# *The Great Decline*

A Novel

**By**

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

# The Great Decline

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Any similarity is by chance

# The Great Decline – Chapter 1

"Are we all here?" asked Vera. "If anyone here is under sixteen then she should go home."

"You, you there in the corner, how old are you?" Vera asked.

"In a few months I will be sixteen..." she replied.

"Good. Now go home and I will call on you when you turn sixteen. Go home… Today, ladies, I will not talk," continued Vera in her Kostur dialect, "about the struggle led by our brothers against the Anglo-American imperialists and their Athenian lackeys here at home. I will only say that the mountains are free, Gramos is free and turned into a free territory and every day victory is closer."

Vera's hands and fists were alive, lightning fast, expressive, leading and threatening. There was a tone of certainty in her voice, resolute and angry. She looked proud, ruthless, angry, destructive, fiery, cruelly profound, victorious and filled with faith. The only thing missing was lightning and fire falling from the sky and turning the enemy into ash. She had the power of persuasion and her every movement, her every word, her every glance, fell on fertile ground...

"Ladies, fall is coming and will soon be followed by winter which will bring cold, rain and snow. Our fighting brothers will need sweaters, socks, gloves. Who will give them these things if not we, their sisters? We need to knit day and night. Am I right or am I not?"

"You are right!" a number of voices were heard saying.

"If that's the way it is, then let us knit all these things for our brothers so that they can stay warm while they are fighting…" concluded Vera.

"You are right Vera, but we don't have any yarn!" a voice was heard saying.

“I know you don’t have yarn. I also know that you don’t even have wool. But please don’t tell anyone what I am about to tell you, we don’t want the spies to know. There, at Gramos, there is a free territory where we have herds of sheep and piles of wool. The piles of wool are high but we don’t have anyone to weave them into yarn... Yesterday or the day before, young ladies from the villages D’mbeni, Kosinets, Labanitsa, Smrdesh and the Koreshta and Prespa villages passed by here. I don’t know if you saw them. No? Too bad! You should have seen how cheerful and full of fighting spirit they were. They are already in Gramos and they have began to weave the yarn and knit the clothing. The young ladies from the Ianovo villages we there even earlier doing the same and were the first to deliver sweaters and socks to our fighting brothers… I hear you were the only ones left behind. Why is that? Did no one come and tell you? When I heard that you were the only ones left behind I said to myself: ‘Shame on those whose duty it was to let you know and didn’t.’ But not to worry, let us not look for faults now, we will find them tomorrow and set those responsible straight. I came here in person to ask you if you want to go to Gramos to weave the wool into yarn and knit sweaters, socks and gloves? I know that the young ladies here knit the best sweaters and socks with beautiful decorations and patterns. Is it like that or not, eh?” concluded Vera.

“You are right Vera!” a number of voices were heard saying.

“What do you say, will you got to Gramos?” asked Vera.

“Yes we will!!!” thundered the crowd.

“Good! Very Good! Now that you want to go, please go home and get your spindles and knitting needs and some bread for a day or two. You should be back home in a week or two. Don’t worry about food and cooking, there will be plenty of bread and cheese. You will also receive a cooked meal every day. There will also be boiled, baked or fried meat… Go and be back here in an hour… Go…” ordered Vera.

With Vera leading, the women left before sunset. Vera looked dignified, confident, energetic and resolute and with every move she made she looked like she had something military about her. She was

well-educated, trained for observation and to show an example... Behind her were the young women with bags on their shoulders, walking in two's or three's out of step in crooked lines, stomping hard on the dry soil and raising a lot of dust…

"Vera, can we sing a song?" one of the women asked.

"Yes we can, why not?" replied Vera.

"To battle, to battle, to battle…" a young woman's voice was heard singing.

Then immediately the other women joined in:

"Macedonian people!
For the people's holy freedom
With songs and joy we proceed…"

They arrived in Kalevishta before midnight. Vera asked where the village Board was located, which at the same time served as a kind of Headquarters for receiving young women. When Vera found it, she, along with those responsible, assigned the young ladies quarters in the various houses. Strangers were sleeping together on the bare floor covered with old worn Italian military blankets. Cramped one beside the other, they slept in the fetal position with their legs up on their chests and arms crossed under their chins. The places reeked of moldy hay and rotting leaves.

At grey dawn they awakened them and gathered them at the blacksmith shop. They called them up by name, took attendance and lined them up in front of a cauldron. Mountain tea was simmering in the large cauldron used for melting pork fat. Steam was rising and spreading the tea's aroma. They were given a slice of dark rye bread and a piece of thick marmalade that had an unusual rotten smell. They ate and drank silently with frowns on their faces. Some had red and swollen eyes from crying and lack of sleep.

"Line up!" a man's authoritative voice was heard ordering. They moved slightly and looked around. They did not understand the command and they did not know who the man was. "Line up!" the

same voice ordered again, this time louder. Vera suddenly appeared out of nowhere. She stood by the man. He was wearing an officer's belt, carrying a leather briefcase over his shoulders and holstering a handgun on his hip. Vera and the man spoke but none of the girls could hear what they were saying.

"Girls, listen to me. Gather in separate lines according to your villages. All those from Kosinets stand here; all those from Labanitsa stand there and line up, stand one beside the other. When our Comrade Commander says 'Line up!' you stand one beside the other just like I told you. Do you understand? Now do as I explained, quickly, quickly, just like that..." ordered Vera and smiled with a satisfied look on her face. She then turned to the commander and said: "You see? This is how it is done. Not like you, suddenly yelling 'Line up!' Do you think they came here already trained?"

"Ok, ok..." replied the commander. "Don't worry. We will train them. Come back in a few weeks and you will see. Line up!" he again yelled. "Like that, side by side..." The line was long and curved. "Now turn towards the hill and 'forward march' on my command. Walk behind the boys carrying guns."

They left, and as they marched their line broke up. Some moved ahead of others. When they came to an opening they turned left. The narrow, rocky path took them to a forest of tall pines. The place smelled of rot and resin. The front of the line entered the village Ianoveni. The leader ordered rest. The remainder of the line arrived. The girls sat down on the warm rocks or lay down on the baked soil. It was noon and it was very hot. The girls wiped the sweat off their foreheads and shoulders and rubbed their legs and sore feet. They were burning from thirst. Old, bent village women carrying water in copper and earthenware jugs approached them. One after another the girls drank and poured the precious water over their shoulders and chests and washed their arms and necks. All around them and far ahead were tall mountains separated by deep ravines. Alevitsa was on their left. They had heard of Alevitsa when they were little children. There, seven years ago, the Greek army had persistently fought against the Italians for weeks. Alevitsa was bombarded by aircraft and cannons, but the Italians failed to take it. They say the

tip of the mountain was demolished but the concrete bunkers held out. Directly ahead, far away was a tall spiky mountain. One of the partisans leading this column said that this mountain was Gramos and behind it was Ioannina in Epirus. All the mountains in this mountain range bear the name Gramos. And the mountains in front of Gramos, the partisan said, were called Krastavets, Flamburo and Charno.

"On your feet! We are going!" a voice was heard ordering.

The human line began to move, crossing over a long, narrow wooden bridge under which the river Bistritsa flowed. The large volume of untamed and enraged foamy water thundered as it rolled downhill colliding with each rock it passed. When the water crossed all obstacles it quickly settled and cleared reflecting the sky which made it look like it was painted blue.

By nightfall they reached the meadows of Miroslavitsa. Vera was not among them…

There were trenches dug under the tall pine trees. Some were covered with tent tarps and others with blankets and rags. It was dark inside. They were stepping on a thick layer of leaves. Exhausted from walking all day, they lay down on the wet leaves and straw, one beside the other, body next to body, squeezed together like sardines in a tin can. They tightly embraced each other trying to avoid the cold and attempting to keep the moisture from getting under their skins. They silently breathed on their hands and then placed them on their faces and foreheads, they also breathed on each other's backs to keep warm. The blankets they were covered with were short, narrow, rotting and smelled moldy. The tarps and blankets that covered the trenches above them were damp with dew and often leaked droplets on them, thump, thump, thump, thump… Tsilka could not sleep. She counted the dripping droplets in the dark and listened to the sighs and moans of the tired girls sleeping next to her. The sound of the falling droplets kept pounding inside her head like a ticking clock measuring time. The monotony made her eyelids heavy and she was slowly overcome by drowsiness. Then, suddenly, she was awakened by a rifle shot followed by a burst of machine gun fire. Everyone was violently awakened from their sleep. They

were terrified. Some were frozen with fear and others were sobbing and running away from the trenches, yelling...

A man's thundering voice was heard yelling in the dark: "Stop! Be quiet, girls! Look around you. It was a false alarm! Get back in the trenches! There is no danger! Look around you!"

The girls trembled in fear and cursed until daybreak.

After breakfast, which consisted of a slice of dark bread, a piece of dry marmalade each and a portion of mountain tea for every five people, they were divided into thirty groups. Each group was then assigned a leader and together they began the first hours of preparations which they would follow from today onwards.

"Girls!" began their leader, "Today and in the next twenty days, we will first assemble here and then we will go up the hills to exercise... When you learn what you need to learn, then you will be allocated to a unit..."

"What exercises and units are you talking about?!" interrupted Mita in a shrill voice. "They brought us here to weave wool into yarn and knit sweaters, socks and gloves for the Partisans," she added, pulling out the spindle and knitting needles from her bag and going closer to show him. "Do you see these? We were all told to bring our spindles and knitting needles. Now take us to the place where the wool is so that we can do the work we came here to do. This is what we were told. Right girls?"

"That's right!" a chorus of voices were heard yelling.

"Quiet! Quiet!" yelled their superior. "You will not need your spindles here. So take your spindles out of your bags and put them over there. Is that clear? You did not come here to sit around! Is that clear?!" he said in a loud, insulting and threatening tone of voice. "Put your spindles over there in a pile! Do you understand?!" he yelled and then looked up towards the woods. A burst of automatic rifle fire broke the tension. Bullets whistled over their heads and the girls ran wildly in the opposite direction only to be met with another

burst of automatic rifle fire from the direction they were running towards.

“Stop! Come back here. This is part of your training. Soon you will learn not to be afraid of gunshots and whistling bullets. Day and night you will be hearing rifle shots and bursts of machine gun fire but you will get used to it. Now put your spindles here in a pile!” he said. And then when they did, he collected some dry grass and some sticks of wood, placed them under the pile of spindles and lit them on fire. “Now, from today on forward you will be learning things from me. I, your superior, will wake you up and line you up in front of the cauldron. Others, who we call instructors, will then teach you how to be soldiers and how to handle weapons... Silence over there! Now take a little rest and after that the instructor will come and teach you how to handle a rifle...”

A man of medium stature, dressed in a pre-war Greek officer’s uniform, with no markings on it, stood staring at the boys and girls who had just been brought there. He coughed, dropped his cigarette on the ground, stepped on it with his dirty boot and said:

“Today we will be together until noon and together we will learn. If you are paying attention you will learn quickly. You must pay attention because you will need to learn. You must pay attention at all times even when you want to think of other things. Today,” he continued, “we will talk about the rifle. What is a rifle? The term rifle, with a capital or lower case letter has many meanings and serves many purposes. But it all comes down to one thing: shooting or killing, which is essentially the same thing. That means that shooting or killing is a skill. Knowing how to use a rifle is therefore a skill. The use of a rifle is nothing more, except what?” he asked. The question was unexpected and no one had an answer. “No one knows?” he asked. “Well, that’s okay, in time you will learn that too,” he answered and continued. “My dear, first you must learn how to use a rifle. In other words, you must learn how to shoot and how to kill... I already told you that shooting is a skill and that that skill can be learned. Learning that skill will begin today and will last for the next three or four days. You will study it and study it until you learn it well... before you go into battle. Then when you are fighting in battle you will convince yourself whether you have

learned it well or not. In short, today we will learn to shoot or kill and please do not be afraid of the meaning of those words," he said and began to laugh out loud while his thick rolls of fat jiggled under his chin and his pot belly danced on top of his old, fat officer's belt.

"I want you to know," he continued, "which means I want you to remember well that with one shot, which is best... to hit the target with one shot, otherwise the target will hit you before you have a chance to take a second shot with what we called a rifle. And like every one of you has a head, eyes, hands, feet and... Yes, the rifle has its own purpose and parts, which means that a rifle," he now raised his voice and spoke louder, emphasizing every spoken word he said, "is a firearm designed for destroying living things. It is well for you to remember that the rifle's purpose is to destroy live targets. This means that you, you and you will be destroying live targets with what I am holding in my hands here." He paused, lit a cigarette, took a long puff, exhaled the grey smoke out of his nose and continued: "In other words, the best results for live targets which can be uncovered, targets which can be hidden, meaning falsely hidden, moving, or suddenly appearing… Do you understand the word 'result'? No? Well of course not... because you have finished high school and university?" he said sarcastically. "So, how do I explain the word 'results' to you?" he exclaimed.

"Does it come from the word 'shame'?" someone yelled and the entire group broke out into laughter.

"Who said that? Let me see who said that!" demanded the instructor.

There was silence... Just silence...

"I did…" quietly said the girl with the round rosy face, glittering black eyes and long thick braid of hair resting over the left side of her chest.

"What's your name?" demanded the instructor.

"Vasilka, but at home they call me Tsilka..." she replied.

"Do you mean Vasiliki?" asked the instructor.

“That’s what I am called in Greek,” she replied.

“Be careful young lady, you all be careful of your words... Remember that. And you, what did you say they call you at home?” asked the instructor.

“Tsilka…” she replied.

“Just remember Tsilka, you are a fighter...” said the instructor.

“In malina…” another woman replied and the group broke into laughter.

“Silence! What is this ‘malina’?” the instructor demanded to know.

“Look at her; she is wearing a dress, a knitted dress.... The dress Tsilka is wearing is knitted with a single needle,” explained another woman. She then took out a long needle from her bag and said: “Like this one…”

The group broke into laughter again.

“What else do you have in that bag?” asked the instructor.

“Well… I have yarn and… unfinished stockings and… nothing else…” she replied.

The instructor went silent for a moment and then angrily asked: “Who was the idiot that brought you here with knitting needles, eh? Will someone answer my question?”

“I,” said Tsilka, putting up her hand. “I think it was the woman whose orders were to bring us here. She told us to take our spindles and knitting needles because there would be wool where we were going and that we would be making yarn and knitting clothing for the partisans. This is what she told us and this is what we did. So, here we are…”

“All of you listen and listen carefully! You became fighters of the Democratic Army of Greece (DAG) the day you arrived here. Forget about your needles and thread and the many other things you were doing at home in your villages… forget about them. Here, I am sure you will forget everything… You are in the army now! Quiet! And don’t talk over there! Don’t you know how to stand there and be quiet? You will learn, you will soon learn!... Silence! Silence over there and pay attention. Let us continue. Where did we stop?” asked the instructor.

“You asked if any one of us knew what... No...” replied one woman.

“You asked whether any one of us understood the word... What was the word? Yeah, I remember now… ‘shame’…” another woman piped up.

“No. No. She meant the word ‘result’...” remarked the woman standing next to her.

“Okay then… and please do not interrupt! Is that Clear?” asked the instructor, looking at everyone and resumed talking. “So, the best results, or if you prefer the words ‘best outcome’ of the rifle is achieved at four hundred metres. But during a fire fight with many shooters and a group of targets you may find yourself at a distance of eight hundred to a thousand metres. How well you do at this distance depends on the sight of the rifle. But most likely you will be shooting from a closer distance. You may even be shooting at low flying aircraft flying at about five hundred metres. The rifle is the primary weapon of the infantry, but it is also used by other corps of the army. You should know that the rifle is also used in hand to hand combat. The rifle butt can be used as a club. A knife can be mounted on the front of its barrel and it can be used as a sword. So, when you carry a rifle never think of knitting and needles and, generally, you must forget about thinking of love. You will be loved and you will love the army. I am telling you this for your own survival…”

He paused and looked around. He noticed that no one was paying attention to him; they were all looking somewhere behind him. He turned around. About fifty metres away a column of civilians was

passing by. They were carrying wounded on horseback and on stretchers. “Hey, over here!” he yelled at the people he was teaching. “Pay attention here. What I am saying should be more interesting to you. Do you know why? Because I want to teach you things!” He paused for a moment, turned, looked at the column and then said: “Well, look over there… how do I explain it to you… This is reality, but I don’t know how to explain that word in simpler terms; just remember the word; it will be a reality that you will soon experience... They carry wounded... Yes, that is a reality... Yes, that’s right! Maybe tomorrow they will carry one of you and that will be a regretful reality for you. But, but if you learn how to operate a rifle or a machine gun in the next few days then they will not have to carry you. They will carry those you shoot at. Remember that girls!

If you don’t kill the person at whom you are apparently pointing your rifles, then you can be sure that that person will kill you. Only one thing can happen: you or the person on the other side will remain standing. One of you will fall and bite the dust and if you are not so lucky, you will be crippled for life because the rifle not only kills but also cripples. It is best to kill or get killed. Bam… and it’s over... That is why today, tomorrow and the day after I will teach you to shoot and kill. Then other instructors will teach you how to hide, how to throw hand grenades, run, communicate with other soldiers, dig trenches, bind wounds, etc.

I want you to remember: if you don’t kill you will be killed. Remember that a rifle is a tool like a knitting needle, a spindle or a loom.” The instructor paused for a moment, laughed out loud and said: “Let us now continue. This is a rifle and it consists of… You over there stop talking and pay attention... You too… over there... This is the chamber, mouth, tube and ring. And this, from here to there, is the barrel. A bullet passes through its inner part. Here is the sight and this is a switch for the sight. You over there, at the end, pay attention and stop looking at the clouds! This is the bed for the bullet and this is called the main opener, which is composed of a pin and a hammer spring. This is a tongue or a trigger. When you pull it back, the needle hits the capsule of the bullet and, if you aim well, the devil will take the person on whom you placed your sight. And the rifle ends with...” he concluded.

“The rifle butt!” thundered Tsilka.

“Bravo! Bravo! And how do you know that this part of the rifle is called a butt?” asked the instructor.

“When the gendarmes and soldiers came to our village they beat us with their rifle butts...” she explained.

“Yes, it is true. And us in our village too, they beat us with rifle butts,” a voice was heard saying.

“They did the same at our village…” another voice from the other side was heard saying.

“They beat us with rifle butts because we sang our (Macedonian) songs which we learned from our mothers and grandmothers. My God, they hit us on our shoulders, heads and faces... They were hitting us with their eyes closed...” piped up another woman.

“They hit us with rifle butts and beat us with sticks, punched and kicked us... They hit us all over our bodies, wherever they could reach...” another woman said before she was interrupted by the instructor who said:

“Ok, ok, ok... You will have to inform the political commissar about this... Now, never forget that you always, and this is necessary, must check that there is no bullet, accidentally or by negligence, left in the chamber. You can check in two ways. You can look through the barrel, or”, he straightened his little finger and pushed it slowly into the barrel, “you can check with this finger...”

“Can you check with this finger?” asked one of the boys who sat at the side and who now spoke up for the first time. Everyone turned around to look and suddenly broke out into thundering laughter. His right hand was raised up and all, except his middle finger were curled in his palm. His middle finger was pointing directly at the instructor’s face.

“Yes you can, young man, but...” in the loud and continuous laughter those laughing were unable to hear the rest of what the instructor said, except for those who sat close to him. They heard a string of profanity.

“Enough! Enough with the laughter! Let us conclude: So, the rifle is made up of about thirty parts which together do only one job. Which is?” the instructor asked.

“Kill…” a few voices were heard saying.

“That is correct!” replied the instructor. “We will now take a short break and smoke a cigarette and then we will resume the training. Please don’t leave this place and don’t mix with the other groups.

After the break the instructors disassembled and reassembled a rifle, paying special attention to the rifle’s opener.

“You all need to remember that if you, yourself don’t know how to disassemble and reassemble your rifle and its parts, especially the opener, then someone else, and that someone else can only be the enemy, will disassemble you permanently. Do you understand? Day and night, in snow and in rain, in storms and in fog you should know how to and be able to disassemble and reassemble your rifle… Yes… And one more thing, which is very, very important, your rifle must always be clean... Your soul,” the instructor raised his voice, “can be dirty but your rifle must be clean at all times! Why?” the instructor asked as he took a sweeping look at everyone. And before anyone had a chance to answer he asked again: “In what condition should your rifle be?”

“Clean...” a few voices were heard saying.

“Why?” asked the instructor.

“So that it can do dirty deeds…” piped up Tsilka.

“That’s right!” a few other voices agreed with her.

“The rifle does not do dirty deeds. Dirty deeds are born in people’s heads. The rifle is simply a tool, like a trowel, hammer, shovel, etc... When I say ‘hammer’ what do you think of? What do you, over there, think of?” the instructor asked.

“I think of hitting something or someone...” replied the person to whom the instructor pointed.

“What do you, over here, think when I say ‘shovel’?” asked the instructor.

“I think of digging a ditch or a hole to bury someone or...” replied the person pointed to.

“What do you think when I say ‘trowel’?” asked the instructor.

“I think of flattening out and smoothing down, let’s say, things that you don’t want seen…” replied another person.

“When I say ‘rifle’ what do think?” the instructor asked but there was no response. He looked into the faces of his audience and said to himself: “In this collection of villages that stink like manure, why is there nothing, nothing revolutionary?”

“Hey you, over there, tell me what you think when I say rifle?” the instructor demanded an answer from a student.

“I don’t know...” he replied.

“I don’t know, I don’t know... I do not want to hear your vulgar words. I don’t know! You over there, you also don’t know?” piped up the instructor.

“I know!” replied the person singled out.

“Well then tell me!” demanded the instructor.

“I think of a clean and well oiled operational rifle, always available and ready to be used at short notice for shooting… a person, ready to kill… I think of carrying it in my arms or over my shoulder. Even

if I think of carrying it like a stick it still does the same dirty deed: it kills. When I hold it in my hands I think I am holding death. When I hold it in my lap I think I am holding death. When I hold it between my knees I think I am holding death. When I look down its barrel I see death. When I look through its target I see death. A clean or dirty rifle always spells dirty deeds, dirty thoughts, dirty conscience, dirty soul...” concluded the person.

“So, that’s what you think!” remarked the instructor. “Okay, but always remember that you must maintain a clean rifle at all times... It must always shine. There must be no dust and not even a single hair on it. You can be dirty and unwashed for days, you can wear a dirty shirt, dirty socks, your face can be dirty, your feet can stink, your armpits can stink, you can look like a manure pile but your rifle must always be clean. Your rifle must be so clean you should be able to see your reflection on it. You should be able to see your dirty face on it. Do you understand? I don’t care how dirty and dingy you are and if you attract flies around you, your rifle must be clean! Got it or not?” concluded the instructor.

During the days when the group first started shooting they heard a lot of yelling and screaming. It was a new experience for them. Those who stood close to the instructor even got sprayed with his spit.

“You over there!” said the instructor pointing at Tsilka, “You, tell me what you think!”

“Me?” replied Tsilka with a surprised look on her face and put her hand on her chest.

“Yes, yes, you... Come over here,” ordered the instructor.

Tsilka went up and stood beside him.

“When I say ‘rifle’ what do you think?” the instructor asked while pointing at the rifle with a stick he was holding is his hand.

“I don’t know...” replied Tsilka, raising her shoulders.

“You don’t know?” asked the instructor.

“I don’t know...” she said again.

“What do you know?” asked the instructor.

“Well, I do know how to knit, cook, clean, milk and make cheese... Well, I know almost everything that is done in the village...” she said shyly.

“Excellent...” replied the instructor stretching out the word. Tsilka, in the meantime, felt like she was being praised in front of everyone.

“Now pick up the rifle,” the instructor ordered.

Tsilka pulled away and showed fear in her eyes. “No, I can’t…” she replied.

“What?” yelled the instructor, looking surprised. He then looked into her fear-filled eyes and said: “You are afraid? Why are you afraid?”

Her lower lip was trembling. She kept staring at the stick the instructor was lowering and raising. She then crossed her arms over her stomach, took a sudden step away from the instructor and hid her hands behind her back. Her eyes filled with tears and for a moment she thought that she saw her old teacher in front of her...

The commander called Tsilka over and, with a sharp tone in his voice, said: “Tsilka, your instructor complained about you. He said you told him that the rifle does dirty deeds. Did you say that to him? My superior scolded me and asked me to punish you. And I will punish you. Tomorrow morning instead of going to training you will be cleaning leaves off the paths connecting the trenches…” he ordered.

It was fall, leaves were yellowing and the sky was taking the colour of steel. It was the last gasp for summer but the golden mountains were still warm at noon. Without pause leaves kept falling and filling the pathways connecting the trenches. The leaves broke off

and as you stood there with your hands open, thinking they would fall into them, the wind would blow slightly, take them away and drop them in the pathways connecting the trenches. Tsilka was sweeping the leaves with a broom made of branches and when she reached the end of the pathway, she turned back and swept it again. The pathways were constantly covered with leaves as if they had never been swept. And as her superior watched her work, he kept kicking the young trees with his heavy boots, dropping even more leaves and smiling.

The women spent an entire month in the wet trenches. They became accustomed to sleeping with their eyes half-open, sitting up, kneeling and crouching next to one another. Their elbows and feet were bare and full of sores from running and crawling in the woods and in the meadows. They routinely did the same thing every day, from morning until night, like beating snare drums with sticks. If there were no exercises then there would be lectures, songs and dances. The same slogans and the same words were repeated daily; many words that brainwashed their minds and filled them with hatred, strange words that carved deep awareness and erased the subconscious. They were taught to only remember what their commanders, Party secretaries and instructors told them. They had no free time at all, not even for a moment. If they had free time they would be thinking of home and of their loved ones and those were unnecessary things to think about. Here thoughts like that were considered distractions, distractions from their mission and from their fighting spirit. Only when darkness came, when they huddled together in the trenches, when the stars came out, each one of them stole some private time before they were conquered by their need to sleep. They constantly dreamt of home and wished they had wings to fly away… They were saddest in the dark... And then they had Mitre in a neighbouring trench coughing and coughing and coughing. The commander tried to teach him not to cough. He asked him:

“What kind of fighter are you going to be, constantly coughing and coughing…? You are keeping everyone awake with your constant coughing... How are we going to get close to enemy strongholds when you are constantly coughing?”

Mitre always fell behind when the group ran or marched. Sometimes someone had to help him out by pulling him along or propping him under his arms. So what if he is like that… Quotas needed to be filled… Some complained to the commander, but he got angry and said:

"I don't see anything wrong with anyone in my unit. No one is sick, lame, or blind. This was what I reported to High Command and this is what they accepted. Now you want me to tell them that I have inducted a sick person? No! I also reported to High Command that you all have high fighting spirits and faith in our struggle. What we don't have is sufficient clothes, shoes and bread to eat, things about which you should be complaining. And you know what High Command said? They said bravo! That's how we like to have things. The only thing those up there care about is your fighting spirit and faith in the struggle... That's all..."

The commander went back to his trench, took out a notebook from his officer's briefcase, pulled out a piece of paper and silently began to read:

"To the unit commanders, political party secretaries and commissars,

In order to increase the fighting spirit of the fighters in your unit you must not leave them any spare time. They constantly need to be busy with training and exercises, and after that cleaning their rifles." The commander paused and looked up. What kind of rifles are they talking about, the commander thought to himself, when we don't have any? "They must not be allowed to have collective conversations, collective reading, singing, or dancing. They must not be allowed to be alone because they will start to think about things that are not associated with boosting their fighting spirit and with preparation for future battles and victories. A fighter or a soldier who has individual thoughts is not a good fighter or a good soldier. The soldier must not be allowed to think. He is to execute orders. Leaving him free time will not only allow him to think, but to also take the opportunity to evaluate, judge and reason out things. And then you will have an undisciplined fighter. And another thing; if there is nothing to be done other than what was stated above,

order them to wash, bathe, or clear ditches. All these things can be done collectively. This way they can create a collective sense of courage, bravery, determination, self-sacrifice...”

The telephone rang loudly, interrupting the commander. He put the guidelines aside and picked up the telephone receiver.

“Training command…” he answered.

“It’s me, number two...” the person on the other side said and continued, “Please report on the situation, and are things taking place as planned? I need an update.”

“We have completed training. All that is left to do is clothe and arm them...” replied the commander.

“Good. Tomorrow you will receive a plan and a schedule for the units. They will receive their clothing and weapons before they are deployed. Is there anything else?” added the voice on the other side of the telephone line.

“I have twenty lame girls and eight with dislocated hips. The number of sick has also increased. A doctor has not yet come to examine them. What should I do with the lame women? They are not even able to walk, let alone run and march... should I send them home?” asked the commander.

“What? Are you crazy?! You don’t do anything unless it’s approved. Hold the line I will go and check,” said the person on the other side of the telephone line. There was silence on the receiver… “I am back. We here have decided to send the lame girls to the main hospital. There is work for them there. They can do laundry, clean rooms, etc., which will be part of their military service. In time they will also learn to care for the wounded. Is that clear? That’s all!” concluded the voice on the other side of the telephone line.

There was a long machine gun burst. Bullets whistled over the trenches. The boys and girls ran outside. But this time they were not afraid...

# The Great Decline – Chapter 2

Giorgievitsa leaned on her elbow and listened. She got out of bed and looked out her tiny window. It was still dark outside but it was slowly turning grey. The knocking now became stronger and repetitive. She returned to bed and woke her husband.

"Giorgi get up, get up, someone is knocking at the front gate," she whispered loudly.

Giorgi quickly dressed and went down to the yard. He stood behind the locked gate and, without asking who it was, raised the lever and opened it. Two armed, young men were standing there and behind them stood Kuze.

"Are you Giorgi? Giorgi Petkovski?" one of the young men asked.

"Yes!" Giorgi replied "What do you want?"

"Yes, he is, he is…" exclaimed Kuze, moving to the side.

"Come with us," said the same young man.

"Where?" asked Giorgi.

"You will find out…" said the same man.

In the church, next to the front door were three women and a man from Giorgi's village. Seated near the altar were twenty men and a woman. Giorgi did not know any of them. An hour later a man with dirty boots, wearing an officer's uniform arrived. He had an officer's belt around his waist, a firearm on one hip and on the other hip hung a large wallet. He pulled out a notebook from his wallet and, one by one, wrote down the names, year and place of birth, father and mother's name and what properties each individual owned.

"And now I will tell you why you are here," the officer said. "Your sons and daughters abandoned our struggle and went to the enemy. They deserted. This is a punishable act. If they are caught they will

be shot under martial law. We also have a law that allows us to confiscate properties of deserters. All properties including their house and belongings… And not only that, we will take you where we take people who have to answer for the acts of their sons and daughters. We will hear all your answers and explanations there. Let's go."

Giorgi froze. And all the time, all day and night while they were traveling, the same question kept turning in his mind. Every time he thought about it he was surprised and dismayed: How could that possibly be? His son Vasil was one of the first people to take a gun and join the Partisans. How could he have possibly deserted to the enemy, of all things? Giorgi found it hard to believe. No, it can't be, it must be a lie, someone is trying to slander us and do us harm, he thought to himself.

When the column left the village, Kuze, without knocking on the gate, entered Giorgi's house. There was no one in the large room. Kuze, with both hands, grabbed the big, heavy woolen red blanket, raised it up, put it down, measured it with his eyes and then smoothed the creases with his hands. After that he lifted the lid off a large box and put it down in the corner. The box was full of clothes. He turned and shouted:

"Giorgievitsa, hey Giorgievitsa…"

"What?!" a voice was heard replying from another room.

Kuze went out on the porch and said: "Come Giorgievitsa, come here so that I can tell you something."

Giorgievitsa asked him to come in.

"Sit down Kuze…" Giorgievitsa said and asked: "Now what have you got to tell me?"

"Well Giorgievitsa, it is not easy for me to tell you this. You know that they took Giorgi this morning…" he replied.

“What? Who took my Giorgi? Tell me Kuze!” she demanded to know.

“You know, they. They, from the People’s government. Him and some others from the surrounding villages were taken,” replied Kuze.

“Why Kuze, why and where did they take him…” she pleaded with him.

“Well Giorgievitsa, how can I tell you… I don’t know how true this is, but word is your Vasil escaped and deserted and the People’s government found out and…” replied Kuze.

“What?!” Giorgievitsa loudly interrupted while grabbing her head with both hands. “Our Vasil deserted? Impossible! What mouth would want to dishonour and do such harm to my son, ha?” she blurted out.

“And,” Kuze continued, “those at the top said that they had proof and with that it was established that he was an enemy of the people and for that reason the People’s government took Giorgi to the People’s prison in Prespa...”

“What!!! My Vasil an enemy of the people? Kuze you do know that the entire village youth gathered in this house and that my Vasil taught them…” said Giorgievitsa.

“Yes, yes… that I do know…” interrupted Kuze, adding, “He taught them about Macedonia… About a free Macedonia, as opposed to saying that our Party...” replied Kuze.

“The hell with your Party Kuze! My Vasil is made into an enemy of the state and my Giorgi is in jail! How quickly you idiots forget that I already sacrificed two of my sons for your freedom! You already forgot!” shouted Giorgievitsa.

“Giorgievitsa please don’t shout. Someone will hear you and do you even more harm. I can understand your pain... There is no one that can understand it better than me. And it hurts me too. I don’t believe

it either... But let me tell you this, the properties of all those who left, I mean deserted, will be confiscated by the People's government. Everything! Including their house and furnishings! I came to tell you this so that you can hide, hide something, before they come. And if you have something valuable, such as money or gold, jewelry, anything worth looting, blankets, plates, spoons, give them to me and I will safeguard them for you... And when all of this is over and Giorgi returns alive and well, I swear to God, I will return everything to you. They will not touch me because, as you know, I am a member of the Village Board ... Hurry Giorgievitsa, gather everything I asked you for and give it to me to keep it for you... That's all I had to tell you. And don't tell anyone about this. From the depths of my heart I want to help you and preserve your valuables... I will come back this evening after dark. I heard that tomorrow they will come and do an inventory and will take everything..." concluded Kuze, then slowly straightened himself, made a sad expression on his face, sighed deeply and went outside. He then turned and said: "It is best that you go away and stay with some relatives in Kosinets or Smrdesh while this is going on. The further away from their eyes, the better for you. Stay healthy and well and think about what I said..."

Kuze showed up at dusk knocked on the door and without being invited entered the house.

"So, what have you decided Giorgievitsa?" he asked. "If you think you don't need my help then I will go," he said. "They already emptied Labro's house. They even dug under the foundations and in the yard. They thought there might be something hidden there. Tomorrow they will come here..."

"To be honest, Kuze, I find it hard to decide without Giorgi. Without him here I can give you some things but only in front of a witness," replied Giorgievitsa.

"A witness? And who would you trust in these bleak times? Don't you think my word is good enough? My oath before God is not sufficient? Do whatever you have to do, because they might be here tonight," said Kuze.

Kuze's eyes were darting from place to place like that of a hungry pig, his arms were crossed and he constantly thought and sighed. Giorgievitsa looked at his face and said:

"Kuze, kneel before the icon of the Virgin Mary and swear that everything I give you in confidence you will return to me," requested Giorgievitsa.

Kuze got up, went in front of the icon, knelt down on his knees, crossed himself three times and said:

"Dear gracious Virgin Mary, I stand before you and swear to you that I will return to Giorgievitsa everything she entrusts to me. If I don't, may I become blind, mute and lame and remain that way... Amen..."

Giorgievitsa went down to the cellar and came back with a small wooden box. She crossed herself and lit the small oil lamp in front of the icon.

"Here Kuze, I am giving you this before God and the Virgin Mary..." she said, opened the box and took inventory of what was inside. She counted one hundred and twenty-two Turkish gold coins, seventy-eight gold napoleons, three gold bracelets, three gold necklaces, four silver belt buckles, a silver belt and six gold rings... "Come back later to take three woolen and one plaid blanket... Here, let me put the gold back in the box. Hide it well and when the bad passes, bring it back..."

"Don't worry, Giorgievitsa. It shall be done like I swore before God and before the Virgin Mary..." replied Kuze, leaving in a hurry.

Giorgievitsa could not sleep all night. Her thoughts were with Giorgi's fate and she had great doubts about Kuze's sincerity. She got up at dawn and started pacing all through the house, thinking and thinking, talking to herself and whispering that she had made a terrible mistake.

"Yes!" she said, "I made a terrible mistake. I am going to get my things back…" She went down to the yard, unlocked the front gate

and, before she had a chance to step outside, saw five armed men and Lazo and Kuze among them.

“We are from the People’s government,” said one of them. “We are here, in the presence of Village Board witnesses, Comrades Kuze and Lazo, to confiscate your house and other properties as penalty for the desertion of your son Vasil...”

They arrived in Drenovo at midnight. They locked them in a room full of people. There was straw on the floor. Giorgi was tired from walking all day and lay down, but he could not sleep. He could not get his doubts out of his mind. He did not believe that his son was a deserter. How could he be a deserter when he was a volunteer and took great initiatives and many risks? He was the one who had taught the village youth many things and made them aware of the movement, the struggle and encouraged many to go to the mountains and fight for their freedom, for Macedonia’s freedom, and now they tell me he deserted? Not to mention that Vasil was a link between us here and those Macedonians who came from free Macedonia to help us. And now they tell me he has fled? I don’t think so! Unfortunately what Vasil did was common knowledge among the village spies and informers, who hid in Kostur when the first shot was fired by the Partisans. And God knows what they told the enemy there.

It was dawn. The sun was shining from Bela Voda, bathing Drenovo in light. Both lakes were visible from the small window, which Giorgi had just opened, and beyond them were many mountains. The door of the room opened and two older men left a pot and a small basket with dark bread at the threshold.

“It’s the same old rye bread without salt. Come people, dip in and eat. It’s free, courtesy of the People’s government,” said one of the men and spat to the side.

Half an hour later Giorgi was taken for questioning.

“Sit down!” said a man, with a tone of command, dressed in a military uniform while pointing to a chair. “I am your interrogator,” he said in Greek, “and I will work with you until the whole matter

that brought you here is cleared. What is your given name, surname, father and mother's names, date and place of birth?" the interrogator asked while looking at his notebook.

Giorgi answered his questions while staring at the blood spray on the wall. It made him shudder. As he stared at the blood it seemed to him like it was dripping.

"Do you know why you're here?" asked the interrogator.

"No!" answered Giorgi.

"You will soon know!" replied the interrogator, continuing. "All those people that were brought here were parents of deserters. You are a parent of a deserter. What is the name of your son?"

"Vasil," replied Giorgi.

To which unit was he assigned and where is he serving?" asked the interrogator.

"I don't know. No one told me anything about that. One time I was told that it was a secret and that I should not be asking about that. So, I did not ask," replied Giorgi.

"And that's the way it should be…" remarked the interrogator in a calmer tone of voice, handing Giorgi a piece of paper and asking him to sign it.

"What is this?" asked Giorgi.

"Read it and sign it!" ordered the interrogator.

"Sorry, but I can't read that well. I hardly know the Greek alphabet..." remarked Giorgi.

"What!!!" the interrogator suddenly interrupted Giorgi and continued. "It has been thirty years since Macedonia was liberated by Greece and that has not been enough time for you to learn to read?"

“I can read but only the Latin script,” replied Giorgi.

“What? asked the interrogator.

“I said I can read Latin letters. I came back here from America nine years ago at the eve of the war with Italy. I studied at night school in America. I worked for a company whose owner was Italian and he did not want illiterate workers working for him. All who worked for his company were obliged to learn to read. I never did go to Greek school, sorry...” replied Giorgi.

“Okay then. It doesn’t matter. Sign anyway...” instructed the interrogator.

“First you have to tell me what it says…” requested Giorgi.

The interrogator got up, approached Giorgi from behind, grabbed him by the back of his head and smashed his face on the table. He then pulled his head up, turned him toward him and hit him between the eyes with his fist. Before Giorgi had a chance to recover, the interrogator hit him on the neck, on the back and in the stomach. Giorgi got up on his feet and tried to defend himself by putting his arms up but it was in vain. He fell down. The interrogator returned to his place. Giorgi came to, slowly stood up and straightened himself. Blood was gushing from his nose and cut lip. He wiped the blood with his hand, and then moved his lower jaw sideways a few time and spat two teeth into his hand...

