” he said quietly with his head down, looking pale from sleeplessness, as he knocked on the doors.

Mitre looked at the smouldering pieces of wood in the fireplace and adjusted them slightly with his metal tongs.

“Leave the fire and go out and see if they are gathering,” said Mitrovitsa and then turned towards Sofka.

“Sofka, bring the ash pan and open all the doors.

Mitre came back and in a low tone of voice said: “It looks like they are gathering. Call the children. And don’t forget anything. First get the bags…”

Mitrevitsa took the ash pan and went to the fireplace, scooped a bunch of coals and knelt in front of the doorstep.

“Okay my dear children skip over the ash pan... over the coals...” and then she whispered: “May all the bad in front of you and over you burn in the fire and turn into ashes... May the warmth of this house warm you and keep your hearts warm…”

When they came out of the yard and stepped over the threshold of the large wooden gate, Mitrevitsa spilled a bowl of water behind them.

Mitre walked in front, followed by Kire and then by Sofka holding Lenka with her left hand and Kosta with her right. Kosta, looking

ahead, walked with small steps. He suddenly stopped, put two fingers in his mouth and blew. He waited for a moment.

The dog, laying under the eaves, shook its tail, lifted its muzzle from between its paws, got up lazily and ran towards Kosta.

“Come, Sharko, come here boy…” called Kosta and hit his knee with the palm of his hand. Sharko snapped his mouth and caught the piece of bread flying his way, licked Kosta’s hand and continued to walk beside him.

Mitrevitsa turned back and went home. She opened all the doors wide open, removed the heavy oak lever from the gate and opened it fully, she then removed her black head kerchief and began to unfold her hair braids.

Swallows were circling in front of the church where everyone from the village was gathering. They were flying over the houses and swooping down low and flying through the village’s narrow street lanes. A stork flew from its old nest located on top of a tall dry elm tree, circled the village without flapping its wings and then flew off beyond the hill past the meadows.

Two DAG soldiers with their shmaizers (machine guns) hanging over their shoulders approached Kuze and spoke with him. The taller soldier lifted his backpack and, while pointing to the hill with his hand on which stood an old oak tree, shouted: “Follow me!”

They began their departure… children, women, old men… all mixed together. First in one big bunch and then, slowly, in a column. They walked it two’s, in fours, seven and even ten together... Families stuck together… Mothers intervened; whispering, comforting, teaching, holding hands tightly and keeping the children warm… lips quivering eyes tearing… the old, pretending they were rubbing their foreheads, were clearing their tears of eyes. They were all feeling tightness in their hearts, a tightness that rose to their throats… restricting their speech… Spring was all around them, green grass, blossoming cherry trees… The oak trees were budding… golden buds… and so were the poplars and the willows. The flute will have to remain unfinished. Sharko kept up with Kosta,

not a step ahead or behind him. Birds were singing by the roadside near the stream. A cuckoo bird was heard singing in the trees. Someone was counting out loud: “One, two, three, four… and finished counting at twelve. The cuckoo seemed like it had lost its voice. Some saw it flying on the other side of the brook.

“Mom, Mom!” Kosta yelled. “Did you hear that Mom?”

“What is it son?” she asked.

“A cuckoo bird was singing... something bad will happen...” replied Kosta.

They crossed the creek and slowed their pace on the uphill. They walked on the shadowed part of the hill until they reached the oaks of Sveti Ilia. The head of the column stopped at the flat part of the hill. There was a blossoming plum tree nearby and past it was the downhill.

“This is as far as those not going with the children are allowed to go. Only the children and their mothers who are going with them can proceed beyond here,” ordered one of the soldiers.

This was it. This was where grandparents and children were separated. There was much crying and sobbing in front of Sveti Ilia. The soldier who stood on the side turned. Kiro saw his trembling shoulders. Grandparents were calling names and praying to the heavens... they were separated… first the older children went downhill and disappeared beyond the tall mountains.

Mitre embraced his grandchildren. He put his cheeks against theirs. He had no voice. His legs were giving away. He folded over and tilted his head against the chest of his grandchildren and cried loudly. Mitrevitsa, with her loose hair, took them in her arms and kissed them on the eyes, foreheads, cheeks and mouth and with both hands, as if fearing that they would fly away, gently caressed them and said: “Go my darlings… go in good health and may God keep you safe!”

She sobbed and sobbed and so did every other grandmother and grandfather who stood under the shadow of the old oak tree in front of Sveti Ilia. Most of them took their bags and went downhill. The horses had not yet left. The soldiers were putting the little children in baskets resting on the saddles on top of the horses. The children knelt and sat on the straw at the bottom of the basket and, with wide open eyes, hung on for dear life...

“Mommy, Mommy!” one of the small children began to scream when the horse started descending down the hill. “Mommy, Mommy!” more children were heard screaming in panic.

Pop Vasil raised his cross and blessed the road they were traveling on.

The people waited until the children going down the slope disappeared… They waited until the last little head in the baskets went out of sight. Everything went silent… the children’s cries were heard no more. No one wanted to leave… No one wanted to move… They stood there until their shadows became long and extended. They stood there until the sun hid behind the mountain and no longer burned… They stood there until darkness began to descend. And while they stood there, it seemed to them that they could still hear the voices of the children… shouting… crying… calling for their mothers from inside the baskets woven out of tender hazel and willow branches and watching their tears dropping like pearls from their eyes in the setting sun. But as they looked and listened they began to realize that, along with the children, their happiness was gone… Mother Angelina… Grandpa Mitre… Grandma Maria… all had lost their happiness. The villagers returned home in the shadows of twilight. They silently closed their doors and silently sat and listened. There was only silence… and they felt like they were not at home…

Mitrevitsa lit a large candle and placed it in front of the image of the Virgin Mary. Mitre, with trembling hands, filled the oil lamp with oil and, after lighting it, said: “Let them burn until they burn out. Let there be light… So that we can watch each other and so that the Virgin May can watch over us…”

Chapter 19

They passed though the ravine and took the path that led to the coast. The two DAG soldiers walked ahead. The older children followed. The five to ten year olds, holding hands and looking ahead, took smaller steps and walked behind them in a long column. Walking with them were their mothers and the women looking after them. Following them were the horses with baskets on their backs and in the baskets lay the two, three and four year old children. They were silent now, most being rocked to sleep by the moving horses, some, sticking their little heads out, were looking at the high peaks of the hills and mountains, the white clouds in the sky, the outcrops of boulders… and frequently yawned. They leaned their little heads on their shoulders and, while being rocked by the motion of the moving horses and mesmerized by the clatter of horse hooves, they slowly sunk into slumber. A woman of about thirty, wearing a black head kerchief, went from basket to basket and, while propping herself on the baskets, looked in on the little children. Some she lightly touched on the head. Once in a while she sighed and shed a tear while staring ahead. Water was heard splashing at their side. It sounded like it was falling from a great height and scattering on the rocks. Cold drops fell on them. The children covered their faces with their hands. The column turned right and began to walk uphill. It slowed down. The DAG soldiers raised their hands up in the air. An armed man ran down towards them.