The interrogation was over. They took Giorgi back to the room. Two elderly men were sitting on the straw near a basket. They got up and helped him sit down.

“How did it go?” one of them asked.

“Can’t you see?” replied Giorgi.

“We can see! We went through the same thing...” replied the same man.

“Yes…” the other man said in a protracted tone of voice. “I have been to their dry Greek islands and to their Greek prisons and I am familiar with their tactics. I have eaten more Greek fists than I have eaten bread and water. They beat us alright, they beat us to pulp, may God help us… Then they told us that they were our government... Indeed…” the man then crossed himself and again said: “May God help us all…”

“Where are the others?” asked Giorgi.

“At work. They took them to the mountains to dig tunnels. They will be building warehouses…” the first man replied.

“And you, why are you not at work?” asked Giorgi.

“We? We are recovering from our beating…” said the older man, lifting his shirt. His back was black and blue. He then he lifted his pant legs. His legs were black and blue. “And you can imagine what my ass is like...” he said.

Giorgi sat beside the two men and silently mentioned a conversation he had recently had with his nearest neighbour, Dedo (grandfather) Kiro. They sat on the table across from one another, sipping red wine and discussed the new People’s government. After lighting a cigarette with a glowing coal from the fireplace, Dedo Kiro asked:

“What do you think? What will the new government be like? Who will lead it? Kuze or Lazo? They will be representing the People’s government. We respected the former government because we were afraid of it. Will the new government punish, order, judge and condemn like the old one? And you know something Giorgi, do you know that it will hurt even more if you get beaten by the government of your choice? Because first it will be a great insult to you since you fought and did your best to put it in power. You bled for it, you gave it your last crumb of bread and you allowed its representatives to sleep in your bed… Now imagine being slapped on the face and cursed in the worst way by the very same people you put in power…”

“Well, it would appear that governments change but their tactics don’t… Maybe Dedo Kiro was trying to tell me something…” concluded Giorgi.

A week later the same interrogator told Giorgi: “We investigated your son’s case. He served in the Yanoulis brigade and we understand he fought bravely in the battle for Grevena, demonstrated great courage and was promoted to sergeant. Congratulations. He is now in command of a platoon. You are free to leave. Here is your pass… The guilty party who misinformed us about this you will find among the people in your village. Go home now…”

Without looking back, Giorgi left the prison and headed for home. On his way he was stopped at a checkpoint in Prevol.

“Where to, Sir?” asked an armed young man.

“I am going home, son,” replied Giorgi.

“Pass please,” asked the guard.

Giorgi put his hand in his breast pocket, pulled out a piece of paper and gave it to the guard.

“Good! Thank you…” said the guard and then asked: “Who beat you? Who did you have a fight with? Your face and nose are like…”

“I did not have a fight,” replied Giorgi, “I was beaten…”

“Ah, in Drenovo, I understand, they picked your brains eh?” remarked the guard.

Giorgi did not answer. He kept silent.

“Which way to Breznitsa, right or left?” Giorgi asked.

“Right, only right. And protect that little piece of paper like you protect your eyes. If you lose it you will again find yourself in

Drenovo or in a ditch somewhere. These are trying times and you can easily lose your head; be warned," advised the guard.

Giorgi left and took the road to Breznitsa. It was busy with traveling horses, mules and cattle. Young fifteen and sixteen year old boys and girls and very old men and women were guiding the livestock. All the young boys and girls were short. Giorgi just remembered. They did not mobilize the young, short girls and boys, they said they were too small and should be left for a while to grow before they took them. The column was long and moved slowly. Several armed men appeared along the way and took three horses and two mules. Some minutes later they came back with the animals loaded with crates. Giorgi joined the column to avoid being stopped by the patrols. A couple of kilometres down the road, the column stopped in an oak forest just outside of Smrdesh. The column leader, sporting a shmaizer over his shoulder, ordered everyone to stay put. Giorgi wanted to continue on his way but figured it was too risky and that it was safer to stay with the column. At dusk the column leader gave orders to begin moving again. It was getting dark fast. Thunder was heard coming from Mali Madi. Machine gun bursts were also heard in the distance. Giorgi, walking along with the column, could not believe that he was free to go home. Who from his village could have done this to him was the new question circling in his mind. His thoughts took him back in his younger years, to another world. He tripped and stumbled and lost his train of thought. The column began to turn right. Giorgi stopped walking and waited on the dusty road until the last loaded animal went past him. He remained there for a while and listened to the various sounds. A church bell was ringing in the distance. It was an ominous sound. Many thoughts were going through Giorgi's mind as to why the bell was ringing in the dark of night.

"It is the sound of death. Had someone died in the village?" Giorgi asked himself and began to walk faster. "Who of the villagers could have died?" he again asked himself, thinking out loud. He began to think of those older than him who were sick. "The bell is signaling death, surely it has to be someone from within the village because, so far, no death has been reported from the front and from the battlefields…" he again thought out loud. The bell began to beat more frequently. "Now it is signaling a funeral…" he thought to

himself out loud and quickened his pace. Even at this fast pace it seemed to him that he was not moving fast enough and that his feet were somehow nailed to the ground. His throat was dry and he was overwhelmed with concern. A mysterious fear began to overtake him. The bell continued to beat, its ringing resonating in the wind, sounding creepy in the dark. Then, suddenly a question popped into his mind: "Why have a burial at night?" A gust of wind blew and Giorgi smelled something burning. He said to himself: "It would appear that they bombed the village and burned it down."

The sight of the burned and ruined houses at the entrance of the village, looking horrific in the pale moonlight, overwhelmed Giorgi with fear and horror. He began to feel weak in the knees and his chest began to hurt. An old woman came out of one of the burned houses crying and when she saw Giorgi she stopped and stood there frozen. She could hardly cry or speak. She looked withered and exhausted. She frantically moved her hands and pointed towards the cemetery. Giorgi left and picked up the pace. When he arrived at the cemetery, about ten steps away from the grave, his ears picked up the sound of the eighty year old pop (priest) Vasil's hoarse voice. Giorgi only heard the words "may his soul rest in piece" and when he came close to the tomb he saw people bending forward, taking soil in their hands and throwing it into the open grave. The soil made a hollow sound as it fell on top of the casket. Giorgi removed his hat, gently pushed an old man standing in front of him, bent forward, grabbed a handful of soil and threw it on top of the casket. He stood up and while he was crossing himself he looked at the people standing around the grave. They looked awful, stone-faced from crying and sobbing. He heard crying and sobbing behind him. The old man who was closest to him, pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and hid his face with it. Giorgi turned his head and saw everyone staring at him. Old Pop Vasil approached him with a trembling step. He put his bony hands on Giorgi's shoulder and with a broken voice said:

"Be strong my brother and son Giorgi..." but the priest could not finish what he wanted to say as he felt tightness in his throat. Giorgi felt his hair stand up and shivers run down his spine. He began to sweat a cold sweat and his legs could no longer hold him. Pop Vasil lifted his head up and, while feeling choked in the throat, in broken

words said: “Here, we at night, brother, are sending your wife away…” Giorgi broke down and his shoulders began to shake... All those gathered at the funeral began to cry. Giorgi covered his face with his hands. Tears began to flow between his fingers, emphasizing Giorgi’s wounds and scars from being beaten. He stood there motionless as if waiting for a lightning bolt to strike him from above. Next to his feet he stared at the open grave, looking like a dark, gaping mouth ready to swallow him. The priest gave a sign to those holding shovels. Giorgi heard the soil knocking on the casket as it fell down. He could neither cry nor utter a word. He put his face on the fresh pile of soil. The tiny, lit candles stuck in the soil flickered in the breeze, painting shades on Giorgi’s pale face. He hugged the grave in silence as if looking for Giorgievitsa’s soul so that he could tell her how difficult it would be without her, how unhappy and lonely life would be and how great was his pain.

Hidden within the leaves of the thick old oak tree was the night bird screeching out long shrieks in its hoarse voice. The moon was making its way half way across the sky. The tops of the hills were turning ash grey. The stars in the sky were pale and sleepily winked at those watching them. The clouds in the eastern horizon looked grey like Pop Vasil’s ruffled grey beard and like Giorgi’s grey hair.

Giorgi coped with the pain of his wife’s death in Dedo Kiro’s house. Here he found a bed and a place on the dining room table. Only ruins of his house remained standing.

“Here”, Baba (grandmother) Kirevitsa told Giorgi, “is where the bomb fell and there is where we found her...” She crossed herself and lit a candle. “Here is where her soul was turning...” she said while pointing to the place where they found her dead body.

On the fortieth day of her death they went to the cemetery for a memorial service. Pop Vasil conducted the service. They all took a bite of the large loaf of bread that Baba Kirevitsa had baked just for this occasion and took a drink of wine in memory of the departed Giorgievitsa. They returned to their homes in the afternoon.

Dedo Kiro lit the oil lamp in front of the Virgin Mary’s icon and said aloud: “Rest in peace… Amen…”

Giorgi knelt down, took two candles from Kirevitsa, lit them, put them between two stones and quietly whispered: “With these, let me and our son light your way. He is still alive…”

They returned home and sat in front of the lit fireplace. There was a long silence. Kiro broke the silence and said:

“They are constantly on the move. At night there is a long string of loaded horses and mules. I hear voices speaking in the dark. They say next year, next spring, a great battle will take place in Gramos. That’s why there is so much traffic on the road. They say from out there, from Prespa, they transport weapons and ammunition...”

“Kiro, what happened to my horse?” asked Giorgi.

“Your horse? They took it the day after they took you. I heard that one of the high ranking partisans is riding it. They say that they had difficulty taming it. They took my horse too. Mito, the lame guy, told me that he saw it loaded with crates... It was doing runs between Prespa and Slimnitsa...” replied Kiro.

“Yes…” replied Girogi with a protracted sigh and then said: “Tomorrow Kiro I am going…”

“What did you say?” asked Kiro.

“I said I am leaving tomorrow. I will join the people who take the loaded horses to Gramos so that I can get there unnoticed. I will go there to see my son. They told me he is serving in the Yanoulis brigade, everyone there knows him. Once I get to Slimitsa I will inquire where the Yanoulis brigade is located. They say that the Yanoulis brigade can be found around the villages Ianoveni, Miroslavitsa, Tuhuli and the Vlach villages Aetomilitsa and Gramoshta. I will find him there…”

“Have they been messing with your head?” Kiro casually asked.

“No, I have decided on my own... And I am not turning back until I see him... I need to see him…” replied Giorgi.

The next day, at sunset, Giorgi picked up the bag with two loaves of bread, cheese and some onions that Kirevitsa had put together for him and went outside of the village. He knew where the column passed, he had been there several times before, and so he hid in wait. Just before midnight two men, armed with machine guns passed by and a short time later he could hear horse hooves stamping on the dusty road. The column began to arrive. He allowed about twenty loaded animals to pass by before he snuck into the column and grabbed the reigns of a horse. No one saw him in the dark.

The column passed by the village Kalevishta at dawn and by mid-morning it arrived in Pilikati. After a short break it crossed the narrow wooden bridge underneath which ran the muddy waters of the swollen Bistritsa River. The column stopped moving on the other side of the bridge. The people were told to wait there while other people took the loaded animals and hid them in the dense pine forest. A little while later, the animals were offloaded and returned. They took the same road back and by noon they arrived in Kalevishta. There they were assigned to various homes and were told to rest until evening. Giorgi and fifty men of his age were separated, taken to the school and told to wait there. Before sunset the column, following the same road, set off for Prespa.

# The Great Decline – Chapter 3

There was a stench of moisture, sweat and unwashed clothes in the trench. Packed together and sitting on bags filled with leaves were members of the United Nations Inquiry Committee and about a dozen members of the Democratic Army of Greece (DAG). Among them were also an American journalist and his translator. A kerosene lamp hung in the corner of the trench and filled the space with dim light creating strange shadows on the faces of the attendees. Thick bitter smoke from the lit, homemade cigarettes hung in the air causing some to tear and cough.

“Comrade Fighters,” began the political commissar, “some of these gentlemen here have come all the way from New York, from the United Nations. They are here to learn more about the reasons for the struggle we are leading. Of course in Athens they told them three hundred stupid things, among which was that the struggle inside Greece was brought from the outside, from Yugoslavia and Albania. We, as you know, are struggling in this country for democracy and peace, mostly against Anglo-American imperialism. You know that with British intervention in Athens and the signing of the Varkiza Agreement, ELAS surrendered its weapons and the Greek reactionaries began the white terror and persecution of the Democratic people. These are the main reasons for the struggle and please relay this information to the gentlemen.”

The Commissar took a puff from his cigarette, blew the thick smoke out of his nose and then said:

“Gentlemen, the fighters are at your disposal. I assure you that they have nothing to hide and will tell you the truth and only the truth. Please do not get the impression that I have placed them under some kind of pressure. I will not be present, here, for all the conversations.”

The Commissar then saluted and left the meeting.

There was silence in the trench as the various people looked at each other.

“And you say,” said the Bolivian man to one of the Partisans, “that you are not receiving any arms and food from Albania and even less from Yugoslavia and that those two states are not involved in this war?”

“Who me? I have not said a single word. But if you ask me, then I will tell you that what you said about Yugoslavia and Albania is a lie. This is what they claim but I have not seen it with my own eyes. Why are you so concerned about what Albania and Yugoslavia are doing and not about us and why we had to flee to the mountains?” replied the Partisan.

“The Greek government in Athens claims that the war in Greece was brought from outside, from Albania and Yugoslavia. We are curious whether Albania and Yugoslavia are giving you weapons, food, clothing...” said the Bolivian.

“What? Do you not see that the guns and machine guns we carry are old English and German weapons? Do you not see the rags we are wearing? Food? My friend, we have as much food as the peasants give us... our own villagers...” replied the Partisan.

“Now please allow me to ask you a question…” said someone at the back.

“Please do, be free to ask, but please come closer…” said the Bolivian.

“You said you came from America. Right?” asked the man.

“From New York...” replied the Bolivian.

“Okay, New York... Some say that in New York, where many leaders gather, a decision was made to evict Macedonians from their homeland. Is that true?” asked the man.

“Why ask him?!!! Ask me!” another fighter piped up. “As far as I know, this is how it works. And here is what I think. If they decide to evict us then they will evict us. If they decide not to evict us, then we will not be evicted. This is what I think. And if they decide to

evict us today, they may decide to bring us back tomorrow. This is what I also think: it is better for them if we die, and it is much better for them if we all die and, if not, then those of us who manage to survive living in the mountains, will have to flee our motherland... And those of us who decide to remain here will have to sign and swear that we will be obedient and faithful and then the crunching will begin... Do you understand? And if a child is born, it will be like it was never born because it will be unborn… Do you understand? Like hell you understand! You understand nothing! If we had an understanding of how things work do you think we would have done the things we did and were told to do? Did you not tell me that you have a brother, a soldier fighting for the government army? And here you are fighting against him! Do you know that for generations we have been fighting each other that way right across Macedonia? Do you ever think of that and consider the implications? Of course not! This is because we allow outsiders to think for us and use us to do their bidding. For example, when the Italians came they told us that they liberated us and we were free to speak our Macedonian language and to sing our Macedonian songs. 'We will not prevent you but we cannot protect you...' they said. 'You are obligated to defend yourselves. And to defend yourselves you need arms which you do not have. Since you don't have them we will provide them to you,' they said. And then some of our brainless idiots followed along and picked up arms without considering the consequences. The Italians then decided they did not want to fight anymore and left. And then Kalchev, a Bulgarian officer born in Kostur Region arrived. He visited Kostur and Lerin Regions, chatted up some of our villagers and told them all kinds of stories. He told them that we were Bulgarians and that we needed to defend our Bulgarian heritage. And so we now surrendered ourselves to the Bulgarians and picked up arms from them and again began to fight for someone else. It was true we loudly sang revolutionary songs from the Ilinden era but we never fired a single bullet. Then the Germans and the Bulgarians left and the Greeks came back and re-established their control. Then because the Italians and Kalchev gave us rifles we were labeled traitors and accused of collaborating with the occupiers or aiding the occupiers. And guess who got the beating for that? We all did! We slurped up the Italian and Bulgarian propaganda without considering the consequences and now we are being tossed at our crossroads. They placed us all

under the same flag... only under different slogans. We were happy cultivating our fields, planting our gardens, celebrating our holidays, generally doing things in our villages and minding our own business. Then, I don't know what the devil got into these people who came to our villages and beat and tormented us? Some came, others left, beating us for speaking our language and for singing our songs. They even beat my ox. The police chief ordered the police to beat my ox for not obeying commands spoken in the Greek language. 'Oxen and donkeys must obey commands spoken in Greek,' he said! Donkeys too must obey commands spoken in Ancient Greek," concluded the man who then looked at the translator and said, "translate that for them!"

"And you, what have you to say?" said the Bolivian to the man sitting opposite him.

"And now you found the right person to ask!" sarcastically replied the same man who had spoken earlier.

"And why not him?" asked the Bolivian.

"Because he stutters..." replied the same man.

"That's okay… That's okay…" Tell us slowly and don't get so excited. Don't get excited and your words will flow like honey and we will note and convey everything you say..." encouraged the Bolivian.

"I I s stutter be because my t tongue s stiffens… T they r ruined o our d dreams and d destroyed… d dreams…" replied the stuttering man.

"This guy just talks about dreams..." piped up another fighter.

"D do n not m make f fun o of m me you you id idiots!" snapped the stuttering man.

"Don't get so excited, speak slowly... continue..." encouraged the Bolivian.

“I am not talking about any dream, you idiots, I am talking about our dream, the dream that we all want, to be like everyone else who is free... We here are all Macedonians and know each other by our Macedonian names and surnames, but they there do not like that and have forced us to add endings to our names like ‘idis’, ‘isis’, ‘poulos’, etc., ruining our names. They also changed our place names and ruined them too, making them alien and meaningless to us. We are afraid to go outside because we will get a beating if we say something to our neighbours and it’s rude to pass by people and say nothing. It’s even more rude and insulting to say something in a foreign, alien language…

They also ruined our holidays. I want to do my rituals in my language, which has meaning for me but I can’t even do that because I am not allowed to speak it. I want to baptize my son with an Orthodox name after my father or grandfather and continue our tradition but I can’t do that either because I am not allowed. I have to settle for an alien name that has no meaning to me. Now my own son is a foreigner. They are forcing us to christen our sons with alien names like Menelaos, Aristidis, Iraklis and our daughters with alien names like Andromaha, Antigoni, Persefopi, etc. And with names like these you can be sure no one will come to your home because we have no such name-days to celebrate (a name-day in the old Macedonian tradition was celebrated in place of a birthday). We celebrated name-days since time immemorial. There was always a holiday associated with each name and it was celebrated every year. We all had traditional Macedonian names like Ilia, Kole, Iane, Petre, Vane, Krsto, etc. If we had a person in the home by that name during a holiday, our doors would be open for everyone to come and celebrate with us.

Take me for example... From what my mother and grandmother told me, my parents wanted to name me Mitre. They went to the priest and made their request. The priest opened a book, turned a few pages and said ‘Mitre… Mitre… there is no such name in the book therefore you cannot name your child Mitre.’ ‘But father,’ said my grandmother, ‘we would like to preserve that name. It is a familiar name. We have been celebrating that name for many generations.’ ‘I know that,’ said the priest, but it is not possible… You once had a Mitre… You know who he was… and that is enough…’ ‘But

father,' my grandmother insisted, 'we want to have…' 'Get the hell out of here!' yelled the priest. 'You want to name your child after that bandit who was an abomination to the Church and to the State?'

'If you can tell us where Mitre was buried,' continued the priest, 'I and the police chief will consider baptizing... the child. And if you won't tell us then we will name your child from the book, we will give him a great name that you can be proud of…' concluded the priest. 'Go to hell!' said my grandmother to the priest. 'You can go to hell with your disgusting names.' She then turned to my mother and insisted that she tell my godfather to name me Mitre and not to accept another name.

The priest called the police chief who then summoned my godfather to the priest's house. Then, in front of the priest the police chief said to my godfather: 'If you name the child Mitre while it is being baptized, then I will nail you to a cross, change your name and shave your head. You will name the child Odysseus, understand? Do you know who Odysseus was, eh? I will order my policemen, who are now patrolling outside of this house, to take you to the town square and beat the hell out of you in the middle of the day, belt you twenty times on your bare back and bare ass, then you will not only know, but you will forever remember who Odysseus was and you will tell everyone. And you priest, if you still want to be a priest, then, from now on, you will tell all the godfathers to follow the book. We did not liberate Macedonia so that they can christen their children with non-Greek names. Macedonia's freedom, for which Greece spilled rivers of blood, must be protected by the eradication of unfriendly names and surnames, names of forests, meadows, fountains, springs, paths, mountains, hills, etc., and by their replacement with glorious golden Greek names, or otherwise there will be hell to pay in the village square… Understand?'

My mother and grandmother never mentioned the name Odysseus at home and always called me Mitre. My grandmother also called me Prle (baby donkey) because I was born at the same time as our donkey. Both I and the little donkey grew up to be healthy boys. When I asked my mother why grandmother was calling me donkey she said because when I was a baby she fed me with donkey milk and so we had two baby donkeys at home. When I turned five my

parents made a saddle for my donkey and I proudly rode it through the village streets... Why are you not laughing at this, you idiots?" yelled out the stuttering man, who paused for a moment, looked around and continued:

"Let me ask you this. Is it a dream to want to speak your own language without being beaten, dragged through the courts and jailed? Is it a dream to have a familiar name chosen for you by your parents and not an alien name chosen by the state? Is it a dream to sleep peacefully without having the fear that someone is crouching under your window or placing their ear on your door to hear what language you are speaking in the privacy of your own home? These basic freedoms for us Macedonians living in Greece are non existant!

Let me put it another way... It is like looking at the sky full of stars and then you pick a star and you look at it like it's your own star, like it only belongs to you and it brings you great happiness and because of this you get beaten. Why do you get beaten? Because you want to have your own star! Should you be beaten for wanting to have your own star? Every person should be able to have their own star like they have their own wife. We Macedonians have eyes and can see colours but they don't want us to see what we see, they just want us to see what they tell us to see. They want us to look only at what they want us to see and if we don't then we get a beating. And that is not right! We have our own eyes and all we want to see is the sun, the light and nature's colours, that's all we want but it seems that we can't even have that. But every time we look at something they don't want us to see we get a lot of swearing, cursing and beatings. They denigrate the Virgin Mary the most with their swearing, which is not right given that they too are Christians. Some Christians…

Who in the world curses God and Christ? The Greeks do, the Greeks who have the most churches and priests. When they beat us they beat us terribly but not to death. They only want to maim and cripple us. Only the lucky ones die… We cry for them, bury them and they are gone. But the crippled ones, they remain with us day in and day out. When we look at them we fear them because someday we could

be them... And so when I am reminded of this my tongue stiffens and my words stop coming out...

They made us so fearful that we stopped dreaming... We constantly stare out of the window, we keep an eye on the door and we even look up the chimney to make sure there are no ears listening, especially when we talk to our grandparents who speak no other language outside of Macedonian. They also listen to hear what grandfathers and grandmothers tell the children and what husbands and wives talk about in the privacy of their own bed... When we gather around the dining room table, we are constantly reminded to keep quiet with the finger over the lips.

Why didn't we seek help, you ask? From whom? Who was going to help us? This was going on in our own homeland. In my homeland! Let me ask you this. Is this my homeland or not? If it is my homeland then why does it not protect me like your homeland protects you? Do you have an answer for me? No you don't. I have an answer for you but I also have a great fear. And where does fear drive people? To the forests! To the mountains! The mountains and the forests have become our protectors! Do you understand? I told you many things but I fear you understood very little… You, translator, ask him if he understood me?" said the stuttering man.

"He says that he understood you," replied the translator.

"I don't think you or he understood anything. Tell me, who cares and has an interest in us? You are telling me that he cares about our pain and suffering? Yeah right! They were told to come here and look around and that is exactly what they are doing. They came here to interrogate and question us but not about what is going on, not about our pain and suffering and not about why we are here. They came here to find out if any outsiders are involved in our struggle... Understand?" said the stuttering man.

"And you, how old are you?" the Bolivian addressed a young man sitting in the corner of the trench.

"Me? I am seventeen. Why do you ask?" replied the young man.

“Aren’t you a little young to be a fighter?” asked the Bolivian.

“No, I don’t think so. We are all young here. The oldest among us is twenty years old. Here is Tsilka, she is eighteen and Mita is nineteen... This guy here beside me is from Thessaly. He is twenty years old...” replied the young man.

“Are all of you communists?” asked the Bolivian.

“No. We have no communists in our squad,” replied the young man.

“And why have you came to the mountains?” asked the Bolivian.

The boy smiled a bitter smile and said:

“I have an uncle in America. When the war with Germany was over he started sending us packages. He sent me a red broadcloth coat in one of the packages. It fit me like it was made to measure. I wore it when I looked after the sheep. I was the village shepherd. Because I was out in the mountains I was often intercepted by the police and by the army and interrogated about partisans in the forests and if I supplied them with bread.

I always told them that I did not know anything about that. But one day, while talking to me they looked at me with stern faces as if they did not believe me, so they beat me. They beat me with their fists and kicked me hard with their boots and then they beat me with sticks. When I asked why they were beating me, they said because I wore a red coat. And because I wore a red coat, they said I was a communist. That day I herded the sheep back to the village, hung my coat on a willow tree and fled to the woods and joined the Partisans,” concluded the young man.

“So, you mean you volunteered…” said the Bolivian.

“Yes!” replied the young man.

“Where from Greece are you?” asked the Bolivian.

“Almost all of us here are from Macedonia except for this guy who is from Thessaly and this guy who is from Epirus. We have only four Greeks in our squad,” replied the young man.

At noon the Inquiry Commission, consisting of a Pole, two Ukrainians and the Bolivian, left for Kostur. The American journalist and his translator turned left halfway before reaching Kostur.

“Are we not following them?” asked the translator.

“No. We are going to this village,” replied the American, pointing to the map with his finger. “This is the closest village to our current position. Tomorrow we will go to another village. Conversations with ordinary villagers are more interesting.”

The political commissar, who occasionally entered the trench to eavesdrop on the conversations taking place between the DAG fighters and members of the Inquiry Commission, lined up the squad and, while pointing at Iani, said: “Why did you go off on a tangent talking about your house, your wife, your children, your sheep, your barns, your grains, your jail time, the courts, the beating, the cursing, the swearing and what not? Why did you not tell them that we are fighting for the national independence of Greece and against the Anglo-American imperialists, eh?”

“I did tell them! I told them exactly that! I told them everything Comrade Commissar...” replied Iani.

“You told them! You told them! You told them crap! There was nothing ideological or revolutionary in what you told them. Do you understand?” asked the Commissar.

“Revolutionary? Maybe not but I answered his questions. He asked me why I went to the mountains and I told him…” said Iani.

“Silence!” shouted the commissar, interrupting Iani. “The pledge you made? The oath you took, you dog?! Did you forget that? Let me remind all of you. Let me recite the oath you took: I, son/daughter of the people of Greece and fighter of the Democratic

Army of Greece, swear that I will fight with a rifle in my hand; I will shed my blood and will give my life to drive the last foreign occupier out of my homeland. I will fight to destroy any trace of fascism. I will fight and do whatever is required in order to defend the national independence and the territorial integrity of my country. I will fight and do whatever is required in order to defend democracy, the honour and property of my people... I swear that I will be an example of good behaviour towards my people...” The commissar paused, coughed to clear his throat and with a hoarse voice continued: “And here is the end of the oath that you must never forget: my ideal is a free and democratic Greece, progress and happiness for my people, therefore I pledge my life in the service of this ideal...”

With a howling roar the jeep took a sharp turn while climbing up a steep hill. After climbing over the hill, on the downhill the jeep encountered a huge mud puddle in the middle of the road. The jeep stopped. The driver took a stick and measured the depth of the puddle. He decided it was safe to drive through it. No sooner had the jeep crossed the mud puddle than it encountered another steep hill on top of which were barns. The barns had no roofs. They had been burned down. All the houses up to the centre of the village had also been burned down. The only building standing was the church but its belfry was in ruins. The church bell was cracked and a piece was missing. It had no clapper; it had fallen off and was resting beside the wall. The jeep stopped. Both men got off.

“It doesn’t appear that there is anyone alive in the village...” said the journalist.

“Look over there. There is smoke…” said the translator, pointing.

“Let’s go over there and have a look,” replied the journalist.

The yard was enclosed by a high wall built of stone. One of the thick, solid oak door wings was chopped with an ax. There was a tall cherry tree inside the yard and a crow was resting on the very top. It was staring somewhere ahead. It raised its beak and gave a long caw.

“Stop that you damn crow…” an old female voice was heard yelling.

They entered the yard. The translator greeted the old woman in Greek. She slowly turned and looked.

“She doesn’t understand,” said the translator and then greeted her in Macedonian: “Good day, mother...”

“Good day! Welcome!” replied the old lady, asking: “Who are you?”

“I am a fellow countryman and this man here is an American...” replied the translator.

“An American? What is he doing here? What does he want?” asked the old woman.

“Can we come in?” asked the translator.

The old woman waved her hand and gestured to them to come inside the house. The yard was laid with cobblestones and the house was old but beautifully built with cut stones. The room was clean and the floor was covered with a colorful hand-woven rug. To the left and right of it were spread thick, woolen red carpets. The fireplace was well-lit and burning hot.

“It is very, very nice here and very enjoyable!” said the journalist in English. “Ask the lady where she bought these beautiful red carpets?”

“What did he say?” she asked.

“He said the carpets are very beautiful and wants to know where you bought them,” replied the translator.

“My dear son, I wove the carpets myself. Those are the only things I have left. I had hidden them in the other pit… What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He is asking with whom are you living? replied the translator.

“I have been living alone, my son, since Ianovden (St. John’s day). That’s when the army passed by here and the people fled to the woods… What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He is asking why the people fled to the woods,” replied the translator.

“Because the army came! The people were afraid of the army that is why they fled to the woods to hide… What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He is asking why you did not leave,” replied the translator.

“I did not manage to escape so I was left alone in the village. The army closed off all the roads and I could not leave. Where was I to go? There were soldiers here and soldiers there armed with guns and shooting everywhere. Where was I to go?… What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He wants to know if you have anyone?” replied the translator.

“Me? My dear son, I do. I have two sons, a daughter and twelve grandchildren… What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He is asking where they are,” replied the translator.

“My daughter and her children are hiding in the woods… What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He is asking where your son is,” replied the translator.

“In America...” she replied.

“Oh in America?!” replied the journalist joyfully with a broad smile on his face. “In America!” he again said and could not stop smiling. “Oh yeah in America...”

“America” was the single word that both the old woman and the journalist understood: he with joy and she with sorrow and cursing. “My son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren are in America, grandchildren I have never seen except in photographs,” said the old woman.

“America, America, damn America… my son is there…” said the old woman quietly with a small whimper. “My son, Mitre... What did he say?” she asked.

“He wants to know in which city your son is living,” replied the translator.

“Oh my dear son, I don’t remember...” said the old woman with a frown on her face, rubbing her forehead and half-closed her eyes in a desperate attempt to think of the city in which her son lived. She then adjusted herself, slowly got up and said: “Let me see...”

She went down to the pit and returned with a pile of papers and envelopes wrapped in an apron. She sat back in the same place and, one by one, she began to open the envelopes, remove the letters and place them in front of the two men. She then paused for a moment, looked at the translator and said: “Can you read this?” and then gave him an envelope.

“I don’t recognize the letters,” he said, “let me ask him.” The translator then took the envelope and gave it to the American.

“Oh, Detroit!!!” the American yelled out joyfully. “Detroit is my city!” he said in English and attempted to say the same in Greek.

“What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He said Detroit is his city, where he was born, where he has a house and where his family lives...” replied the translator.

“My son is there too… Ask him if he knows him… He doesn’t know him? Well, tell him when he goes back, what is the name of the place where he lives?” asked the old woman.

“Detroit...” replied the translator.

“Tell him when he goes back home to Detroit to look for my son Mitre, to find him and to let him know that I am okay... except, as you can see, part of my house was burned down and everything that we had in our home has been stolen... What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“And you, my dear woman, do you know how big a city Detroit is? Your son is living among hundreds of thousands of people, how will he be able to find him?” replied the translator with a frustrating tone of voice.

“Perhaps there are hundreds of thousands of people but there can’t be thousands of bakeries in Detroit? My son has his own bakery. He can inquire among the bakers. Bakers must know one another... What did he say?” she asked.

“He is asking since when has your son been in Detroit?” replied the translator.

“Since a long time ago. He was only twenty years old when he left. Tell him to tell my son that our oxen and sheep were taken from me and I have been left alone with nothing... what am I to do? These are bad times... very bad times... Perhaps things will calm down and the people will return to their homes... What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He is asking if you have seen an army from Yugoslavia or Albania pass by here.” replied the translator.

“What is that?” asked the old woman.

“Soldiers, soldiers from Serbia or from Albania, did they pass by here. That’s what he is asking…” replied the translator.

“Is he is asking if a Serbian or Albanian army came here? No they have not. But I have seen many armies? Yes, I have seen armies. Tell him that I have seen many armies pass by here... What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He is asking whose army have you seen?”

“Well, I was a child when the Ottoman army was here… After that it was our people, the Ilinden fighters who passed by here. After the Ilinden Uprising Greek armed bandits came. They were worse than the Ottomans… They wanted to make us Greeks by force. They burned houses, killed people, beat people, raped women, bribed people and turned people into snitches and spies... After the Ottoman army left the Greek army came... After that came the French army and brought black men with it. The French positioned their cannons up there on top of that hill and from there they were bombarding that hill over there. The French would send black people over on foot and they would come back wounded and mutilated. You should know that even though those men were black, their blood was red… just like ours… The English came after that and after them there was only the Greek army. When the Italians hit they bombed us here with cannons and airplanes. The entire place was plowed and burned down by bombs. The Greek army came here, collected us all and put us to work without pay. We dug roadbeds, baked bread and carried cases of ammunition and bombs... They sent us as far as the Morava Mountains. That mountain over there is Morava. Do you see it? The Greek army reached beyond that mountain. The Greek army consisted mainly of our men (Macedonians). They fought the Italians. They told us that they passed Korcha and went as far as Pogradets... They drove the Italians back. But, I don’t know what happened and why the Greek army came back and allowed the Italians and later the Germans to come here. After that a war started and many of our men and boys fought against the Italian and German armies. They used to say that was our army (Macedonian). They made an army from our (Macedonian) fighters but then it left. It went over the mountains to where Macedonians were in that Macedonia and joined many Macedonian soldiers... And afterwards the Greek army came back and with it came many policemen who beat us a lot. They encouraged the Madzhiri (Christian Turkish colonists) to rob us and our properties… What did he say?” concluded the old woman.

“He is asking which army was better?” replied the translator.

“Well, my son, he is asking me to tell him whose foreign soldiers were better? Let me say this. When they came no one welcomed them. And when they left no one invited them to come back. We only greeted our Ilinden fighters with joy and waited for them to return with tears. And when they returned we offered them bread, salt and wine and prepared a bed for them to rest... What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He is asking why?” replied the translator.

“Why? Because they were our (Macedonian) fighters! We greeted them with bread and wine. We hosted the red shirts that came from that Macedonia and cried with joy listening to them speak Macedonian and sing Macedonian songs. We used to go to the church to light candles and pray to the Virgin Mary so that they would return to their homes and to their mothers healthy and alive. We protected and helped them because they were Macedonian soldiers who spoke Macedonian and sang Macedonians songs…What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He is asking if you have any relatives among those in the mountains and forests?” replied the translator.

“My dear son, I do... My grandchildren and many relatives are in the forests... What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He is asking if you give those in the forest food?” replied the translator.

“How can I not give to my own people? I give them food, clothing and a bed... But what I don’t understand is why they have joined the Greeks. That I can’t understand at all... Ask him if he knows why. Ask him… What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He is asking if you son Mitre writes to you?” replied the translator.

“Two years after the war my Mitre sent me letters, money and packages. I could have opened a shop and dressed up half the people of Kostur with the materials he sent me. But unfortunately the Madzhiri (Christian Turkish colonists), those thieves, followed the

army and attacked and robbed us. They dug under our foundations with pickaxes, broke into our cellar and found and broke into our pit. Come I will show you... Do you see? They tore everything apart and took everything. They only left the letters... Look over here… They broke my oak chest and took my wedding dress. They broke the cradle in which I cradled my children and they took my loom…" said the old woman, becoming visibly upset and began breathing deep and painful sighs. A few moments later she recomposed herself, crossed herself, sat down, placed her hands in her lap and began to talk again:

"What joy... what joy my people, what joy..." she said with a sad tone of voice, "what joy we had in this house... Three births, three baptisms, two weddings and countless banquets... Our cellars were never empty. Our land fed us all and the foreign soldiers… We had enough food for everyone… We had two pairs of oxen for pulling a plow and a horse just for weddings, festivals and to go to the market. We had seventy sheep, forty goats, a cow and two hired helpers... Then last year, during the spring, the Madzhiri came and stole everything that was not buried underground. Should I have complained? To whom could I complain? There were Greek soldiers stationed right there. They and their superiors were watching and doing nothing. A few days later I went to Kostur and complained but no one wanted to listen. So, what was I to do? I don't speak their language so they looked at me as if I were stupid and worthless... And those Macedonians who do speak their language were afraid to open their mouth…" concluded the old woman.

The Journalist bent down and picked up a number of postcards. Some were of well-known cities like Detroit, New York, Washington, Los Angeles and others were of famous American monuments familiar to the journalist... The journalist showed most interest in the postcard from Detroit and looked at it for a long time. He then pointed to the upper part and, in English, said: This is my house…"

"What did he say?" asked the old woman.

"He said the city he is looking at on the postcard is his city and he can see his house in the picture," replied the translator.

“Ask him when he will be going home?” asked the old woman.

“He said in about a month,” replied the translator.

“Tell him not to forget to look for my son Mitre. He should look for him among the bakers... What did he say?” asked the old woman.

“He said he wants to take your picture,” replied the translator.

The old woman smiled. It was a barely visible sad and sickly smile. The wrinkles on her forehead and face became emphasized. She adjusted herself. With an easy movement of her hands she adjusted her long, black dress and put on her black, red beaded, fringed vest. She stood up straight and placed her hands on her head to cast a shadow over her eyes. She then placed her left hand on her hip, as if she was supporting her entire past life on her old frame. She stared in front of her into the distance with a long and begging stare and waited… Then something occurred to her…

“Dear boys… in all of our talk I forgot to offer you something... I have wild strawberry jelly. It is very sweet. Here, take some. Here is some water; I got it just a while ago fresh from the spring… To your good health…” she said as she watched the men spoon and eat the delicious jelly.

The mountain on the other side of the forest began to turn purple. The sun was setting. A cold autumn breeze blew from the north, dislodged a few leaves from the cherry tree in the yard and carried them down through the village streets... The color of ash was slowly enveloping the landscape. The old woman lit a kerosene lamp and placed it on the shelf above the fireplace. A tiny oil lamp was illuminating the icon of the Virgin Mary. The room began to darken. The old woman set the table, covered it with a white tablecloth and put a plate with cheese and half a loaf of bread on it. In the meantime the journalist brought a box from his jeep from which he removed a couple of cans of meat and placed them on the table. The three ate in silence.

A yellow glowing ball could be seen slowly drifting by the small window in the room. The moon was full. The old woman collected all the crumbs in one hand, stood up and said: “I will set a place for you to sleep here…”

Sitting crossed legged, resting his elbows on the table, the journalist, by the light of his flashlight, was writing something down. There was silence. The only things heard were the scratching of the ink pen and the gentle rustling of the paper. The translator was sleeping with his mouth open. The journalist continued to write through the night. There was a loud crow of a rooster. The journalist paused, got up, stretched his legs and went outside. The cold autumn wind hit him in the face. He returned to the room and woke the translator.

“Get up. It’s time to go!” he said.