“Stop, Stop!” he yelled and waved with one of his hands while pointing his machine gun at the hill with the other. “Turn back, turn back!” he yelled, “Turn back go down, go down I said!”

The column stopped. Suddenly there was thunder. The brooks and gullies were filled with echoes that sounded like a strong thunderstorm. The horses became frightened. The second and third roar of exploding shells sent the children running in panic. They ran in all directions, screaming and crying.

“Mommy! Mommy!” a voice was heard calling. It was a five or six year old girl, standing alone in the middle of the path, stretching her arms out, stomping on the dust, and calling: “Mommy! Mommy!”

A woman ran to her, hugged her, took her bag in one arm and the little girl in the other and ran for cover.

There was a lot of shouting… children crying and screaming… mothers calling… DAG fighters yelling… More DAG fighters ran down from the top of the hill to help out. The children who had run down into the ravine and those who had hidden in the grove were gathered together at a clearance on the other side of the hill. The frightened children were eventually gathered together in one group and were joined by the mothers who accompanied them. Attendance was taken and each child was accounted for. They were asked to sit down and rest.

The sun had gone beyond the mountain top and a shadow began to fall on the clearance where the children were resting. The two DAG soldiers called the women in charge for a meeting, during which a few things were briefly explained.

One of the soldiers said: "We will stay here until nightfall. The fighters that came from above told us that a large government military (enemy) unit was seen making its way towards Aliavitsa. Therefore we cannot go in that direction... Don't tell the mothers anything. Go back and pretend as if nothing was said… just tell them we will be resting here for a while longer. Sit the children under the pine trees and give them something to eat. And no movement!"

After the women went back to the children, the two DAG fighters stayed where they were. They each lit a cigarette and stared at the hill where cannons were rumbling.

"Open the map. Let us see where we are now," said the older fighter. He then ran his finger over the map, pointed at one spot and said: "We crossed this stream. Now we are here. We should continue, but along this path…"

"If we follow that path we will be late and we will miss our connection," said the younger fighter. "We are scheduled to make our connection today, eight hours after sunset. We need to be here," he said and knocked on the map with his finger.

“No. I don’t think we will be able to make it there today at the specified time. I am worried that we will be running into the aircraft and they will ruin everything. If our fighters manage to repel the government troops, then our path will be free. Here, look. We are here now. We needed to continue on this path and exit at this pass. If we go down here through the river we will connect with this path... wait ... the map is damaged, I can’t see anything beyond here...” said the older fighter.

“Okay, if you can’t see anything on the map… no problem… I know that place well. I can go through it during the night with my eyes closed...” said the younger fighter.

“You best keep your eyes open... We are leading children here and their mothers are with them... It is precisely now that the Burandary (enemy forces) in Kostur are making their move,” said the older fighter.

“And how do you know that they are making their move from Kostur and not from Chetirok or Nestram?” asked the younger fighter.

“It doesn’t matter where they are coming from... My point is they are ruining our plans... I just want you to understand that... But you know something, I still think we can do this…” said the older fighter.

“If we proceed and don’t make our connection and if the government units cut us off, then what?” asked the younger fighter.

“Then we will not go to the designated place and we will bring the children back up here... They can cross the border here…” said the older fighter.

“What if they don’t accept them here, then? We were ordered to bring them here!” said the younger fighter while pointing at the map with his finger. “They will not take them at any old place, will they? If it was arranged to bring them here then we must bring them here. If we bring them to another place then who knows how long it will

take before they are picked up. I am looking at the map and I don't see a road where tracks can travel. They will be expecting them to arrive here... That's why they ordered us to bring them here. What do you think?" said the younger fighter.

A woman was coming towards them. They ended their conversation.

"Come, have something to eat," she said and pointed to a place where the children and women were sitting and eating. "Come, join us and have something to eat."

"You go ahead, dear mother," said the younger fighter. "Let the children eat and rest. "We have our own food here," he tapped his backpack with his hand.

The woman returned to the children. She walked quietly and slowly while taking careful steps on the moist ground. The older fighter yelled: "Do you have water? If you do send someone to bring us some…"

The two DAG fighters, and guides of this expedition, sat on the side of the path, under the shade of the tall pine tree, took off their backpacks, opened a can of meat, broke a piece of rye bread each and began to eat.

"What a feeble-minded person!" muttered the older fighter.

"What did you say?" asked the younger fighter.

"I said what feeble-minded person…" replied the older fighter.

"Who are you talking about?" asked the younger fighter.

"The person, the feeble-minded person who ordered us to take the children…! What will happen if an airplane flies in this open space and sees the children under these pine trees? Never mind. Let us eat and we will move deeper into the woods," replied the older fighter.

They suddenly heard long machine gun bursts nearby. They could also hear, quite clearly, explosions of cannon shells. They stopped eating.

The older fighter asked the younger one to investigate. He said: “Go up there, on the top of the hill and see what’s going on… and come back quickly.” But before the two DAG soldiers were finished collecting their food and putting it away in their backpacks, an armed horseman arrived and ordered them to secure the children.

He said: “Take the children deeper into the woods. Stay there until the end of the day. We will move out after dark. I am taking command of the column. From now on you will take orders from me. These are your orders from headquarters.”

“I understand!” said the older fighter, saluted and went to secure the children.

At nightfall they gathered in the open. A cold wind was blowing from the mountains. The man riding the horse waved his arm and said: “Follow me!” and moved ahead.

The children began to move. They slowly formed a column. They walked the same as before… holding hands and holding the dresses of their mothers. The light of the setting sun was still visible on the peaks of distant hills… The children loaded in baskets riding on horses joined the column. Darkness began to descend. The terrain became less and less visible.

“Children!” yelled the older fighter. “Hold on to one another... Walk slowly and steadily!” he added in a gentle and comforting tone of voice.

The mothers, who kept the children company in the baskets, gave them clothing to put on, including their own jackets.

Lena Kostova handed the harness of one of the horses to an older boy and said: “Young man, grab this harness. I want to see why this child is crying?”

She pulled off the blanket and uncovered the basket. Maria was crying quietly. This was Fana Pandov's little daughter. Her mother Fana was not able to accompany her. She stayed home with her one year old son. It was up to Lena now to take care of her. She picked her up, took her in her arms and did her best to soothe her. The little girl embraced Lena and hugged her tightly around her neck and continued to sob intermittently.

"I want my mommy…" she said loudly in Lena's ear and began to cry.

It was dark in the mountains, especially in the dense forests. They walked in the dark, stumbling, falling, crying… Every few hours they stopped for about twenty minutes and then went off again in the dark. They crossed a river and came out all wet. Some up to their knees, others, the ones who fell in the cold mountain water, needed immediate changing. The ones who had no change of clothing had to wear the same wet clothes after they had been squeezed and wrung out by the mothers. There was a curve in the road past the wooden bridge. The horseman yelled out: "Be careful, the path is narrow. Walk one by one!"

Water was heard running immediately under the path they were following. They began to take shorter and steadier steps.

"Stop! Stop!" a frightened female voice was heard yelling, "Stop!"

A horse's neighing was heard coming from the river below, accompanied by a squeaky, long cry of a child.

Both DAG fighters yelled and ordered everyone to stop and move to the opposite side of the path away from the river. One of them shone his battery powered flashlight in the direction of the crying. He then yelled: "I am coming down, I am coming. Is anyone hurt?"

He went down. Two women were standing in the river knee deep in water. They untied the baskets resting on the saddle. The children, all wet, were clutching the baskets tightly with their cold hands and crying loudly. One by one they took them up to the path. The women climbed after them.

“What about the horse?” asked the fighter standing beside it.

“Leave it there,” said one of the women who had examined it. “It doesn’t seem to be able to stand up. It probably broke a leg.

The wet children were given a change of clothing and the column began to move again. The horse’s painful neighing and crying was heard far in the distance in the dark.

After an hour and a half of walking, the fighter riding the horse ordered everyone to stop and rest.

One of the women approached him and complained. She said: “We can’t continue like this. We are all exhausted. The children are falling asleep.” Then after a short pause, she looked up, raised her hands towards the sky and said: “Well, now it’s starting to rain...”

“Another half an hour’s walk and we will be arriving at a village. We will stay there until dawn. Now let’s move out!” ordered the fighter riding the horse.

They arrived at the village two hours after midnight. The children were split up and taken to various houses.

The president of the village board angrily addressed the horseman: “You Comrade are soulless… It seems to me like you don’t know anything about children. How can you possibly travel at night with such young children… and so many of them?”

“I have orders… Sir!” replied the horseman.

“Orders?!” repeated the president, “Orders? Screw your orders and those who gave them to you…”

“Sir, Comrade, please no swearing,” replied the horseman and, in a gentler tone of voice, asked: “Have we made our schedule?”

“No! You are half a day late. They waited, waited... and waited. I sent a courier but he came back and said that he met no one on the road that you were expected to travel.” said the president.

“We had to take another road. We were met with unforeseen circumstances. When did the earlier column leave?” asked the horseman.

“Before sunset… The courier from Nikoler arrived and said a battalion of government troops had attacked but they repulsed the attack, that’s how the column of children who arrived earlier were able to leave. And as I said, they left before sunset. They have been on the road for seven hours now,” said the president.

“Good then. I will ride off to the following link, and you will take care of this column and make sure it leaves on time,” replied the horseman.

The women lit fires and dried clothes until dawn. The children, lying one beside another, slept and cried. They must have been dreaming of hills, forests, crazy waters, trees as tall as the sky and a number of other scary things... A mother, leaning in the corner of the room was holding a five year old girl in her lap. The little girl was rocking left and right while staring at the dancing flames and the coals turning to ashes in the fireplace.

“Mommy?” said the little girl.

“What is it, dear?” asked her mother.

“Are we there yet?” she asked.

“No, my dear… sleep now…” replied her mother.

“How much further is it, Mommy?” she asked.

“Just a little further…” replied her mother.

“Do we need to cross three more rivers and climb over five mountains, Mommy? Tell me Mommy?” said the little girl, paused

for a moment and then said: “Mommy, tell me the story about Silian the Stork? Please…?”

“I will tell it to you but you have to promise me you will go to sleep...” replied her mother.

“Okay, I promise,” said the little girl.

“In the old days, a long, long time ago…” began her mother, “there was a stork…” but before she was able to finish telling the story the little girl fell asleep in her lap. “That’s okay,” her mother whispered, “when you come back to me I will finish telling you the rest of the story. Sleep, sleep now my dear child...”

A strong wind began to blow during the night. It came in snarling waves twisting the pine trees and causing their trunks to crunch and moan.

They woke the children early in the morning. The sun came up. It was sunny but cold outside. The nearby mountain peaks were covered with snow. Lena Kostova gathered the clothes she had hung the night before in the various rooms to dry. Her face looked withered. When she came back she went from child to child, touching the little ones on the head and smiling at them. Half asleep, not quite awake, she quickly dressed them and put on their shoes.

Both DAG soldiers were going from house to house urging the women to hurry with dressing and feeding the children. “Hurry, please…” said the older fighter, “our time is fleeting…” Then, after a long and extended cough, he said to his comrade: “You can say, so far it’s been okay for us… we did okay.” He paused, looked into the distance and said: “Look up there…” pointing at the mountaintops with his head. “Snow awaits us at the pass my friend, let’s go back and tell the women to dress the children in warmer clothes.”

“We will stomp down the snow…” said the younger fighter after thinking about it for a moment and then asked: “Did a courier arrive last night?”

“For what?” asked the older fighter.

“What do you mean for what? Do we know what awaits us beyond the pass?” replied the younger fighter with a tone of concern in his voice.

“Well, you heard the president last night saying that the attack was repelled, right?” said the older fighter.

“Yes, that true… but this silence disturbs me. This village was always full of our fighters. Right now I don’t see any. I did not see any on the road either, except for those who appeared to us from the hill yesterday...”