Then, just as they were about to exit the room, the old woman appeared and in a quiet voice asked: “Are you going?” and before they had a chance to answer she said: “Be well and take care of yourselves. And you, tell him not to forget to look for my son Mitre in Detroit… May God be with you…”

The Journalist knelt down before the old woman, bowed his head, took her hand in his hands and gratefully kissed it…

Eight kilometres from the village the jeep struck a mine. Five Partisans left their posts above and went to investigate. The jeep was ejected from the road and the American journalist and his translator were lying dead in the ditch. There was a backpack lying beside them. In it they found a thick notebook with well-written, small legible letters.

“Is there anyone here who can read these letters?” one of them asked.

“It’s in English. I can read English...” another one said, taking the notebook, leafing though it and then said: “Let us sit, I will read it and tell you what it says… Yes, the first two pages are illegible. They are soaked with blood. I will start from page three...”

“I am sending you a photograph. I found it among many letters, old postcards and photographs. It is very old. Not only does it document her youth, but also shows the beginning of our century. It is the hallmark and confirmation of time and life that has taken place here for centuries. I do not venture publish it in any newspaper because I am afraid it will die along with the news. I want her to live forever. That’s why I need you to find it a place in your new home in the new country. I will send you two more photographs in my next letter. One I took at the threshold of a house of what a few days ago was your house, the house in which you were born and raised and from which you went into the world. All that’s left of that house now is one room, a small chamber on the ground floor. The rest has been destroyed. What remains standing is well-looked after with much love and is waiting every passing hour for guests to fill it. In the corner there is an icon of the Virgin Mary and in front of it is a tiny oil lamp with a tiny flickering flame. Your mother fed me with a piece of bread and a cup of goat’s milk here in this room. I have never tasted anything so delicious. One picture I will keep for me to remind me of that wonderful woman with whom I spent a few precious moments while I was here. When I return to Detroit I will frame it in a golden frame to remind me of the Macedonian Angel I met in your country...” concluded the letter.

“Dear Jim,

Your mother told me that for years she has been collecting dowries for your daughters... She has spun yarn, knitted sweaters, woven material and spent many nights sewing dresses. She told me that all mothers do that...

Here, my dear Jim, I sensed that there is hardship and I felt the pain of existence, here I also found roots deep rooted into the rock and cracked earth. This rugged, rocky, cooked by the sun, washed by the waters, polished by the winds and humiliated by its new masters, is your country adorned with the beauty and human warmth of your people. Dear Jim, I sincerely trusted the politicians in Athens but now I only have contempt for them and wonder if they have any sense of dignity. I also have to admit, though reluctantly, that I am a member of the so-called free and civilized western world, of which today I am ashamed... I have a feeling that this piece of land, an

eternal place of crossroads for innumerable conquerors, a place broken up by the greed of your neighbours through which the Great Powers found their accounts, because it is subjected to suffering, sorrow and anticipation, is the only place where a man can earn his bread with sweat, and without peace and quiet until the end of his days...

I watched your mother in silence for a long time. I remember every flicker of her wrinkled cheeks. She is a person who, despite her old age and wrinkled face, has preserved her beauty as a woman and her kindness as a wonderful human being. She showed me parts of her old wardrobe... I do not know how she managed to save and preserve it. She showed me her silver belt buckles, money from various times and rulers embroidered on her dresses and the handmade embroidery with red thread on white linen...

Her voice was like a sweet melody in my ears which seemed to me like everything was hers yesterday and today. And tomorrow? I, my dear Jim, I'm really stunned! Our discussion lasted all night. We sat on the doorstep of the burned down house. Above us were countless bright stars, the kind of which I have never seen in the United States. Here it seems like the sky is closer to the ground but more distant from the people and their destiny... Beside us was a broken cradle. Your mother said it was the cradle in which she cradled you and your siblings when you were babies... We sat and talked on the doorstep and all the while we watched soldiers passing through the village and climbing up the hill beyond the river. There were non-stop machine gun bursts coming from the mountains. The two sides were stubbornly defending and attacking each other's positions. And we, on the other side, continued to talk all night, barely noticing the moon moving across the star-lit sky. A crowing rooster, from the lower neighbourhood, then heralded the coming of the new day. And what will this new day be like?" concluded the letter.

"Dear Jim,

Here I learned about the many lies and truths through my stories which I will try to introduce to our American public. Stories that your people told me, people who spoke very plainly; mostly illiterate peasants. I had patience and through an interpreter I

listened to everyone and wrote down every word they said. Beaten down and bare handed, I am told, led by the Communists, which was worst, these people rose up against the state which uses our (American) money and weapons to ruthlessly abuse and beat them down. I have written in my notebook that, through the Truman Doctrine, my country (the United States of America) has awarded Greece: 142 aircraft with seven thousand bombs, ninety-seven thousand rifles, three thousand, eight hundred and ninety mortars and machine guns, four million cannons and mortars and three hundred million bullets. There is also a lot of information in my notebook concerning large sums of money and other types of grants given to Greece... Everything that has been given to Greece to this day has been listed.

The question now is how much more will there be given in order to bring extinction to the Slav-Communists and Communist gangs, as per General Van Fleet's report? General Van Fleet is chief advisor to the American regime in Greece. There is a Civil War raging in Greece, my dear Jim, and it is harnessing your people, the Macedonians. According to various sources, including the Greek royal headquarters and the communist party leadership, there are 25 thousand Partisan fighters of whom 11 thousand are Macedonians. Semi-official Greek sources claim that eighty thousand indigenous Slavs, who call themselves Macedonians, live in Greece. If that is true then every eighth Macedonian person is at the front line right now. And those behind the scenes in Kostur, Lerin and Voden District are mobilized by the Communists. What horror! America loves numbers! About your compatriots, my dear Jim, they are in real danger! Your people here are beaten down and their torment is used to promote destruction and hatred. They are a deep, open wound, which if it ever heals will leave a visible scar that will haunt the souls of many generations. People here are thrown to the bottom of human humiliation, their souls crushed to a breaking point. The state has cast them to hell. I met people who know nothing outside of fighting. They are being cast to hell. They fight when they are awake and they fight while sleeping. The fireplaces here have lost their warmth. If the Communists lose, and that with American help, then it will mean a certain end for you Macedonians..." concluded the letter.

“My dear friend whom I have not met,

I am sorry I saddled you with all those numbers. Forgive me. Such is my profession. Let me return back to where I started. While your mother was speaking, I maintained my continuous silence, listening to every word she said and memorizing every flicker of her wrinkled cheeks and forehead. I enjoyed listening to her beautiful, heartfelt and peaceful voice which seemed like everything was hers yesterday and today. And tomorrow? I, my dear Jim, am frightened and appalled by the things that are going on... And another thing: a persistent universal rule of the sun exists here. Besides that, the devil burns and scorches here and there is no escape anywhere; there is no hope; this place is a place of damnation... And I ask myself: who did this and why? Nothing happens by accident in this region, nothing is done without purpose and specific expectations and no one and nothing is without fault… Who is responsible for the fate of this place? Who is responsible for the disaster unleashed? And is there an escape from it? And why, my dear friend is there so much suffering in this land of the sun?!!! The sunrises and sunsets here have the most beautiful colours - from the brightest white to the deepest purple. Every dawn, every morning generates a rainbow of magnificent colours. I have been so privileged to witness them...

This has been going on forever! They say the sun is born in a chain and with it comes suffering. Is that the only thing? The night is for rest, they say, and before going to sleep there are moments of much thinking; what would the next day be like? The next day comes with the birth of the sun, complete and self-leading... And that’s how it should be! But beyond that there is evil that drains and spreads like an island on the ground and with the birth and warmth of each sun, it poisons and burns everything. It continues to poison everything during the night but it seems less so in the dark. Is it because it is less visible? And in those brief moments of thought before going to sleep, pressing and turning in my head is the question: What are light, stone, time and man? Are they traps that enslave? What is a person who lusts for power? A blind weapon? One who lives in delirium and is unable to think and assess and reassess his or her own actions? One who is unable to understand his or her own behavior? And can such a person actually be fit to lead others? And

more importantly can others not see who they were led by? Is this not like lambs being led to slaughter?" concluded the letter.

"Dear Jim,

I cannot get my head around all this. I feel like I am broken... The world is woven from depravity that leads to hopelessness. The world in which I walked so far is without faith, but not the people who live in it. It was destiny that I met your mother who made me understand and assured me that there are people who know how to trust and how to hope in the spirituality of the day and who are free of demons. I think and have come to realize that where cynicism and nihilism triumph, animal instinct prevails and the world turns to hell. It is fierce and vicious... disgusting and unfortunately very true...

The surprise however is, when in the face of an old woman, you see anticipation and great and unlimited hope. This is a feeling free from all vices, hatred and reluctance! Your mother often said to me: 'Bad times have come, my son, bad times have come.' This means that if they come then they must also go. Storms come and go. Isn't that how nature works? Is this faith something new? No, because her whole life has been full of storms, floods, uncertainty and things that destiny delivers but then there is the calm… Initially I thought of this as some kind of Jewish perseverance… But it is not… It is something else. It is not Jewish, it is from here, it is yours. I say yours because you, my dear Jim, I believe still belong here... This is your perseverance and endurance as Macedonians.

I am convinced that there is no other way out: just perseverance and patience. Your mother told me the same thing... And I am not surprised because so many of your people here bear the names Traiko, Traianka, Zhivko and Zhivka, and the names of Orthodox saints and of the apostles including Peter and Paul. All indicative of faith, hope, perseverance and patience and... God!!! And when she prayed, when she crossed herself, when she looked up into the sky, when the light from the sun, the light from the oil lamp illuminated her face, they created a glint in her eyes. Her prayers were hearty, simple, open and seemed like God was going come down from the sky... And I, since the very beginning of my inexorable mixed feelings, in being reconciliatory and enchanted, as if I had fallen into

a deep spell, stunned and numb, watched her... I knelt beside her, bent down, lifted her hand and kissed it... I also kissed the plate in front of the altar which your mother touched with her temple and I bowed before it… No, I do not have sympathy and compassion for the old woman, only admiration... I have much admiration for her endurance, patience and great hope… I felt small and weak beside her! And when she said 'new times will come' I heard in her scant, seemingly poor words, infinite duration and triumph! Again and again I looked into her eyes. I watched her face and forehead full of wrinkles… I again bowed down and kissed her hands... I was again filled with admiration…

She said she lived on this same spot, on this piece of God's country for ninety years. She said she never moved and she never traveled, not even for one day. Never in her life has she ever left the warmth of the sun and the goodness of this earth on which she was born and grew up. Never has she ever thought of leaving this fruitful and bountiful land which has supported her family and her ancestors for generations. This land on which she stands is her life's wealth... The sun and the fruit of the land are equal to life. The land must not be abandoned, there must be no divide between it and the people who live on it because if a wide gap occurs then the land will become void and it will be covered with weeds. When a child is taken away from its mother's arms then direct contact is broken from the warmth of her breast and from her milk. The mother's body becomes distant. Mother and child can only be one over her breast. Taking the child away is a division tactic and early separation between mother and child creates new relationships. Is it not the same with a country and with its people? For as long as you stand or lie on it, for as long as you feel it under your feet, for as long as you touch it, cultivate it, venerate it, then, you and the land are one. Is that not true with your hearth? For as long as its smoulders, for as long as a single spark exists, for as long as you feel its warmth on your fingers, then it is a part of life. If it runs out of smouldering coals then the fireplace becomes a simple ornament, a simple memory just like a distant childhood memory...

The day started and ended in conversation and discussion. The sun freely set. The grey arrived with a frown, swirling around until darkness fell, seeming like a dark cloud had fallen covering

everything, and behind the cloud half the sun leaned over the hill. Flame burned in the sky and the ridge was covered in velvet purple as the fireball fell behind the hill and the last light dimmed. The end of the day had arrived.

We sat on the doorstep of what once was a house and gazed at the sunset. I looked into the old woman's eyes attempting to gaze into her soul and understand her feelings. And then I realized that in heinous times such as these, her soul would be like ointment on an open wound... And her eyes!!! I looked into them with noble inspiration. I thought to myself, there is still a spark in them even after experiencing generations of devastation, hardship, evil and the burden of time...

When she handed me the letters, when she showed me her wardrobe, when she showed me the broken cradle... A cloud covered the sky... The evening came quickly and we hardly noticed when darkness fell. Darkness grew and enveloped us with every passing moment, with every spoken word… And with every breath and sigh she took I felt her pain and loneliness, her bitterness and torment… I felt a lump inside of me as hard as a rock... The way she took her breath and sighed told a story of its own… A sad story… I could not shake the feeling that all this great big darkness suggested only evil... we were together, facing each other and sensing our dark and heavy burden through our breathing, seeming like we could see our feelings through it... Suddenly the full moon appeared from behind the thick dark cloud, a gentle wind blew and the sky filled with stars… many bright stars the likes of which I have never seen before. We looked at each other in the starlight in silence, barely noticing that the moon was turning, the stars were dimming and the Milky Way was slowly melting away… And down here, the darkness was turning grey giving way to dawn…" concluded the letter.

"Dear Jim,

It is daybreak. Dawn has arrived. There is whiteness and colour appearing above the grey, twisted and blurred cloud. The sun is rising, making its morning appearance, giving the landscape a rainbow of colours; yellow, pink, gold, red, purple… each taking its

turn appearing and slowly disappearing. The ominous cloud is visible now. The sun has magically given it a layer of purple... We are still sitting on the doorstep and our words kept falling like autumn leaves. There was silence... The sun found us looking at one another. Suddenly the silence was broken by some barking. Further down in the upper neighbourhoods a column of soldiers appeared. They were walking though an area that was once houses. It was the government army and many of the soldiers were carrying American arms. Your mother stared at the soldiers for a long time and then quietly said: "The soldiers have come to beat our people..."

I said nothing… I did not know what to say… I felt ashamed… I felt a great void, a wide gap coming between us. Now I remembered why I had no answer as to why Macedonians fled to the mountains along with some Greeks. I did not know... why! And to justify my weakness and ignorance to myself, dear Jim, I said to myself: everyone has their cross to bear... Today or tomorrow I will finish this letter and will send it to you as soon as possible…" concluded the letter.

They also found a bottle half full of yellow liquid in the back pack. It had a smell of something singed and although it had the same aroma as rakia it was not the same kind of rakia they were accustomed to; strong and made of grapes... They took the bottle passed it around from person to person and each in turn took a sip from it. As they felt the burn from the alcohol, they each had their own opinion as to its taste and strength.

As for the letters, each person, in their own way, told and retold the pain the stranger had experienced. The letters had a profound effect on all of them because in the letters they saw something of themselves, of their own homes and in the old woman they each saw something of their own mothers. And of the stranger lying dead in the ditch, they were curious as to why he, so persistently and passionately, wanted to enter the soul of the old woman and wondered why he wanted to feel all her past experiences, to understand her joy and pain, when around here, cruel hatred prevailed?

They found nothing strange about the incomprehensible foreign language; they found it warm and close... But, when the commissar caught them and yelled at the one reading and translating the letters, they all swore and had bitter words for it…

# The Great Decline – Chapter 4

A fire was burning in the middle of the church. Piles of split wood and fence posts taken from the closest village yards were being burned. The flames were burning high, licking and caressing the dry wood, twisting and turning, slowing down and igniting with a sudden ferocity, eating away at the wood and once in a while spitting out swarms of sparks. With a muffled scream one of the burning poles twisted and fell into the burning coals and slowly turned into coal itself. Frozen, wet, they put their hands in front of them to bring them closer to the fire. Thick smoke caused their eyes to tear. Those sitting close to the fire adjusted themselves and pulled their feet back as they got hot. They were feeling the heat of the flames and the glowing hot coals on their cold faces, beaten by the wind and the cold. Those sitting close to the fire unbuttoned their overcoats and began to yawn with wide open mouths. The heat made them sleepy and standing above them others put their hands out, pushing their way closer to the fire.

A young woman, who some said belonged to the Women's Anti-Fascist Front (AFZH) leadership and others said she was a commissar, excitedly stirred the fire with a prong and said:

"Comrades, fighters, please allow others to come closer to the fire and warm themselves. Move over and make a circle…" She then moved closer to the fire, whose warmth and flames created a slight glow on her face. She unbuttoned her coat, took it off and placed it over her shoulders. She then poked at the fire with the poker and while breathing out slowly said: "So many coals… so many coals… enough to roast… if only we had some potatoes or…"

"Chestnuts... this bed of coals is good for roasting chestnuts..." someone said.

"Yes, chestnuts...," she replied, "how could I have forgotten that chestnuts grow in this village…?" She then looked around, spotted the detachment commander, waved her hand at him and, in a commanding voice, yelled out: "Commander, order someone to go and fetch some potatoes or chestnuts..."

With a grimacing look the commander asked her:

“From whose house should I take them? We are waiting for the people to bring us bread, and now you decide to look for an appetizer? My fighters know what it means to bring something and the difficulties it creates...”

But before the commander had a chance to finish his sentence she interrupted him and said: “You are the commander, right? So then please do command!” And then she laughed out loud.

“My job is to command fighters in battle, not to follow up on someone’s whims about chestnuts!” replied the commander loudly, with a raised tone of voice that echoed all throughout the church. He then laid half his overcoat under him on the floor, covered himself with the other half and soon fell asleep.

The woman commissar, as if nothing had happened, sat more comfortably and said: “Yes. And there are people who don’t know a joke....”

She quickly realized that she had insulted the commander. The moment she realized this she wanted to get up and ask him for forgiveness, but she didn’t have the will to do it in the presence of so many fighters. She reminded herself to do it the next day or perhaps tonight under different circumstances. She had realized that she had overstepped her position but she did not know what to do. It was not something that could be dismissed and the longer it lasted unresolved the worse it became for everyone. All the people around the fire and those behind them who were waiting their turn to come close to the fire to warm up felt the tension and were looking at each other in silence. They liked and respected their commander. They were accustomed to his strong voice, his strict rules, and his vision for details while carrying out his orders. His harsh sentences were easily and quickly forgotten. They loved him because he was always with them during long marches and marched on foot alongside them, personally checking the road. He was always the first to step into the cold water and to encourage the marauders. He always gave his horse to those who needed it the most to load the weapons and heavy backpacks filled with bullets and hand grenades which they

ordinarily carried on their backs. They liked him because he never, at least not until now, separated his portion from the common cauldron.

As if it were nothing, she said: “There are people who don’t like jokes...”

It was evident that she was trying to soften the blow but the silence continued, except for the occasional spit and quiet curse. The smoke became thick as the men added more wood onto the fire, some wet and green. It seemed like the smoke covered the quiet, the silence and the contempt. The smoke unfortunately did not take these things with it as it left for the sky through the hole in the church roof that substituted for a chimney. It seemed like the silence and the contempt remained with the people and grew like moss; it did not hurt, but underneath it all there was something sickly, hidden...

“When we free ourselves,” she broke the silence with a tone of voice belonging to a commissar giving a lecture, “fellow fighters, we will build homes of culture in every village to replace every church. The churches, whose time has passed, were only built to keep people ignorant, uncultured and illiterate. This is how the rich, the bourgeoisie wanted things to be. This is how, fellow fighters, the Anglo-American imperialists, the most evil people of today, want things to be and that is why we are fighting to eradicate that evil… I say... What was that word I used? Oh, yes… culture… Like I said, we will build many homes of culture where our people can go to learn…” She suddenly stopped talking and stared at the altar. She half closed her right eye and silently measured from top to bottom, approximating the height, then turned to those that stood in the way and in a commanding voice said: “Hey, you, move out of the away a little, you are blocking my view!” waving her hand gesturing for them to move. “Here… I am here…” she again yelled out loud. “I am here wondering and asking you why, for example, can this church not be a house of culture, eh? Well, almost everything we need is here. We will remove the altar and take it outside... Then we will have a place for a stage. Up there,” she looked up over the altar again measuring with her eyes, “we will take the icons down and we will toss them into the compost heap of history.... And in their place we will put pictures of our beloved leaders Zahariadis, Stalin, Tito,

Dimitrov and all the others who are part of the international proletariat..."

"What did you say?" someone interrupted. "What is he to you, what did you call him?"

"P r o l e t a r i a t!" she replied spelling out the entire word. "First, allow me to finish what I started telling you and then I will explain to you what 'proletariat' is and I am sure you, who interrupted me, will have no clue what I am talking about..." She stopped talking for a moment then returned to where she was interrupted:

"Side by side, like the way the big and small icons are lined up today… one beside the other," she pointed with her hand, "from one end of the altar to the other". She adjusted herself, threw a couple of thick sticks of wood into the fire, looked into the faces of the others sitting around her and asked: "Did you all understand or did you not?" Expecting no answer she continued: "I saw something like this in a village in Bitola. Picture beside picture." She raised her hand, pointed at the left side of the altar and slowly waved it towards the right and with a smile on her face she said: "There will be a picture of Tito with a cigarette in one hand and a handgun in the other, it will be a large picture covering that entire area…" pointing with one hand while bumping her hip with the other. "There, to the left of that, will be a picture of Lenin, with his arm raised, showing the proletariat the way to their bright and happy future. To the right of that, there will be a picture of the great Stalin with his great big mustache looking like he is telling the Anglo-Americans, 'hey, you, over there, don't you dare trifle with my friends, Markos's Partisans, because I will hang you all on a single noose…' And with his slightly closed but very wise eyes, he looks far ahead into the future of communism... Photograph beside photograph. Under those photographs, like the little icons, there will be pictures of Kardeli, Rankovich and of course Lazo... What can I tell you... an entire iconostasis... Oh, your soul will feel so complete and your heart so full of happiness when you think of how it will be when our freedom comes... And that's what we will do." She paused for a moment, looked up and then said:

“We will put a large speaker on the bell tower which, from that height, will transmit the sound from our radio to the entire village. The voice of our beloved leader and the words and music of our revolutionary songs will be heard everywhere… This is what I saw in the Bitola village which I mentioned to you earlier... We will have new holidays. Not Sveti Nikola, Sveti Ilia, or Sveti Pavle. We will create new saints and new holidays. In place of Petrovden, for example, we will celebrate the day of the commissars, because we started this, as of today we will have a day of the Commissars...”

“Okay, stop playing games with us. Is this some kind of prank?” someone piped up.

“No prank! We will have a day...” she replied.

“Yes, a day of…” someone else interrupted.

“Yes, a day of the shepherds!” loudly interrupted the man who wanted to know what a ‘proletariat’ was.

“Why not?” she replied. “We will also celebrate all the trades but not the saints. Oh, only if you knew! We will create a new society and of course we will have new practices. We will destroy everything old with all its features and the oldest of them all are the churches. We will create one nation. And that nation will be called the ‘proletariat’. There will be no Macedonians...”

“Well, that suits me fine. The Macedonians must go! To too many people, they are a thorn on the backside…” someone in the back yelled out but no one could see his face.

“This is not just about the Macedonians,” she hastened to explain. “There will be no Turks, no Bulgarians, no Serbs...”

“Will there be Greek?” asked someone from behind the darkness.

The woman turned to see who had asked that question and after a short silence she continued:

“We will all be ‘proletariat’, not nations! The proletariat will rule over their proletariat dictatorship.... The proletariat from all countries, like Marx said...”

“Who?” someone interrupted.

“Well, you know, Marx... The person who invented and taught communism...” she replied.

“What??? And here I thought Zahariadis was our teacher!? That’s what our commissar told us only a few days ago!!!” interrupted another man.

“Zahariadis? Of course he is our teacher and also our leader... When all the proletariat unites, there will be no nations and states and no limits. If you want to go to Russia, for example, then you can go to Russia … No problem…” she replied.

“So what will happen if everyone goes where ever they feel like going? How far will this go?” asked a man standing next to her.

“In communism…” she replied, and before she had a chance to finish her sentence the man who wanted to know what ‘proletariat’ was loudly interrupted and said: “Forget about traveling all over the world and explain to me what ‘proletariat’ is!”

“Proletariat?” she asked.

“Yes, proletariat!” replied the man.

“Proletariat are those people who only have their own two hands...” she explained.

“Only their own two hands? And you want me to remain with only my two hands? No! No, thank you, my dear! You mean to tell me no fields, no sheep, no goats, no oxen, no cows? No thank you, I am better off being a villager...” he replied.

“What’s so precious about your goats? They too will disappear. There will be no goats. Goats are harmful to the forests. There in

Bitola they told me that goats were harmful to the forests so they passed laws to get rid of them, so they slaughtered all the goats," she explained.

"Goats?" he asked with astonishment.

"Yes, goats…" she replied.

"That's a darn shame... goats are such peaceful, beautiful and charming animals and now you are telling me they slaughtered them all? You are telling me they adopted such laws? It seems to me that those people who adopted these laws must be very irresponsible people! The goats? Did you hear that people? They slaughtered all the goats!!! What a darn shame!!!" said the man with disgust and spit into the fire.

The woman then turned to the others and said: "This is the soul of a peasant, comrade fighters. Peasants do not understand the revolution, no matter how many times you explain it to them, they will still talk about oxen, sheep and fields and... now let me tell you that after our victory there will be no peasants, all of us will belong to the proletariat with two strong hands to work for the greater good of communism..."

"So, we will stop being peasants?" someone asked.

"Well, yes!" she replied.

"We will all be proletariat with only two hands? another man asked.

"And it will be so great!" she replied

"People, people!!! I want no part of this! I don't want to associate with such people... Just two hands? Really? Where, my dear, have you seen such a place, eh?" he asked.

The woman stopped talking, but only for a moment. She then opened her eyes wide open and, while making a wide circle with her hand, shouted: "All of Russia is like that… you…" and without having her sentence finished she shouted even louder: "All of Russia

is like that!!! Russia! Do you understand??? Russia, the first socialist country in the world is proletariat!!! And do you know how big Russia is? There is nothing here to compare it to… and there is nothing more to explain… and if Russia, this great big socialist country is like that, why can't we be, eh? Do you understand or not? It is the same in Yugoslavia… there is even a song sung about it. Let me see, how does it go? Aha! America and England will be proletariat countries… Everything… everywhere and everyone will belong to the proletariat."

"Russia can be what it wants to be.... What I don't understand is why we have to be like Russia?" replied the man.

"What is there to understand? That's what comrade Marx said, you simple ignorant peasant!" yelled the woman.

"My dear woman, can I ask you another question?" asked the man.

"Well, go ahead… ask!" she replied.

"The proletariat, about which you boast so much that they have two strong hands and nothing more and that you say are great fighters, why are they not here amongst us? Are we all here simple ignorant villagers? Is there such a thing as a proletariat among us? If so, then let them stand up so that we can see them." The man looked around for a moment and said: "Are there any? I don't see any? There you are my dear woman there are none. Why is that?" he asked.

"First and foremost comrade Zahariadis said that a proletariat revolution in Greece has not yet begun... And... And stop suffocating me!" she yelled out.

"I did not mean to upset you, I was only wondering. And if that is the case why don't you go looking for the proletariat to support your revolution? Why have you collected us simple ignorant peasants to do your bidding? You talked us into joining your revolution, you pointed your guns at us to force us to join, you fed us to the fleas, you made us bleed and sacrifice our lives for you, and now we are only simple ignorant peasants to you. In the meantime you have allowed the proletariat with two strong hands to stay home in the

cities and to spend their time in cafés and bars. And from us, the simple ignorant peasants, you have not only taken our bodies and souls, you have also taken our fields, our grains, our wine, our sheep, cattle, orchards, mills and everything else that you could lay your hands on… and still we are not good enough for you because we are not your ideal proletariat? Let me be the first to say that I do not belong in that group of people," the man explained.

"Earlier didn't I say that you would not understand? What you don't understand is that after we win the war, the revolutionaries will implement the proletariat dictatorship and then..." she said without ending her sentence.

"Well, that too I don't understand! Is the proletariat dictatorship something like the Metaxas dictatorship? Have you forgotten the Metaxas dictatorship? Have you forgotten the salted cod, the castor oil, the beatings and the reproach because we spoke our language? I don't understand..." replied the man.

"What… you… what do you still not understand?" she asked with a frustrated tone of voice.

"Well, I don't understand the proletariat dictatorship?!" he replied.

"What's the rush? When we get there you will know it… you will experience it first hand. Stop being impatient… Wait! It will come even if you don't understand it! When it comes then you will understand...." she advised.

She paused for a moment and continued with her commentary: "So, comrades, you have to be patient. We must win first. When we win, we will have only one holiday, the holiday of the proletariat. We will gather in the village square and listen to our leaders give speeches, we will call out slogans and we will sing revolutionary and proletariat songs. We will make the Anglo-American imperialists and their local lackeys shake in their boots. And, as I told you earlier, we will discard these church icons hanging above us…"

“That is not for me! I prefer to celebrate our old customs, passed on to us from generation to generation. These are our holidays, our symbols and our hallmark, which are different from those of others. I prefer celebrating with family and friends, with humour and happiness, with wine, appetizers, baked and broiled meat, sitting around our dining table and singing folk songs. Then I would like to go out and celebrate with my friends and neighbours and dance a few folk dances in the village square. Did you say that somewhere they did not celebrate holy holidays?”

“They, there, broke with faith. Now they celebrate the first of May, the holiday of the proletariat and the day when our leader was born. I want you to know that this is a very happy and joyful occasion. No one works during these days and everyone sings and celebrates. And when we, here, free ourselves, we too will celebrate. The first of May will be celebrated everywhere. The Party secretaries will come and give speeches, then together we will attend many rallies and go to Solun and even to Athens to hear Zahariadis who will speak about our new victories…” she replied.

“And who will work?” the same man asked.

“Don’t be daft man! Do you think we are here up in the mountains fighting against imperialism so that we can work? No! The proletariat will work and earn for us. They will set some money aside for us so that we don’t have to work. If we the fighters have to work then who will attend the meetings and rallies?” she explained.

The woman from AFZH (Anti-Fascist Front for Women) turned to the person sitting to her right and whispered: “Keep an eye on the guy who is asking all the questions. He will do a lot of damage if he is allowed to remain amongst the fighters…”

“You are saying that the icons will be discarded?” a voice from the crowd was heard asking. “Are we taking the people’s faith away from them? Is that right? Is this what the new government intends to do? Are we going to chase God out of the hearts of the people?”

The woman looked in the direction of where the voice was coming from and, without asking who was speaking, said: “The comrade,

shamefully, said that the new government will chase God out of the people's hearts. But I, comrade fighters, want, here before you, to tell you what our leader comrade Zahariadis said about our faith. Comrade Zahariadis said that the faith of the people is… wait, what did he say? It's on the tip of my tongue… He said that it was incense… not incense but something worse, much worse, my God, what was it? It was bad, a very bad thing…"

"It was that bad, eh?" someone interrupted but then she cut him off and said:

"Yes, that bad... it's here on the tip of my tongue but I just can't remember it because it was a big word and only great people say big words and our leader Zahariadis is a great person. How was it again? It's on the tip my tongue…" she stuck her tongue out and pointed at it with her dirty finger. "Well, it's here, just here..."

"Was it poppy?" someone asked.

"No, it wasn't poppy! It was something else," she replied.

"Was it tar?" someone else asked.

"Be quiet you! And watch what you say. Don't mix Zahariadis with tar!" she snapped.

"Well, tar is made from poppies and from tar..." he explained.

"Dung..." someone else yelled out, interrupting the first man.

There was laughter amongst the people, which was then overridden by the woman's threatening voice who said: "If I whack you one across the eyes, then you will understand dung. Look at this guy! Do you think comrade Zahariadis will say such a stupid village word? Shut up… you!" and then she spat into the fire.

"Hey, don't get yourself into a fit. We in Voden Region do this regularly. We make a cut into a pine tree and allow the sap to drain. We then mix the fluid well and when it dries we turn it into dung," explained another man.

“Is it opium?” asked another man laughingly.

“Opium!!! Yes that’s the word comrade Zahariadis used. Opium… Yes opium!” she said triumphantly, joyfully and with much pride. “Yes, it’s opium, opium, comrades...”

Then, after calming down a little from her excitement, she looked down and said: “I needed that, I needed some time to think about it and it came to me… Oh, I am so relieved... Opium... It was opium!” She then became excited again and repeated the word several more times as if wanting to remember it forever. She then looked up and continued with her address: “Well, fellow fighters that Opium! Opium is the religion of the people. That’s what comrade Zahariadis said… Yes…”

“Did Marx say that?” suspiciously asked another man sitting with his back to the sweltering fire. To many he sounded like he was the same man who revealed the word “opium” to the woman who tried so hard to find it.

“Be quiet, you! What Marx are you talking about? It was our Zahariadis about whom you understand nothing,” she snapped, paused for a moment and continued:

“Opium, comrades, is the faith of the people! For centuries our precious people have been poisoned by it and it has remained that way. By ejecting the icons from churches we will free ourselves from this poison... what was it called?”

“Opium!” many yelled out in unison.

“Yes, we will eject the opium!” she explained.

“You think the icons are opium and we will discard them?” a man asked.

“For sure! They are from our past. Just ordinary boards. We don’t need them. We will rebuild everything anew… Yes.... We are chatting here and forgot to feed the fire which is almost out. Go get

some wood from outside, come on, somebody? You, over there, yes you, go...” she ordered.

“Me? No, no no, I went earlier. Pick someone else. I just got myself warmed up… It’s really wicked out there and visibility is very poor. Perhaps you can burn some of the icons, as you said? replied the man.

“It is possible, it is possible. Everything is possible in the revolution. Toss that one, that one over there… the big one...” she ordered.

Mita stood up slowly, went to the altar then suddenly turned and with a quiet but stern sounding voice said: “Don’t you dare!”

“And who do you think you are, some sort of commander or bishop?” snapped the woman.

“I am neither and I will not stand here and watch you desecrate the church!” replied Mita with the same tone of voice and adjusted her shmizer (automatic rifle). “If you have the guts then get off your butt and toss the icon into the fire… Do it!” Mita ordered.

“And, you, you are against this?!” replied the woman sounding scolded. “Okay, let it be that way… tomorrow we will review your demand and decide what to do about it… Well, now I will tell you how a red commissar in Russia dealt with those people who opposed him. I learned about this in Bitola from a documentary Russian film I watched. This is how it was done. Red Army fighters were sitting around a fire getting warm, much like we are doing here now. It was winter and winters in Russia are very cold. Then their commissar entered, frozen and covered with ice, and told those sitting around the fire: ‘Do you not see that those hanging from the walls are laughing and mocking you? Do you not see them all bearded with their eyes wide open staring and laughing at you? And do you know why they are laughing at you? They are laughing at you because you refuse to understand the revolution and because of your ignorance, you sit here freezing. Shame on you!’ The commissar then said: ‘Take down and toss one of the big icons in the fire so that I too can warm up.’ Then a Red Army fighter, young like you, took the largest icon down with his two, strong Red Army hands and tossed it

into the fire. The flames shot up high and warmed everyone... They were all happy...” she stopped talking and looked around to see what kind of impression she had made.

Two fighters sitting side by side some steps away from the fire, near the bishop’s throne, discussed developments in the current situation.

“What do you think, will they burn the icons?” the first man asked.

“No one will dare touch them while Mita is standing there in front of the altar,” replied the second man.

“A few days ago we spent the night in a church where we burned the altar and some of the church’s icons. In doing so, I felt like we burned part of the soul of our people. The simple, the poor, the sick, the ones with many children, the ones with no children, the crippled, the blind, they all collect coin after coin, depriving themselves of essentials, in order to set aside enough money to build a church. Building a church is expensive especially since they have to pay skilled workers to do the delicate work and artists to paint the icons. Then, after the church was built and consecrated, they all line up with lit candles, half afraid and with sober faces they prayed for relief to come from above, from God. They pray to be healed, to be healthy, to be happy, to be prosperous and then waited in hope that their prayers will be heard above and that their suffering will be alleviated, their pain will vanish and their diseases will heal. Then if their suffering ended, if they become healthy, happy and prosperous, they thank God for that… They thank God for births, for the water they drank, for the food they ate, for the rain… They said thank you Bogoroditse, Sveti Ilia, Sveti Nikola, Sveti Dimitria and stared at the faces of the icons and made silent gestures and promises and then they prayed to each of the icons and waited and hoped. Have you ever seen anyone pray to the Government in the way they pray in church? No! But do you know why? Because the government is only interested in taking from the people! It is greedy, cruel and uncaring towards the needs and desires of the people, especially towards the needs of the very young, the helpless and the poor and powerless. And now, we who have stood up to change the government and replace it with our government and power, are burning altars and icons; with them burning all hope for the meek and helpless… Go

ahead, warm yourself by the fire burning in the middle of the church and greedily look at the icons, not to pray, but to burn them in the fire, to destroy all hope for the weakest in our society, and we dare call ourselves the fighters of the people's government. As I listened to this woman I thought to myself: Where did this corruption in her come from? Where does she get these wild and crazy thoughts? Toss the biggest icon into the fire, she says, and then expresses joy at the prospect because that's what some people in some foreign country did... Have we gone completely out of our minds? It is none of our business what other countries do. Let them do whatever they want to do. But who is teaching our people to behave this way; to want to destroy our heritage, to want to act like ignorant barbarians and to want to dream pipe dreams. Are we now going to act like some crazed ignorant Russians from the far steppes? Are we going to burn everything from our past because they decided to? Have we gone mad? Where do you think the people from this village will go after we are gone? Do you think they will go to the people of our government? Where are they going to find these people from the government? All this time these so-called government people have been hiding themselves in the mountains and only passing through the villages at night so that they can stuff themselves with food and drink at the expense of the peasants. Only two or three people know about the government people, about the house in which they are placed, about the time when they come and go. Nobody else knows who they are or their schedules... the only thing that ordinary people know is that they have to feed them and keep them warm when they come to their homes… Our comrades from the government sure know how to hide… they hide like lone wolves and only move during the night. They hide, but do they hide from the people? Yes they do. They never trust those who feed them, who give them a warm place to stay, who give them water to drink, who wash their feet and who share the last piece of bread with them… Our people sense the wildness in them and will not willingly go to the government. But the people will come here… they will go to their churches and pray. They will pray warm prayers about hope… They will secretly pray about their sorrows and about their pains…" said the first man, pausing for a moment. It seemed like he was losing his voice. He looked around and then turned his eyes up and looked at the ceiling. Then he looked at the walls. As if for the first time, he noticed the icons above the altar. He stared at the saints standing

upright along the walls, their faces vibrating, reflecting the flames of the fire. One saint had a gleam of light in his eyes. In amazement the man whispered: “Look at that saint” and pointed with his head. “No matter how I move, no matter where I go, he looks me straight in the eyes. Look, is he looking at you the same way?” asked the first man.

“Yes, yes… he looks me straight in the eyes too! I will go further away... It’s the same. He does not move, he does not turn yet he continued to look me in the eye. He is looking at me right now as if he was alive! Look at the others, are they also looking,” said the second man.

“Yes, straight in the eye... They look like they are angry, ready to yell at us...” replied the first man.

“Do I think it’s a mirage? It is not a mirage. Look at them. They angrily look you straight in the eye. What’s their problem, eh?” asked the second man.

“They have no problem. I believe they were painted that way. The artist who painted them looked them straight in the eye and they looked at him the same way…” replied the first man.

“Brave man that artist!” said the second man. “Brave man… He must have been very brave to be able to stare them straight in the eyes. How old do you think these walls are?” asked the second man.

“If only the soot could speak, then we would know how old they are,” said the first man while shaking his head, shrugging his shoulders and raising his eyebrows in amazement and then said: “Bad, very bad…”

“What’s bad?” asked the second man.

The first man turned his head and with his eyes pointed at the woman who was speaking earlier. She was quiet now, sleeping. Her head was turned to the side and saliva was dripping from her mouth. Without taking his eyes off her the first man said: “When corrupt people enter the church... ordinary people begin to curse and the curses from ordinary people, they say, are the most damning. They

last for as long as the family line is alive and as long as its roots exist... down to the last living individual. The curses, they say, will live on and carry the evil for as long as the line lasts. The evil lives in the curse. Curses also continue to live in the memories of poor nations and haunt them for generations… bad memories of mistakes made are passed on from generation to generation so that such mistakes are never made again… they serve as lessons and warnings… we will be cursed for this, mark my words, we will be cursed by the people for doing this to them… we will be cursed…" he concluded.

Just a few steps away from the two men the fire was spreading, the coals were piling up and the flames were caressing the new layers of wood piled up on top of them. Occasionally sparks flew. The heat from the fire spread warmth all throughout the church. The fighters were loosening their belts and unbuttoning their overcoats. Those sitting close to the fire were removing their heavy garments. Those who were sufficiently warmed up lay sleeping on the stone floor of the church, covered with their old Italian and English overcoats. Those still cold sat by the fire with their backs turned to it. A man suddenly jumped to his feet and rubbed his shoulders. The smell of burned cloth proliferated all through the church. Mita, leaning on the doors of the altar, drifted in and out of sleep. The radiance of the fire, the shimmering of the bluish flame caressing the coals, the flashes of flames dancing around the burning wood and the sudden eruption of sparks flying in the air was the central focus of everyone's attention. They all sat quietly as light broke away from the fire and spilled all around the church, making things fade in and out of twilight, emphasizing and hiding the wings of the angels and the cheeks of the saints. Someone brought two split logs and threw them into the fire. A cloud of sparks, like a swarm of bees, jumped out reaching all the way to the ceiling. The flames suddenly jumped on the logs, walking on them and leaving dark scars wherever they touched. They danced all around until they completely surrounded the logs and held them in their grasp. And as the fire burned, someone else cast an icon on it, torn from the altar. For a moment the enire church went dark. The sharp smoke that rose caused many to tear. Flames danced under the icon working their way around it. The paint on top began to fry, darkening and changing the icon's colour. Then small flames began to dance on top of the saint. The

canvas began to shrink and it suddenly burst into flame. A bundle of sparks exploded into the air and lit up the entire church, dancing their way down. It seemed like the warmth of the burning icon had placed everone in a trance… The place was silent.

The church door suddenly opened. A cloud of snow and wind followed the man who entered.

“Commander, where is the commander?” he asked.

“Over there in the altar,” someone pointed with his head. Just as the man was asking for him, the commander, adjusting his officer’s belt, came out of the altar.

“Comrade Commander! There is an urgent message for you!” the man said, removing his hat, tearing a piece of paper from inside it and handing it to him.

The commander turned the piece of paper towards the flame so that he could see what was written on it, raised his eyebrows and moved his lips. He then put the piece of paper in his officer’s briefcase and yelled out: “Attention everyone! Put out the fire, get out and line up!”

The squad formed a line in front of the church and the sergeant took attendance to make sure everyone was present and accounted for. After that the squad was ordered to march single file, walking one behind the other following the courier who knew his way around in the heavy snow.

The woman from AFZF, with her head wrapped in the high collar of her coat, knocked on Kuze’s door. There was a quiet rustle and then the door opened, but only a crack. Peering through the crack was Kuze with his messed-up hair.

“Ah, it’s you!” said Kuze without being surprised. “Come in, quickly come in… it sure is cold out there…”

Kuze lit a kerosene lamp, looked into the woman’s face and, with an apologetic voice, said: “I wish you could have come earlier, we

would have had dinner together. You also missed the baking of the big loafs of bread. Seven batches are being baked in seven different ovens… enough to feed an army," said Kuze while showing her with his arms the size of a loaf.

She gave him a harsh stare, grabbed him by his double chin and, while squeezing every word, shook him and said: "You left my army hungry!"

"What? What? Hungry? Seven ovens…" he said unable to find the words to explain himself.

"The hell with your seven ovens! I said you left my army hungry! You never delivered the bread you were asked to deliver, now the fighters are gone, hungry, without food! They are gone, they left, don't you understand!?" she said angrily.

"What? They left? Why did they leave without the bread?" replied Kuze, with an expression of great surprise and disappointment, and then ran to the window to look outside into the darkness. "Oh well, I guess they are gone. Now what am I going to do with all that bread? And you, what are you doing here? Why aren't you with them?" asked Kuze.

"It's not your business to know where I should be! My job does not take me to marches. Make sure that the bread is safeguarded. Tomorrow at dawn there will be other columns marching by here. Remember that!" she said and again grabbed him by his double chin, shook him, sternly looked him in the eyes and then, with her finger shaking in front of his nose, said: "You had better remember or else! Because if you don't you will find yourself in the front with the next column! Now listen! You should immediately feed those passing by here tomorrow! And remember: always have bread on hand! Keep it in a safe place wherever you want but always have it on hand. If you don't, I will personally kill you!" she yelled at him, pulled out her side arm from behind her belt and pointed it at his nose. "I will kill you like a rabid dog!" she said and put her pistol back into the holster. "Don't disappoint me or else… I will kill you like a rabid dog!" she said again.

She again raised her high overcoat collar above her ears, stuffed her hands deep into her pockets, turned, kicked the door open with her army boot, went outside and, without saying another word, disappeared into frozen snow. And Kuze, standing at the door, when he was sure she had disappeared into the dark alley, hit his right elbow with his left hand and said: “Like hell you will kill me…”

# The Great Decline – Chapter 5

Step by step they marched, stooping forward in a crooked line following one another and breathing heavily. It was cold and the frozen snow squeaked and cracked with every step. In some places the snow was waist deep and sometimes shoulder deep. It was a real struggle marching through the deep snow and dangerous, especially when passing over deep crevasses and under potential avalanches. A cold breeze turned their faces ghostly white and froze their ears and cheeks. They felt the burning cold everywhere. Their fingers, toes and feet burned and hurt. They had never before encountered such cold and snow that was so loud, crunching under their feet. It seemed like it got louder with every step they took. It squeaked and crunched under their feet and each step became heavier and harder to take. Up above, on top of the hill, the wind roared as it passed through the beech trees. It was very cold. The howling wind picked up drifts of snow, whipped it around in a wild frenzy and tossed it into their faces and eyes making the march even more treacherous.

“Move forward! Hold on to the person in front of you! Do not stop!” the order was given and passed along from person to person.

They marched bent forward, breathing heavily and all sweaty.

“Do not stop. Keep moving or you will fall asleep... move... move, do not stop!” were the only words heard from the invisible column passing through a blizzard.

Tsilka began to lag. She could not keep up the pace. She felt as if the snow under her feet was slipping backwards and pulling her with it. She could barely lift her feet. She slowed down a bit but her knees could not hold her weight... Someone caught her under the arm and pulled her closer. Tsilka was out of it, but still aware that a strong hand had grabbed her and was now pulling her forward.

Holding hands, holding on to coats and to gun belts, they slowly crossed the river. Their wet clothes felt heavy and quickly began to freeze. Their coats, shirts, pants and socks inside their heavy boots were completely drenched. Their wet backpacks weighed them

down, making their legs stiff and tired, feeling as if they were stuck in the earth.

“Get up! Move! Forward! Do not stop!” were the new encouraging words now barked at the column which soon began to move again.

The fighters were moving with eyes closed, holding each other by their coats and belts, following one another single file, enduring pain and fighting drowsiness… Finally they reached their destination at dawn.

“Light fires!” a commanding voice was heard barking.

They collected scraps of wood and lit fires on top of the snow. There was too much snow and as it melted it put out their fires. They gathered around, cleared a large space, piled all the wood in it and started a bonfire. In spite of the bellowing smoke, which made them cough and spit, they made a large circle around the fire and began to warm their stiff, frozen hands and bodies...

The march resumed in the afternoon. They were given a new destination.

They were gathered in trenches and huddled together, next to one another, leaning on the frozen walls where water had once drained before it froze, looking at the flickering flames of the tiny fires they lit. They looked like they were mesmerized by the dancing flames. One would think they were all sleeping with their eyes open except for the tears dripping down their cheeks from the smoke that irritated their eyes. The warmth from the fire made them drowsy and sleepy but they were not sleeping, they were simply burdened with deep thoughts… The march traumatized their bodies and now they were stunned and had surrendered to the warmth and serenity of their environment… Everything hurt including swallowing the leftover stale bread now soaked in water…

Iani closed his eyes and all he could think of was a table full of all kinds of foods, including his favourite dish of baked beans. To the side of the table he pictured a fireplace with a burning fire, burning oak logs and sparks splashing all over the room. It had a lively fire,

its flame thundering up the chimney and warming the entire room. He pictured himself stretched out in front of it, covered with a red woolen blanket, with his cold, dirty and tired feet soaking in a bowl of hot water. He pictured his mother fussing about and cutting freshly baked bread. He then pictured his mother coming over and sitting next to him, caressing his sore hands and offering him a cup of warm milk... He was asleep by now and dreaming, but his dream was not so pleasant. Just as he fell asleep, Iani began to fret, yell, threaten, jump, kick and punch the air with his fists... He opened his eyes. His entire body was rigid and he was sweating profusely... Tsilka was leaning over to him and wiped the sweat from his forehead and neck...

The fire, burning in the makeshift fireplace inside the wall of the trench, was out. Shadows were creeping up everywhere and darkness began to overtake the trench. Night was slowly approaching. Tsilka tilted her head on Iani's shoulder and fell asleep. In her sleep, like a scene from a film being rewound, she heard the usual swearing and cursing. But this time something was different. This time she heard Tsana praying and calling for help… She was heavily wounded out in the field and was yelling and calling but no one could hear her over the flood of gunfire. No matter how hard she yelled her voice was overpowered by the gunfire. She felt drained and wasted... Tsilka suddenly opened her eyes wide open and jumped to her feet. A glowing coal in the makeshift fireplace got her attention. She stared at it until it went out. It was drowned by the dripping water that was now slowly draining into the trench and accumulating at its bottom. She looked up and through the gaps of the tall beech trees she could see stars. Tiny lights were penetrating through the large black canvas of the night sky. A gust of wind blew and shook the branches above, dislodging chunks of snow that fell on her face. More wind blew causing her to shiver and return back to her place. She heard a quiet hoarse voice saying something. It was Kole who recently had returned from the hospital.

"I met her at the hospital," he said. "After that I followed her everywhere every day for many days. One day, up there on the steep slope, I stopped in front of her and stared into her eyes. She looked at me and gave me a cold poisonous stare. I approached her and

grabbed her by her face with both hands. She turned her head and looked away. She said nothing. It felt like she relaxed in my hands. I then put her in a cart and push the cart down the hill with her in it. They found her late in the evening. They said the cart had overturned in the ditch and she broke her neck. But only I know what really happened and now you also know... You would not believe how many young men and women suffered because of her lies and her spying on people... She informed on everyone, on people kissing, on people taking an extra portion of bread… And as such many people were shot and died before dawn and behind the bushes for nothing... And every time I think about it, it makes me sick. Hold my hands... They are soaked from my own sweat... I can't seem wash it off, not even with soap... I even pissed on them but they still sweat..."

It was obvious that the man was delirious so Tsilka, quietly, without a word, moved away and sat next to Zoia, who had just returned to our detachment about a week ago. In the semi-dark she looked at Zoia and saw the damaged side of her face. Tsilka thought to herself: The poor woman, she is such a good and peaceful person, why did this have to happen to her? Why did her face have to be hit by shrapnel and damaged so badly? She wanted to say something warm and gentle to her but she knew it would not bring her any comfort. Instead, Tsilka began to pray silent prayers. She prayed for Zoia and for those who were lying exhausted now, napping frozen and wet in the trenches, she prayed for those on guard, for those who returned from battle and for all those who were on their way to the hospital...

Zoia turned her head and came cheek to cheek with Tsilka's face and the two quietly, to themselves, prayed together. They both prayed to the Almighty with all their strength, desperately hoping their prayers would be heard. Embraced in thought and spirit they both surrendered to God...

Minutes later the detachment's political secretary entered the trench and asked: "Who among you here knows how to perform cupping? (a medical procedure)."

“I do…” a shy voice was heard saying from down the corner. A moment later Zoia stood up while buttoning her great big wide coat. The political secretary looked at her coat then moved his eyes down to her dirty boots and said: “Come closer.”

Zoia came closer and stopped in front of him. The dim fire burning in the makeshift fireplace, together with the dim light entering the trench from the outside brightened Zoia’s face revealing the large crusted scar on her right cheek.

“What is that on your cheek?” the political secretary asked while pointing at her face with his finger.

“I… I… I…” Zoia began to say while being overcome with intense emotions. “I just returned from the hospital. I am almost recovered. I was wounded and now I am back with my squad with my crusted wound…”

Once again he looked at Zoia carefully, like he was measuring her from head to toe and then said: “One of you girls knows how to perform cupping,” and then looked around at the faces of the others. “This one knows how,” he said while pointing at Zoia. “How about you?” he asked another girl and pointed at her. “You have until the end of the day to learn. This is an order. Do you understand?”

“I understand!” she replied and gave him a military salute. “I will immediately learn how to perform cupping!”

“Immediately and then report to me!” he instructed.

“Understood… Political Secretary! Report to you!” she replied.

Tight at her shoulders and bent forward, Zoia stood at the edge of the pond looking into the clear water. Looking back at her was a woman with wide open eyes, like those of a frightened doe. She had a large ugly scar on her face. Her forehead was wrinkled, her lips tight and her jaw clenched… Zoia was looking at a broken woman… And just now she realized how much she had degraded and how much it hurt her to be this way... A tear dropped into the water creating a widening circle, and then another and another

spreading all through the pond and distorting the entire mirror. Each circle slowly moved away from the shore and faded only to be replaced by another circle, carrying with it Zoia's pain, grief and ugly face. As the ripples subsided the water relaxed its shivers, scars and abrasions. Zoia again bent forward and with her big brown eyes looked deep down into the pond until she saw the sand on the bottom... Life is like a handful of sand, she thought to herself, which someone can measure by dropping it through their fingers...

In the evening the woman, who by now had learned how to perform cupping, took her backpack which had the apparatus for performing the procedure in a little bag and reported to the brigade commander's trench. She was immediately put to work. Several days later she was transferred to the brigade headquarters where a girl was also needed to perform cupping...

The weather had somewhat improved in the first days of March. Winds blowing from the south began to melt the snow making everything wet. Soon afterwards the rains came to Gramos. They were preceded by lightning and thunder. Lightning strikes were very common in these barren rocky hills, especially against the isolated and sporadic trees. The brooks and ravines get dangerously swollen with fast flowing water at this time of year. Visibility is poor during the day and it gets very dark at night, especially during intense rain storms. The fast flowing muddy waters carry leaves, branches, logs and sometimes stones, making them very dangerous to cross in the dark. There are days when it rains with no end, which darkens a person's soul and makes them very irritable and angry. The milder weather also brings cold fog which settles in crevasses and ravines. The fog carries droplets of water and a person feels lost in it. Prolonged exposure can make one feel small, weak, lonely, empty, broken and powerless. Sunlight and heat seem to relieve the anxiety people feel up there in the mountains.

Soon afterwards the trees bud and grow young and tender shoots. The grass starts to green and grow. The birds begin to sing and the faces of the girls flourish and are full of smiles. Spring has arrived…

Ilo, leaning on the wall of the trench, was talking to two new arrivals from the hospital in Suk. He said:

“There is no girl older than twenty in our detachment. We have four seventeen year olds, seven eighteen year olds and five nineteen year olds. We have one twenty year old and she was put in charge of all the girls. Only she knows when washing and other female things are done. Right now they are going to the river to wash. I accidentally opened a backpack left on the ground and took out a notebook. Here is what was written in it: ‘The political commissar of detachment 587 has a very bad attitude towards girls. He always looks down on them and refuses to recognize their pains. He says he only recognizes heroism and nothing else. This villainous man arrived here about a month ago. He came from Bulkesh. Those who come from Bulkesh, we call Bulkiotes. We hate them. They consider themselves educated and upper class and trust no one. We are all “questionable” to them. They are very strict and without humanity. All commanders that came from Bulkesh are like that. When someone says they came from “Bulkesh” be careful of them... When one of my girls says something that may be of use to us, he immediately objects to it, saying that she is not mature and educated enough to have policy building ideas. He is a terrible and heartless man. I am sorry for Lenka and Marika who got caught and punished for eating green grass and swollen buds. There is very little food to eat, what does he expect us to do? Starve? We eat fifty grams of stale bread and almost everyday for lunch and dinner we eat flour mixed in warm water. The man scolded the two girls so badly that all through the last march they felt depressed and isolated. They were given the task of carrying a heavy machine gun and as a result they fell behind. When the greater part of the detachment took its position on top of the hill, the two girls were still climbing the slope. When the commander shouted at them to get them moving the political commissar told him to stop yelling, we were not in a village or walking down a promenade serving water. Later when the commander questioned Marika as to why they were late, she told him the machinegun they were issued to carry was very heavy and there was no one there to help them carry it... Until two months ago we had no uniforms. They sent us on exercises, marches and to battle in the clothing we brought from home. Our dresses were torn to shreds and we had to walk in bare feet... I can’t write much more because I am constantly crying when I think of what we have gone through.’...”

The women were spotted coming back from their wash. They were just beyond the brook when Ilo put the notebook back in the backpack, lay down and placed his hat over his face, pretending that he was napping. Moments later he felt a kick on his hip. He turned his head and looked.

“Look!” one of the men said.

“Wow, it’s our girls…” Ilo said with admiration. “Wow!”

“Yes, yes… they are our girls… Whose girls did you think they were?” replied the other man.

“Wow! Look how clean they look…” said Ilo, jumping to his feet. “Look at their red cheeks…” he added.

“Clean, Ilo, they are very clean...” said the first man as the girls passed by them.

As the three men ogled and teased the girls, several other men popped their heads out of the trenches and the machine gun nests, stretching their necks out to have a better look. Mita, the oldest, with her shmaizer hanging over her shoulder, tapped Ilo on the arm and moved on ahead of the other girls. She walked tall and proud with her hat slightly tilted, her long, black hair flowing behind her and her top two shirt buttons unbuttoned. She floated by them like a breeze, throwing her shoulders back and walking with a beautiful rhythm. Her step was hard and certain as she floated over the grass and her body emitted an aroma of mountain mint and flowers. She looked stealthily at the trenches and was well aware of the men looking at her beautiful body and swallowing hard. Then as she passed by the first group of men she saluted with a gentle motion of her hand. She then quietly said, “What a bunch of bulls!”

After the women had passed by, everyone dispersed and went back to what they were doing… Ilo took a deep sigh, looked up at the sky and, while shaking his head, said: “Lord please don’t take away my desires…”

# The Great Decline – Chapter 6

"This is some snow, some blizzard...," said Stoian. "Let it snow… Let it accumulate to waist high… shoulder high if it wants to... Let it block all the roads so neither we nor they can move. It's a good thing that we built these trenches when we did. We were complaining when they were pushing us to dig and carry logs but our sweat paid off, right? We can now sit, lay down, snooze, relax, warm ourselves on the fire and pray that more snow falls. And the longer we are stuck here, the better, right?" Stoian paused for a moment, look over at the makeshift fireplace and said: "Iani, are you still messing around with the fire? Here are some dry twigs… Shake off some dry grass and some lint off someone's backpack and light it. Get going Iani, light the fire… Let it burn high… And you guys… don't you dare put your smelly socks out to dry…"

In no time at all the trench was filled with smoke. Almost everyone was coughing and squeezing tears from their smoke filled eyes. Iani, kneeling in front of the fireplace, standing under a pot hanging from a chain, kept blowing on the fire in an attempt to expedite the burn. Then suddenly there was a flash and the fire was ablaze, flame was shooting up and quickly devouring the moss and dry twigs. Iani gently added more wood and as he pulled away, he spat to the side and wiped his tears with his dirty palms. The fire grew bigger and lit the entire trench. Minutes later its warmth was felt in every corner.

Crammed next to one another they all sat silently in the trench, each burdened with their own thoughts, looking at the branches above sagging down from the weight of the snow. Mita appeared at the entrance and shook the snow off herself. The cold and the blowing wind followed her from behind. She dropped a pile of wood near the fireplace.

"There is some blue sky opening up to the north of us… You can see the stars," said Mita breaking the silence and sitting near Tsilka.

"If it clears up then we can expect ice cold weather. Everything will freeze… We will be under ice. The snow will compress…" added Stoian with a disappointed tone of voice, tossing a couple of logs of wood into the fire. "Let's hope they don't order us to get moving…"

Again they all sat in silence staring into the fire, lost in their own thoughts, no doubt contemplating what was in store for them next and how their loved ones were doing... They sat and waited in fear… they sat and waited in anticipation… they sat and hoped, prayed and desired… And in the silence… silence prevailed… except for the heavy sighs and the sparks flying out of the fireplace… There was no joy in this miserable place and anyone who felt any joy, jealously guarded it deep down in their hearts. They did however appreciate spending the night in this warm trench instead of under a winter star-lit sky covered in snow and ice… and waiting for their dinner to arrive.

A little earlier the cook had brought them boiled corn for dinner. He handed out one handful of corn to each person. Iani made a game of eating it; one kernel at a time. He tossed a kernel up in the air and caught it with his mouth. At one point he said: "Look… look… it loves to land in my mouth. It's sweet like candy… like a lokum (Turkish delight) with chunks of walnuts, yum.. yum… delicious…"

The pot with water hanging on the tripod over the fireplace was boiling. Mita threw in a handful of mountain tea and when its fragrant aroma permeated all through the trench, it was time to drink. Each person took a turn and filled their aluminum cup and at the same time used the warmth of the cup to warm their hands and with their hands they warmed their faces. They each blew on their hot tea and slurped it down loudly trying not to get their lips burned. The hot liquid felt nice going down, warming their throats, chests and stomachs. The pot was then again filled with snow and hung on the tripod.

"It would be nice to have some bread to dip in our tea…" piped up Iani, making a dipping motion with his hand.

They were all suffering from fatigue and the warm tea naturally made them drowsy and wanting to sleep. Mita leaned her head on Tsilka's shoulder and watched the flames dance in the fireplace and the sparks fly. Over the silence she heard breathing, sighs and the occasional quiet moan from the girls. She knew that some were secretly crying. She knew from their sighs and from their laboured

breathing that they were troubled. When it was all quiet like this and there was silence among them, they tended to think of a lot of things, especially things that troubled them and caused them to sigh, moan and shed tears. Mita turned her head and looked at Zoia. Her face had the colour of fresh honey burned by the sun, blown by the wind and washed by the rain. Her cheeks were slightly red from the warmth of the fire and the dancing flames were reflected in her mesmerized eyes. Mita then turned her eyes and looked at Velika. Her cheeks too were slightly red and for a moment she looked as if she showed a sign of happiness only to be quickly replaced with sadness, sorrow and pain. She was probably happy because they were all together in one place, warm and alive. If only the blizzard would go away and the sunshine would come back. Sunshine and the warmth of the sun seemed to bring happiness to people. Sunshine also allowed them to go outside which beat sitting in the trenches and breathing stale air, smelling of rotting leaves and ferns, smelly military shoes and socks, unwashed sweat-soaked clothes and dirty bodies. In the outdoors they could lie on the frozen snow with their eyes closed, looking at the red colour under their eyelids, feeling the warmth of the sun on their faces. Mita again turned her attention to the fire. She focused on herself now and began to examine her own life. She sped through her twenty years of life, which seemed to have had too many sunrises and sunsets, much fog and rain, marches and battles, days and nights, wetness, hunger and the pain of missing her family and friends, many of whom were now gone. She again looked at Tsilka, Velika, Tinka, Zoia and for a brief moment felt some joy. Emotions were driven by thoughts and thoughts in these circumstances were quickly replaced by other thoughts as the memories unwound one after another. And as she was going through her own memories it seemed to her like she had just heard the voice of her political commissar who had spoken to her nearly four months ago at the meadows of Arena. He told her: “If you don’t kill them, they will kill you!” She then thought: Why is it necessary to kill and be killed? She couldn’t remember how many times she had asked herself this same question. Who invented this evil idea of killing? Would the time ever come when this evil would be eradicated? Someone, some say it was Christ, undertook the task of uprooting evil, bad, pain and ugliness and attempted to replace them with good and doing good. But the poor man suffered immensely for what he tried to do. That is why since then and until

this day he is celebrated and people are convinced of his good and in his name they die and defeat death... But why do people, who believe in the same God, hate each other and want to kill one another? Mita took a deep breath and shook her head in disbelief. She then looked at Velika and Zoia again, noticing that their chins were shaking slightly and tears were forming around their closed eyes. At that moment, at that sight, Mita's chest began to vibrate uncontrollably and a loud involuntary howling sound came out of her mouth. She began to cry, but not silently like the others. Unable to control her emotions and her outbursts, she began to pull on her hair. She then quickly turned to Tsilka and shoved her face into her shoulder. Mita looked up towards the ceiling as if searching for something. Tsilka, shocked out of her sleep, was gently stroking her head. Across the trench Iani was heard speaking. He said: "Tsilka, all the time you keep quiet, why are you so quiet? I have not heard your voice since yesterday. They say you are a good story teller. Please tell us a story."

"You again with the stories. What kind of story would you like me to tell you Iani?" asked Tsilka.

"Well, one about home, like all the stories we tell… about home," replied Iani.

"Argir, hey Argir! Are you sleeping?" called out Tsilka.

"No! No, I am not sleeping," replied Argir.

"Well then, stop snoring… You are a funny man Argir. You fall asleep even before your head hits the ground and then you start snoring..." said Iani mocking Argir and then asked Tsilka to start telling her story.

Tsilka adjusted herself, threw a few sticks into the fire, coughed and began speaking:

"We had two female (Greek) teachers in our village. Their names were Maria and Sofia. Maria taught me when I was in kindergarden and Sofia when I was in grade one. The teachers had no permanent residences so they spent their time in our people's houses. Because

the state had no money to pay for them, the villagers had to provide food and sleeping quarters for them. So every two or three days the teachers switched houses. And, whether they liked it on not, they had to learn our (Macedonian) language if they wanted to communicate with our people. We often sat on the porch and quietly, quietly, sang our (Macedonian) songs for them. They did not understand the words but were delighted to hear us sing. "You have very beautiful songs," they would say and make nasal sounds mimicking the melody. They slept in our guest room where my mother and grandmother made their beds for them. They spoke Macedonian as best as they could with the old people and only said good morning to the men. They did not speak with the men. We, the little girls, liked them and often came over just to say good day in Macedonian instead of in Greek. They did not get angry or annoyed with us speaking Macedonian. But they said that we needed to speak Greek at home with our parents and grandparents in order to be good girls. One day, one of them said to me that God and the Virgin Mary would love me and protect me if I spoke Greek. 'If you do not speak Greek like you are told,' she said, 'then every night you will have dreams of wolves chasing you through the dense forests and dragons burning your little bodies with flames... and the good angels will not come to help you'..." She paused for a moment, threw some more twigs into the fire and continued:

"I was very frightened that day and after I returned from school I spoke Greek to my grandfather who came to get me at the gate. He looked at me sternly but compassionately, put his finger to his lips and whispered: 'Be quiet child…' and that was it, he did not say any more. Some time later my father asked me what I had learned in school that day and I said that all this time we had been learning the Lord's Prayer which started with 'Pater Imon…' Then I heard my grandfather cough and as I looked in his direction I saw the same stern look on his face that I had seen some time earlier. Since I had forgotten what it was all about, I continued talking. My grandfather then came over, sat me down on his knee and said: 'The Lord's Prayer in our (Macedonian) language goes like this:

**Отче наш иже еси на небесах,**
**да свјатитсја имја твое,**
**да приидјет царствие твое,**

**да будјет воља твоја,**
**јако на небеси и на земли.**
**Хљаб наш насушниј дажд нам днес**
**и остави нам долги наше**
**јакоже и ми остављајем должником нашим;**
**и не ввеги нас во искушение,**
**но избави нас од лукавого**
**и ниње и присно и во вјеки вјеков... амин...'**

I know this prayer! I screamed out. My grandfather then hugged me and said: 'You must never forger it… my child'…". Tsilka stopped talking, sighed deeply, looked around and quietly, barely audibly said: "My grandfather, grandmother, father, mother and all the relatives in our household used to cross ourselves and say: '**слава Отцу и Сину и Свјатому духу и ниње и присно и во вјеки вјеков... Амин.'**…"

Tsilka looked up at the trench ceiling and crossed herself three times.

"For as long as I can remember, this is how we used to cross ourselves and pray to God at home…" Tsilka whispered and then placed her hands over her face and went completely silent. The makeshift fireplace, hollowed out inside the trench wall, let out a loud burst of sparks breaking the silence and disturbing the fighters lying around the fire. After the sparks flew, a small flame burst out of the coals and began to climb on the logs. It quickly moved along, licking and hugging them, until the logs were completely surrounded. The warmth of the fire was felt all around the trench. Everyone was silent again, staring at the dancing flames, deep in their own thoughts, searching their memories and taking long sighs to ease their pain and sorrow. Outside of the added burst of sparks flying out and flames gently flaring in the fireplace, it was quiet again. The only signs of life in the trench were those of the shadows dancing on the trench walls...

"Continue, Tsilka…" Zoia's voice was heard saying, breaking the silence.

“After finishing fourth grade it was off to work for me. I got up at dawn with my mother and worked with her all day, mostly at home and sometimes out in the fields. Do you think work was easy or there was little work in the village? No! The only time work eased in the village was after harvest time so I kept telling myself, just a little longer and I would be going back to school. During the short summer nights I slept outside in the yard on the cobblestones on top of a straw mat. I slept outside to avoid being eaten alive by the fleas that were very active inside the house at that time of year. Before falling asleep I stared at the stars, looking from one end of the sky to the other. I followed the visible sky from one side enclosed by our house to the other side enclosed by the barn where we kept our sheep. I then followed it on the opposite sides enclosed by our outdoor oven on one side and by the common wall of the yard we shared with our neighbours, on the other side. As I watched the stars I thought of the promise my father made me to send me to Kostur to become a dressmaker. But I never did make it to Kostur… On the fourth day of August our village became mute. At sundown the girls and young women did not go to the spring to fill the jugs with water. The old people went home early that day. The men did not get together at the blacksmith shop to have their daily chats. The young people did not gather at the village square and go for their daily stroll around the neighbourhoods. My mother called us in, locked the gates and bolted them with heavy bolts. Then we all gathered together in the guestroom; grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, sister and my brothers.

‘Grandpa...’ I said to my grandfather, but he interrupted me, putting his finger to his lips. I understood that I needed to keep quiet but why I had to keep quiet I did not understand. I stood there puzzled and confused. Grandpa extended his hand and motioned for me to sit down next to him. We all sat down. We immediately thought that someone was ill or dying or, God forbid, someone had already died... Father was smoking cigarette after cigarette and wanted to light his pipe, but his hands were trembling. Grandma with her hands folded in her lap, swayed back and forth on her chair. Mother, with her cheek propped up on her right hand, stared into the lamp’s flame.

‘Grandpa…’ I interrupted again, but he again pointed to his lips asking me to keep quiet. I said nothing more and stared at the ceiling. Father tossed his cigarette butt into the fireplace, coughed, spit in the ashes and said: “This kind of thing never happened, not even in Ottoman times…”

‘What?!’ my grandfather asked angrily with a worrisome tone in his voice. ‘Do you remember the Ottoman Aga asking us not to speak our language? Do you remember that?’

“Yes I do! How could I forget? I remember it well. Right mother?’ replied my father turning to my grandmother and saying: ‘After the Beg left, I was twelve years old, right?’

‘Did the Beg ever say anything like that?’ grandfather asked angrily. ‘I am almost seventy-five years old and I have never witnessed such a thing as to prohibit people from speaking their own language. The idea is insane. When I was in America I heard people speak many languages and no one said anything to them. But here, here in our birth place, in our own homes…’ my grandfather trailed off without finishing. I immediately thought that grandfather, when he started talking again, would talk about America. I wanted to hear more about his time in America. It was so nice listening to him telling us stories about America. He used to tell us stories about Detroit, a major city in America where the houses were very tall, as tall as the hills, the streets were wide and always full of people and Detroit had big factories... I did not know what factories were but I liked his stories about them. We could not understand that there were black people and people with oblique eyes living there. We had never seen people like that before. Detroit was an entire world on its own and we had my grandfather at home to tell us all about it. We did not know as much about Kostur as we did about Detroit... And as we stood there I foolishly piped up and said: ‘Please grandpa, tell us more about Detroit’ and then sat on his knee.

‘Quiet child!’ my father said and gave me a strange look. He then asked my mother to set the table for dinner.

‘Don’t get upset and don’t take it out on the children!’ my grandfather said.

‘Son,’ my grandmother decided to get involved, looking my father straight in the eye, ‘you know how children are, they will talk and they will sing… Why shouldn’t they? Because some Greek decided they shouldn’t? The Greeks are here today, they will be gone tomorrow and so will their teachers. They will not remain here forever. The Ottomans were here, right? They were here and they are gone. The French and the Italians came and went and so will the Greeks. They will go the way they came, all we need to do is survive them, sadly a lot of people will suffer and die like they always have. We should not be afraid just because some army or some idiot decided to push us around and tell us not to speak our language. And please don’t yell at the children…’ she said.

‘Your mother is right,’ my grandfather said to my father. ‘We will talk and we will sing! Why not?’

After that my grandfather often said: ‘What are they going to do to me? Cut off my tongue?’…” Tsilka paused for a moment, took a deep breath and continued: “They didn’t cut off his tongue. But one day there was a knock on the gate. My mother opened it. There was a Greek policeman standing behind it. He asked my mother in Greek: ‘Is the old man home?’

My mother did not understand what he said because she did not speak Greek so she called me to come over and interpret.

‘Tsilka, come here and tell me what this man wants!’ she said.

‘Tell the old man to get down here. Immediately!’ he yelled out and whipped his leather boot with his whip.

My grandfather came out the front door and looked at the policeman.

‘Are you looking for me?’ he asked in our language (Macedonian).

‘Walk in front of me!’ ordered the policeman in Greek, pointing with his hand to indicate that he wanted the old man to walk in front of him.

My grandfather came back in the evening before dusk. Two strips of hair about an inch wide were cut off from across his head in the form of a cross. He was bent forward holding his abdomen. He had bad diarrhea all night. My grandmother cursed loudly all night long. I did not understand any of this; what they did to him and why. I was so sad and felt so bad for him, I could not look him in the eyes. He look very bad, his eyes were lowered in shame. He had a hurt expression on his face. He was silent and depressed... I could not understand why the teachers Maria and Sofia never returned from Kostur and why our new schoolmaster was so strict. One time when I entered the classroom the new teacher looked at me with a mean look on his face and asked: 'What's your grandfather's name?'

I said: 'Krsto,' with a trembling and frightened voice.

'That is not true! he yelled out loud. 'Tell your grandfather his name is Stavros! Do you understand?' but before I had a chance to answer him he said: 'What's your brother's name?'

'Krste… Sir,' I replied trembling in fear, sobbing and dripping tears all over my notebook. I never did tell my grandfather what the teacher told me. One day, long after my grandfather had had his ordeal he said to me: 'My dear child, come here and sit next to me. Grandpa is going to tell you something, so please listen carefully. My grandfather was named Krsto and so was his grandfather and many generations before that. Every first born male in our family, for generations, has been named Krsto. This is why, my dear child, in our home we celebrate "krstovden" (Holy Cross Day).'

But I still could not understand why the teacher reacted the way he did, why my grandfather was mistreated and what this hatred was all about? The teacher lived in a designated house but every three days he went to a different house for his meals. So for the three days that he came to our house we greeted him in silence, we served him in silence, we waited for him to finish eating in silence and we sent him home in silence. No one dared open their mouth in his presence. Hardly anyone spoke Greek in our house and those who spoke some were afraid to express themselves because they spoke so poorly and I doubt he would have understood what we were telling him

anyway. One day, when our turn came to feed him, my grandmother forgot to give him a spoon. He showed his displeasure by first giving my grandmother an evil stare and then in Greek he said: "Give me a spoon, old woman!"

My grandmother stood there stunned, wondering what she had done to offend him.

'Kutali, kutali, gria!' (Spoon, spoon old woman!) he began to yell.

My grandmother opened her eyes wide, pressed her lips together and in Macedonian said: 'Well, the kutale (puppy dog) is outside with its mother guarding the sheep…'

I broke into laughter and ran off outside. My grandmother ran after me cursing angrily: 'May he rot in hell! What in hell does he want with the puppy dog?'

'Grandma,' I said to her, 'he doesn't want the dog, he wants a spoon… "Kutali" in Greek means spoon…'

'May a pack of wolves tear him apart and those who sent him here…' cursed my grandmother."

By now the entire trench was filled with laughter. Zoia and Mita, who sat closest to Tsilka, were laughing the loudest.

When she recovered from her laughter Mita asked: "What happened after that?"

Tsilka coughed and continued: "The teacher left the house quietly, closed the door behind him, silently trampled through the yard and down the narrow muddy lane. He did not touch the bread or stew we had prepared for him. I believe that's why the village mayor was so loud when he arrived even before we had a chance to clear the dinner table. When he came up the stairs our puppy dog and its mother were finishing off the teacher's meal on the porch. My grandmother gave it to the dogs. The mayor yelled at my father for a long time.

‘You have offended the teacher!’ the mayor screamed at my father. ‘You have brought shame to the village. Look what you have done! What will those in Kostur say, eh?’

My grandfather, who was just listening all this time, suddenly yelled out: “Who is going to be asking and saying things? No one! What about them shaming and insulting us every day? What do you have to say about that, eh?’

‘Well, barba (Mr.) Stavros…’ said the mayor, who was immediately interrupted by my grandfather who jumped on him and said: ‘What did you call me? Get out of my house and I don’t want to see you here on Holy Cross day… Not only inside my house; I don’t want to see you passing by my house. Get out you Greek flunkey!’ And as such my grandfather opened another crack of intolerance. But this crack led directly to me. The dust created by it landed on me.

‘Your grandfather,’ the teacher said to me in a raised tone of voice while hitting his desk with his wooden rod, ‘is hard headed, stubborn and not smart at all. This will end badly for him.’ He then walked over to my bench, looked me straight in the face and, with a sharp tone of voice, said: ‘Read!’

I was frightened out of my wits , trembling all over, I was lost, I couldn’t get a single word out, I couldn’t even breath.

‘Hands!’ he ordered.

And then, I swear to you, without fear and in defiance, I suddenly stuck both of my hands out. He swung back and whack, he hit my hands with his wooden rod. He kept swinging and hitting as hard as he could and kept looking at me, staring at my face, waiting for me to start crying, expecting me to wail, scream and beg… I, on the other hand, looked him straight in his eyes and deep down endured the pain and held my tears back. And as he kept hitting me, breaking the skin on my hands, I stubbornly held back my emotions…

‘You are just like your grandfather!’ he said to me, spitting in my face. ‘Detention after school and for tomorrow you will draw one thousand lines!’

When I got home I told my grandfather what had happened and he said: ‘You did not cry on purpose? To spite him?’

‘Yes!’ I said, ‘to spite him...’

‘Now, my child, you need to study hard and be the best in your class just to spite him some more. You need to be the best...’

‘Study Greek?!!!’ gasped my grandmother.

‘Why not?’ asked my grandfather.

‘Because I can still see the cross on your head...’ replied my grandmother.

‘That’s what you should do and many other things...’ my grandfather said but did not explain what the other things were that I needed to learn. I spent a good part of the night drawing lines and all the while my older brother laughed and made fun of me saying the teacher was going to send me back to first grade. My grandfather helped me count the lines, one thousand, the exact number the teacher ordered. The next morning, after examining my notebook, he said:

‘For tomorrow you will draw another thousand lines, tilted, on this side of your notebook. And for the day after tomorrow you will draw a thousand circles.’ I was disgusted with the man and completely lost interest in learning. That afternoon I returned home sobbing and stubbornly said that I never again wanted to set foot in that school yard. But Grandfather insisted that I should go to school. He wanted his granddaughter to be the best student in the school, but to me it seemed like he did not understand how hurt I was... He then invited Priest Stefo’s son, who had studied at the Solun gymnasium, to hire him to teach me. My grandfather said to him: ‘I want to hire you as a teacher.’

The priest’s son smiled and asked: ‘What, you want to learn Greek now?’