“I think they are here, somewhere nearby. I overheard someone say that all our units were going to be pulled away from the road the children will take,” said the older fighter.

“Why?” asked the younger one.

“To keep their fathers, brothers and sisters away so that they don’t get upset. If they see their own children…” he broke out coughing again and after a long cough he said: “Right here…” he hit his chest and continued: “I have a burning feeling right here, it is quite painful… Do you think the fathers will be happy if they see their own children…? Let’s go. Let’s tell them to get moving. We have a long way to go, we will be moving the entire day. It remains to be seen how long we can endure…”

They finally got moving but a little later than expected. It was still morning. Now, immediately following the DAG fighters in the mud made by the military boots the night before, followed the horses with the loaded baskets. Following the horses were the little ones all bundled to protect them from the morning cold and wind. The children looked on and occasionally rubbed their eyes. They smudged the tears forced out by the cold mountain air on their faces and cheeks. Following them were the older children. This new arrangement was ordered by the older DAG fighter.

“The older children will want to walk faster and being behind the younger ones they will push them ahead of them to go faster,” said the older fighter to justify the new arrangement.

They were led on a narrow snaking path up the hill. The path was full of small cracks, baked by the sun, frozen by the cold and washed by the rain. Small pebbles flew out of the horse hooves as they dug into the soil, loosening them. The head of the column reached a wider section of the path from where the end of the column could be seen. The village they had just left, surrounded by tall pines, was visible from up here. Grey smoke billowed over the village rooftops. A sparkling river flowed at the side of the village. Its rustling water could be heard all the way up here. It was quiet in the mountain. The only noises heard were those of the stomping horse hooves, the older fighter’s coughing and the quiet whispers of the women. The view was spectacular; the mountains, the valleys and the brooks running through them were all visible. The snow that had been seen from the distance early in the morning was slowly diminishing, melting in the strong rays of the sun.

For two hours they had been walking on wet snow and mud. It seemed like an entire day had passed. The head of the column began to descend into the valley on the other side, while those at the end were finally arriving at the pass. An hour later they all gathered in a wide valley. It was warm and no wind was blowing. The yellow spring flowers on the dogwood tree quivered in the gentle breeze. New shoots of tender green grass pushed their way past last autumn’s yellow leaves burned by the early spring frost.

“Rest!” yelled the older fighter. “An hour and a half rest and then we move on. You can start fires,” he added.

Let loose, the young girls took a stroll in the thick forest and on the grounds in the green meadow and gently picked daisies.

At Mitre’s house, in the meantime, Mitre, Kiro and Giorgi sat in the guest room and smoked cigarettes made from strong tobacco. It almost seemed like they were attending a wake as they discussed the exodus of our people.

“Who knows how far they will take us, beginning with the exodus of our children…” mumbled Kiro through his nose.

“Last night I was walking past Pando’s house. Pando was sitting in the yard and so I said hello Pando. He ignored me. He then bowed his head. He sat there daydreaming. Lost in his own thoughts…” said Giorgi.

“Do you think he is the only one?” replied Mitre. “The entire village is like that, Giorgi!”

“My poor Mara,” said Kiro, “has been crying her eyes out. Our village is becoming desolate, she said. She went out to the village square last night, she said, and the entire village was desolate, she did not see a single soul. It was deserted. No sound, no voice, no laughter... only the dogs ran wild through the neighbourhoods, she said. We have never had such silence! What happened to our life, she asked? Let me also tell you, she said, that this is the first time I have seen our people so depleted. On the way back she met Kuze the lizard. He too was silent and looking down with hung eyebrows. He looked like he was lost. She asked him how he was doing and he, in his usual way, pointed to his chest and said he felt tight right there. And before he left, he said to her that he had asked Vera if our children were going to be okay in those countries? And Vera told him they will not only be okay, but if only God Kuze could grant you such good things too. There in those countries, Kuze told Mara, there is bread around every corner... and all the delights your heart may desire... And so Kuze said he felt somewhat relieved then but that relief did not last long… Now he feels even worse than before, he said... that’s what my wife told me…” concluded Kiro.

“Kuze,” said Mitre, “believes the words of a stranger as truth. Let it be that way... maybe it is easier for him... But what I am wondering now is why have the women taken so long to return? Our village has become desolate without the children. Like the wind blew them away. They left and to me it seems like they were separated from us and banished... They were torn out from the chest of their motherland... Broken off like a chunk of rock from a boulder… they rolled off and got lost... How many roads will they take? Will they separate them? Will they forget us? And when and what mother will

collect them? Who and where will they find the flock to collect? Eh?"

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They left the fires burning in the mountain meadow. The flames died out and the coals turned to ashes. The column left the valley and walked through the plowed fields. Village dogs were heard barking, announcing the arrival of the column. They reached Lobanitsa at nightfall.

And in the twilight, during the evening, when the light breeze gently shook the dew off the tender spring leaves and brought with it the aroma of mint, the children gathered. They stayed in the villages, all gathered together, resting in the arms of their mothers until the afternoon of the next day. They left again at sunset. A half hour later, a man on a horse wearing a leather coat, a military belt and a leather bag over his shoulder, while pointing with his hand, made a loud announcement.

He said: "Mothers and all others who escorted the children here please stand on this side. Say goodbye to them now." He then turned his head towards the border so as not to look at the weeping mothers and children. He did not want to look at the convulsive chests and shoulders or the bitter looks on their faces. He did not want to see the faces crying and wailing…

The children moved on... frightened, crying, praying, looking back and yelling, hurting… they moved on... Their mothers stood there on the hill motionless and in silence… The place was packed with people but the hill remained silent until the long, crying column disappeared...

The sun began to set behind Morava. Only minutes now before its last rays disappear behind the mountain.

"They are gone…" one of the women said quietly in a whiny tone of voice.

Darkness descended from the surrounding mountains.

“They are gone…” silently and painfully said hundreds of mouths as they lifted their hands, took off their black head kerchiefs and began to wave them in the air gesturing “Safe trip!” to the children. They all stood there, on top of the hill waving their dark head kerchiefs in the dark of night.

How they decided it was time to leave, they themselves did not know. They left in the dark of night and located each other only by their loud sighs, the silent moans and prayers, prayed to God and the Virgin Mary to look after their little ones...

The church in Lobanitsa was too small to fit them all. The majority stayed outside and they took turns going inside, lighting a candle and praying for the safety and safe return of their little ones.

Chapter 20

Pop Vasil did not stay with the men in front of the church. Exhausted, he returned home. He took off his frock, went down to the cold storage room and came back holding a box. He opened the cupboard, felt in the corner and took out a key. He unlocked the box. He took out a book and dusted it off with a cloth and, after putting it on his knees, turned it over and opened the last page. With the pencil that was tied to its wooden cover, he wrote:

"One thousand nine hundred and forty eighth summer of our Lord, March, twenty fifth day. Fifty four children and three women left in the afternoon. At sunset they entered Albania. Only the children under two years old have remained in the village…"

His eyelashes dropped, he felt shaky, he shivered, a tear drop formed in his eye. He felt tightness and pain in his chest.

Pop Vasil put the pencil down, opened the book, turned its pages, read to himself while whispering one thing after another:

"Pass, pass my people, go into the dark rooms for a moment, until the anger passes... and you, heavens, listen, and you earth, open your ears... the children have left and the place is crying… the homes are desolate and the hearts are empty... the birds are no more and their joyful shouts have dried up... the meadows will mourn and the vines will wither… people will drink their wine with tears... o, tortured earth, o, dispersed whirlwind, without comfort you are left..."

Pop Vasil continued to flip the pages in the Holy book and with them unfinished thoughts... He closed the Bible, leaned his elbows on it and put his forehead on his hands. He felt sadness, bitterness and torment...

Chapter 21

In early May the fourteen and fifteen year old boys and girls, the ones that had been mobilized last fall, returned from Gramos. Many people were delighted to see them return, which put the spark of life back in the village. Joy appeared on people's faces, although barely visible, especially with the prospect that the other children who had left a month ago might also return. Every day more and more people began to look towards the hill, towards Sveti Ilia, hoping, praying and often climbing up the hill to have a better look. Every moment of every day it seemed to them that the children were on their way home and God help us if they arrived and there was no one home to see them, to greet them, to run to them and call them at the top of the voice and to release the joy of seeing them returned!

But instead of hearing the expected, something unexpected was heard. After May first all of the children would be going to the countries. The man who came and brought this piece of news said that the children would go only as far as Bitola and as soon as the fighting was over, they would immediately return.

"This," he explained, "you will have to do yourselves. You must take your children to Prespa yourselves. The little ones, the ones under two yeas old that were left behind earlier and the infants need to be taken personally by their own mothers… so that the children will not cry on the way. It will be easier that way… The older children, those who were recruited and returned from Gramos, they will be going there to attend school… There is no need to prepare much for them to take with them. Once they cross the border they will be given everything they need…"

Mialitsa, the old woman who had tried to send her orphaned infant grandson before, spoke up. She asked: "Will you take my grandchild?"

"We are taking all the children, Grandma," the man replied.

In those days there were increasing fears that the government army was going to escalate the conflict against DAG. Military airplanes, flying from Rupishta and Kozhani, were constantly circling over the

villages and battles fought in the surrounding hills were taking place more frequently and lasting longer.

On Thursday May first, during the night, mothers and children left their villages. The ones from the Kostur Region gathered in Breznitsa, Rula and Zhelevo. They spent the night there and the next day walked to the border at Markova Noga. Giorgi, walking beside Mialitsa, was guiding Kuze's mule loaded with two baskets carrying little children.

A man wearing a leather jacket and carrying a notebook in his hand passed by and took down the names and surnames of the women. He then said: "Take your children there and then return here. If they are crying make sure they are looked after and after you put then to sleep leave. They will take them right away. Have confidence and don't worry… don't be afraid."

Mialitsa, in the meantime, grabbed one of the older children by the arm and asked: "What is your name, my child?"

"Tashko, Grandma," he replied.

"May Grandma ask you something?" she asked. "Can Grandma count on you to take this little boy over there…" she pointed with her head towards the road that went to Markova Noga. "You see the man over there? He said they will be waiting for you there and will immediately take care of the little ones... Please I beg you, take him. Here is some bread for him to eat so that he won't cry. Look how Grandma is feeding him." Mialitsa broke off a piece of bread, chewed it, turned it into a ball and shoved it into the child's mouth. "See? This is how you can feed him and he will not cry! Here. Take his bag too, take it. Grandma has put covers and diapers for him. He is not that young… He is eight months old... he is a big boy... Here, take him and carry him... Ah, I must not forget. What was your name again?" she asked.

"Tashko..." he replied.

"God bless you Tashko, son..." said Mialitsa.

The mothers spent the night in Medovo, German and Shtrkovo. The next day they were split into groups. Some were sent to work in kitchens and ovens, others to carry wounded from the battlefields. One group was sent to dig trenches and carry logs and stones to build bunkers.

“And you…” a man carrying a pistol on his hip and a leather handbag over his shoulder yelled at Giorgi. “What are you waiting for? Take your mule to Rudari and there they will tell you what to do. Move!”

Only Ianovitsa returned to the village... When she came home her neighbour came over to her house and gave her the bad news; Iane had been killed. After she cried for him, she took the cradle from the corner, cleaned it, wrapped it in a blanket and took it up and put it in the attic.

Chapter 22

In his last entry, which Pop Vasil had made in his scripture book, he wrote: “One thousand nine hundred and forty eighth of the Lord’s summers. Month of May, the fourth day. A week ago the children from Gramos were returned, the ones that last year were gathered for battle. They were sick, most had tuberculosis. Today both them and the smallest, with their mothers, were gathered and taken to Prespa. The children traveled beyond the border. The mothers stayed.”

Besides his recent entries, there were many more records entered in this book and from the looks of them, by various different hands. They spanned a long period of time and left us a record of what took place, a record written in simple letters and plain words. They were a reminder, like an old scar, of a distant and not so distant time full of bitterness, torment and spilled blood… like an open wound...

Pop Vasil gently, as if putting an infant in its crib, put the scripture book back in its box, locked it up and put it back in its old place in the cold storage room…

In Place of Epilogue

I remember going often to Sinadev Rid with my grandfather. The whole villages and much of the wide open space could be seen from there. We sat under the old elm tree where Grandpa often lit his tobacco pipe and, after exhaling a long stream of smoke, he would tell me a story.