‘It’s not for me, it’s for my granddaughter Tsilka,’ replied my grandfather. ‘That cursed teacher hates me and is taking it out on my granddaughter. I will pay you one lira (Turkish gold coin) per month, is that okay?’ asked Grandfather and waited for confirmation.

‘I will do it for a lira and a half, Grandpa Krsto,’ replied the priest’s son.

Surprised, my grandfather raised his eyebrows, swallowed hard and said: ‘You are young but you drive a hard bargain! Is this what they taught you in Solun?’

‘Will you pay me one and a half liras or not?’ asked the priest’s son.

My grandfather thought for a while, the wrinkles on his forehead became more pronounced. He adjusted himself, coughed and said: ‘You have yourself a deal! But you have to start immediately, today, right now, okay?’

‘And my money?’ asked the priest’s son.

‘I will pay you after you have done your work,’ replied my grandfather.

‘You have persuaded me…’ said the priest’s son, shaking my grandfather’s hand and getting ready to leave.

‘Wait! Where are you going? Didn’t we agree that you will start teaching right now?’ my grandfather asked.

‘That’s exactly what I will be doing…’ the priest’s son said. ‘Sit there in good health and don’t worry…’ He also said goodbye to Grandma Krstovitsa.

‘May the Lord give you good health and a clear mind, my son, and give our regards to everyone at home…’ replied my grandmother.

The same day the priest’s son took his horse and went to Kostur. The next evening he returned to our house and said to my

grandfather: ‘Grandpa Krsto, we made a deal yesterday but we did not decide how long this job will last?’

‘Well, let us decide right now...’ replied my grandfather.

‘Your concern, Grandpa Krsto, is that the little girl does not repeat the year and that the teacher does not “pick” on her, as you said yesterday, right? Because from what I know the little girl is a very good student, right?’ asked the priest’s son.

‘Of course she is a good student…’ confirmed my grandmother. ‘There is no one better than her in her class. She is like my brother Mitre, may he rest in peace and may God cut off the hands and heads of those who cut his throat...’ My grandmother crossed herself and then grabbed her spindle and began to spin yarn.

‘Well, this is what the Ottomans did to our people Grandma Krstovitsa,’ said the priest’s son.

‘It was not the Ottomans, my son, who killed my brother… It was the damn Greeks… they cut his throat… like a lamb… they laid him down and…’ she made a sign with her hand how they used the knife on him. He was a teacher too but he was one of ours… he taught in Bitola and he taught the children just like we speak today… Macedonian…’

‘Don’t get involved in men’s talk!’ my grandfather yelled at my grandmother, who was firmly holding the spindle and spinning it angrily. My grandmother then got up and left the room without saying a word. ‘Now let us continue with our bargaining…’ my grandfather added.

‘Yesterday, Grandpa Krsto, I went to the Eparchy and also visited the Bishop. I told them everything about the teacher. The people in both places told me that such a person can cause a lot of damage to the Greek state. One has to be firm but very delicate when dealing with the locals, but not in the way this teacher was handling things. To make a long story short, you now owe me six liras…’

‘What?!!!’ yelled my grandfather. “You haven’t started teaching yet and you want money already?’

‘I, Grandpa Krsto, finished the job. They will replace the teacher. Tomorrow a new teacher will be arriving. They said he is really good. So, now let us settle our account and you pay me and all will be well for both of us, right? Well, two liras will go to the bishop, two to the eparchy and two for me; six liras. And for you, I brought you a bag of the finest tobacco... To your good health…’ said the priest’s son, sticking out his hand holding the bag and looking into my grandfather’s eyes.

My grandfather was not only surprised, he was stunned. With his eyebrows distorted and lips pressed together, he asked: ‘Are you sure they will remove the teacher?’

‘That’s what they promised…’ the priest’s son replied.

‘You did well my boy...’ my grandfather said, getting up, unlocking the door of the cupboard and returning with a little black cloth bag. He opened it, counted six liras and then said: ‘Like the previous state, this state too is corrupt... It arrived rotten and it will leave rotten… Spend your money in good health… you earned it. Give my regards to your father, Pop Stefo, and ask him to whip you one with his belt for being so devious... Go well my son...’

‘Goodbye Grandpa Krsto and please don’t complain too much about your money because your granddaughter will finally get the education she deserves...’ he said and then yelled out: ‘Goodbye Grandma Krstovitsa!’ as he went down the stairs.

I don’t know why my grandfather remained silent after that. Was he dismayed by what had actually happened? Was he disgusted with the whole situation? Whatever it was, he found it hard to swallow. He sat in front of the fireplace thinking for a long time before he called me to come over. I was sitting on his knee when he said:

‘You will have a new teacher tomorrow and I want you to study hard and learn a lot from him… and from me… Okay?’ He then turned to my mother and asked her to set the table for dinner.

After dinner my grandfather sat me on his knee, called the other children over and said: 'All of you pay attention…' He then removed a brick from the wall next to the fireplace. From the hole he removed an old book with worn out, blackened and brittle covers. He opened it. Its crusty pages looked more like dried bark than paper. Then with his usual hoarse voice he began to read: '**Аз, буки, веди, глаголи...**' I, somewhat frightened and shaking a bit, looked into his moist and tearing eyes and at his slightly singed moustache and said: '**Аз, буки, веди, глаголи...**'

My grandfather flipped the page, coughed and said: 'And now we will read together: **"Мама меси", "Баба пренди", "Тате ора"**…' I watched his eyes and mouth. When he saw me watching him he said: 'Don't look at me, look at the book!'

'But Grandpa, it doesn't say that in the book. You made that up…' I said to him.

He looked at me with a strange look on his face, smiled under his moustache and continued:

'Yes, you are right. It doesn't say that in the book but sometimes you need to use your imagination…' he replied as he stroked my hair a couple of times. Then after taking one-two-three puffs from his tobacco pipe, he tapped the book with his finger and said: 'This book my dear, is very old and I don't even know which grandfather brought it here to our home. All Christians take oaths, pray, hope and wait with such a book. And we too are Christians…' He paused for a moment, looked at us, crossed himself three times, placed his finger on the page and began to read, following each word with his finger: '**Царју, утешитељу, душе истини, иже вјездје сиј и всја исполњен сокровишче благих и жизни подателју, приијди и вселисја в ни, и очисти ни о всјакија скверни и спаси, блаже, души наши. Амин**'…"

Mita opened her eyes wide, turned towards Tsilka, raised her hand giving her a sign to stop and then asked: "Let me ask you Tsilka… In what language was the book written?"

“In ours, of course, but in the old language spoken by our ancestors. According to my grandfather, this is how our ancestors spoke. His grandfather told him this and he had learned about it from his grandfather. The priest Pop Vasil also said so…” explained Tsilka.

“Do you know any other such prayers?” asked Velika.

“I know almost all of the prayers that my grandparents and my mother prayed in front of our icon at home.” replied Tsilka.

“Please tell us some more Tsilka,” requested Mita. “And did your grandfather teach you to speak the old language?” she added.

“Unfortunately no. Only prayers...” replied Tsilka.

“Okay then… tell us more…” Zoia was heard saying.

Tsilka adjusted herself, threw some sticks into the fire and began to think of which prayers to recount for her audience. She then picked up a stick and pushed the unburned wood closer to the centre of the fire. Sparks began to fly and flames rose, drawing everyone’s attention. The people closest to the fire jumped out of the way to avoid being singed. The fire was bubbling again and warming the trench.

“Shall I start?” asked Tsilka.

“Please do,” replied Zoia.

“Well,’ began Tsilka. “Since I was very young I listened to my grandfather and remembered what he told me. I remember him saying: ‘odeshchem, placheshchem...’ And some words I memorized from the prayers. My grandfather often read the scriptures and I repeated them. He said: ‘My grandfather, may God bless his soul, constantly read from this book. But I got more involved with a shovel and a hoe and with plowing than I did with a pencil and a book...’

Then my grandmother, taking her eyes away from her knitting, said: ‘Look at the teacher, what good is his education when he has no

money to buy proper clothes. They say he is educated but look at the tattered pants he wears…'

'He is poor… like his country. If the state paid him more money he would not have to walk around with patched pants...' replied my grandfather.

'Poor you say? My dear husband, poor and teacher don't go together. I feel sorry for the idiot. His character is like he was not born of a mother... He is here today, somewhere else tomorrow. He eats in other people's houses by himself and with people that don't care for him… What kind of a person is he? His belly is bloated from constantly eating beans…' my grandmother pointed to her own belly. 'And when a person passes by him they have to hold their nose… And you my husband, you will not sit at the table unless we cook you a well prepared and rich meal...'

'Quiet!' my grandfather raised his voice. 'I told you to be quiet!'

'I said you won't sit at the table…' continued my grandmother as if she did not hear what my grandfather said. 'Look at him, he now wants a pencil and paper…' my grandmother mocked my grandfather. 'You just hang onto your shovel because you will be working with it until you hit the grave, just like Lenka's Pandeto. Look at me for example I don't know "a", "b", "v" or whatever…'

'You don't know but you still talk enough for half the village… Imagine if you knew a little bit of this…' said my grandfather while he shook the book in front of her nose.

'It's enough that the priest knows about this…' interrupted my grandmother refusing to back down.

'What priest?' asked my grandfather.

'Pop Basil, who else?' replied my grandmother.

'Yes, of course, he knew... I thought you were going to say the tubby guy who does not even look like a person. The poor man repeats the very little he learned from the Scriptures and holds his

place in the book with a straw. And that very little he knows had to be in Greek, of all things…' said my grandfather.

'And how do you know it's in Greek? You don't understand Greek… Please my dear husband don't try to be a know it all… If you claim to know it says "**Аз, буки, веди, глаголи...**" then what does it say past that… further down...' asked my grandmother.

'Of course… what does it say further down…' my grandfather said mockingly. 'This, old woman… this is the most important part.'

'Maybe it is, but what does it say? Why have you not mentioned what it says? My dear husband, why have you not mentioned my brother, may God bless his soul and may he rest in peace...' said my grandmother, crossing herself three times. 'Why have you not mentioned my brother?' she again asked.

'How many times do I have to mention him?' asked my grandfather, looking at me and continuing: 'Your grandmother's brother Mitre was an educated man. The Greek armed gangs killed him in 1905... They cut his throat… They stepped on his shoulder, one of them put his knee on his head and they cut his throat… just like a butcher cuts the throat of a lamb…' At that moment my grandfather turned towards our icon, crossed himself and said: 'Dear Lord, give him peace in your heavenly kingdom and forgive his sins... Yes... Mitre was an educated man... I remember him like it was yesterday...'

'He was well educated my dear girl… Educated like no other around here…' boasted my grandmother. 'I may turn to stone if I lie to you…' she said and hit the floor with her fist. 'Our father, may he rest in peace, was very proud of him and encouraged him to learn… learn, he used to say, learn… but those blood-thirsty Greeks took his life...'

'Why did they kill him, Grandpa?' I asked.

'Because the Greeks did not want our Macedonian language and alphabet to spread. They wanted the Greek language to spread… That's why...' he replied.

My grandmother was crying quietly and after blowing her nose and wiping her tears she said: 'Education is for men and not for women. Yes, women need to learn too but to cook, to bake, to mend, to sew, to weave, to milk, to…'

My grandfather, who quickly lost his patience, angrily yelled out: 'Just like you, huh?'

My grandmother got angry right back at him and said: 'What did you say? If you don't like my cooking and baking then you can go and eat at the local Ioteto Vrtentse Inn!'

Ioteto Vrtentse was the village innkeeper. Because he was very feeble minded and forgetful and constantly ran around looking for things, the local pranksters named him Ioteto Vrtentse (Ioteto the twirler). My grandfather and grandmother always took swipes at one another but I had never seen them seriously fight. I remember my grandfather being good at one more thing; he never opened his mouth in church. Not even a peep. He prayed twice on Sundays and holidays. Once at church quietly, while looking at the Virgin Mary, and again at home loudly. After lighting the oil lamp in front of our icon of the Virgin Mary, he would cross himself and begin to pray. He prayed for everyone's health, for us at home and for our friends and relatives and for everyone's prosperity. After that he would get his book out, cross himself and start to pray again: "**Оче наш, иже еси на небесах, услиши молитву моју, внуши моление мое во истињаТвоеј, услиши мне в правдје Твоеј. Хвалим те, клањаем ти се, славословим те, благодарим те, великија ради слави Твоеја**"...'

And this was how my grandfather prayed and with these words: 'Dear Lord,' Tsilka began to pronounce each word, 'I call thee, to protect me, God; please hear my words. Please show your mercy, You, who gives those, who depend on You – from those, who oppose Your right. Look after me like the apple of your eye; shelter me under the shadow of Your wings from the wicked face of malevolence. Protect me from my enemies that surround me... Rise my Lord, intercept them and break them; save my soul from the wicked with your sword... And I will do justice before You, and will be filled with your glory.'..."

Tsilka paused for a moment, took a deep breath and continued: “At his point my grandfather would stop, cross himself like this,” she showed the others how he did it, “and silently would begin to pray again: ‘Lord, hear my prayer which does not come out of a lying delusional mouth. Lord, establish my footsteps on Your road so that my feet don’t weaken. I call upon You because I know you will hear me, O God, hear my words…’ At this point my grandfather would cross himself again and continue to pray: ‘Save me, O Lord… O Lord, You are our Defender who protects us in this life and forever… Amen…’ That’s what he said at the end of the prayer.”

After taking another deep breath, Tsilka crossed herself three times and said: “This is how my grandfather prayed in front of our icon of the Virgin Mary.” Then Tsilka bowed her head, picked up a stick and began to knock unburned pieces of wood into the fire, flicking each onto the burning coals. The fire started burning again, illuminating the trench. And as Tsilka stared into the burning flames it seemed to her that she could still hear her grandfather’s voice speaking to her. From the corner of her eye Tsilka observed Tinka raise her hand with ease and touch her temple. Mita’s face looked illuminated and Zoia looked up at the ceiling, seeming like she was praying… Tsilka, in her usual tone of voice, then broke the serenity and said: “My grandfather always ended his prayers with the words: “**Свјатиј Боже, свјатиј крепкиј, свјатиј бесмертниј, помилуј нас. Слава Отцу, и Сину, и Свјатому духу и нињa и присно и во вјекп вјеков амин...**”

“Amen...” whispered Velika, followed by Tinka, Mita and Zoia. The trench then became silent. The fire continued to burn, its dancing flames caused shadows to appear and disappear all around the trench walls giving the place an eerie look…

Except for the occasional “snap” made by the fire, the flying sparks and the heavy breathing, the trench was practically silent. Circling in the silence were the people’s thoughts searching and longing, remembering and wishing… In the dead of silence, Tsilka, in her own mind, thought she heard the beating of a heart, but not that of her own heart, but the hearts of everyone in the trench. Sparks flew out of the fireplace momentarily creating lights and shadows on the

walls. Tsilka watched the sparks for as long as they lasted and in their luminance she saw Mita's pale and gentle face. She watched her move her hand touching her forehead with her three fingers... She watched Mita look up, her view locked somewhere up on the pine logs of the trench ceiling. She was patiently and obediently looking and waiting… For a short moment her lips moved and were followed by a long nasal sigh. She then very quietly, so as not to break the silence or disturb the others, barely audibly, whispered: "Our father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven, give us our daily bread…"

Mita suddenly stopped whispering… but just for a moment to see if her words were reaching where she was sending them. Her prayer was coming straight from her heart, traveling up into the heavens and with it carrying the warmth of her soul... She looked like a lily with its leaves spread all around staring into the vastness of the sky and praying… She looked like a pine tree, soaring high, surly and proud with all its branches stretched, reaching for the sky and praying for light... Gently she moved her hand, like a quiet breeze, separating it from her forehead and, almost with an invisible movement, moved it down, first to the right shoulder and then, ever so gently, to the left shoulder. Mita then began to whisper again:

"Lord, if you can hear me, please protect us from harm, make sure our backpacks are filled with bread and thick socks to keep our feet warm. Please make sure our boots are sturdy so that we don't have to walk in bare feet. Please make sure we all have thick pants and heavy coats so that we don't freeze during our marches. Lord, please make sure the weather is not too cold and rainy during our marches and please make sure we come back alive and undamaged from battle. Please Lord, protect us from flying bullets and let our rifles feel light in our hands. Do whatever you can, Lord, so that we get a warm meal more often, perhaps a bowl of hot bean soup with some meat in it. Please Lord, punish the commissar who constantly abuses us and all those who spy and inform on us… Amen..."

Mita paused for a moment, looked down as if searching for something, then put her hands together in front of her, looked up and said: "Dear Lord, I beg of you… one more moment of your time…

Lord, the bread they bring to us, can we get it a bit earlier… and please make sure we all go home as soon as possible…"

At this point Mita began to shake and was unable to speak properly. Her words sounded strange and unintelligible. She convulsed in silence, unable to stop, unable to stop her tears from flowing, unable to stop herself from the sadness that was overpowering her. But it was not all sadness she was feeling, it was the power of prayer which caused her tears to flow down her cheeks and her body to tremble with every word she attempted to mutter. And all this over some inconceivable spiritual joy and calm that came simultaneously with fear and despair. Every word she managed to remember she repeated even though she could not fully understand it. And just because she did not understand the words, it did not mean that they were not mysterious and that they did not have some invisible power, a kind of force that inspires, instills faith and confidence, encourages, and fills a person with hope... Perhaps the strength of the prayer lies in the words that are unfamiliar. Perhaps words such as these have magical power and are able to get closer to God. Perhaps it is words such as these, unknown words, known only to God, that evoke memories of returning home, of being close together, of feeling good, of bringing joy to the soul, of making the heart feel less lonely and of helping the body feel less pain and able to endure the long, cold winter nights... "Lord o God, please protects us from pain…" Mita managed to squeeze out after her last convulsion. She then shook again but this time it was because she felt the warmth of her own tears dripping on her crossed arms...

Tsilka bent down and threw some sticks into the fire. The tiny little flames suddenly flared up engulfing the dry wood, imprisoning it in its grasp, turning each stick black and then grey and making it twist and bend as if begging for mercy. The trench became bright again.

No one was moving. Mara, with her eyes looking like those of a frightened doe, was staring at the dancing flames in the fire. Iana was stealthily wiping her tears. Argir, who had ice cold fish eyes, was staring at the entrance, as if expecting someone or something to jump in. Tinka, with her cool, playful and curious eyes, was staring up at the trench ceiling, looking as if she was counting and measuring each beam and each stone. Zoia, looking grim, eyes

closed, was probably sleeping as one of her cheeks vibrated with each breath she took. The fire was burning bright and was reflected through Velika's mesmerized eyes, as she sat there quietly, deep in thought. Andonis, the eighteen year old young man from the Thessalian villages, who only spoke and understood Greek, was leaning his head on Iana's shoulder. Even though he did not understand what Tsilka was saying, he still listened to her with a sympathetic expression on his face. He enjoyed listening to Tsilka's tame voice and enjoyed being with the girls he had met in the mountains and with whom he had spent half a year in the trenches, sharing water and bread. He was holding his chest at the moment because something inside was making him wheeze. When he started coughing he could go on uninterrupted for long bouts, coughing and turning blue, unable to dislodge and spit out whatever was inside him. His eyes looked glazed and carried the fear of fire in them. Stoian, who still had an open and festering wound, was rubbing his cheeks with his hands. Yesterday his cheeks turned white from the cold. Stoian was always hungry. He had his chin resting on top of his knees, which he was squeezing together with both arms. He rocked from side to side and back and forth with his eyes fixed on the fire. He was in pain. His stomach hurt and was making loud noises, loud enough for those near him to hear…

Tsilka glanced at Mita. Mita had a happy expression on her face. Probably as a result of praying. She was now looking at the fire. Her eyes were reflecting the flames and the sparks dancing in the fireplace. It was no longer the silence, but her soul and spirit that dominated her thoughts and feelings. She was thinking happy, loving thoughts. Finally she was able to separate good thoughts from the painful ones that caused her pain, tightness in her stomach and reminded her of the dampness and the cold, her blisters, her sore feet and her constant need of sleep...

Cramped together, tightly against one another, body to body, they all surrendered to their thoughts which took them to memories of home, their loved ones, food, joy, songs and dances, laughter and life back in the village. They were all sleepy with drooping eyes and eyelids half closed. And just at that very moment, when they were all warm and comfortable, blessed and full of hope, Tsilka, in the presence of

everyone, crossed herself three times and said: "**Свјатиј Боже, свјатиј крепкиј, свјатиј бесмјертниј, помилуј нас...**"

"Amen..." whispered Velika.

At that very moment Argir jumped to his feet, tightened his military belt, squeezed his hat on his head, raised his coat collar over his neck, stooped his head forward to avoid hitting the low trench ceiling entrance and silently walked out.

"Hey, fix the blanket!" Iana yelled, telling him to fix the blanket which substituted for a door to the trench, as he was leaving.

Tsilka, now in an altered tone of voice, filled with some anger and regret, continued to unfold the thread of her narrative but to everyone inside it seemed a different kind of wind and a different kind of sound was filling the trench.

"One day Dina, our neighbour, came inside our house. The woman had a habit of entering houses without knocking. She came over to borrow a cup of sugar and... heard my grandfather praying. She had a big mouth and told many people about it. Words were not like a donkey or an ox where you could go, take them back and tie them down. In time the words reached people that they were not supposed to reach. One day policemen came to our house and took my father and grandfather. Ten days later they summoned us to go to court. My mother and grandmother attended the trial. It was held in Kostur. The next day they returned and my mother told me what had happened.

She said: 'The moment we entered the court, the judge told your grandmother: "Katse, gria…" (Sit down, old woman…) Your grandmother first looked at him then at us and then turned to him and in Macedonian asked: "What are you saying to me, my son?" The judge became furious and yelled at her: "Katse, gpia!!!" Your grandmother then asked him in Macedonian: "Ami, de da katsna, de da letna, iaska kutraaa…? (Poor me, where should I land and were should I fly…?" Your grandmother then started crying…' said my mother."

The trench burst into laughter. Tsilka waited for everyone to calm down and then continued: “My mother then said: ‘At that moment the judge jumped to his feet and began to yell out loud: “Ekso paleo gria, gamoto Hristo sou ke tin Panagia sou!!! Pentakosia drahme prostimo!!!” (Get out you antiquated old woman, screw your Christ and your Virgin Mary. Five hundred drachmas fine!!!) After that your father got up, went to the judge’s bench and placed one thousand drachmas on it. The judge yelled at him too and said: “I said five hundred, not one thousand!” Your father then said: “Keep the other five hundred for the next time, because this old woman will do the same thing every day and with every spoken word. Keep it for the next penalty.” And that’s the way it was,’ my mother said.”

The trench burst into laughter again. Mita, laughing out loud, asked: “What did your grandmother say to the judge? De da katsna, de da letna… ha-ha-ha, ho-ho-ho!!! She sure told him good! Heh-heh-heh!”

Tsilka continued: “My father and grandfather were taken away and sent to jail. We did not see them for a long time. Our home felt empty and desolate without them. My mother and grandmother cried practically every day. My grandmother was sick with worry and it began to affect her heath. Her physical posture began to droop and she walked around stooped forward. She constantly filled the tiny oil lamp in front of the icon with oil and lit it at every opportunity. I remember watching her tremble in front of our icon, lighting a match and then lighting the oil lamp with it. Strangely, sometimes the lamp would light up with two tiny flames, one at each end of the ribbon-like tiny wick. And while my grandmother lit the lamp, my mother would place pillows against the window so that no one could look inside. The two of them then would kneel down, side by side, in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary, cross themselves and pray with the following words: ‘**Нескверная, неблазная, нетленная, пречистая, чистая дево, богоневесто владичице јаже Бога слова человјеком преславним Твоим рождеством... јаже ненадежних едина надежда, и боримих помошч... и приими мое, еже о скверних устен приносимое моление... СлаваТебе, ниње и присно, и во вјеки вјеков амин**’...”

When Tsilka finished the prayer Mita quietly said “Amen…” and was followed by Velika, and Tinka. Then Tsilka said “Amen…” again. And with that the trench went silent again.

After a brief pause, Tsilka resumed telling her story: “My mother and grandmother always prayed together. Sometimes I would stand behind them and listen to their quiet, warm and gentle prayers; my mother with her gentle, clear and quiet voice and my grandmother with her hoarse and elevated voice. They would say: ‘**Пресвјатаја Богородице, нескверная, неблазная, нетленная, пречистаја, чистаја дево... слава Тебе, ниње п присно, и во вјеки вјеков, амин...**’ Standing there and listening to their prayers made me feel warm inside. They gave me hope that my father and grandfather would, one day, return to us… This was how we spent our time inside the house but not in the village. The village seemed as if it had been transformed into a song, which was constantly accompanied by a trumpet and a drum to which everyone marched from the upper to the lower neighbourhoods. The new teacher enlisted all the young people into the organization “EON” (National Youth Organization) and put them in uniforms... Then, with help of the police, he had all the dogs killed so that they wouldn’t bark when his spies eavesdropped under the windows of our homes, listening to what we were saying...”

“It was the same in our village,’” Zoia piped up.

“I too was recruited into EON... And who wasn’t in those days? In our village everyone was…” said Mita quietly.

“It was the same with us…” whispered Tinka.

“Most of the songs sung were about the greatest soldier, the greatest plowman... the greatest, the greatest, the greatest, and that greatest... who?” asked Tsilka.

“Metaxas!” piped up Tinka.

“It was the same in our village,” said Zoia quietly.” All we did was sing about him. The trumpets played about him… The drums beat about him… in the morning… in the afternoon and at sunset. We

were marching on dusty village streets and shouting at the top of our voices, calling him 'great'; that bloody butcher Metaxas. And it went on and on like that until war broke out with Italy..."

"Soon after war broke out with Italy, we received a letter from my father, who informed us that he had been released from the prison where he was held on one of the dry Greek islands. He said: 'I was released because I volunteered to fight against the Italians. By the time this letter reaches you, I will be at the front fighting the Italians…' Soon after that we received another letter, which, by the way, arrived very quickly, informing us that my father had been killed for the 'greatness and glory of mother Greece...' But by then there were no Greeks in Macedonia; they had fled. Then the Italians arrived. People from a nearby village, where the Italians had landed a few days earlier, came over to our village and told us that the Italians did not object to us speaking Macedonian and that people could speak whatever language they wanted. They said that they were already speaking Macedonian in their village and nobody was afraid because there were no fines or punishments like those the Greeks had imposed. Kuze, who the Greeks had beaten unconscious and given castor oil to drink because he spoke Macedonian and not Greek to his oxen, was so happy to see the Greeks go. When he heard that the Italians were coming, he ran to the entrance of the village to greet them. He stood on top of the hill, in front of the village, shouting: 'Viva Italia, Avanti Italia', and sang: 'Bandera rosa la triumfera...' The Italians immediately seized him and beat him on the stage in front of all the villagers that had assembled there… They then took six oxen from the village and left for Kostur. The next day, Kuze who had lost an ox to the Italians, went up on his balcony and yelled out: 'Screw the freedom the Italians brought us…" said Tsilka as she waited for the laughter to subside before she continued:

"Two days after the 'Italian freedom' arrived, my grandfather returned home. Our house was full of people. Almost everyone from our village came over. We were all happy to see him return. The next day, in the afternoon, the church bell began to ring and the village crier went through the village streets with a funnel yelling: 'People, people… Male and female… Young and old… Please go and assemble at the blacksmith shop!!!' But as he was yelling, old

man Nake yelled at him and said: ‘What did I ask you to do, eh?! I asked you to invite only the men! Now go back and invite only the men!’

Old man Nake then raced towards old man Labro to catch up to him. The first to arrive at the blacksmith shop were Labro, Iano, Risto, Nake and Pando... all of them ex-guerillas, fighters from the Ilinden Uprising, and all of them the same age as my grandfather. After all the men were gathered together, old man Iano removed a Greek flag from his bag and Labro, Risto, Nake and Pando each grabbed a corner, spread it out and placed it on the wall. Iano took out a few nails from an apron pocket and nailed the flag on the wall, placing a nail in each corner. After he finished, he stepped back and looked at it. It looked as good as a stretched skin ready for tanning. He turned to the others, pointed at the flag and in a tone of voice resembling that of our commissar, said:

‘With the Lord’s help, let us move forward. Labro, you do the honours and start first since you came very close to being draped in this colorful cloth.’ Labro, without hesitation, untied his waistband and, while holding his pants with one hand, went closer to the wall and pissed all over the flag. When he finished, Labro coughed a few nasty coughs, spit on the flag and barked a few nasty curses. At the end he said: ‘May God will it that this flag never fly under our skies!’ He then turned his back to the wall and let out a loud fart.

After Labro was done Iano called on the others to do the same. He said: ‘Now Risto, followed by Nake, Pando, Krsto and all of you behind Krsto, line up and take your turn at the flag…’

My grandfather went closer to Iano and, making sure the others heard him, said: ‘This is no good… it’s shameful pissing on a flag…’

‘You say it’s shameful, Krsto?!’ Iano snapped back at my grandfather. ‘It wasn’t shameful when they hunted us down in our fields and in our gardens? It wasn’t disgraceful when they spied on us at our homes and under our windows? It wasn’t painful when they broke up our weddings and celebrations? It wasn’t criminal when they fined us, made us drink castor oil and eat salty fish for

speaking our language at home, in the market and in the streets of our villages? And you are trying to tell me it wasn't shameful what they did to you; cutting a cross on top of your head, humiliating you and sending you to prison for nothing? I see that your hair has grown back but it seems you have not learned your lesson. Did they brainwash you there… at the prison on the island, eh?!! Even still, regardless of what you say, it was criminal and humiliating what these people did to us… And that is where the great shame lies…'

Iano, Pando, Labro, Risto and Nake; all began to argue with my grandfather, yelling at him one after another.

'And I kept insisting that it was not good what we were doing…' said my grandfather in a conciliatory tone of voice.

'Okay, okay Krsto, we hear you…' said Iano. 'Now please tell us why this is bad… You, the person on whose head they cut a cross with goat shears… You, tell us your side of the story…'

'We need to be smart about this…' my grandfather said while pointing at the side of his temple with his finger. 'And not with…' he said, pointing below his navel.

'People, people, don't listen to Krsto… his brain has been fried on the hot dry island where they sent him. His judgment is impaired, that's why the poor man talks like that. Everyone, do your thing and get your anger out!' Nake yelled out and by the time he got to the wall he pissed on his own feet."

The blanket that was substituting for a door to the trench suddenly flung open and cold air rushed in. Argir was back and with him he brought snow, cold and howling wind.

"Put the blanket down!" Mita yelled. "We are losing all the heat! Fix the blanket!"

"Okay, okay!" replied Argir. "Pull your legs back so that I can pass by. You are stretched out like you own the trench... Move your legs!" he said sternly, but before Argir had a chance to sit down, a head popped into the trench and, in a loud commanding tone of

voice, said: “Attention!” It was the political commissar. He had a flashlight in his hand and was shining it on the faces of those inside the trench. “I hear,” he said, “in place of resting and sleeping, you have turned the trench into a church… and you are praying? Everyone can use a prayer, right? Is that right, Velika?”

“No, Comrade Commissar...” Velika replied timidly.

“And what then, were you doing?” he demanded to know.

“Well, were telling each other stories…” she replied.

“Telling each other stories? What kind of stories were you telling each other? The dark side of darkness?” the commissar asked mockingly.

“Stories about our past experiences, Comrade Commissar…” replied Velika.

The commissar raised his flashlight, pointed it at their faces and said: “All of you get out of the trench and form a line! Now!” He got out first. “Single file, form a line here!” he barked out loudly. “You turned a military trench into a church, eh? And you Tsilka, you are converting fighters into worshippers? So, you say you are telling each other stories, eh? The day before yesterday you were supposed to dig a trench. But as you can see, the job which you were expected to finish yesterday was not done. You left the trench half dug. Now I know why. You were rushing to go to your church! Argir, Kole, Velika, Panaiotis, run quickly and fetch picks and shovels! You have one hour to complete the job... Dig here and dig deep, and… stop telling each other stories. Dig deep, a deep ditch because tomorrow it will save your lives… stories and prayers will not... Gamoto Hristo sas! Tin Panagia sas ke to Stavro sas!!! Kolopeda!!!” (Screw your Christ! Your Virgin Mary and your Holy Cross!!! Queers!!!).

The commissar’s yelling and swearing created a chilly atmosphere for everyone in the trench. Now, on top of being scolded, they had to work outside where they were whipped by waves of blowing cold wind and pounded by whirling snow, ripped out of the branches of

the pine trees and deposited on their faces and bodies. The fierce wind was coming from above, from the tips of the bare hills where a howling blizzard was forming. It came whistling and moaning through the branches of the tall pines, picking up all the snow it could carry. And as one wave passed, seeming like the worst was over, another, more fierce, took its place, blowing and howling louder as it made its way down. The waves hit hard, scooping snow from the forest and depositing it everywhere… The waves relentlessly came one after another without end, making life unbearable for those caught in them…

"Argyris," yelled out the commissar, his voice barely audible over the noise made by the blizzard, "you are in charge of the digging. And you" yelling at the others, at the top of his voice to compensate for the noise, "dig, dig right here… and no telling stories. Dig deep down past your shoulders, past your necks and past your heads. The deeper you dig, the safer the trench. And no telling stories… Gamoto Hristo sas! (Screw your Christ!)... Argyris! When the dig is completed as ordered, come to my trench and report to me! Is that clear?!"

"Clear! Comrade Commissar…" replied Argir.

The commissar then yelled: "Start digging!" knocked his heels together, stomped his heavy boots on the frozen soil, covered his face with his hand to prevent the snow from flying into his eyes, turned his back to the falling snow and headed straight for Tsilka. "And you Tsilka," he yelled angrily at the top of his voice while pointing his finger at her, "you will serve three consecutive guard shifts! Understand?!"

"Understand…" replied Tsilka in a quiet, sad and hoarse voice.

Unable to hear her reply in the midst of a stormy wave, the commissar went closer, stuck his face in front of Tsilka's face and yelled out loudly: "Three guard shifts in a row, I said, do you understand?!" sounding like a snake hissing.

“I understand…” Tsilka yelled out as loud as she could, but in the storm her hoarse voice sounded like a whisper. But it seemed like the commissar got the message because he soon backed off .

“Dig!” he yelled out one more time, stomped his boots on the frozen ground, to keep his feet warm, and said: “Argyris! When you dig up to here,” he pointed with his stick, “take them back to the trench. Now go find the corporal and tell him that Tsilka has been ordered to serve guard duty for three consecutive shifts! Got it?! And tell the corporal to call me at report tomorrow.” Without saying a word, Argir quickly left and, as if walking on broken glass, with a brisk step, disappeared into the storm.

They dug, picking at the frozen earth with their picks, breaking off small pieces of soil and tossing them to the side piece by piece. And while they dug, the storm kept filling the hole with snow.

About fifteen minutes later, the corporal arrived at the dig, pointed at Tsilka and gave her the signal to go with him. He led the way through the storm, holding his hand over his eyes, protecting them from the flying snow. Suddenly he stopped and turned around to make sure Tsilka was following him and said: “Are you afraid?”

“From what?” she asked.

“The dark of night, the cold, the wild beasts...” replied the corporal.

“No, I am not afraid... Not of those things… I am afraid of people...” said Tsilka.

“If you want, I can stay with you or come occasionally to visit you. Would you like me to do that?” asked the corporal.

“I wouldn’t mind it, but it would be better if you didn’t… They might check on you and if they don’t find you in your trench they will penalize you too…” replied Tsilka in a trembling voice. “Just take me to my place and go back… So you don’t get punished… Please let us get going…” added Tsilka.

On their way, they encountered a drift of snow as high as their heads.

“Let’s go around?” said the corporal sounding uncertain.

“Let’s go through it…” replied Tsilka. “If we go around, in the dark, we might lose our path…”

The corporal took Tsilka by the hand, bent his head forward, took a step and plunged neck deep into the drift.

“Don’t follow me,” the corporal yelled, with a worried sounding voice. “Do you hear me?” She helped him out of the drift and they tried going to the left but a large boulder was blocking their way. They came back to the same place.

“We will have to go through the drift…” said the corporal sounding uncertain and starting to dig his way through the snow with his bare hands. When they punched through the first drift, they were hit in the face by a blast of cold wind. They were out of breath for a moment, as if they had run out of air. They turned their backs to the storm. They remained with their backs turned until they caught their breath, then holding hands, they plunged into the next drift, pushing the snow aside with all their might. Their progress was very slow, measuring in inches with each swipe they took at the drift. Finally, their effort paid off and they reached open space.

“Halt!” ordered a strong commanding voice cutting through the storm and echoing on the rocks.

“Okay!” replied the corporal.

“Password!” yelled the voice.

“Meadow!” replied the corporal.

“Hair! Turn!” answered the voice, but this time in a soft friendly tone.

“Change of Guard…” announced the corporal.

“Finally! I am frozen from top to bottom. What kind of weather is this?” complained the guard. “Who is replacing me?” he then asked.

“Tsilka,” the corporal said quietly.

“Tsilka? So it is....” said the guard and moments later added: “This is not the kind of weather where you want young women on guard? Go back,” he said “I will stay on a bit longer. I will stay on guard another hour… I can take it… Take her back…” insisted the guard.

“Don’t be a fool!” said the corporal quietly. “It’s her turn, she has been sent here to be punished. Do you understand? Orders from the political commissar! Don’t feel sorry for her…”

“It’s that Bulkiotis, isn’t it? Screw him…” cursed the guard. “Those who came from Bulkesh are the worst. It is the same with the commanders… they are the worst... They act as if they are more knowledgeable, skilled, experienced, faithful and all...” he said without finishing his sentence. He then stepped out into the deep snow. “This is really bad,” he said. You are not even going to find a wolf leaving its lair in weather like this… Let me ask you something corporal. Is our commander one of those people who came from Bulkesh?”

“No,” replied the corporal. “He was one of those who were in the brigade…” he explained.

“Those Bulkiotes are dreadful people! I have been told that they were specifically taught how to act as commanders and commissars and… The rat ... Why is he punishing you?” the guard asked Tsilka.

“My friends will tell you when you get back,” replied Tsilka.

“They were taught as commanders and commissars but, it seems, that in all their education they forgot how to be people. Do you know what the commissar did to the people in my trench?” asked the guard.

“Did he invent something about them?” asked Tsilka.

“All ten were taken out of their trench... I was lucky, I just happened to be in the trench next door...” replied the guard.

“Well, brother, you were lucky. What happened after that?” asked Tsilka.

“They were ordered to dig trenches…” replied the guard.

“Dig!” yelled Tsilka, weighing in on the conversation. “Dig but no tell stories…” she added with a slight tone of guilt in her voice.

“He kept yelling like a mad man…” replied the guard.

“He may not be a mad man but he is a commissar. Even the commander is afraid of him,” added Tsilka.

“Someone will surface who will not be afraid of him, eh?” said the guard.

“I am sure someone will…” added the corporal, “But now it is time for us to go. And you, Tsilka, if you are afraid tell me right now…”

“Don’t worry about me... Fear, no fear, it’s the same to me,” Tsilka replied to the corporal and turned to the guard and asked: “Just let me know where to pay more attention?”

“Believe me Tsilka, in weather like this not even the devil dares to show its horns…” replied the guard.

“As you can see, visibility is very poor. Just keep your eyes on this side of the brook and if you see something fire a round or two…” instructed the corporal.

The two men departed and Tsilka was left all alone in the dark. She stood under a well-insulated giant pine tree whose underside was free of snow. She leaned against the tree’s giant trunk and listened carefully. She listened to the wind howl with waves hitting the trees and disappearing as soon as they arrived. They twisted and howled all through the trees making eerie noises giving Tsilka chills and

goose bumps. The snow began to freeze, squeaking under her heavy boots, torn and full of holes.

“It’s going to be a long chilling, cold night…” Tsilka said to herself very quietly as she took a couple of steps to the left, a couple to the right and then forward and back attempting to ward off the cold. She felt safe as long as the two men were in close proximity. But the moment she could no longer hear their voices she felt completely lost in the dark. Even though this was not her first night standing on guard, this time, perhaps due to the commissar being upset and everyone being kicked out of the warm trench, she found the silence more eerie and the blizzard much colder to endure than usual. She hung her rifle over her shoulder, rubbed her hands together vigorously, blew several warm breaths on them, stepped back towards the tree trunk, stepped forward again, raised herself on her tiptoes and attempted to look over the tall snowdrift.