One time he said to me: “Kire my boy, if you look straight ahead you will see Stenite. Now use your imagination and climb up to the peak. Now look down and, in front of you, you will see Kostur Pole and somewhere at the end of it you will see the blue water of Lake Kostur. If you look beyond that, beyond the rocks, you will see a bald mountain covered by a blue cloud. That’s why they call it Siniachka (sino is blue in Macedonian). Behind Siniachka, on its left, is Kailiarsko Pole and Mount Karakamen. And behind the mountain are the cities Negush and Voden. It is difficult to get to Voden from here in a straight line, you will need to turn a little to the left so that you can pass by the Rudnichko Ezero lake. Then, after you pass through Sorovich you will take the road to Petersko and Ostrovsko Ezero lakes and you will arrive in Voden. Under Voden is a green and wet flat plain with a lot of water running through it.”

I used to walk everywhere with my grandfather.

Grandpa continued with his story: “And now dear boy, if you follow the flat plain you will arrive in Solun. To the east of Solun is Tsari Grad, or what today they call Istanbul. Kire, my boy, you don’t need to go that far… I mean to Istanbul. Go, visit Solun and come back because this is our birthplace… we need to hang onto it… keep it in our hands. Throw a stone and a stone you will find… but throw some seeds and you will prosper. To the left my dear boy, if you look to your left… Are you looking? If you are looking then listen! The mountain on our left is called Morava. They say it’s Albanian. To our right is Mali Madi. Do you see the pass in it? The cut in the mountain; a bit that way… So, now if you leave here and walk through Protselo and Lobanitsko, you will arrive at the Lobanitsa border, and if you pass through Lobansko Pole you will pass by Lobanitsa and, following the path along the river, you will come out

at Smrdesh. If you want, stop there and drink some cold water and then continue and you will take the road to Breznitsa. Just outside of Breznitsa, immediately after passing the bridge, the road forks. Take the upper road, it will lead you to Gabresh, Aposkep and below that is Kostur…"

Grandpa then looked at me, smiled and said: "You know how to come home from Kostur, right?" I smiled and said: "Of course, Grandpa!"

He continued with the story: "Well, if you take the other fork in the road… the lower one… it will take you straight to Rula. To the right, up there in the woods is Oshchima and Trnava. Immediately after you pass Oshchima the road splits again. To the left is the road to Preval, which will take you to Prespa. There you will encounter the two Prespa lakes. The closest to you is Little Prespa and the one past it is Big Prespa. Stay on the road that leads you to the right side of the villages, it will take you to Resen. Before you arrive at Resen, look to your left and you will see a tall and long mountain. That's Galichica and behind it is Ohrid and Lake Ohrid. The road on the left side of Resen leads to Ohrid and the one on the right leads to Bitola. From Ohrid you can go to Struga and from Drimot you can go to Debar, Raditsa, Mavrovo, down Gostivar, Tetovo and if you follow the Vardar River you will arrive in Skopje."

Grandpa smiled at me tapped me on my head with his finger and said: "Did you know that if you followed the Vardar River downstream it would take you to Solun?"

"But if you continue on the road," he said, "you will arrive in Veles. A beautiful city! I already told you that if you took the road on the right it would lead you to Bitola, right? That's correct. Once you arrive in Bitola the road to the right will take you to Lerin, from Lerin to Sorovich and you know where Sorovich will lead you. If you take the road to the left in Bitola it will take you to Prilep and from there to Gradsko. There too you will find a fork in the road. The fork to the left will take you to Veles and Skopje. The fork to the right will lead you to Solun. To the right of Veles, the road will lead you to Shtip and from there to Strumitsa. And from Strumitsa, if you follow the Strumitsa valley, you will arrive in Petrich. If you

follow the Struma River, you will find Sveti Vrach, Kresna, Simitli, Gorna Dzhumaia, and if you turn southeast you will arrive in Razlog and then in Bansko. Mount Pirin towers over all these places. Now, my boy, if you go south, either to Kukush or Seres, every road will take you to Solun. Take the left road from Solun and you will be back in Kostur. And through all the villages and towns that you will pass the people speak the language we speak now. The language is the same... Macedonian…"

He must have been tired from all the talking, my grandpa then said: "Leave me for a few minutes and as long as the shadow is on me let me sleep for a while. You go and look around, use your imagination… travel the roads and visit the places I told you about… When the sun hits me I will wake up on my own… then when I start filling my pipe with tobacco you can tell me how far you went and what you saw when I was sleeping…"

And as such from my grandpa, I learned some rudimentary geography about my Macedonia.

One other time he said: "There are many more roads, rivers, mountains, lakes and cities in Macedonia but I have never been there and I am not familiar with them. I have been to America but before I could get there I had to take a ship and travel over great waters for a long time. I have been to America three times and three times I returned. You don't need to go on that journey…"

One time he said: "Kire, my dear boy, wherever you go, wherever you find yourself you must protect your language… protect your language... Protect your language because life begins and ends with it. Wealth, my dear Kire is not forever… but language is. It is a face, an image that marks yesterday, today and forever. If you don't protect it you will have no tomorrow... That's the way it is... The beginning is language and the end is death. It if you save your language you will save the fire that burns in your native hearth. Language is the beginning and death is the end."

He looked at me with a serious look on his face and said: "Take your mother for example: Who will you call for your joy and for your sorrow? Your mother, of course! For whom will you ask in

difficult times" Your mother! Where do you always return? Home to mother of course!"

"Take the soil, for example," he said. "What are you standing on right now? On the soil! What do you walk on? The soil! You lie on the soil, you stand on the soil, you kneel on the soil, you get yourself dirty on the soil and you sleep on the soil. The soil takes sweat and water and keeps taking and, like a burning fire, it never has enough. At the same time water bubbles out of the soil and life springs and grows from it."

"Take the bad for example," he said. "About them they say the ground burns beneath them! The soil produces humanity and evil against it. Take the good for example. About them they say they are the soil's pride and joy. And the miserable beg for the soil to open up and swallow them! Above ground it rains, snows and drips blood and sweat. Everything falls on it. And so they say for the soil we live, for the soil we die and for the soil we make sacrifices. We plow, dig and water that soil and that is why we say it bears fruit and gives birth to sons and daughters. And so Kire my dear boy, they rightfully say defend your soil when someone wants to rob it or abuse it… that's when it bleeds. They say that no darkness, fog, snow or fear can cover the soil. They also say that the soil is a carpet of flowers, foliage, golden wheat, blue lakes and snaky rivers. And when it produces in abundance it creates prosperity for all, that's when they say milk and honey flows."