She was too short to be able to look over the snowdrift so first she used her hands to clear off some of the snow on top, then she used her rifle butt like a shovel. She worked hard to make an opening, after which she realized that she was feeling very warm, so much so that she needed to unbutton her torn overcoat and loosen her scarf. After that she turned her back to the snowdrift and pushed hard until she pushed all the snow out of the way. She had opened a path through the snowdrift.

She was surprised at the thickness of the drift. It measured ten steps. So, to prevent the path from being filled again, and to keep warm, she decided to march back and forth over it. Ten steps forward and ten steps back. The frozen snow crunched under her boots as she marched, sounding like an entire squad was marching behind her. She walked backwards slowly, carefully, looking behind her, making sure she did not run into the fighter marching behind her. Unable to see in the dark, however, she stopped and listened. There was only silence, except for the noises made by nature. She listened some more. High above her, she could hear the snow falling through the pine needles, hissing its way down. She stopped breathing for a moment and took a few quiet steps forward. It was the same silence. She strained her ears to hear more. Something made a shuffling sound in the dry leaves. She held her breath. She shuddered. She

quietly raised her rifle. The sound petrified her. She listened some more. She took silent deep breaths. Then, just for a split moment, she glanced down at the thick woolen hand-knitted sweater she was wearing, which her mother had sent her a few months earlier, and saw her own strong heart restlessly thumping like it was trying to get out. A handful of chunks of snow dislodged from the tree branches above and fell on dried leaves. She was relieved.

Tsilka began breathing normally again. She was relaxed now as she stepped back under the pine tree, tilted her head and listened to the various sounds. There was nothing unusual going on so she resumed her march of ten steps forward and ten steps back. There was silence, only the frozen snow squeaked under her ripped boots. The snow also squeaked on the trees as the wind pushed them back and forth. High above Mount Bel Kamen the sky began to open up, but only for a moment. Behind the shabby cloud the moon suddenly appeared, looking pale, but was gone again. Tsilka now turned her head the other way and looked towards the brook. Beyond the brook, on the other side of the mountain she noticed the sky was slowly becoming bright. A strong gust of wind blew and dislodged clumps of snow from the tree branches.

Clumps of snow fell on her. Waves of wind began to blow from the north. Tsilka watched the clouds mingle, mix and twist in the dark sky as the winds drove them into a frenzy. She looked towards Bel Kamen again. Up high above Mount Bel Kamen the clouds were coming apart, torn like rags, then suddenly the full moon lit up the terrain, creating long shadows behind the great big pines covered in an infinitely large sheet of snow. And in the distance, on the open slopes, Tsilka saw the dark shadow of a suffering cloud being pushed around by the crazy winds. To the right, the terrain was dotted with dark spots tightly packed against one another; another pine forest. The north wind was now blowing fiercely and howling as it passed through the pine trees, dislodging more snow, dropping it carelessly all over the place. The wind was fierce sparing nothing and no one, not even the ancient rocks standing still and drawing and consuming its energy. The wind became angrier and dispatched wave after wave twisting and turning and uprooting snow from high above the pine trees. Again and again the waves came one after another causing snow clouds to form, grow and disburse again,

pushing the snow further down the hills and depositing it into the deep crevasses of the brooks down the hill.

The sky above began to clear, the moon was shining bright, the grey was turning white and darkness vanished right before Tsilka's open eyes. Stirred by the clearing sky, the north wind delivered more cold; a dry cold which froze the snow even more. Tsilka looked around as night gave way to day and everything began to look bright and shiny. She watched the silvery moon slowly turn pale and the black sky turn blue. Everything looked bright and beautiful... The cold wind blowing in her eyes caused Tsilka's eyes to tear as she watched the birth of a new day. She suddenly shuddered. She felt the morning cold deep inide her. Chills and tremors gripped her entire body as if she was standing bare naked in the cold. Her feet were frozen, feeling like a swarm of ants were crawling all over them. Her fingers clenching her rifle were stiff like icicles. She bumped her feet together and attempted to wiggle her toes. Her cheeks felt like they were pinched. She placed her rifle over her shoulder and began to rub her hands, then her fingers, cheeks and ears.

A sharp chill overpowered her and shook her entire body. She leaned forward, slapped her hands together and, for a moment, placed them under her arms. She then began to blow warm breath on them as she rubbed and squeezed each finger individually, starting at the tip. She felt nothing except for the sensation that a swarm of ants were crawling on them. She felt the same sensation when she rubbed her cheeks, forehead and ears. Suddenly she heard a thundering, cracking sound originating below her, on the other side of the brook. She looked. A large branch broke off a pine tree. It surrendered to the cold and gave away to the weight of the snow. Tsilka grabbed a handful of snow and with a single movements rubbed her cheeks and ears with it. With tears in her eyes she looked up at the pale bluish sky. Then as she gazed lower she noticed that everything was covered in snow, cold frozen snow. And the more she thought of the snow and the cold, the colder she felt, unbearably cold, the kind of cold that spreads through your body, penetrates deep down inside you and coagulates your blood. Despite the cold, it was beautiful out there, the endless sheet of snow glistening and competing for attention with the bluish sky and the pale full moon. A strong gust of

wind blew, shook the pine tree branches above, dislodging small chunks of frozen snow. Tsilka looked up and then as she looked away into the distance, her eyes became blurred and her eyelids felt heavy. The rustling of the pine trees, the falling of snow, all made Tsilka sleepy. She tilted her head and placed it on her rifle and then, suddenly she was dreaming dreadful dreams, spinning and turning in her head, mixing and bubbling. She shuddered and woke up. She grabbed a handful of snow and tossed it on her face.

Tsilka attempted to raise her leg and move it, but she could not feel it. It felt like it was stuck deep inside an ant hill and ants were crawling all over it. Her foot was completely frozen and she could not feel it at all. The numbness of it began to hurt her, to burn her and torment her. She kicked her heels together but felt nothing; like they did not exist. She alternately pounded the frozen ground with her boots, which made a sound but still she could not feel her feet. Chills began to rise up and travel over her entire body, making her shiver all over. The wind died down and the squeaks from the snow became louder. She looked around. The snow looked a little brighter. She tightened the collar around her neck and the belt around her waist and wiggled her shoulders. Then she thought she saw a flash far away in the valley, she looked in that direction. She continued to gaze. Her shivers died down. It seemed to her that mist was forming in the distance. She persistently stared at it until she was lost in it, like she was having a dream inside it. Her eyelids became heavy and she became lost somewhere deep down in her consciousness. She was experiencing a crisis: one side was telling her to stay awake and be vigilant, the other side was telling her to take a nap, just a little one, a tiny nap, to slightly lower her eyelids for as long as it took to count to five, just a little nap...

Her heavy eyelids began to close slowly. Her sleepy side was winning. Opposition to her sleepiness seemed to slowly disappear in the far away mist over the hills and... a thundering sound rushed from below, from the brook. A large ice sheet slipped down and broke the branches of several beech trees. Tsilka was shaken by the noise. She quickly lifted her head and rubbed her eyes with her frozen hands. She was awake, but only for a moment. Her need for sleep again overcame her. She began to stare into the distance

looking for the mist and she again surrendered to her inexorable need for sleep…

She tilted her head and placed it on the butt of her rifle and slowly she closed her eyes and went to sleep. This, however, was not just an ordinary night's sleep but an eternal sleep that would last forever and make up for all the nights she had missed while marching in the rain and snow, marching in the heat and during the long vigils in anticipation of battle. This was a sleep that would satisfy her desire to sleep for all the nights she missed sleeping and not only for herself but also for her friends who craved to sleep but couldn't… There was another big bang down by the brook which again woke her up but only for a moment. She then shook again and could barely hold her rifle with her frozen fingers. She felt like her legs had disappeared and her knees were touching something, but what she could not tell. She turned her head slowly and in that very moment it seemed to her that something or someone was making the snow squeak.

"Hhhhhallttttt" she said and it seemed to her that she yelled "halt" at the top of her voice. She felt like her teeth were tied together and her mouth was clamped shut. She tried to move but in the process she dropped her rifle. She tried to balance herself but her legs refused to hold her up and she fell down. She stretched out her arm in an attempt to grab something and brace herself but she could not bend her knees. She made several attempts to roll, to turn, to grab onto something, to kneel, to stand up, but with every movement she became weaker and felt darkness all around her. The earth was pulling her down, her throat was shutting and she felt like she was choking. She somehow remembered that she must breathe deeply through her nose, not panic, not be afraid, to relax, to rub her shoulders with something hard and not forget to move her hands and feet non-stop. She did all those things and managed to compose herself. She continued to breathe deeply. She pulled in her right leg then her left leg. She then turned and stood on her knees. She grabbed her rifle, leaned on it, stood up and took one, two, three wobbling steps.

Tsilka slowly stumbled her way back to her original position from where she could better view her surroundings. To stop herself from

falling asleep she decided to count the trees sticking out of the snow to the left of her. When she counted thirty, it seemed to her that that particular tree shook and separated itself from the others. It was decorated with white snow, had a slender build, was very tall and its branches were nicely arranged and pointing downwards like a long white robe with numerous small sparkling lights, so beautiful they were blinding… Then the tree started coming towards her… Tsilka watched the tree take steps, light steps, standing upright, slender, tall, moving quietly, without a sound, balanced and dignified. It looked like a bride dancing the "bridle" or the "Bairacheto" dance, sure-footed, dignified, balanced and sober. It bent over her with ease, extended its hand and slowly pulled her out of the snow. They set off holding hands. Step by step they walked one beside the other over the soft snow, leaving no trace behind them. The wind disappeared before them and something moved the snow in front of them making a wide snow-free path. She felt like they were walking on a thick soft carpet as soft was dewy green grass. Suddenly her village appeared before her. The houses were painted white and from their chimney grey smoke rose high above them.

A red rooster, sitting on a fence was spreading its wings, opening its beak wide but making no sound. Tsilka's dog, Belka, ran over to her, squirmed, jumped, barked and then ran in front of them and disappeared. Belka too made no sound… They walked down the narrow village lane and before turning towards her grandfather's house she saw her mother and grandmother sitting side by side on the balcony. Behind them, just for a moment, she saw her grandfather Krsto sit upright. At that moment Tsilka ran and after crossing the threshold of her yard, she noticed that the tall fairy dressed in white, which accompanied her this far, was no longer with her. Her mother, grandmother and grandfather were smiling but none of them left the balcony to greet her. They stood on the balcony, watching her, extending their arms out, inviting her to come up. Tsilka watched herself move slowly, in slow motion, walking up the stairs, taking each step and momentarily stopping to make sure it could hold her weight, moving closer to her loved ones with each step. But before she could reach them, they turned their backs and went inside the house. Tsilka ran after them but as soon as they crossed the door they disappeared… Tsilka ran into the guest room. The big bed was covered with red woolen blankets. A fire

was burning in the fireplace. Her grandfather Krsto was sitting in front of it, cross legged, and lighting his tobacco pipe. He took a couple of puffs and slowly released its fragrant aroma into the air. Tsilka's grandmother came in and left a freshly baked loaf of bread on the table. Her mother brought sweet liquid refreshments and set them on the same table. Tsilka loosened her belt, unbuttoned her coat and sat at the table. She then broke a chunk of bread from the fresh loaf and dipped it into the sweet liquid. The room was warm and full of pleasant aromas of ripe apples and quinces. Her grandmother prepared her spindle and began to spin her white thread.

Tsilka's mother threw a thread of black yarn over her neck and began to knit. The dry wood in the fireplace was by now ablaze and beaming warmth and soft light throughout the entire room. Golden sparks exploded out of the fire, filling the room with light… They were so beautiful ... Tsilka thought. And that thought gave birth to another thought. The same thought. She thought of exploding sparks again and again until the entire space in her mind was filled with little sparkling stars… there was silence... A beautiful silence… In fact there had never been any sound since she met the tall fairy disguised as a tree…

Tsilka collected all the bread crumbs off the table, bound them in her dirty handkerchief and shoved the handkerchief deep into her military coat pocket. Her mother got up, gently grabbed her by her underarm, as if not wanting to awaken her, lifted her up and gently laid her down on the big bed whose pillow smelled of fresh apples, pears and quinces and whose covers smelled of freshly baked bread just taken out of the oven. She expected the bedsprings to squeak but in her mind all she could hear were bombshells exploding… She lifted her eyelids open. Her grandfather was watching her with a wide smile on his face. She closed her eyelids again, they were much too heavy for her to keep them open. Then suddenly she opened them again but only momentarily. It seemed to her that she had not removed her dirty military boots before going to bed. She tried to move, to get out of bed, but something was holding her back, something had nailed her to the bed. A heavy sigh tore out of her chest. She wanted to open her eyes but felt like someone had tied stones on her eyelids.

She woke up. She got up. She grabbed her mother by the hand and the two went to the next room. It was warm there. Four boxes were stacked against the wall. Boxes belonging to a bride. Tsilka took them down and removed their covers. From the first box she pulled out a number of dresses. She unfolded the first one, stood in front of the mirror and measured it against her body. She did the same with the others. On the first day of her wedding her friends would wear these dresses. This one, the green one, she would give to Maria ... Maria, Maria, who was Maria? She thought. Ah, Maria, Maria… poor Maria… a mine exploded in Kopanche and broke her legs. I heard they had to cut them off at the Elbasan hospital... How is she going to dance at her wedding without legs? This one, the yellow dress will be fitting for Tsana… Tsana? Ah, yes, she was captured by the government soldiers. She was badly raped. Would she come out in public and dance at her wedding… in her shame? This one, the dress with the flowers, she would give to Dina. Dina... they were together in the same unit. Poor Dina, she was a machine gunner but they still had not issued her military pants. She was still wearing the same dress she had brought from home. It was shabby and in need of much mending…

One by one, Tsilka folded the dresses and put them back in the box. The last dress she looked at she remembered she had promised to Lina. When the girls had gathered together to examine Tsilka's dowry, Tsilka had said to Lina: "You will look your best in this dress and I want you to be the first to lead the 'Bairacheto' dance wearing it." Lina? Oh, that Lina, how she begged me to save her. She was wounded in the hip and both her legs were broken. We were walking under a cloud of flying bullets and grenades. We were all ducking to save our own necks when we heard her screaming from behind. We felt sick and were terribly frightened. It tore us apart to have to listen to her crying, begging voice. Where is she now? Is she alive?

Tsilka opened the second box. It too contained dresses. This one, the red one, would be for Kotsa. Oh, poor Kotsa, why couldn't she run a little faster? Why did they have to shoot her out in the open? We did not even hear her fall... She fell and never got up again… This one, the green dress with the wide collar. This one Tsilka had

promised to Sofka... Sofka? Yes, Sofka who we buried at St. Ilia church. She was killed during our first battle. She had a tiny bleeding hole in her forehead but the entire back of her head was missing… it had dispersed...

Tsilka was now folding all the dresses and for each dress she folded she remembered the young lady who did not wear it or who had no wedding of her own. They were all out there somewhere now… Lying dead in a ditch… under a beech tree… in a river… or crippled and laying in a hospital somewhere. They were freezing in a trench, on a long march or on guard… And why would they need wedding dresses? What they needed was what Command had promised them and had not delivered… What they needed were shoes, socks, pants, sweaters and winter coats… They were tired of laying on the cold earth. They were tired of walking in the mud, in rain and in snow with torn boots and barefoot... Their shoes were full of holes, their sweaters worn and eaten by moths. Their coats were riddled with bullet holes… stripped off the backs of the dead who no longer needed them. Their blankets were worn thin and loaded with lice…

Suddenly there was a thundering crash up above. Tsilka turned and looked. Some trees had lost their branches from the cold and from the weight of the snow. A whole pile of snow had dislodged and was rolling downhill, passing through more trees. It was an avalanche and was growing larger as it dislodged more and more snow on its way downhill. Tsilka stared at it and to her it seemed like the trees were white fairies being mowed down by balls of snow and they bent, lay down and were trampled by the snow. A cloud of snow formed over them, blowing, twisting and thundering, pushing its way downhill until it finally disappeared down the gorge. There was silence again, no noise, just silence...

Tsilka was back in the guest room at her grandfather's house watching the flames in the fireplace come alive. Her grandmother put the spindle down, picked up a lit stick from the fireplace and with it she lit the little oil lamp in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary. She crossed herself and then prayed. Tsilka sat at the table, broke another chunk of bread from the loaf and began to pluck at it, pulling smaller pieces out of it. She whispered: "This one is for Velika, this one is for Mita, this one is for Zoia, this one is for Argir,

this one is for Antonis, this one is for Panaiotis... And all this while, non-stop, ants were crawling up and down her legs on her shoulders and on her cheeks. She raised her hand to rub her head, to drive the dream away, but her eyelids were too heavy...

Tsilka's mother came closer and sat beside her. Tsilka wanted to grab her and embrace her, but even that she could not manage. She was so close yet so far… far away vanishing into the whiteness of the room. She stared at the room. It seemed to her that it was getting bigger and brighter, expanding into infinity. The sight frightened her so she closed her eyes and stuck her head under the white covers and wondered why the covers were so white and so cold. She wondered why she could not realize that she was dreaming a dream and that someone was slapping her, shaking her, turning her over and undressing her in a desperate attempt to awaken her… She would not awaken…

"Strip her down and cover her body with snow!" was the last order given by the commissar.

# The Great Decline – Chapter 7

Every day the long days were spent in defense of the territory and under rain of fire. Waves of planes flew every morning, early in the morning. Trenches were fired upon with machine gun fire and bunkers with rockets and bombs. The planes came in waves, wave after wave dropped their bombs and flew away. And then the cannon and mortar fire started, beating everything down, bringing more destruction and obliterating what the planes had missed. And the moment the roar of cannon fire died out and the smoke cleared, the infantry attacked; lasting until sundown. Then, during the night, after midnight, there was continuous digging until dawn.

The commanders inspected and re-inspected the digs and reminded the fighters that: “Those who don’t dig deep, will quickly find themselves in a grave…”

They dug deeply, up to their shoulders and past the tops of their heads; “It was better to be alive deep in the earth than be dead, buried in it.” Up until recently, they had been accustomed to constantly moving, but now, being buried in the ground, they could not go anywhere. All they could do was stare up at the sky; this was their world. They looked up and watched the sky… at whatever they could see through the gun holes. They felt like eagles in cages with trimmed wings. It was difficult to be this way because the opponent could now easily find them and beat them down when he wanted and with whatever he wanted.

The sun was hanging above Mount Bel Kamen ready to set. A red cloud stood in its way. The sun descended towards the cloud. The cloud turned so red it seemed that at any moment it was going to burst into flame. The sun went behind it. The cloud turned golden yellow and looked like it was made of pure gold. The sun began to descend behind Mount Bel Kamen. The cloud regained its red colour but could not hold it for long. As the sun disappeared behind Bel Kamen, the cloud began to darken. It first turned light purple then dark purple. A shadow began to form in the valley below and quickly made its way up the mountain. When the shadow reached the top of the mountain the cloud was black. A coat of darkness began to cover the land…

The sunset behind Bel Kamen was a sad affair. The cover of darkness over Kostur Region and over Vicho and Siniachka brought pain and sorrow. Above, in the sky, lay a belt of gray clouds looking like slabs of marble. The dry leaves in the forest rustled in the wind under the young birch tree where Tsilka was digging a deep trench into which she had completely disappeared. The shade of the birch tree was stationary, but underneath it Tsilka's fears and thoughts were circling, searching, flying, wondering what was going to happen next… searching for hope in distant places...

It was ordered that way and Tsilka was carrying out the order. She dug. She dug deep. She had no choice. Someone else made that choice for her. She must dig deep and hide the trench well. Her choice was to do what she was ordered, like it or not, there was no turning back. If she did turn back, it was certain she would be facing a firing squad, or just her commander and then she would be leaning against a wall, a boulder, tree trunk and then… bam… and into a narrow shallow grave covered with a bit of soil, stones, leaves and branches… And no one would ever know who was underneath all that…

She continued to dig deeper. She lined the edges of the trench with stones and placed a few branches on top to hide the freshly dug, leveled soil. She dug some more. The deeper the better to protect the position. And was anyone worrying about protecting her? Protecting the position was far more important than protecting her. She must not think about protecting her own head. People here had no need to think about today or tomorrow, their job, in these "evil times", was to protect the position and keep the enemy at bay. The only objective was to stop the opponent from passing! That indoctrination was deep rooted into her mind and had taken root in hard ground; "The enemy must not pass!" The ground was hard, not because it was constantly being bombed by the airplanes and cannons but because it was beaten by human misfortune and hatred…

Tsilka's throat tightened at the thought that one of the fighters had been executed the day before. She felt sick to her stomach and began to sob… He cracked, he could not hold out, he withdrew from his position… but only for a moment… and for that… bam… he fell

forward with bent knees and hit the rocks and hard soil with his face. Did he manage to think of anything? Something he wished perhaps? Earlier Tsilka had noticed his hands trembling and his chin shaking. His left cheek muscle was vibrating… then bam… everything froze, including his thoughts… The ravens, pecking at the warms in the fresh dug soil near the trenches, took flight… Tsilka, just for a moment, wondered if his heart was warm in all that cold? Then chills and fear covered her entire body. She broke into a cold sweat...

"Dig! And not a step back!!!" Tsilka thought she heard someone say. She raised her head. The clouds above her were turning dark.

She jumped out of the trench. There was a fire burning in the distance. The century old pine trees were burning like candles. The forest was burning and with it the trees and the mountain flowers. There would be no aroma and no spring without mountain flowers. The sun was losing its height to the west and the shadow of the birch tree was covering most of the trench. Tsilka sat at the end of the trench and looked westward. She wondered what the night was going to bring? Then she remembered it was Sunday. It was the Lord's day, a day of prayer and rest... But she heard no church bells ringing. On the other side, beyond the river Bistritsa, airplanes circled the mountains and cannons beat the earth to pulp… Tsilka looked up towards the sky and said: "Lord, please hear my prayer…" She then covered her face with her hands and said: "Please help us survive this day… and many others..."

Here the night, under Gorusha, was bright and warm. The soil was torn apart and wounded but still breathing. Black clouds hovered over Mopava and after midnight it began to rain. It was a fine, warm and gentle rain, enough to wash off the dust. Fog had formed and filled the gorges. And while it was still dark in the valley and in the brooks below, the sun was rising up in Gorusha, Krusha and Bel Kamen. Dawn was breaking… The morning wind gently blew the fog away and a new world was revealed… Up high the sky was changing colour, opening the heavens until a cord of light, a thin sunbeam touched the earth and began to spread from the top of the mountains to the valleys below… slowly and gently caressing the land. The day began first in Siniachka then in Kopanche, Sv. Ilia,

Krusha, Gorusha, Bel Kamen, Arena, Gramos... The sky turned pale blue then pink, red, purple and, with a sudden flash, it flooded the side of the mountain with light. The sun then slowly grew into a disk flooding the entire Kostur valley with bright light.

Three black dots appeared in the sky and they grew and grew in the eyes of the guard watching them.

“AIRPLANES!!!” he yelled out as loud as he could and he disappeared into a bunker.

The aircraft flew low and dropped fire and great fear on the ground… and when they were done, they disappeared. Then the artillery came to life.

Curled up like a roll, with knees pressed against her chin, hands on her head, sprinkled with fear, Tsilka lay at the bottom of the trench, waiting. Would the next flying shell miss her trench or hit it and would she feel the pain or would she instantly die, she wondered? And right away yesterday’s thoughts came to mind, when in the early morning hours, two artillery batteries beat her position to no end. After the infantry attack was repelled they began repairs on the trenches and bunkers and collected the bodies and body parts of their wounded and dead fellow fighters. Would tonight be the night when they would collect her body parts and bury them in a common grave?

Tsilka became one with the ground as she tried to make herself as small as she could and stay as deep down in the trench as possible. As she waited she could not shake off her bad thoughts. They stuck in her mind like lichen on a rock. She placed her fingers deep into her ears and squeezed tight to stop the sound of the whistling shells entering her mind. The ground shook underneath her after a dull roar. Hot soil mixed with bits of stone fell on her. She curled and tightened her body even more… and waited. She lay still, at times not even breathing, fearing that even the smallest movement or slightest breath would uncover her and reveal her position... She persistently endured and fought every instinct in her body. Then, suddenly it was all quiet again. And in the silence her ears were ringing, sounding like the whistle of approaching cannon shells. She

listened carefully. She heard new roars and thunderstorms, but they were not real. Those were generated inside her head. Her blood was pounding in her eardrums with each heartbeat. She felt tightness in her throat and was afraid to move.

Tsilka had nearly lost her life the day before. She had accidentally bumped a green branch covering the trench she was in with her head. It was enough of a movement to give away her position and for the enemy to take a shot at her. She did not hear the rifle shot but felt the hot bullet whiz by her left ear. Then a clump of soil flew off the back of the trench wall. She immediately realized that she had been shot at and broke into a cold sweat. She was petrified with fear. When she finally composed herself she checked her head with her hands, a clump of burned hair came off. At that very moment another bullet whizzed by her head and many more after that. It was a full burst of gunfire. When she realized that she had been discovered she wanted to call out loud, to cry for help, but fought her instincts. Then she heard the moaning and wailing of wounded. She bit her hand hard and drew blood in an attempt to control her fear and panic. She managed to remain silent and motionless. She sat at the bottom of the trench and covered her head with her shmaizer (rifle). She then bent forward and lay her face on top of her knees. She remained in that position until dark. When darkness covered the trench she stood up and when she saw others come out of their trenches, she came out. She breathed the fresh air and lay down on the beaten and burned soil plowed by the falling shells. Then, bowing low, she stepped back several metres and went to relieve herself behind the rocks. And so did the others… But that was yesteday… Today was a new day…

It was quiet now, the roaring and thundering had finally ceased… for the moment. Tsilka took a long and deep sigh. The air smelled of smoke and burned gun powder. She shook her head and grabbed her waist. She listened. The echoes of exploding shells were still bouncing back and forth from hill to hill in the distant hills. She carefully lifted her head. There was silence. A tree cut down by gunfire was smoldering and covering the trenches with smoke. She heard Mita coughing in the next trench. Further over she heard Iani's voice. He was swearing. He stuck his head out of his trench and yelled out: "Is there anyone left alive out there?"

The trenches came alive. People started pouring out and, in their own way, felt good that they were alive. They expressed joy in their eyes, in their voices and in their faces… for just being alive. Some laughed, some sighed and others cried with joy for surviving another day… It was also a joyous occasion because no one had been killed that day. The five that were wounded were looked after. Their wounds were patched up and they were transported to the trench on the other side of the brook.

Tsilka returned to her trench. Now free from fear, she leaned on the warm trench wall, breathed easily and picked the dirt and soil out of her hair. She felt thirsty. She looked for her backpack. It was covered with soil. She shook it and pulled out her flask. She drank several gulps while staring at the blue sky. She then turned her head. White clouds appeared over Vicho, hovering, hanging low over the mountains. She heard footsteps. The company commander was passing by, ordering everyone to clean their weapons. Tsilka bent down to look for her shmaizer. It was buried under a pile of soil at the bottom of the trench. She cleared the soil with her hands and tossed it out. At that moment, from the corner of her eye, she saw a little bird. Slowly, so as not to scare it away, she gently caught it and held it on the wide part of her open palm. It was unconscious but still warm, barely alive. Tsilka put it on her lap and slowly opened its beak. She bent down and blew air into its mouth. She did this several times while rubbing its belly. The bird shivered momentarily, shook its wings and moved its claws. Tsilka took it in her hands, warmed it and gently blew air into its open beak. She then put a drop of water in its mouth with a piece of grass… then another and another. The bird opened its eyes, shook its wings and stood on its tiny, weak feet. It looked at Tsilka with a dizzy and blurry look. It turned its head and looked around. Tsilka placed it in the palm of her hand, stroked its back, smoothed its ruffled feathers and raised her palm above the trench. The bird shook, moved over and grasped Tsilka's finger with its claws. It then turned its head, looked here and there and flew off... Tsilka, watching the bird fly away, said: "Oh, if I only had wings…"

During the day the opponent went on the attack twice. Gorisha was defended all day until dusk. The approaches were burning and the

top of Gorisha was still on fire. The ivy wrapped around a beech tree was burning. Flames, like strings, were running up the tree. There was a crack in a stone and a flower was growing in it. Tender leaves were fluttering in the warm wind. Tsilka, with extended lips, was blowing. She was blowing out the dust and caressing it with her staring eyes. She was afraid to touch it with her finger... She was afraid of touching the rock... Dusk was approaching. Behind their backs the sun was setting and losing its intensity. Lying flat on their backs or face down, facing east, they lay there as the night approached. They lay there the way a bullet, a grenade, or a bomb fragment made them lay. Now they were only a number in the commander's ledger...

The night was calm and hot. The mild wind was spreading warmth all around. The sky was clear and filled with beautiful sparkling stars. Fragrant aroma from the Ianovo flowers was penetrating everywhere. People were sitting up behind the trenches; some were lying down sleeping. They were sitting facing the wind blowing from Bistritsa, bringing freshness with it. The gentle wind was blowing against the trees making rustling sounds. The leaves and the tall, half-burned stalks of grass were waving in the breeze. It was quiet and peaceful. The men were smoking cigarettes while hiding the lit part from view with their hands. Deep in thought many sighed deep sighs...

Someone was coughing in the trench for a long time, then someone began to sing quietly:

Mitrevitsa chekankata,
Rano rani na utrina...

Another voice, in the next trench, a thick, rough voice, crackling like a broken board joined in:

Ovtsi pasa gaber lezha,
Vecher ke ti doida...

Then there was silence, as if listening for a response and then the singing began again:

Za tatko ti, kolai biva,
Edno lule tutun…

The voice paused for a moment and asked:

“Hey, Kolio, what are you doing? Are you sleeping? You are not sleeping? Well, then toss your bag of tobacco over this way so that I can twist one...”

While he was twisting his cigarette, there were sighs everywhere. They were daydreaming in the night under the full moon:

Doidi mi Magde,
Tvoito belo litse,
Tvoiata ramna snaga,
Samo so Magde mori sonuvam…

Someone from the other side decided to join in:

Of, aman, aman mori Eleno,
Of, aman, aman, umiram za tebe…

The song then came out of the trenches and broke out everywhere… in the dark…

In the beginning it was barely audible, almost shy, quiet and easy going like the flickering wings of a gee gee, one extending and the other threading into a chain and inside – the cold springs from which young maidens fetch cold water, the wedding ring, the long years of waiting, the tall verandas, the white wheat and the nine pigeons flying high above the wide field, the miserable young lovers and their love waiting under the window, in front of the door, on the porch... And in the singing – Fanka was mentioned. Fanka who stole grapes and was caught by the young guard who would not accept a five lira bribe, but instead he wanted her dark eyes and her love… and swarthy Donka, and Kalina with wiry blond hair, thick and fit for a stringed instrument, the Gergievden (St. George day) cradle and... Still the passion was there, when from up above, from the second line of defense, the boys from Krchishta, Lobanitsa, Kosinets, Papra, D’mbeni, Babchor, Ezero… all began to sing:

Mori Chupi kosturchanki,
Rashirete go oroto,
Rashirete go oroto,
Da vi vime fustanite,
Da vi vime fustanite,
Chii e fustan damkalia,
Chii e fustan damkalia…

They sang out loud and their voices were picked up by the wind and planted on the hillside from trench to trench and from bunker to bunker. From there the wind carried them over the brook to the other side of the hill and up the peaks where they were slowly diffused. The song they sang brought memories of home, of the blacksmith shop, of the vineyard, of freshly cut grass in the meadow, of the garden and the terrace, of pleasant reunions and encounters with family and friends... Someone sighed deeply and secretly wiped another bulging tear. Fanka, wounded on her right arm, was groaning, but her pain did not stop her from singing. In the warm night the wind carried a load full of voices into the broad rifle hole of the bunker and awakened the gunner. The male voices were pleading:

Ne prusai, prusai, (Don't busy yourself, busy yourself,)
Pred mene mori lepa, (In front of me my beautiful,)
Ne mi go gori srtseto, (Don't burn my heart,)
Stiga e samo goreno, mori lepa, (It's been burned enough, my beautiful,)
Goreno, pepel storeno. (Burned, turned to ash.)

Lapka ke frla po tebe, mori lepa, (I will toss an apple at you, my beautiful,)
Da se svrtish, da vidish, (So you will turn, and to look,)
Da ti go vida litseto, mori lepa, (So I can see your face, my beautiful,)
Litseto belo tsrveno. (Your rosy white face.)

Da to go pisha na tefter, mori lepa, (To draw it in my sketch book, my beautiful,)
Koga ke oda asker, (For when I am drafted into the army,)

Koga ke mi tekni za tebe, mori lepa, (So when I think of you, my beautiful,)
Da go otvora teftero. (I will open the book.)

Da ti go vida litseto, mori lepa, (To see your face, my beautiful,)
Litseto belo tsrveno, (Your rosy white face,)
Da mi pomini merako, mori lepa, (To quench my desire, my beautiful,)
Merako golem po tebe… (My great desire for you…).

Coming from deep inside their hearts, the song awakened memories, arched towards the sky, as if wanting to touch the stars. One voice rose, dominated the others, then trembled. Other voices took over, fighting one another for dominance, joining each another, complementing one another… They were male voices, deep, assertive and reliable, coming from inside the neighbouring trench. They were joined by the female voices, warm and soft like a mother's whisper and caress. They all blared out uninterrupted with only a brief pause to take a breath, their melody traveling from ear to soul. And while one part of the song traveled deep down into their soul, another took its place swirling gently in the air. It seemed like every word was loaded with youthful dreams, desires, grief, pain and wounds, embroidered, and decorated with silk and beads. Female voices took flight from the left, like butterflies, penetrating the dark and while bracing themselves through the wounded trees, scorched branches, singed grass and wilted wild flowers, they spoke of lost youth, beauty and unfulfilled love...

Belo litse lubam jas, (I am in love with a fair face,)
Tsrni ochi lubal jas, (I am in love with dark eyes,)
Gaitan vegi lubal jas, (I am in love with thick eyebrows,)
Faide nema… (There is no use…)

"Oh!" sighed a wounded man, hiding his face in his hands and whimpering. "My bloody wound hurts and I have squandered away my youth. There is no use..." he sang with a broken voice, which quickly dried and disappeared. Was there any use in thinking of the sweet, brown haired girl when his own life had been unfulfilled? Was there any comfort in that? But none the less the trenches and

bunkers kept on singing, sorrowful songs, longing for Tinka, for Tina, for Fana, Donka, Sevda, Mare…

Of, of sevda pusta po edna,
Sevda golema po site…

Even before those voices had done their part and even before their song took flight, new voices began to sing:

Izniknalo tsveke vo momini dvorovi,
Ran bel bosilek, tsrven karanfil…

Suddenly the voices died down. A flute spread its wings and overpowered them. It cried and wept, it shouted and wailed for the mothers who had lost their children. Its whistling, weeping and shouting traveled up the hill, filling the souls of those listening to it, stirring the air, twisting and trembling, calming down and resting on the soft grass... It played a sad melody, low and high notes, howling and crying, falling and rising like the flight of a restless falcon, then whimpering peacefully, stirring emotions of love and memorable secret kisses. It carried grief, hope, aspirations, fantasies and the sadness of yesterday's battle… the crying and pleading of the wounded and the living...

The song had warmed the hearts of those in the trenches and bunkers making their environment seem a little gentler and the stars above them looked a little brighter. Once in a while, in the semi-dark of night, small dots of light would brighten only to die down again as the smokers puffed long puffs of smoke from their cigarettes. And if you listened intently, you would hear them exhale, you would hear them sigh long sighs of grief… Grief they carried in their hearts. Over the hill the full moon was shining, looking down at the trenches and bunkers and at the young men and women of seventeen, eighteen, nineteen and twenty years of age... who had grown and matured spending long nights marching in the rain and snow, in dark fog and dense mist in the cold and wet trenches, behind rocks and fighting in deadly hot battles… Young men and women who had lost their youth… who had lost their tenderness and innocence... A great loss indeed!

The brigade's political commissar, who half an hour ago had arrived at this position, leaning against a large pine tree, spoke up and said to the battalion commander:

"Your songs are good… They grab you by the throat, by the heart, but they are not for these kinds of occasions. The following must be sung now: Vrondai o Olimbos, ke se stravti I giona…" (A Greek song). "Or this one, one of yours: Vo borba, vo borba, vo borba… Makedonski narode…" (A Macedonian song).

"Tsilka!" the commander yelled out. "On Guard!"

The full moon was turning towards Bel Kamen. Pearly dew was covering the burned terrain, the leaves, the grass and the freshly dug trenches. There was a flash in the sky from beyond Bistritsa. It was almost daybreak and the end of silence and calm… The battle was about to resume… Flashes were soon followed by the thunder and roar of exploding shells and the mountain range and ravines again began to fill with smoke.

Tsilka took fifty steps forward and fifty steps back as if measuring the terrain. There were others beyond her. It was wet, cold and misty. Tsilka shuddered from the cold and her teeth began to chatter. She took steps to guard the terrain but she took greater steps to guard herself against her own fears. Her heart was pounding and she could hardly breathe. She forced herself to breathe, to keep the fears away. She pushed her fears deep down and squeezed her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering... She perked up her ears and listened… but all she could hear was the songs sung earlier… before she had been sent on guard. How many songs had they sung? And how many songs had they not sung… songs she had learned from her mother and grandmother? And she wondered: How can we possibly sing when there is so much fear, so much distress, so much spilled blood, so many killed and wounded and so many more crying and wailing? Maybe that's why, here in the Gramos mountain range, there were no songs sung about us...

Tsilka continued to count her steps back and forth. She had been in the armed struggle for over a year now and in recent months she had experienced the limits of human greatness on one hand and the

limits of humiliation on the other. By now she was convinced that even the shadows come in many shades. In the trenches and bunkers, in the long, mostly stammering drivel of yesterday's herdsmen and shepherds, now confident and self-absorbed political commissars, who had turned people into slaves, brainwashed their minds, robbed them of their ability to think for themselves, were words which she now recognized and with which she had become familiar, words that had led the youth to one long disaster… There was nothing in their lives to rejoice… in the trenches and bunkers there was no one close to them that they could be with… No one they could confide in… She knew that every unit had its informants. And that's how the system lived and worked… the slaves doing the bidding of the stupid… now Party Secretaries and Commissars…

There was a change of guard. Tsilka was back in her trench. She leaned against the soggy wall and fell asleep. The earth shook underneath her. She awakened but could not understand what had happened. After the heavy bombardment they found her unconscious...

# The Great Decline – Chapter 8

There was a large, tall boulder towering over the narrow, winding goat path. Climbing on the boulder one could get a broad view of the hills and surrounding brooks. At the very top was a bunker armed with anti-aircraft guns, serving as a lookout. The steep slope leading to the boulder was overgrown with short grass and above that the boulder was bare. This was the highest point of the mountain. A beech tree with twisted, torn and mutilated branches was growing out of a crack in the rock. There was a sound of falling water coming from a brook further down the mountain. It was from yesterday's rain. The foaming water sparkled as it reflected the shining sun. About twenty steps further down there was a meadow being watered by the flowing water. Even though it was the middle of summer and very hot, the grass was green and the white daisies were in bloom. Further over there was a thick forest of beech trees. Under their broad branches there was deep shade. Here was where the women lay resting, some sitting, others sleeping, under the forest's thick canopy. The women remained silent throughout the day, quietly waiting for the day to end. They often looked at the sky and listened for the airplanes circling over the hills and waiting for them to come out. Airplanes flew all day long, circling over the hills and forests and whirling around like vultures as they climbed higher and higher. The draft animals were tied to tree trunks under the forest canopy and nibbled on nearby grasses. It was hot but the valley was green.