Grandpa looked at me strangely, as if wanting to emphasize something and said: "There is also hunger for soil and from soil… there is sorrow and tears, joy and hope. The soil is very dear to you when you leave it or when someone takes it from you or when someone divides it into pieces and you are forced to look elsewhere… for just a small piece, a lump, a handful, a belt of soil… And then you might hear things said about someone like; this is a son of his own soil, or this person ruined the soil. There are things, Kire my dear boy that you must know. The soil pulls, yells, cries, warms, rests and tugs at your heart. You can say about a person that they are dark, pale, dirty, difficult… and wonder how can the soil support them? Well, my boy, everything depends on the soil, everything is on top of or under it. People are born on top of the soil.

And when they go away, they take a handful of soil with them and safeguard it so that it will protect them, keep them warm and remind them of who they are. Then when they die they are buried in the soil and they become part of it. That is why the people say 'may the soil be light on them.' Where in the world can it be easier for a person than on their own soil?"

Grandpa looked at me, smiled and said: "For us, my boy, the soil is streams, fields, meadows, grass fields, gardens, orchards, vineyards, trees, roads, mountains, hills and all the places where our language is spoken. And the stone, look over there, to the right, at the end of Stenata, there is a boulder. It is naked, washed by the rain, beaten by the wind and baked by the sun. It has been that way since it became a stone. It has been standing there for centuries and you might say; so what it's only a stone? Yes, it's a stone but it is part of our soil, the same as our rivers, forests, source of water, fields, and... well... our faith... That's the way it is… The stones in our yard, on the road, in our foundations, in our walls, on the side of the road, in our fields… those stones too are soil. They are all part of our soil that makes up our country."

He must have sensed that I had not seen the far away stone that he was pointing at so he looked away and said: "That stone over there. That one! At the end of the Stenite. Do you see it now?"

When I shook my head in agreement he continued: "Underneath that boulder is King Krali Marko's tabernacle (tent) and underneath that is a source of water. When King Krali Marko, Kire my boy, came to Kosintsko Polie he spurred his horse to jump over Stenite. Unfortunately his aim was off… and exactly over there his horse's hooves hit the rock and stumbled. King Krali Marko hit the rock with his hip and water started to flow from it. One day we will go there and see for ourselves what the rock, hit by King Krali Marko's hip, looks like and drink from the water flowing out of it. And a little further we will see his tabernacle... After falling down Marko became angry and hit the boulder several times with his fists, putting a hole through it… And... The boulder, Kire my dear boy, which you are looking at now is called Dupen Kamen (a stone with a hole). Dupen Kamen can be seen from all the surrounding villages east and west of Stenite. It has a hole from this side, from Sinadev Rid. But

only a circle can be seen from Naselitsa. And from down below, from Giamov Trap, somewhere in front of that clearing, before the summer heat starts, the sun passes through it. It is most noticeable however during the winter, when the ice bleaches the rock and when it covers it with frost. Then redness spreads in Dupen Kamen. It only lasts a short time... but it is memorable."

"Kire, my dear boy, I will tell you more about Dupen Kamen another time..." he added with a smile on his face.

I never did hear the rest of the story about Dupen Kamen from my grandfather. The stone is still there and rests at the southern end of Stenite… elevated and with a hole in it... Soon after that they gathered us children and, with us not wanting to go, they sent us on the road my grandfather had never traveled. Without wanting, without knowing, first on foot, then on trucks, and later on trains, we crossed many borders and rivers. But none of them we took… to the right or to the left, ever led us to the cities whose roads would lead us back to Kostur. And as you know, Krchishta is close to Kostur.

We crossed the Danube, Moravia and the Carpathians. We were beaten by the north wind in the deserts of Syr Daria and Amu Daria. And now, after forty years, I went back to Krchishta… but only for a visit. I climbed Sinadev Rid then traveled east and sat under the shade of the same old elm tree… just like I did with my grandfather in the old days. I got down on my knees, assuming the height when I was a boy, and began to scan the terrain. I found the large rock called Dupen Kamen at the end of Stenite. As I stood there looking at the stone, I was taken back in time to the day when I was here with my grandfather. I could almost smell the pungent odour of his tobacco pipe and feel his presence like he was there with me. I could almost hear him speaking to me in his old hoarse voice. I could hear him say: "…and there Kire, my dear boy, is…"

I looked for old people from my place, both here and there, to tell me the rest of the story about the stone but I could not find any. They had been swallowed by time… After they were driven out of our homeland some remained in Romania, others in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Uzbekistan, Hungary… and many went to America, Canada and Australia. Many also left their bones, especially during the older

days, in Anatolia (Asia Minor), the dry islands in the Aegean Sea and in the prisons all across Greece. The only lasting thing that remained constant was that stone, and who knows how many more centuries it will remain there and carry the name Dupen Kamen. It has endured all kinds of storms, nature's wrath, good times and bad, and despite all that it stands there proudly… and I still don't know where its name came from... Is it only because it has a hole in it? Or does it suggest that our fate is like a sieve with a hole in it? Only if the bad had not come, as my mother used to say, then maybe my grandfather would have finished telling me the story.

As I sat at Sinadev Rid I looked down the slope and there in the distance I saw my aunt's almond tree grove... but there were more than almonds growing in the grove… I saw weeds, thorn bushes and tall grasses… and where there had once been a village and a thriving community, there was desolation and silence… silence... silence... I put my hands together, made a cone and yelled: "E-e-e-e-e, nashi-i-i!!! (hey, our people!!!)"

"Eeeee ..." echoed the mountains Telok, Vishomo, Borovo, Stenite… back at me… They also echoed my voice back at each other and it seemed to me that my voice reached Aliavitsa, Naselitsa and traveled on to infinity and after a while my "eeee" returned to me, barely audible but carrying nothing back with it…

There was silence everywhere. Only the leaves on the old poplar trees rustled... the wind hissed through the branches of an old leafless oak tree. The old meadow, where weddings and holidays were celebrated with much music and dancing before the bad times, was now silent. I turned on the little transistor radio that I had with me... it played and played and played music… and nothing… I looked far into the distance and listened harder... something was playing... playing... but it was not in the distance… it was from a different time. I listened… It was the Baraicheto playing... and I heard breathing… Kostur was breathing in the silence... it was peaceful… I heard voices in the distance… I listened… they were voices from my past… calling… I listened… I heard breathing, breathing, breathing… Kostur was sighing...

I descended down the hill. The only building still standing was the church. An old woman sat on the stairs. She said that she did not remember her years… she did not know how old she was. We entered the church. I lit a candle. Twenty nine! That's how many died on the battlefields during the Greek Civil War. I lit twenty nine candles, one for each. I then took the stairs up. Two hundred and eighty! That's how many people lived in the village before the war. I lit two hundred and eighty candles, one for each living or dead person so that there was no dark moment, day or place for them. So that they will have light in their eyes and before their eyes and will not be lost on the road they travel and if they again think of embarking on new adventures, they will be able to see with whom they will go, who they will follow or if they want to they can venture on their own...

I lit a big candle in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary. She had a worried expression on her face and looked lost in her own thoughts. I wanted to light her way so that she would watch over the roads traveled by those who knelt, prostrated themselves and prayed to her the most with the kindest, warmest and most loving thoughts and words. I also lit her oil lamp and placed it in front of her sad face. I lit another big candle and then I prayed, conveying my mother's words and greatest wish.

I said: "Dear Mother of God, please help us return to our homes, to our native hearth. Please show me the way to the bones of my son. Please take away the sadness of those wandering the world. Please show us the unknown graves of our children who fell in that miserable war and who were taken from us by storm… Help us find their white bones bleached by the sun, washed by the rain, dried by the wind and covered by the snow... please end our suffering… We suffer like You have suffered for Your son nailed to the cross… let there be light before Your eyes and before the road that will lead us back to our grandfather's land. Please let scented flowers grow where our feet have touch and let our footsteps be the footsteps of love and hope..."

That's all I remember and that's all I said from my mother's prayer. And before I took my eyes of Mary the Mother of God, I said: "And

please protect us in the lands where we now live since you could not protect us on our own lands..."

And before I left, walking backwards, I said: "So that I can come back here again…"

And as I was leaving, when I looked at her and saw the candlelight and the oil lamp light flicker in her eyes, it seemed to me like She was crying. So I said: "I will be back next year so that… so that I can tell you, whisper in your ear, where the others have gone and why they have left you all alone…"

I came out of the church. I went back inside again to ask her a question.

I asked: "Dear Mother of God, how did you protect our houses from which now there is not even a stone left? I don't see a stone left. I can't even tell where one house ended and another one began? I can't see any of the alleyways or streets. And please tell me why have the graves of our ancestors and predecessors been dug up and their bones scattered and destroyed? And where are my mother's silver belt buckles and the dowries of my sisters? Why have the forests been cut down, roads moved and the vineyards uprooted? Who made the new roads and why? Is that so that we cannot find our way, our hearth and our vineyards? Why is there no water in the brooks and who changed their course? And the cemetery, dear Mother of God, is overgrown with weeds... Why dear Mother?..."

I took a great big white candle, lit it, placed it in front of the Virgin Mary and said: "I am burning one more candle, dear Mother of God, to keep my word to you that I will come back again and so that you will not say that I have abandoned you. Please protect my promise and my sad enthusiasm..."

I went to the cemetery to look for my grandfather's grave. The old woman said: "Your grandfather died in Kostur and there is no grave for him, my son…"

My grandfather died alone... in solitude. He went, like he used to say, in the ground or underground. I was on my way back to Sinadev

Rid when I heard my grandfather's voice whispering in my ears like a source of water gurgling from underground: "Kire, my dear boy, wherever you go you must remember two things… Your language and the road you took! Only that way you will return, you will find your way home. If you forget your language then you will forget who you are. And if you forget who you are you would have forgotten the way that would lead you home. And if you forgot your way home then you will wander the world forever... Your language, my dear boy, is what makes you who you are. If you forget your language then you will forget yourself. If you forget the road back home, you will wander forever… So protect your language and it will protect you. If you don't forget your language then you will not forget your way home... And then you will come home..."

I went up to Sinadev Rid, sat under the elm tree, as I used to sit with my grandfather, and said: "And there, Grandpa, before Moravia in Moravia and after Moravia we took our culture and dispersed it. We sang our songs that we learned at the foot of the Stenite and danced our dances that we learned to dance in the village and in the houses which now no longer exist. We played the same melodies which we learned to play on flutes made of willow branches. We sang the same songs we learned singing under the eaves of our houses that are now gone. We played flutes the same way we learned to play them with the willow flutes in the narrow alleys of our village, in the meadows, fields, vineyards, at weddings and during holidays. Our songs and our language have been our symbols that identified us for who we were at every road we traveled and at every boundary we crossed. And through them we kept this nook here and the crying face of our mother, in our hearts… And we used to say: 'We hope the wheels keep turning so that they return us back here!' That's the way we used to think in the earlier days. But later, when we realized that returning to our native hearth was more a dream than a reality, we used to wonder if our kind became uprooted with our exodus. If our roots were cut behind us when we left and if our connection to our native hearth was gone? And us such, we grew up, in these alien worlds where we realized that we had matured and understood that in us nothing had wilted. We left fragile and here we are returning with roots fully intact and embedded deep in our soil… in this country... And that's the way it is Grandpa…"

The old woman waited for me in front of the church. She said: "Please dear boy come visit with me at my home. No one has visited my house in a long time." I decided to go. We entered a large room. In one corner hung an icon of the Virgin Mary and in front of it was a small oil lamp. Against the wall stood a number of jugs all lined up nicely. There was a shabby rug on the floor and a pot hanging by a hook in the fireplace. Outside by the door, almost within reach, water slowly trickled from a tap. About ten steps away was a pole with electrical wires. There was no electricity or running water inside the house... She used a kerosene lamp for light… She offered me a lokum (Turkish sweet) and a glass of water...

She said: "I don't even share my water with the Madzhiri (Asia Minor settlers). I get my own water from the spring in Petkovets…"

"Thank you mother," I said and started to walk out.

"Are you going?" she asked. "Go... go… I will stay here to protect the soil… defend the place… And please, don't forget to tell everyone… to tell everyone… tell all our people that I am the last one to remain here… I am the only one left in our village… To protect the soil, to light candles, to burn fire in the fireplace. Tell them my chimney is the only chimney that smokes and my window is the only window that has light in the night that can be seen from Dishonor, Stenite, Talk, Borolo, Pratselo… so that the beasts don't get the idea that there is no life here...

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. Nakovksi 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. Nakovksi 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. Nakovksi 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.