Fimka, looking at the two men sitting to her side, was trying to remember where she had seen them before. She finally remembered. It was the same two men who, about a month before, had led her here through the various paths. They took her and a few other women uphill then downhill, turning here and there and then following a herd of cattle and a column of village women. Only now Fimka realized why they had deliberately led the women this way. It was so that the women would not remember how to find their way here or back. The women were eventually taken to a secret warehouse where arms and ammunition were stored. The women arrived here at night, loaded their draft animals in the dark and traveled to their destination in darkness.

Nearly all the women wore black and had their heads and faces wrapped in black head kerchiefs. They spoke quietly and refrained from falling asleep. They wore black because they were mourning a family member… a dead husband, a dead brother, a dead child… There were always tears in their eyes and they sobbed and moaned softly. Their burden was great and often caused them tightness in their throat and pain in their chest. Their pain dug at them constantly…

A breeze blew from the top of the mountain. It gently shook the leaves on the trees and made them rustle. The daisies hardly moved but the tall grass swayed in gentle ripples. There were playful butterflies flying over it. The gentle breeze, the low flying birds… all signaled the day was coming to an end. The sun was setting and the sky was changing colour… azure-pink… shades of blue… timid and sad. The white clouds hovering over the mountains began to turn red. Twilight was approaching giving the terrain a certain strangeness. Darkness was winning over light, covering the meadow with an invisible cover.

Up high in the sky the purple light of dusk was vanishing in the final moments of twilight before darkness enveloped the tips of the hills and crickets came out to play. Several steps away there was a cricket chirping. Sounding frightened, there was another cricket responding right back. There were many crickets chirping like a chorus and waiting for replies. The entire valley had come alive and was singing, pleading, begging… It was magical and humbly captivating… loud and quiet, soft and soothing, passionate and inspired, pious and poignant, seductive and gentle, playful and sweet, promising and deceptive… The meadow was alive with the song of the cricket. It filled the air and permeated under every blade of grass… It paused enough to take a breath and started the song all over, pouring, spreading, soaring and continuously flying without interruption, and non-stop begging: “come… come… come…”

Then suddenly there was a loud, commanding, hoarse voice which hit like thunder and scattered all over the meadow and in the trees: “On your feet!!!”

The meadow and the forest came alive. The draft animals raised their heads and became alert. The women quickly wiped their tears and assembled together. Those in charge of leading the draft animals went looking for them. The others picked up their loads of boxes and bags and threw them over their shoulders.

“Move out!!!” ordered the same hoarse, commanding voice.

There was a living chain of people and burden animals moving along in the meadow, step by step, one foot following another, stamping on the grass covered in fresh dew. The first foot bends it down and the hundreds that follow trample it. A daisy’s flower was bent and as it painfully tries to straighten itself, another foot pushed it down… then another and another... But soon the living chain left the meadow and veered off towards the incline and the column began to climb up the slope. Down in the meadow, new fresh dew collected on the trampled grass and the frightened crickets resumed their song which lasted until dawn. The burden animals followed one other in a long queue and not one went off its course. The path they walked on was well trampled and smelled of urine and dung. They maintained their pace and knew when to slow down, when to shift their weight from one leg to another and when to catch their breath... And the women hanging by the bridles and horse tails, walked in front and beside them, matching their stride down to the step. How many times had they done this? How many times had they walked these paths at the same pace? Let’s say that they were familiar with every bump, crack and pebble. They knew where to step, what to avoid and when to skip over...

To the left of the trail were bare and cracked rocks. Dwarf pine trees grew deep in their crevices enduring cold, wind, rain and snow. To the right was a deep, dark abyss which began immediately after the entrance to the narrow path. Sounds of flowing water were heard coming from the depths of the abyss. Fimka gripped the horse’s mane with all her might, gently bent down and, while whispering to the horse, pressed herself against its ribs and walked on the path that hung above the dark abyss. The boxes loaded on the animals, full of cartridges, mines and hand grenades, touched, scratched and hit the jutting rocks, decorating them with wooden markings. Suddenly a bat took flight and a notorious owl began to hoot.

Step by step, foot behind foot, in the dark of night, the column made its way to its destination. Just as its end passed through a clearing, its front began to enter a dark pine forest. It was very dark but the sky was visible above the towering, tall trees. Their tips rocked back and forth as waves of wind brushed against them. The sky was dotted with dark clouds and in between them were veins of visible, shimmering bright stars. The heavens looked gruesome as if they were shaping up for a bad storm. Flashes of lightning were seen from time to time, like a flashlight turning on and off, flaring up in the distance. It was not a good sign. It caused much distress among the night travelers. It was enough of a burden to carry the heavy loads on their backs. They did not need rain to mess things up even more… Just as their anxiety began to heighten they were finally out of the woods. In the distance they could see a pale sky high above the hill.

"Get going!!!" a loud voice was heard yelling.

Fimka stopped for a moment and turned her head. To the east the sky looked pale. Down below her the valley was covered in white fog. To the west the high mountain peaks were becoming visible and up above her the sky looked red.

"Get moving!!!" the same voice again yelled sharply.

About a hundred metres above the steep slope they reached an open area. There were wide and deep holes everywhere. There were broken stones all over the place. It smelled of burned things and burned gunpowder. Three days before this hill had not been gutted like this. Who said it had been done by exploding bombs? Had the shells fired by the enemy from the other hill reach all the way here?

"Move!!!" the same voice was heard yelling, this time at Fimka, as she encouraged her horse to get going.

There was a huge rock facing the column. Someone was loudly swearing and threatening court martial. Our leader had taken a wrong path. The column turned left to bypass the rock and divided

itself into three columns to reach three different destinations. The day was breaking. The sky over Siniachka was turning red.

“Stop!” the same voice was heard yelling out loud.

Our leader and our guard exchanged signals and immediately after that the women offloaded the boxes and bags they and the burden animals were carrying. With the load off their backs, they stretched, rubbed their shoulders, wiped the sweat off their faces and deeply inhaled the morning air. They breathed bitterness and spit out thick, sticky and foamy saliva. It was a short rest. Day was breaking over Siniachka. The sky was purple all over. The wounded were already loaded on the horses and on stretchers and the women were deployed; four per stretcher and one per horse.

“Move out!!!” the same voice was heard, ordering the women to get going on their return trip.

The return trip was downhill. The column was able to move faster and make the trip back before the mountain peaks became visible, before Siniachka Mountain had lost its redness and before Lake Kostur could be seen. Just as the terrain was becoming visible the column, quickly sliding downhill, was fast approaching the tip of the pine forest and entering the woods. People and draft animals quickened their pace and suddenly disappeared… they were now invisible… The damn airplanes flying out from Rupishta could now cruise and circle all they wanted.

The tired and exhausted column slowed its pace and, in the grey dawn, moved down with ease, hidden in the safety of the pine forest.

“Please mother… Please, slow down,” a wounded person was heard moaning but his voice was lost in the painful moaning of the multitude. The wounded all begged not to be shaken so much and when they did finally get their wish there was silence. Most were unconscious and breathed with ease but when they returned to consciousness, their voices were finally heard; some were crying, some were praying and some were swearing and cursing...

Blood was dripping from the blanket nailed to the two wooden poles substituting for a stretcher. The drops were falling on the green grass and on the leaves of the Ianovo flowers. Stalks of grass bent under the heavy drops, slowly coagulating in the morning coolness.

“Please slow down mother…” a voice was heard begging. All of the wounded were begging for the women to slow down. Their darkened, dried blood and bandage covered wounds were becoming visible in the morning light.

Fimka bent her head down and looked at the face of the wounded person she was carrying. A tear drop fell from her eye.

“Don’t worry, mother…” muttered a voice from the stretcher. The body was wrapped in dirty bandages from top to bottom. Nothing seemed alive in it. Only the face and the eyes were uncovered. The only thing this crushed being was able to do was grumble and mutter a few words that made no sense.

“Don’t you worry, mother…” the voice said again and breathed a deep sigh. “Don’t you worry… that’s what the commander said to me! And what should I not worry about? About the hill?! We held the hill... We held it… We endured everything they threw at us... Everything they attacked us with… Fire was burning us? And who else could endure that much?...” The wounded person stopped talking, groaned making a crackling throat sound, sighed, opened his eyes and quietly muttered something unintelligible. His eyes looked blurry reflecting the sky. He had lost his voice. Two green flies landed on the abrasions on his lips. There was a reflection of the white clouds and the blue sky in the glazed pupils of his eyes.

Moving along down the steep hill there was some commotion. Someone slipped, stumbled and fell. They dropped their stretcher. The entire column had to stop. The stretchers were lowered to the ground. Many of the wounded began to moan and complain. Fimka and the woman in front of her also put their stretcher down. They wiped the sweat off their faces and took a deep breath.

“Get moving!!!” the same commanding voice yelled at them.

They picked up their stretchers and began to move. With every step that they took they found their stretchers heavier and heavier. The wounded person Fimka was carrying felt cold to the touch. They took him off the stretcher. They did the same with two other wounded men and one young woman. Fimka's team loaded a different wounded person on their stretcher. This person too was groaning and moaning and looked pale. He was arching his back and his chest was sticking up. He had difficulty breathing. His bandages were bloody and blood was dripping from the side of his mouth. Decrepit old men, incapable of carrying guns, with shovels over their shoulders, followed the column and collected the cold bodies left behind. They were going to bury them in a previously excavated hole near a large beech tree en route and they were going to cover the hole with branches. This is what they did with the dead returning from battle...

There was a talkative wounded person on the stretcher in front of Fimka's team.

"Here," he said. "Here is where I was stabbed… where all that blood came from, I don't know? The commissar, that idiot, instead of patching me up to stop me from bleeding, he comforted me by saying 'don't be afraid'… Is there anyone out there who is not afraid of a bullet? I am afraid… Fear was a big deal for me... A great deal, I say... If you are not afraid then you will not protect yourself… I was afraid and I protected myself and here I am on a stretcher... up there in the trench..." he continued to speak but not with ease as blood kept dripping from under his stretcher. "In the bunker, I, who they called a hero, was always afraid…" His words started to become intermittent and he began to gently and painfully cough short coughs, cry in delirium and pray. And when he regained consciousness and his breathing became easier, he said: "My whole life I have been poor and miserable… and maybe that is why… the bit of life I have left in me… is now leaving me with my blood… dripping out of…" He was unable to finish his sentence; he had a large, wide gaping wound in his chest.

Fimka did well to remember what he said: "If a bomb exploded near you, then you were either dead or wounded. If a barrel lit on fire fell from the sky near you then you were to stay there until you turned to

ash. You were not allowed to move… so we were ordered… to die there to the last one… 'You may fall but the position you are protecting must not fall!' we were told. That's the way it was…" said the man who died before her eyes. They loaded another wounded person onto the stretcher.

"All stop!!!" the same authoritative loud voice yelled out and then: "Offload!!!"

The column was ordered to stop in a lush circle of grass under the thick pine forest canopy and put down the stretchers.

The women immediately put down the stretchers, offloaded the wounded from the horses and everyone sat down in the shade. There was more groaning and moaning coming from the wounded. A young lady arrived. She was wearing a military uniform and carried a bag with a red cross on it over her shoulder. She went amongst the wounded. She bent down and adjusted someone's bandages then quietly and quickly said something… comforting…

Fimka put down her stretcher and sat beside the wounded person she was carrying. She then took the end of her black head kerchief and slowly, with measured movements, like a harvest worker, wiped the sweat off her face and forehead. The wounded person was a young man not more than eighteen years old. He lay there quietly, breathing slowly but with difficulty. His eyes were closed. He opened his eyes slightly and said something that sounded like he was begging. He attempted to speak louder but only a groan came out. The spasm made him clench his teeth. A round tear slid from his left eye and rolled down his dirty blood-stained cheek. He took another breath through his half-opened mouth. He blinked his eyes and moved his lower lip, signaling that he wanted to say something. He begged… He begged… But for what?! Fimka did not understand so she asked: "Are you in pain?"

The wounded young man took a deep breath. The air entering his body made a growling, wheezing sound. He clamped his lips tight.

"Do you want something to eat?" asked Fimka.

The man nodded slightly indicating “no”.

“Do you want some water?” asked Fimka. The man opened his eyes wide indicating “yes”. Fimka reached for her bag, opened it and pulled out her canteen… It was empty.

“One moment, my son, I will go and fetch some water,” she said.

She got up and went downhill to the brook. She walked very slowly, leaning close to the ground and grasping at tree branches and thick foliage. When she had left the circle, only then did she realize how many people were lying in the open, surrounded and covered by the tall pine trees. This was the first time she had seen so many men and women covered with bandages on their heads, arms, legs and chests. They lay there quietly under the shade of the tall pines, wrapped in bloody, dirty bandages. They rested, attempting to recover from the battle they had fought the day before and from being jolted while being carried on stretchers and on horseback during the long night’s journey.

She kept going. The foliage was very dense past the green circle. Steps later she heard shovels digging and soil being dropped. She figured they were digging trenches. Then when she saw the rows of young men and women with pale faces lying there motionless she understood what it was… They were digging a mass grave. She quickly veered off to the right and disappeared into the ditch. She pushed her canteen with her left hand deep into the water. She then made a cup with her right hand, scooped some water and drank it. She then rushed back, running up the hill.

There was no one near the thick foliage now, the diggers had all left. Fimka slowed down and looked where they had been digging. Apart from the broken branches interspersed over one another and some fresh soil spread over the grass, there was nothing else to see… No crosses… no tombstones… no markers to indicate that there was a mass grave here. She was surprised at how quickly they had finished the job. She hastened her step returning, wanting to get away from this place as soon as possible.

When she started on the uphill she felt tightness in her chest. She saw stars in front of her eyes and everything went black. She paused for a moment to take a deep breath. She felt weak and fell to her knees. She splashed a handful of water on her face and head. She again looked at the branches and the freshly dug soil and at that very moment her throat tightened. She moaned a bit and then began to cry. She cried for the strangers being buried in this unmarked grave where they would have to lie for eternity… Would their mothers know where they were laying? The thought of this tightened her throat even more. She shed more tears, tears of pain and anguish for the mothers who would never know where their children were. Fimka then composed herself, got up and left. She walked straight ahead, looking ahead. She felt as if her heart was bleeding. She passed by many wounded and headed straight for her wounded young man who had a burning thirst. And just for a moment, coming from not too far away, she heard the voice of a young woman say: "Mother… Mother…"

It was a pleading but peaceful voice which touched her gently. She did not turn. She figured it was one of the wounded girls in pain calling for her own mother, looking for some relief. Everyone when they are in pain, even in the smallest pain, call for their mothers… It's human nature… They feel safer when they call their own "mother". Fimka continued walking, holding her canteen tight against her chest with both hands, as if holding her own baby.

"Mother…" she heard the same voice calling again. This time the voice was distant, quieter, mellower but still pleading. Fimka slowed her step, paused for a moment and whispered: "The poor girl… she must be hurting very badly… wanting her mother so much…" She continued walking. The voice persistently followed her. She paused again and turned her head. She looked at the wounded lying around. She then looked at the women who carried the stretchers.

"Mother… mother…" she again heard the whiny and begging voice say but this time it sounded like it was closer. "Mother!" the same female voice again called out. The voice now seemed somewhat familiar to Fimka. She shuddered and slowed her pace. She was shaken and her whole body felt like it was covered in crawling ants. Her forehead felt cold and was covered in cold sweat. She felt weak

at the knees and her feet refused to move. She lost all her strength as she slowly turned her whole body. She looked in the direction of the voice while silently praying to God: “Please God let me hear the familiar voice one more time… please…” She stood there waiting. She waited but it seemed like the voice withered away and disappeared. Then, at the very moment when she was about to turn and walk away, she looked one last time. Her eyes were watery and her sight was foggy, but through the blur she could see a hand, a hand wrapped in bloody bandages, waving. Fimka quickly wiped her tears and looked straight at the raised hand. It belonged to a young woman dressed in a military uniform. She was lying down, leaning on her left elbow and waving with her right hand. She waved at Fimka to come over. She called her to come over, but not with her voice, because her voice was exhausted, but with her bandaged bloody hand. Fimka could not help herself, feeling that the voice she heard was familiar. She kept wondering who she might be as she stared at the woman from the distance? She wondered who this girl was who was persistently calling her? She walked towards her with a hesitant step. The girl tried to sit up, but was unable to. The best she could do was lie down and push up her upper body with her arm. Lying down on her left side, she continued to wave at Fimka to come over. When Fimka came close she stopped beside her. The girl reached out to her with her bandaged hand and, with an almost silent whisper, said: “Oh mother, dear mother…”

She spoke so quietly and softly that it seemed like her voice was carried by the wind from far, far away bouncing over the rocks, traveling through the meadow and flying over the pine trees before reaching Fimka. And up in the air her bloody bandaged arm still waved, calling on her… calling on her: Come… come… come… My dear mother…

Fimka took a small step... It was a difficult step because her feet felt like they were made of lead and cuffed together. She approached, half looking at the girl and slowed down. She had this nagging feeling biting her from the inside when she came close to touching the girl’s hand. She stopped moving and looked into the girl’s face and large dark eyes. The same begging dark eyes looked back at her. They began to pool with tears which quickly swelled up, overflowed and ran down like pearls on a string, washing off a streak of dirt,

blood, gunpowder and smoke from her cheeks. The girl again, in a mellow, begging broken whisper, painfully spoke to Fimka and said: "Mother… My dear mother…"

At that very moment Fimka froze. Her lower lip began to tremble uncontrollably. Her cheek muscles began to vibrate and a cold sweat covered her entire body. She lost control of her limbs and dropped hard on her knees. She then screamed out loud: "Tsilka… my dear child!!!" It was such a loud cry, it frightened a flock of birds into flight in the sky above the pine grove.

Mother and daughter embraced each other tightly, shaking uncontrollably. For a moment they both forgot their pain and felt a great joy… Fimka pulled her face away and again looked into Tsilka's big dark eyes. And for a brief second, a secret voice inside of her whispered: "Is it her?"

"My dear child…" whispered Fimka and now began to cry out loud, her cries were heard all around the pine grove, disturbing the wounded lying under the pine trees.

If there was ever a moment when in every day horrors, sorrow and pain, a mother could hear and recognize the voice of her own child, this was it...

"It is me, mother… It is me your daughter Tsilka…" said Tsilka, breaking Fimka's last doubts. She then mustered enough strength to smile.

"Oh, Tsilka, you are alive!" replied Fimka looking straight into her eyes. She again grabbed her and hugged her gently, not wanting to be separated from her ever again.

"I am alive, mother. I am alive…" replied Tsilka.

A woman sitting nearby removed her black head kerchief and said to the other women: "Fimka found her daughter…"

“If I had known,” added another woman, “that she was her daughter I would have told her the moment we picked her up…” “We,” the woman beside her said, “carried her on a stretcher...”

Fimka slowly released Tsilka from her embrace and again looked at her face. She took a good long look as if wanting to uncover all those traits and characteristics that were unique to her Tsilka and to reassure herself that the girl she was embracing was indeed her own daughter. The years passed had taught her to be cautious and distrustful, to always be on her toes, not to jump to conclusions, not to ask too many questions and not to support more than she could bear. The difficult months she had spent in the struggle had taught her to rely only on herself, not to submit to loneliness, fear, hunger and the cold. But she had never learned how to cope with young men and women in military uniforms, ragged, hungry, full of fleas, wounded and dead. No matter how hard she tried, the moment she saw a young man or a young woman in despair, she always thought of Tsilka and her two sons Risto and Tashko. Every moment of her day was filled with thoughts of them. After plowing and sowing the fields and collecting firewood from the forest for the winter, she always took to spinning wool and weaving and knitting socks, gloves and sweaters. Then when there was news that Partisans were going through the village or staying in nearby homes, she always came out and stood at the end of the road watching the columns passing by and asking if anyone had news about her Risto, Tashko and Tsilka. The bag which always hung behind the door was always full of sweaters, socks, gloves and something to eat.

“So they could stay warm…” she used to tell herself, “so that their feet would not be cold when they walked in the rain and snow.” And now, looking at Tsilka, she was reminded of one such time when she waited outside by the road. She remembered the moment well but did not hold a grudge against the people. She remembered the time a bird flew into her yard. The lie left a bitter taste in her mouth. She now remembered how last year, in late fall, before the bad snow had fallen, when she stood by the roadside and asked a couple of people if they knew anything about her children who were fighting in the war.

“Dear boys, may I ask you something?” she asked.

“Please mother, ask away…” one of them said, the one with the crooked hat and dirty boots. “Please ask away… if we know we will tell you. Tell us, what is bothering you…”

“Oh, my dear boys…” said Fimka, directing her attention to the one with the dirty boots. “Do you know anyone named Risto, Tashko or Tsilka?”

The one being questioned turned to the other and quietly asked: “What’s the name of this village?”

“Krchishta,” replied the other one with a muffled voice.

“And what are they to you, mother? Children or grandchildren?” asked the one with the dirty boots.

“They are my children, my son… my children...” replied Fimka.

“I know, I know a Tashko, but he is from Krchishta...” said the one with the dirty boots.

“This is Krchishta, my son...” replied Fimka.

“Well, I did not know that. Their names are Risto and Tashko you say? I have not heard of Risto but I have definitely heard of Tashko from Krchishta. Is that who you are asking about mother, Tashko from Krchishta?” he asked, lifting his head and looking her straight in the eyes. Fimka noticed that he had a pale, plump round face, small, shiny, smart and cold-looking eyes, like the eyes of a hungry pig. Unfortunately her desire to hear some good news about her children was stronger than the nagging doubt she had about the honesty of this young man knowing her son Tashko. “Tashko you say?” the young man echoed the same question without taking his eyes off hers. “Is he slightly shorter than me?” he asked without even attempting to stand up.

Fimka looked at him from the top of his crooked hat to the bottom of his dirty boots and said: “Taller than you…”

“This much taller than me?” he asked while holding his hand over his head.

“About that much… No… Slightly taller…” replied Fimka.

“Does he have licked hair above his forehead?” he asked.

“Yes…” replied Fimka.

“Does he have a moustache?” he asked.

“Yes…” replied Fimka.

“Hell, I know him!” he said and spat to the side. “Yes, the guy with the licked hair above his forehead wearing a moustache... Yes, I know him well!”

“Are you sure you know him?” asked Fimka distrustfully.

“Do I recognize him? Oh, mother, mother, you ask me if I know him,” he replied while winking at his friend and then said: “Tell her Kolio what good friends we are with Tashko! Go ahead, go ahead tell her… tell her…”

Fimka reached into her bag and took out a pair of socks and a pair of gloves and then said: “Please give these to Tashko and say hello…” but before Fimka could complete her sentence, he interrupted her and said: “From his mother… Right?”

“From his mother, my son, from his mother…” she said and then whispered: “Mother of God, please protect my children…”

“When I first saw you,” said the man, “something whispered in my ear, pulled at my heart telling me to be aware. This little woman is surely Tashko’s mother but I could not ask her. You know my dear mother, the commanders over there prohibited us from asking questions, telling people who we know, what we see and when and where we go… We are soldiers... I will certainly give these to Tashko… I will also give him your regards… Tell her Kolio. Kolio will be my witness. Tell her Kolio!

“Son, say hello to Tashko from his mother… and thank you…” replied Fimka.

Fimka stroked the socks and touched them to her cheek as if wanting to pass on her love to her son through them and handed them to the man. Suddenly she heard laughter and pulled back a step. She heard someone speak. Fimka thought it was Kolio. His words were harsh and hit her like the blows of a wooden cane.

“You waste of a human being,” he said, “you always lie to desperate women…”

Fimka felt small and the pain of disappointment was overpowering her. Her instinct was to take the socks and gloves back, get angry and say something, perhaps something hurtful, but she decided to walk away. She removed her black head kerchief and rolled it into a ball and with a heavy heart she bowed her head down and headed for home. She was a different woman today. A grey old woman, prematurely aged by the hardships of life, she looked exhausted, bent forward and small. Then, in a mind-numbing flash, she quickly rushed through her memories, like links in a metal chain, linked one behind another, of the hardships she had endured in life. How had she done it, she wondered? It felt so tiring… She felt very tired…

A cold wind blew. It picked up dry grass, straw and dust, raised it up in the air and dropped it down on the village lanes. The raised dust from her protracted steps was not enough to cover the old traces scratched into the cobblestone road from years of use. The wind picked up and was now howling behind her. It came around the corner from the broken down house sounding like someone was quietly howling and crying... The unlocked gate kept squeaking and clinking as its handle beat against the latch. Fimka pushed gently against the oak door and entered the yard. She felt belittled and lonely in the darkness and silence. She sat on the stairs, put her face in her hands and shook her head. She kept thinking and her thoughts were getting dark. They became darker as she thought more. There was no joy in life she concluded. She got up and went inside. The darkness was broken in the warm room by the tiny, oil lit lamp whose flame flickered in front of the old Virgin Mary icon which

hung in the corner for eternity. Fimka looked at the icon. It seemed as if the Virgin Mary was crying. Fimka looked into Mary's eyes and Mary looked right back at her with penetrating eyes. It seemed as if their gaze met half way between them. Fimka, with her eyes locked on the Virgin Mary, crossed herself and said: "Mother of God, please look after my children…"

The flame on top of the tiny oil lamp suddenly flickered. Fimka raised her hand towards her forehead and noticed it was shaking. Her eyes filled with tears and her sight became blurred and fixated on the icon. She felt as if she was staring at the face of God. Two women - two mothers... she thought. Her thoughts then drifted… She again focused on the fate of her children. A certain fear began to conquer her, rendering her helpless. Are they alive? Are they healthy? I hope they are healthy…The tiny flame flickered again, distracting Fimka from her dark thoughts. Fimka adjusted the wick in the oil lamp and light flared up all through the room… The lamp was left to burn bright until sunrise when it was overpowered by the light of the bright sun. Fimka could not help herself but think of more dark thoughts… especially after her experience that day… She continued to cry and shed tears in front of the icon.

Meanwhile, after Fimka had left, the two fellows sitting on the side of the road continued to have discussions and argue.

"Why did you go and do that?" Ilio objected. "How else should I have done it? I do what I do and that is why I have warm clothes to wear and food to eat!"

"Warm clothes to wear? Food to eat?" interjected Kolio. "With lies!!! You don't really care how you hurt people… Do you? You don't care about the pain and tears… You know you are living on pain and tears… You… You son of a bitch… I am telling you so that you know…"

"Okay, okay, I will keep it in mind. And you can be honest and decent and frozen and hungry all at the same time. I will continue to be a liar and a thief but a warm and full liar and thief. My feet will be warm and my belly will be full…" said Ilio.

“You are a real bastard you know! You are going to live off people’s pain and bitterness? There is no humanity in you…” replied Kolio.

“And you think that there is humanity in what we do here? Is there humanity in Zoia, look at her, she is still a girl, a little girl, look at her, look how she stoops… and she carries a machine gun... Look at her, a child soldier! If you are so honest, decent and caring, why don’t you go and take the damn machine gun from her? Go, take it, what are you waiting for? Take the damn machine gun!!! Oh, I see... You don’t want to… No one wants to… It is you, Kolio, who is spoiled, not me. You are spoiled because you only see some things… Not everything. What I did earlier is… I almost succeeded in giving a mother some hope… hope… that’s all that’s left in these people... All the time she would have thought that her son was alive and well and how warm he would have been wearing the socks she knitted for him. What was his name again? Tashko? Yes Tashko… Perhaps this night would have been the first night in many months that she would have gotten a good night’s sleep and blissful dreams knowing her son was not only alive but well and provided for. One pair of socks and one pair of gloves… She would have been so happy she would have knitted another pair of each by the end of the day, if not today, tomorrow… She would have personally contributed to the revolution and felt good about it… Go ahead call me all kinds of names… Now take a good look at yourself? Who is the real bastard now, eh? You know you ruined it for the little woman… You know that. You took away all her hopes and the little joy she may have had… Eh, Kolio, Kolio, you need a whack on the head to get your sight back so you can see straight… And you call me names…” concluded Ilio.

Many things had happened in recent months. Evil and dark things. They were stuck in Fimka’s memory like a dried scab on a wound, a wound that would not heal. Wherever she went they followed, always reminding her of bitter and dark days. She was tormented by them and felt bitter and disappointed. But now at least she was with her daughter… she was hugging her daughter… And at that thought fear began to creep all over Fimka… Tsilka was wounded… she suddenly realized. How badly was she wounded? She pushed her thoughts deep down and took a good look at Tsilka’s face. Only now she noticed that she had no eyebrows… They were completely

burned off. Only now she noticed that her right leg lay immobile. Many questions flooded her mind…

"Are you badly wounded?" she asked Tsilka and moved back to have a better look at her leg. Tsilka's bandage from her knee up to her hip was covered in dried blood.

"Yes… I think so…" replied Tsilka with pain in her voice.

"Are you in pain?" asked Fimka with pain in her voice.

"Yes… a lot of pain…" replied Tsilka.
"Where are you wounded… where have you been hit…" asked Fimka in a sickly and sad voice.

"Here and here, mother," Tsilka murmured painfully.

"Is your hand wounded badly?" asked Fimka.

"No... only scratched... It will be fine, mother..." said Tsilka, sighing and trying to sit up. There was visible pain in Tsilka's face. She did not tell her mother that she could not feel her fingers.

Fimka detected an odour of sweat and blood. She then reached into her bag, pulled out a rag and said: "Let me wash you a bit…"

She moistened the rag and slowly and gently began to wipe her face and neck. "Let me undress you a bit so that I can wash you…" she said and then unbuttoned Tsilka's shirt buttons. With the moist cloth she then rubbed her shoulders, chest and under arms. Fimka remembered how she had washed Tsilka, just like this, out in the fields during harvest time, when she gave birth to her, all alone. She cut the umbilical cord with her own teeth, washed her baby with a moist cloth, cleaned herself and then called for help. The cow herder, a young boy, answered her call. He ran back to the village, crashed through the yard gate and, while panting and trying to catch his breath, yelled out: "Grandma, Grandma, give me a reward, I have good news for you… Aunt Fimka gave birth to a baby… a girl!"

Fimka also remembered the woman walking in front of her, leading the horse that carried the wounded commander, to whom the woman said: “This mother has… my son…,” her words together with the quiet clop of horse hooves and gentle tapping of pig skin slippers, rustling along the dusty mountain trail, walking down a steep breakneck slope, echoed in Fimka’s head. “This mother has… both young and older children…” she said. “But I never did get the chance to give the older ones warm socks and sweaters. They were taken abruptly and hauled out to the woods and to the mountains before we had a chance to see them off. We were out in the fields working… gathering grapes from the vineyards and firewood from the forest when they came to the village… And they took our children. They took them as they were, in the clothing they wore that day… They did not ask or tell us… They took them without provisions and without warm clothing…

We were ready for the younger ones when they came. We dressed them in good clothing… Their church and holiday clothing… We also gave them warm clothes, gloves, socks and plenty of food… We baked fresh bread and roasted chickens… bless their little souls… And ever since the day they took both my older and younger children I have been praying to God and to the Virgin Mary, begging them to keep my children safe and alive and to return them to me as soon as possible.

I am constantly praying for my children and waiting for their safe return… And now… here I am praying for you so that you do not fall off the horse and that your wounds won’t hurt too much… I pray for those I carry on my stretcher… I pray for them to heal and to return to their homes and to their mothers safe and sound. And at the same time I think of my own children and pray some more for them to return to me, both young and older... Now I am left home alone, like a stone in a barren plain, like a black birch tree without branches, beaten and twisted by nature’s elements; blown by the winds, washed by the rain and frozen by the snow and cold... And God my good Lord, do I ever pray… I always pray, always begging God to keep evil away from my doorstep…

Please bless me God and let me know when my children will return… when will this cursed war end and when will my young and

older children return… safe and sound. When will I hear them knock on my door, run up the yard with open arms so that I can hug them once more… When will I hear their lovely voices sing to me in the garden, in the vineyard and in the green meadow… Oh dear God, will I ever dance at their wedding…

When will they return? When? Please Lord dear God… Please end this terrible war and stop the pain and sorrow… Please give us back our peace and return our joy… Please help the wounded on these stretchers and on the horses heal fast and end their misery… Please take away this madness and reopen the roads, the bridges over rivers and brighten the skies. Please God return my children to me safe and sound…" the woman said and then began to sob.

Going down the steep slope Fimka heard all kinds of sobbing, wailing… cries of mourning… from the women waiting and looking for their children, from the women carrying the wounded and from the women who had just found out that their children had died… killed in battle… Some mothers just simply cried… for their living children who never grew up properly and who did not deserve to be plunged into this terrible, senseless war… Watching the pain and desperation in these women… mothers like herself… Fimka cried some more… for them, for their children and for her own children; for her older ones who were fighting in the war and for the young ones who were taken away from her and sent to foreign countries...

And as Fimka listened to the woman in front of her pray and sob, she felt pain and anguish. She equally felt this stranger's, this woman's, this mother's pain as she felt her own… Day and night… Uphill and downhill… traversing the paths of doom, Fimka's pain grew larger with each encounter and with each passing day. Could there be any greater pain? What kind of pain could there be that was greater than the pain all these mothers were feeling?

Fimka began to cry out loud… It was a mother's cry of desperation which sent shockwaves throughout the column inching its way down the steep, breakneck mountain slope. It was a cry of desperation meant to be heard by all the children… older and young… It was a mother's cry for her children…

Fimka found it impossible to tune out the resounding sorrowful cries of all those mothers... She felt a sharp pain in her chest. It felt as if someone had gripped her heart with their hand and squeezed it tightly...

“Now please let me take your shoes off... So that I can wash your feet…” said Fimka with an almost visible smile on her face. She then gently pulled off Tsilka’s torn boots, then her socks; wounded leg first. “How long has it been since you last took your shoes off?” asked Fimka.

“Honestly mother, I don’t remember… I was up there on the mountain ridge…” replied Tsilka, looking up towards the mountaintop. “There… we were not allowed to take our boots off.”

“Oooh, your feet stink! Cover them quickly before the flies attack them…” said Fimka with a tiny smile and a funny look on her face.

Fimka grabbed her canteen to wet the cloth. There was no more water in it. She tipped it and only a few drops dripped out. Fimka wrapped Tsilka’s feet in the moist cloth and then began to rub them. Only then did she notice that Tsilka was missing the nails on her big toes.

“What happened to your toenails?” asked Fimka with a shocked look on her face and before Tsilka had a chance to reply Fimka said: “Not only your toenails but part of your toes are also missing…”

“They froze…” replied Tsilka.

Fimka sighed deeply and said: “I am going to the brook to get some water. I don’t think we will be moving out until dusk… I will be right back!” Then as Fimka rose to her feet she noticed that Tsilka’s braid of hair was missing. “Tsilka,” she asked, “what happened to your braid of hair?”

“It caught on fire and burned, mother… when I was shot at...” replied Tsilka.

“Oh, I am so happy that you are alive. Your hair will grow back,” said Fimka, staring at Tsilka carefully, examining her head with her eyes.

Fimka sighed deeply again and said: “No other girl in the entire village had a more beautiful braid of hair than you did. Your hair was shiny and straight and your braid was as thick as an arm. When I watched you coming back from the spring fetching water, I used to say: “My daughter has the most beautiful braid of hair in the entire village.”

Fimka put her hand over her own head and showed Tsilka how she (Tsilka) carried the pitcher of water on her head. She then said: “You stood straight and glided through the air, only your braid and hips swung from side to side with every step you took.” Fimka then smiled, remembering something joyous from her life’s experience. But she felt poorer now, seeing that the braid that once gave her pride was gone… But then, she thought, the hair would grow back and meekly smiled at Tsilka looking into her big beautiful, moist dark eyes. She smiled and then she remembered that this was the first time in a long time that she had smiled and felt happy and warm inside.

Fimka took out the comb from her bag and said: “Please let me comb your hair… my child.” She then smoothed down Tsilka’s hair, stroked it, kissed it and combed it and being unable to accept that it was gone and, with a sorry and disappointed tone of voice, said: “No other girl had a braid such as yours… no one… your hair will grow back and you will have a beautiful braid again...”

About half an hour later Fimka was back. She had returned with a canteen full of water and with Tsilka’s clothes all washed. On her way back she gave the wounded person she had been carrying a drink of water. Then, while going towards Tsilka, Fimka heard a man’s voice say something. She turned and looked. A wounded man was sitting down, leaning against a huge pine tree trunk. He looked into Fimka’s eyes and said: “Give me some to drink…”

Fimka looked at the man and noticed that he had no hands. The ends of his stumpy arms were wrapped in blood-stained, dirty bandages.

She placed the canteen of water at his mouth and the man began to drink slowly, then greedily gulped down all the water.

“Take it easy… Drink slowly… I will get you more…” said Fimka.

“Please mother, bring more…” he said. “But first may I ask if you have some bread? No? You don’t have any? How about a cigarette? Do you have a cigarette? No? Can you please find someone who does? Ask… Please ask around… dear mother… Someone… You ask… Please ask…”

Fimka left and shortly after returned with a lit cigarette. She placed it in his mouth and the man immediately took a long puff and looked up at the patches of blue sky visible through the branches of the tall trees.

“Please hold my cigarette for a moment dear mother. May I ask you to get me a little bit of bread? Can you please find some for me? No? You don’t think anyone has any? Perhaps they will bring us bread after dark…” said the man, pausing for a moment and then asking: “Are you related to the girl?” pointing with his head in Tsilka’s direction.

“She is my daughter… she… she is wounded...” replied Fimka, looking down.

“She is wounded?” asked the man, sighing deeply and looking down. Then after a short pause he quietly said: “Well, this is better, mother… than being left up there permanently…” pointing at the mountain with his eyes. “There are many, dear mother, left up there… left forever… I should have been left up there too…” he said, pausing he looked up at her and said: “Please bring me the canteen.” Fimka placed the canteen with water at his mouth and he drank greedily with large gulps. “Thank you… Thank you… God bless you dear mother… Thank you,” said the man in a serious, sincere and thoughtful tone of voice. “I should have been left up there too… forever...” he again said, “That would have been better…” He then raised his arms. “Look! Both my hands...” he said, shook his arms and turned his head away from her. The pupils of his eyes were swimming in tears.

Fimka went closer and stroked his head and in a sad voice said: "Please don't say that… don't talk like that… Please don't do that…"

"Well, what should I be doing if not crying… I am without hands, am I not? How will I do anything for myself? How will I hug my children? This is bad… wrong… very wrong… This happened to me… to me, a person that has wronged no one. What have I done?"

Fimka didn't know how to comfort him. She couldn't find the words to say that would calm him down and alleviate his pain and suffering. She stroked his head again and left without saying a word.

"What is wrong mother? Why do you look so sad?" asked Tsilka.

"Do you have some bread?" Fimka asked without replying to Tsilka's questions.

"Are you hungry, mother? Do you want to eat? Tsilka asked.

"When I see you all like that," said Fimka, sighing deeply, replying to Tsilka's first question, "only bitterness fills my heart… my child..."

"Here mother, I have a piece of bread in my pocket. Take it... are you hungry? Are you very hungry?" asked Tsilka in a puzzled tone of voice, attempting to understand what was going on.

"No, no Tsilka, it is not for me. There is a wounded man over there, the poor man has no hands; he is the one who is hungry… Oh, how sorry I feel for him…" she said and wiped her tears with the corner of her black head kerchief.

"Here, take it to him…" said Tsilka.

The stranger stuck his lips out, as if expecting a kiss, and took the dry chunk of bread in his mouth. His jaws began to move playfully and his eyes brightened up. He gulped the piece down and looked into Fimka's eyes.

“It was very little,” he said, “but it was delicious… God bless you mother…”

Fimka kept staring at him and still could not find the words to console him. She had seen many wounded and many of them she had carried on stretchers and horses. She had seen them cry and she had seen them die. And always she had been thinking of her own children. It had almost been a year since she had started doing this job and every day, without exception, she had asked about her children… and nothing…until today. Today she should be happy that she had finally found at least one of them, wounded but alive, and her heart should be filled with joy and happiness, but instead her pain had intensified. And while sitting beside Tsilka and talking with her non-stop, there was one nagging question on her mind. She wanted to ask Tsilka if she knew anything about her brothers Risto and Tashko and the other children in her village. But she could not find the courage in herself to ask. She was afraid of bad news. There was a saying among the women who delivered ammunition and wounded that: “Bad news travels fast and will hit you when you least expect it.”

Fimka returned to Tsilka. Just now she noticed how much Tsilka had changed since last year when all the girls in the village were gathered together and taken by the partisans. Fimka sat down, looked at Tsilka and began to think, counting the years since Tsilka’s birth. She counted eighteen harvests not including this year’s. This was how she counted the ages of all her children: after harvesting the crops, after harvesting the grapes, after sowing the seeds and after bad times. Fimka associated Tsilka with the bad times. She sat next to her, thought and said: “You have grown up my child…”

“I have grown up? Do you think so?” asked Tsilka smiling.

“You have grown up my daughter, you have grown up… in the mountains and in desolate places…” Fimka replied.

“We all have mother…” said Tsilka pointing with her head at the wounded. “All of us here have grown up and matured in the

mountains… And home? How are things at home, mother?" asked Tsilka.

"Home..." replied Fimka in a strained tone of voice and then went silent.

Home was everything to Tsilka. That's where her grandparents, younger sisters and brothers were. She was tied to home like water to the shore and like birds to the sky. It had been almost a year since she had been home and seen her family. Home was where the fireplace was burning warm and bright, especially when it was snowing or blowing cold air outside. Home was the place where the family sat behind the window while chestnuts and potatoes baked and loud sparks shot out of the fireplace. Home was where her grandfather told great stories to his grandchildren, about beautiful princesses, fairies and dragons, while they excitedly listened to every word he said with eyes and mouths wide open. Tsilka was always the last one to fall asleep. She closed her eyes, listened to her grandfather telling his stories and imagined herself being the beautiful princess. She particularly enjoyed the stories of the princess helping the lame, the blind, the hungry and the thirsty. She also imagined being a fairy with long blond hair, dressed all in white, dancing in the green meadows and collecting flowers or playing with the bunnies and squirrels in the woods.

Thoughts of her grandfather snatched Tsilka from her dreams of being a princess and a fairy and sent her off into a different dream, a dream of her grandfather returning from Kostur and bringing gifts for everyone. Home was where the children ran down the yard to greet their grandfather returning from market, bringing back all kinds of sweets and delights for them.

Just at that very moment Tsilka remembered one particular story her grandfather had told the kids. It was of the time when he was returning home from market and had a run in with one particularly nasty dog.

"And when I came near the edge of the village," he said, "returning from the market in Kostur, where I bought gifts for everyone, that stupid dog belonging to the Nanov family started barking at me.

Bark from this side, bark from that side, he was all over me. I defended myself with my staff but the dog wanted to bite me, to pounce on me. It refused to let me pass so I had no choice but to throw a dress at it… I threw the dress I had bought for Tsilka. So when the dog went after the dress I passed by and came home alive and well..."

When Tsilka heard this story she quickly opened her eyes and returned from her dream of being a princess and complained to her grandfather: "Why Grandpa? Why did you have to throw my dress to the dog?" Then she complained to her mother. "Mom, tell Grandpa to take my dress back from the dog and give it to me!"

So, grandfather, to make his little granddaughter happy, resumed telling his story with a different ending:

"But then… but then…" he said in a soft, quiet voice. "After returning home and dropping off all the other gifts I was carrying, I went around the back of the Nanov house and quietly snuck in, waiting for the dog to fall asleep. When the dog closed its eyes I snatched the dress from it and brought it back here…" After he finished telling his story, Tsilka remembered, he tapped his tobacco pipe on the red clay tile he used for warming his feet and said to mother: "Go ahead, take the children to bed now…"

"Home..." said Tsilka out loud in an extended quiet tone of voice, sounding as if she spoke in a dream.

Home was much more than that for Tsilka. Home was where the annual cycle of life repeated, beginning with planting and ending with harvesting; filling the stores with life sustaining crops, grains and flour. Home was where the wheat, flour, cupboards, table, wide pans, the oven and the rolling pins resided... Home was where Tsilka excitedly followed her mother around the house watching her making dinner, baking bread… First she prepared the yeast in a small earthenware bowl, then, early in the morning, she kneaded the dough. She then covered it with a thin cloth and patiently waited for it to rise… just right. For daily consumption bread was made from a mixture of wheat, rye and corn flour and baked in the large outdoor oven. A different kind of grain mixture was used to make bread for

those without teeth, like grandfather and grandmother. For them Fimka made sour dough with two parts wheat flour to one part rye flour. This bread was baked in the coals of the fireplace in a pan covered with a dome-like iron cover.

For holidays, celebrations, name days, baptisms, village fairs, when entertaining guests and when donating bread to the army, only refined wheat flour was used. A variety of breads were also baked for special occasions such as Easter and for church. It was customary for the women to give out small homemade buns of bread at church along with other donated foods such as boiled wheat, homemade feta cheese, olives, fish, etc.

Zelniks were a little harder to make. But in time Tsilka learned how to properly mix, knead and roll the dough into paper thin layers, how to chop, mix and fry the ingredients consisting mostly of well fried leeks, onions, fried pork, etc., what proportions to use and how to bake them in the fireplace in a wide pan covered by an iron dome cover. Zelniks were also made with squash, pickled cabbage, feta cheese, cottage cheese, eggs and in the spring with nettles, sorrel and dock mixed with cheese, eggs and cottage cheese…

More difficult to make than zelniks were the bureks. To make a burek Tsilka had to learn to roll out the dough in four or five thin layers, add the ingredients consisting of feta cheese, mixed with cottage cheese and eggs, twist them into a long cylinder resembling a thick rope and then curl the cylinder into a winding circle inside a wide round pan. Bureks were also made with dissolved sugar, honey, fruit jelly and other sweets.

Another difficult pastry to make was maznik. The layers of pastry were similar to that of a burek except that they were made to fit the pan and laid one on top of the other in multiple layers with filling added in between. The ingredients for making the filling included rice, eggs, beans, lentils, etc. Maznik made with rice was called an oriznik. Maznik made with eggs was called mlechnik because it also contained milk (mleko).

All of the pastries were covered with layers of sheep's butter or pork lard to keep them flaky and so that they browned nicely during

baking. Ingredients were properly soaked, baked or fried before they were added to the layers of pastry. More layers of dough made a richer maznik. Mmmm, finger licking good...

“Home...” Tsilka was again heard saying in a low, strained tone of voice while keeping her eyes closed.

Home for Tsilka was where clothing for the entire family was made, where wool was turned to yarn and where yarn was knitted to make sweaters, gloves, socks, etc., and woven on the family loom to make carpets, rugs, bed covers, aprons and even dresses, pants and vests. Tsilka pictured her mother and her grandmother sitting side by side near the fireplace carding and spinning the wool and turning it into yarn. She then pictured her mother bent over the loom weaving and weaving, all night long… She wove cloth with a white background and added patterns of black and red to it and then switched to white, then black, then red and with each thread she added she wove a row of joy, a row of sorrow, a row of desire and a row of suffering… And as such, the chests were slowly and painstakingly being filled with the dowry and wedding gifts for her Tsilka...

Home for Tsilka was where she and her friends and other village girls got together and while telling jokes, dreaming about boys and singing love songs, they knit socks, sweaters, hats, gloves, purses and other necessities of life… And the boys, making fun of them, circled around, playing with beads and chains, twirling them around their fingers, nervously waiting to be noticed and anxiously looked for the girls to toss a look in their direction. That was home...

Home was where the yard was full of sheep, goats, oxen, cows and horses, where young lambs ran playfully. Home was where a cow named Belka, two oxen named Balio and Sivko, two horses, a mule, a cat and a dog named Sharko lived. Home was where a pear tree grew inside the yard, where almond, walnut and chestnut trees grew in a place called Old Meadow. Home was where the gardens bloomed; where the vineyards flourished and from whose grapes barrels of wine were made…

Home was where the family got together to work; in the meadows, the vineyards, the fields, the gardens and at home, where young and

old sang together, where Tsilka learned her songs from Fimka; captivating, joyous, tearful and sad songs. These were beautiful times that warmed the heart and filled the soul with happiness. This too, for Tsilka, was home…

Tsilka remembered singing together with her mother and when the two sang together the sun was brighter and the atmosphere was warmer. Those were the good times. Tsilka remembered many people in her village, and in the surrounding villages, say:

"When Fimka sang the sun looked brighter and felt warmer. Her sweet voice warmed and soothed souls. People felt calmer, less anxious, less troubled and their hearts were filled with bliss." That too was home…

"Home..." she again said, searching her memory for things that reminded her of home.

Home was where the old, blackened from years of smoke, Virgin Mary icon hung in the corner with its tiny oil lamp always burning… where they whispered prayers quietly; for health… for prosperity... for safety… for thanks… Home was where the swallows made their nest under the eaves and where their chicks chirped incessantly... Home was where the flowers and the red roses grew, on whose leaves dew drops collected… Home was all that and more...

"Home, mother… How are things at home?" Tsilka asked again.

At the sound of the question Fimka felt a cutting pain in her stomach and all the bitterness and sorrow that had collected and was pushed into a tight lump, she felt, was about to fall out. The question gave her pain which she felt all the way down in her soul. She sighed and moved her hand. From her hand gesture Tsilka understood that something dreadful had taken place…

"Home… My dear daughter... there is no home... Everything was burnt down… Turned to ash..." replied Fimka, taking a deep breath and placing her hands over her face attempting to control her emotions. Tsilka looked at her with disbelief. Fimka began to

tremble. She looked exhausted and in despair. Her heart was pounding and her muscles were tightening. She became oblivious of the voices, the quiet whimpering and the complaining of the wounded and all other sounds around her. Her shoulders began to shake uncontrollably. Tsilka looked up at her face. Tears were running down between her fingers. Tsilka placed her head on Fimka's shoulder and hugged her tightly. She too began to cry. She sobbed quietly and in her soft sob she carried a great burden; Fimka's burden; Fimka's pain and despair. Fimka dropped her hands down from her face, embraced Tsilka and, with a whimper, said: "We have no home, my dear child… we have no home…"

"What about Grandpa, Grandma and the children?" asked Tsilka in a broken voice.

"I took your grandmother to your aunt's place in Labanitsa. Your grandfather was taken by the government army. I was taken by the partisans to transport ammunition and carry wounded. The village was burned down by the government army two months after you were taken. They bombed the village with cannon fire from Nestram," replied Fimka.

"What about the children, mother? What happened to them?" asked Tsilka with a tone of desperation in her voice.

"They took them too…" replied Fimka.

"What?! Who took them?!" asked Tsilka.

"Those from NOF (National Liberation Front) and AFZH (Women's Anti-Fascist Front). They came to the village, went from house to house and invited everyone to a meeting. They told us that a big battle was coming, everything was going to burn. The rivers and the wells were going to evaporate from the heat and the fire was going to reach the sky. The airplanes were going to drop bombs of fire and burn everything. Everything living, they said, was going to burn… They said the government army was coming and was going to take all the children to the islands where they were going to brainwash them and turn them against their parents and siblings. They were going to turn them into snitches and spies. They were going to turn

the girls into servants so that they would cook and clean for the rich... That's why, they said, we should give up our children from ages two to fourteen so that they could send them to some other countries and save them. There, they said, the children would have good food to eat and new clothes to wear. And best of all, they said, they would be able to go to school and learn… and become teachers and doctors. It was difficult for us to give away our children… to strangers… Who knows what will happen to them… And who to trust..." replied Fimka.

"Oh, mother, mother… Why did you give them up?" asked Tsilka disappointed.

"What choice did I have? They took them…" replied Fimka. "They took you and they took Risto and Tashko… Do you think they asked me or any of the mothers if we wanted to give you up and how we felt? No! They gathered you and took you. They gathered the little children and took them before we even understood what was happening…"

"Well, perhaps you are right. They were young and would have been in grave danger… Where are they now?" asked Tsilka.

"Young you say, daughter... And you think you are old? I know, Tsilka, I know how much it hurts and I constantly ask myself why they did that... I think this was planned… Someone wanted this to happen… They wanted it to turn this way, I am certain of that..." replied Fimka.

The conversation slowly withered and died out. Now there was only silence between them. Their sight began to wander as they looked away from each other; up at the trees and the clouds sailing above the tall pine trees. Sometimes they peeked at each other wondering who had suffered more and whose fears were greater.

Fimka crossed herself and began to cry. Her throat tightened and she found it difficult to speak, but with a broken voice and with great pain she said: "Why did I give them up? Do you think I gave them up? They took them… They took them… First they took our

children then they took one third of our sheep. After that they took our goats, two goats out of every five we owned.

They came back and took half of our grain; our rye, wheat and corn… 'It was all for the struggle,' they said. Your aunt was not so lucky. Because her husband Laki did not return to the village from Kostur, after he went to apply for a visa to go to Canada, they took her and put her in jail. Then they went back and gutted her entire house. They took everything. They told her that she and her husband were enemies of the people and ordered her to write a letter to Laki and ask him to return and answer for his crimes… They wanted to grab him, like they grabbed you Tsilka, and send him up here to fight. They ruined everything Tsilka… they destroyed everything… And your grandfather, when they were gathering the children… the most…" Fimka could not finish her sentence because she completely lost her voice. She paused for a while and resumed: "He cried the most… He cried, the poor man and cried… and kept saying: 'I will never see my grandchildren again…' He swore… he swore something awful…" Fimka paused again, wiped her tears with the corner of her black head kerchief and at that very moment Tsilka noticed peace and tranquility in her face.

"And the cherries, dear Tsilka, this year there was a bumper crop of cherries... The branches were loaded. There were more cherries than leaves," said Fimka "But there was no one to eat them… The children were gone…" Fimka took a long sigh and in a broken voice said: "They were gone…"

A white butterfly took flight beside them and in the ensuing silence Tsilka thought she heard its little wings flap.

Tsilka after thinking for a long time, with hesitation, broke the long silence and said: "You know mother, about fifteen days ago they brought eight young partisans to our detachment. They were children. Someone said they were brought back from the countries. At the time I did not understand what that meant. The security services from the second division wanted to know who was spreading such rumours. I don't know if they found the person but I do know that the boys were all killed in battle in the first few days. And you don't dare say much or ask any questions up here because

even the trees and rocks have ears." Tsilka paused and looked around and with relief, quietly said: "Our children are very young… They will not be bringing them back…"

At that moment Tsilka grabbed her mother's hardened hand with her good hand, brought it to her lips and gently kissed it several times. Then she smiled with a smile full of sadness, as if thinking of something very close and very dear.

"Mother," she said quietly, looking into her eyes. "Your hands used to smell of fresh bread, milk and cheese, hay and wheat, fresh apples and baked pears, of wine and honey, flowers and basil, of freshly plowed soil and ashes from our fireplace and from our oven. Now..." Tsilka paused mid-sentence and did not want to say what her hands smelled of now. She lowered her gaze and turned her head the other way. She did not want her mother to see the tears in her eyes.

Fimka patted her on the head like she used to when she was little and she held her in her lap and felt her warm breath. This gave her joy and warmed her heart. Fimka had not felt this relaxed since her young children had been taken away and since her older sons and daughter had been drafted into the partisan army. This was the first time since last year that she felt relieved. Her only wish now, at this very moment, was to prolong this feeling and make it last days, weeks, months and years.

"On your feet!!!" a loud commanding voice was heard yelling. "On your feet and begin loading!!!" It was their leader calling on them to get ready to move out.

The circle came alive. Horse hooves were heard stamping on the ground and the air became filled with women's voices talking, horses neighing and wounded, moaning, groaning, complaining and swearing.

"Line up single file and form a column!!!" the same voice ordered.

The women who had been carrying Tsilka earlier came over and waited. "Let's go dear…" one of them said, bending down and grabbing the stretcher.

“And you sister, are you the girl’s mother?” asked the shortest woman all dressed in black.

“Yes, she is my mother.” replied Tsilka.

“You are lucky… you are so lucky sister. And don’t worry; we will look after your daughter with much care… Go; go to your wounded person so that they don’t yell at you,” and without looking the women bent down, lifted Tsilka and placed her on the stretcher.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” the leader yelled out again.

“Goodbye… Tsilka… be well…” Fimka said while trying to smile. “And be careful, my child, be very careful…” Fimka then bent down and they hugged. Fimka did not cry, but deep inside she hid the pain and anxiety that only a mother could understand.

“Goodbye mother...” said Tsilka, turning her head and looking at the start of the column. She did not want her mother to see the tears in her eyes. But Fimka could tell she was crying by the vibration of Tsilka’s shoulders. A long column of wounded was forming in front of her. Looking up towards the sky, Tsilka listened to the horse hooves pound the hard mountain soil and stones. She listened to the women’s pig skin slippers and bare feet rustle in the leaves. She saw a women trip and stumble over a rock. The wounded person on her stretcher complained.

Fimka looked towards the head of the column, stuck her arm out, as if attempting to get someone’s attention, and with a sober look on her face, whispered: “Go in good health my dear daughter and look after yourself…” And then she stood there and watched the women carrying Tsilka until they disappeared from her sight. After that, Fimka untied her head kerchief, raised her arms up in the air, looked up at the sky and said: “O Mary, mother of God, who understands the pain of motherhood, please protect my children…”

A purple radiance emanating from above lit the mountain peaks. The last cool, reddish rays of the setting sun showed themselves behind the low flying clouds. The sun, looking like a blazing disk of

fire, slowly descended behind the mountain. The sun sank quietly, fading behind the hill and behind Fimka's tears. The column continued to pass by. In the twilight Fimka noticed a stretcher with a man with no arms pass her by. There was another man walking beside him on crutches. He was looking down. It was hard for him to keep up on crutches. The man without arms turned to the man on crutches and, pointing towards Fimka, said: "The poor woman, she looks so sad, so much pain and suffering…"

"What are you talking about? You are telling me you don't know that woman?" asked the man on crutches.

"What did you say?" asked the man without arms.

"I asked you if you know her?" replied the man on the crutches.

"Who, her?" asked the man without arms.

"Yes, her!" replied the man on the crutches

"No! I don't know her… Who is she?" asked the man without arms.

"Oh, you stupid ox, she is the woman from last fall… The woman you coaxed into giving you gloves and socks. You remember, the woman you told that you knew her son. You remember her, right?" said the man on the crutches.

"Socks? Oh, yes… socks… wool… thick, black wool socks, right? How could I forget them? Very warm socks. I wore them until spring. I remember wearing them. But her, the damn woman, I don't remember…" replied the man without arms.

"Don't swear!" interrupted the man on the crutches.

"Do you think it was her? My God? Wait a minute… She was the one who gave me water today! Wait! Stop!" replied the man without arms, yelling for the women carrying the stretcher to stop but they ignored him. He then yelled out: "Call her to come here… Call her… She also gave me bread… and I never… I don't know her name… What a wonderful woman… Stop! I said stop! Hey, stop!!!"

# The Great Decline – Chapter 9

At the end of the presentation the political commissar took out a dirty, shabby piece of paper, folded in four, from his officer's briefcase and said:

"Comrade fighters! Now I will read you a very interesting letter which will explain the amount of support the people are giving our struggle. I will begin..." he said and then he coughed, looked at the people sitting in front of him and began reading:

"We, the residents of village German, members of our organizations NOF and AFZH, are gathered together here for a festive rally and are sending you our warmest greetings... Our thoughts are always with you. We are doing as much as we can here, behind the scenes, to help you and we are all behind you in this struggle.

You need to fight bravely. Fulfill General Markos's every command with your hearts and bring the final destruction of the Monarcho-Fascist beast. Turn every shrub and every stone in Gramos into a grave for the Monarcho-Fascist hordes. Ruin all Anglo-American imperialist plans of enslavement and stop them from attaining victory..."

"Screw them..." yelled Iani. "Some jackass wrote that letter... It seems to me that someone had to have a bit of education to write such a letter. I ask you… And you tell me who in German is educated enough to write a letter like this. They are all uneducated farmers who can't read and write and most don't even speak Greek! …Maybe they just signed it…"

"SILENCE!!!" yelled the political commissar. "Don't interrupt… No comments... Shame on you! Silence," he said! "Can't you see? Can't you feel how inspiring this letter is coming from the fighting spirit of the people and from the leadership of our Party, headed by the great son of the Greek and Slav-Macedonian nation, comrade Zahariadis? Right? That is a fact, comrades..."

"Long live comrade Zahariadis!" yelled someone in the back row.

“Now I will go back to reading the letter and you… you make sure you remember every inspiring word... Understand?” said the political commissar and resumed reading:

“Gramos will become a symbol of our people’s liberation struggle. We, your relatives, parents, wives and sons, offer you, the fighters of DAG, our help with honour, as an expression of our modest appreciation for what you are doing…”

“And of course… comrade political commissar!” Iani echoed again. “The letter is truly moving. But please read it slowly and pause between words so that we, the illiterate here, can better understand the deep and profound meaning that our comrade villagers in German put together for us... Continue, please, and put a little more feeling in your voice...”

The political commissar had never before encountered, in any other unit, a “comedian” such as this person. He tensed up, got red in the face and angrily yelled out: “The person who thinks that way, comrades, it seems to me is insane… But fear not, we will evaluate him at our Headquarters to see if I am right or not… I will resume reading the letter now, so please do not interrupt me… Be quiet now! Let us continue… Where was I?”

“You were at ‘…appreciation for what you are doing’…” replied Mita.

“Ah, yes... In appreciation we are sending you the following assistance: 9 heads of large livestock, 156 heads of livestock; 136.5 oki of wool; 134.1 oki of cheese, 8 pieces of gold; 25.1 oki of butter, 54.15 oki of pork fat, 218.3 oki of grain; 936.1 oki of beans; l47 pairs of socks, 32 bags, 20 metres of woven fabric, 310 eggs, 46 chickens, 22 shirts; 3 dresses...”

Someone in the back was giggling. Iani whispered something to the guy standing next to him: “The dresses must surely be for the political commissar… Did you also notice how accurately the villagers of German measured the weights on a hand-held weighing scale?”

“My God… I could cry from being so excited...” said the guy sarcastically. “Yes! I noticed… how could I have not noticed? Not only in oki but in tenths and even one hundredths of an oka… Weighed on a hand-held balance… Wow… But I did not hear anything about anyone giving goats or a sheep? Did you?”

“I didn’t hear anything about that either... Maybe they did donate goats and sheep for the struggle and wrote those numbers in a different letter... Be patient, we will see,” replied Iani.

“Maybe they donated the goats and sheep much earlier... That’s what someone from my village said. They were donated last fall...” replied the guy.

“SILENCE!” shouted the political commissar. “Stop laughing at the donations and be serious…” he added and resumed reading: “12 vests; 8 pairs of pants, 2 scarves, 4 towels, 9 pairs of panties...”

“Male or female?” someone in the back yelled out and the entire gathering burst into laughter.

“Silence! Silence! Silence! Or I will send you all on report! Silence! Let me finish reading the letter…” yelled the political commissar and resumed reading: “10 oki of tobacco; 361 thousand drachmas; 264 bee hives.

Responsible for NOF and AFZH
1. Mihail Gogarov
2. Sofia Gakova.”

“That is all. And shame on those of you who were laughing. And not only that. I remember every one of you, and even now I see you laughing and making fun. Rest assured proper disciplinary measures will be taken against you, perhaps even severe measures.

Thank you comrade fighters. All to arms and everything for victory!” concluded the political commissar, turning around and disappearing into the thick forest.

Iani spat to the side and said: “And what did those people in that village leave for themselves? And he, this political commissar character, behaved as if he was not a soldier… Briefcase in hand and hopping from unit to unit… That louse should have remained here with us for a while… Screw him!”

“It’s good for nothing people like him that makes us all look bad. It’s good that he left it, was beginning to stink around here...” said the guy.

“Yes, the idiot comes here to read a letter like that and he thinks it will bring us happiness… He thinks he is Santa Claus… Screw him!” replied Iani.

“Yes, Santa Claus… gifts… but not from himself but from our villagers. They have been going around the villages and robbing them since the beginning… Last year, I think it was November or the beginning of December, we were sent to separate some sheep and goats from the herds. A little woman approached me and asked me: ‘My son, what does it say here?’

‘What is it?’ I asked.

She showed me a piece of paper with some writing on it, pointed at it and said: ‘One of your people gave a piece of paper like this to everyone whose sheep and goats they took…’

‘Let me see,’ I said. The writing on the paper was Greek. It said ‘Apodiksi’ meaning ‘confirmation’ and below it read: ‘We confirm that the holder of this confirmation has voluntarily provided five sheep and three goats for the needs of the people’s revolution. After the revolution achieves victory and after the establishment of a people’s democratic government, the National Government will pay everything back.’ That’s all it said. I gave her back the piece of paper. She looked at me, pointed at the paper again with her finger and said: ‘Seriously my son, can you read? Please tell me what does it say?’

I didn’t know what else to tell her so I said: ‘I am sorry, I can’t read Greek… I am not educated…’ She looked at me like I was some

kind of thief and actually felt sorry for me and said: ‘That’s okay, my son… that’s okay… Perhaps when freedom comes someone who can read will come, someone more educated who will also understand what it says on the paper, and not only to pillage…’

‘And you, dear aunty,’ I said, ‘wait over there on the hill. Wait for someone more educated to pass by and ask him to read your letter for you… Wait for someone more educated to come by’...” said the guy standing next to Iani.

“Why did you have to be such a shithead, eh???” Iani interrupted angrily.

And at that very moment Kolio’s voice was heard yelling: “Eh, Traiko, what work awaits us…”

“What? We won’t sleep all night because we have to carry a few logs?” said Traiko.

“I am not talking about that,” replied Kolio.

“What are you talking about then?” asked Traiko.

Kolio took the binoculars, handed them to Traiko and said: “From here to Gorisha, everything is in your palm, here, have a look… Do you see it?”

“What am I supposed to see?” asked Traiko.

“Down, a little further down, look down. Look at the villages…” replied Kolio.

“What villages? All I see is ruins...” said Traiko.

“Well, that’s exactly what I am talking about… that’s what awaits us... ruins… Start from the left. Kalevishta... Do you see it? Go further… right, to your right... That’s Novo Selo, after that is Krchishta and on the other side is Labanitsa… look to the right… that’s Kosinets, then D’mbeni, beyond that is Dolno Papratsko, over there is Zhelegozhe, Chuka, Grache, Sveta Ana, Lubovo, Ezerets…

Not to mention the rest… They are all demolished; burned to ashes...” replied Kolio, pausing and then said: “And how many more will they burn tomorrow?”

“And?” asked Traiko.

“And they will be coming after us next,” replied Kolio.

“Us?” asked Traiko.

“Yes, Traiko, us... up here in the bunkers and trenches… we have no idea what awaits us,” replied Kolio.

“Do you think they will be coming up here… after us now?” asked Traiko.

“I am not talking about now, I am talking about when the war escalates and even after the war ends. Imagine how many more houses they will destroy before the war is over and how will we hold them back when they come up here after us. Where are we going to get our food from when all the villages are destroyed? Where are we going to get the fighters to continue the struggle, to replace us, when we are dead and gone? And if we do manage to win the war, how are we going to rebuild our homes and villages… with what? One pair of hands?! Are we going to employ someone educated in architecture to draw up some plans on a blank piece of paper and from that we will rebuild our homes? We will rebuild them with a hammer and a trowel,” said Kolio, taking a deep breath and continuing: “How are we going to rebuild our homes with a hammer and a trowel, eh? Are we going to create the miracle of the century? I suppose the stones you work with your hammer, Traiko, will be perfect blocks and will glitter and glow in the dark… And what will that house be called? The house of life and love... filled with joy… and children will be running from one end to the other... eh? Oh, Traiko, Traiko… We have no clue what awaits us!”

Iani, who was listening to the two men with indifference, suddenly came alive and said: “What do I see and hear here? Are you both mad? Have you both gone mad? Come, come, brothers… Do you think I will work after the war? Do you think this is why I am

running up and down these God forsaken mountains… so that I can work after the war? Do you think I have endured the rain, cold, snow and wind so that I can work? Oh, come, come now, you think that is what communism is all about? Do you think communism…"

"We will all be going to the same cauldron…" interrupted Kolio. "Isn't that what comrade Vera was telling us last winter? We will be going to the same cauldron just like we do now…"

"Hey…" a sleepy voice was heard saying, "if they only bring the cauldron… then all day I will be there, pacing around it… Hey, when I hear the word 'cauldron' something in here jumps up," said the sleepy man, pointing to his stomach. "I think there is no more beautiful word than the word 'cauldron'. Imagine: a cauldron full of beans... Is there anything better, eh?"

"You again! You and your cauldron! Find something else to think about. Go back to sleep and stop thinking about that damn cauldron..." replied Iani.

Kolio waited until all the conversations were over and then resumed voicing his thoughts: "We will all be going to the same cauldron, just like we are doing now. In your communism, for example, Iani, the laziest people will be the first to stand in line. We had such a person in our village, his name was Lazo. He always walked around with his jacket over his shoulder. One day when I was working in the yard, he came over and said: 'When communism comes, I am telling you, I swear to God, no one will have to work. Everything will be done by machines…' I said to him: 'Isn't it a little premature for you, Lazo, to be thinking about that now?' He said: 'You shouldn't be talking like that because if the Party Secretary heard you, he would think of you as a reactionary and against such ideas… You should know that… You should also know,' Lazo offered his free advice, 'that in communism it is not going to be like you think… you get what you work for… In communism everyone will get whatever they want… and more…' I then asked him: 'Why is it like that?' And he said: 'Because if it was any other way no one would want communism… Who would be crazy and stupid enough to want to work hard and get so little for it? In communism it will be the other way around; work a little, get a lot.' Then I asked: 'Don't

you have to prepare for that?' And he said: 'I, if you care to know, have been preparing for communism all my life. I think about it all the time. I wait and watch for it to arrive here every day. I pray to God for it to arrive here as soon as possible. I watch how other people work and I think all the time about communism. I ask myself: When, oh when will that communism get here so that we, the poor people, can live like normal people and eat at a rich table?' I said to him: 'You, Lazo, and everyone who thinks the same way as you, even in communism will be poor and in rags. Unfortunately even we who work hard and have things, the bread earners who earn our bread with our sweat, plough, pitchfork and sickle will become like you; poor and in tatters. That will be the downside…' He said: "In communism, I am not going to care at all about you and those who have things. You had things all your life, it's about time you learn to do without and see how it feels. And if you do any differently, then we will put you in your place; to chisel stone for mansions… I want you to know, Kolio, that's not the way to talk to the Party Secretary, like the way you talk to me. By doing so, you show how much against communism you are.' And who do you suppose the Party Secretary in our village was; none other than Comrade Lazo himself; the biggest and laziest dreamer in our village. And you, Iani," Kolio looked at Iani, "are you like Lazo from my village? Look at yourself… You are not going to work after the war is over??? Think very carefully because someone like Lazo will think for you…"

Iani smiled a sly smile, tapped his temple with his finger and said: "Hey, think… think… Did you forget what our political commissar said to us a few days ago and what comrade Zahariadis said to him? Are you now contradicting what comrade Zahariadis said? Eh, Kolio, Kolio… if you don't trust comrade Zahariadis then you don't trust the Party or the struggle. Is that the way it is? What… now you have nothing to say, eh?"

"And how can you be sure of that…" remarked Kolio.

"Oh, Kolio, Kolio... Iani is right," said Argir. "If that's what was said high above, then that's exactly what's going to happen… And you can be sure of that… If Zahariadis said it, then it will happen. He is an intelligent and wise man and he can be trusted, right? Don't

think of the villagers, think of the Party and the Party is Zahariadis. Isn't that what the political commissar said? Zahariadis is a smart man and can be trusted… by all of us, right? We will all follow his lead."

"Enough bumping your gums…" yelled Traiko.

Iani adjusted himself, leaned forward and said: "You can do whatever you want, I, on the other hand, after the war, will sit in front of the village tavern and drink rakia and eat salad one day, the next day I will drink wine and eat roasted chicken and I will look into the distance, into the mountains and will reminisce about the long, sleepless nights I spent there and that's when I will have a nap. That's when I will sleep to make up for all the nights I went sleepless… Then when I wake up I will watch you idiots break and chisel stones and build houses and palaces… In other words, I will take a long, long rest to make up for the sweat and blood that I spilled for the struggle against the Anglo-American imperialists and the domestic traitors. Just the way comrade Zahariadis described it. And if that's the way comrade Zahariadis described it, that's the way it's going to be, because if you were to do any differently, then you would not be with Zahariadis, which also means that you would not be with the Party. And if you are not with them then you are a traitor to our anti-imperialist and people's liberation struggle..."

"Iani, listen to Kolio, he knows what he is talking about. Why are you deluding yourself with this and with that? You are acting like that Lazo, Kolio described. Not that Lazo has any thoughts of his own, but because someone else is putting them in his head. Someone sold him a dream and that's what he now dreams. He doesn't think for himself. He should be satisfied that he has a head on his shoulders, but what's in it? Only he knows who is putting things in it…" Mita said angrily. "And you, it looks to me like you are a lot more like Lazo than you care to admit, right? Look at yourself… you will be taking naps… Let us survive this war first and then we will see..." concluded Mita.

Iani did not respond to Mita's criticism and decided to resume his ranting at the point where he had been interrupted:

“And you, with hammers and trowels in hand, will then be anti-Party elements because you ignored what comrade Zahariadis said. That’s what I will do and you, the ignoramuses, can go to the villages with your hammers and trowels… I can’t wait for the war to end, once it’s over I will marry and then lie under the thick shade of the plane tree and my young bride, equipped with a large fan made of leaves, will keep me cool and keep the flies away… And for the fun of it, once in a while, I will read, write and sing a little song:

My bird sings early in the morning
And awakens my young bride...

That’s the way it’s going to be... I will lie around, do you understand, under the thick shade of the plane tree and she, my young bride, early in the morning will be awakened by the birds; nightingales, flying from branch to branch. She then will chase the flies away all day long... When darkness falls and the full moon rises in the sky, we will roll in the freshly cut green grass and make children. That’s right; children who will live in the houses you build...” concluded Iani.

“And who is going to feed those children, Iani, when all you do is lie under the deep shade of the plane tree in the village?” Mita asked mockingly.

“Who? They of course… the working class people who today sit around in city cafés. If they don’t want to fight today, they will have to work tomorrow… That’s the way it is… And you ignoramuses, I told you, I swear to you, you might as well put on your aprons and pick up your hammers and trowels, you will be going to the villages and you will be chiseling stone and building houses... And also know this, you, today, the heroes of Kopanche, Sveti Ilia, Gorusha and Krusha, tomorrow when you go out to build, know that your sweat will be measured by loyal, village Party people like Lazo. And I’m telling you, I know people like you and I know of people like that Lazo of yours and that is why I am telling you this now...” replied Iani.

“Good grief, Iani… not the same song… over and over again?” said Argir. “You poor deluded Iani, trying to patronize us with some big ideas and empty words...”

“I… am?” snapped Iani angrily.

Argir turned his head towards him, looked into his eyes and, in a tone of voice that was sure to start a quarrel, said: “Yes you… who else… Do you think it was my aunt?”

“Okay, okay… That’s enough…” Mita weighed in. “All we need now is to start a fight between us. Enough, Argir! Very clever of you...”

“Leave him be!” snapped Iani. “Do you want to hear what I have to say or not?”

“Go on! Now that you have started… hit us again, but not with those big words,” responded Argir.

“You all know that I was enlisted into the brigade, right? Well, after we fought with the Albanian Balisti, they brought us outside of Gostivar...” said Iani.

“Where is that?” interrupted Traiko.

“In Vardar Macedonia… You don’t know that?” snapped Argir.

“There the brigade was disbanded. Then, like many others, they invited me to command and, after a long inquiry, they told me: ‘You, comrade, you can join OZNA (military police) or UDBA (security services). It’s your choice...” said Iani.

“I did not want to join either, so they told me: ‘The enemy, comrade, has not yet been destroyed, we need to destroy him first. We must destroy him’…

I changed my mind. Why not I thought to myself? This is precisely why I picked up a gun, to fight against the enemy. If command wants me, it means I am needed. Okay, if there is still an enemy,

then on to combat we go. They swapped my khaki military for a policeman's black uniform. Almost all of us, simple soldiers, commanders and commissars from the disbanded Aegean Brigade, were recruited into the various forces to fight against our enemy. Some were recruited into the army, some into OZNA, some into UDBA and some into the people's governing councils... In other words, we were all working for the people's government and fighting against an internal and an external enemy. Some received brand new beautiful uniforms and boots and as such we were all given a role to play; some served, some squealed and spied, some collected testimony and others inflicted punishments. In other words, the people from our brigade were in control of security. Those who were principal players continued to be principal players and boasted about it; especially about being Aegeans. This naturally put off many people from Vardar and we became a divided people. So, we became Aegeans and Vardarians and between us were Vlachs, Gypsies, Serbs and Albanians. And in them all were had enemies to be hunted down.

Initially they sent me to Tetovo. I guarded Greek communists in the barracks, Greeks who had fled Greece to avoid persecution by the Greek government. There were many of them, almost all ELAS officers. At one point there were two hundred of them. The barracks were filled. One night we loaded them onto a train and sent them to Bulkesh. They settled them there…" said Iani.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, what are you saying? Those idiots we call 'Bulkiotes' you are saying they are the ones?" interrupted Kolio.

"Yes, they are. They got their name from a village called Bulkesh. Bulkesh, if you want to know, is a very nice village in Banat, near the Romanian border. Three years ago Germans used to live there. The Yugoslav government expelled them; from both Vojvodina and Banat. In their place there, and in other villages like Gakovo, they settled Greek refugees from Macedonia, particularly from the Lerin and Voden Region villages. In Bulkesh the Greeks opened a large agricultural cooperative, a middle school, a high school and even had their own government and currency. They had a militia and a printing house where they printed newspapers and books. Almost

everyone who was an ELAS fighter was educated and made into a political commissar. In a word, Bulkesh became a small Greek state inside Communist Yugoslavia.

I went with the refuges all the way to Bulkesh. When I was there, they told me that Zahariadis and Markos visited this place many times. I did not see them there myself. After that they sent me to a new assignment in Oteshevo. This place was near Lake Prespa. I was sent there in the name of the people to guard our enemies. And I, on behalf of the people, guarded our enemies well, making sure that they worked hard breaking and chiseling stones. I measured their work with the point of a needle, making sure the stones fit perfectly on top of one another… And, as our commander used to say: 'The stones must be air-tight.' These were stones cut by the hands of our enemies which were used to build villas for government people. They were called 'Yugoslavia', 'Sytjeska' and were names from over... First to be built was the hotel "Yugoslavia". In fact this was a resort for the Macedonian communist party. I did not go inside but found out it had 12 rooms, a large meeting room and a kitchen.

Twelve people from the Politburo worked, ate and slept here. These government people came to Oteshevo in limousines. The entire place and roads leading to it were cleared of bushes and shrubbery supposedly to prevent the enemy from sneaking up on the people's government. The enemy of the people was kept out of the place by vigilantes like me and by barbed wire. In fact the whole place around the fine villas was surrounded by a couple of metres high woven wire with two or three rows of barbed wire tied on top of it. Nothing could pass by it. Besides, it was forbidden even for shepherds and cowherders from the sorrounding villages to get near the place, especially near the fence.

The government people living and working inside the fenced villas spent their weekends and holidays on the beaches and shores of Lake Prespa. They drank cool beer, which their women servants kept in nets deep inside the lake. They ate lamb which their servants roasted on rotisseries over burning coals. Women from the surrounding villages kneaded and baked zelniks, bureks and mazniks for them. Women wearing folk dresses sang folk songs for

them… Their voices could be heard for miles… all the way to Galichitsa... They had musicians from Bitola play for them… everything was done to keep the people's government happy…

The women (wives and girlfriends) of those in the people's government were plumper, fatter and had bigger butts and breasts than the village women. They had big bellies and wide hips. I swear to you, they just sat there under umbrellas, ate and grew fatter and larger... They kept their faces out of the sun so that their skin did not darken. But they sure ate; sinking their gold teeth into the succulent freshly roasted meat that they were served by their servants… and constantly picked at their teeth with their fingers…

And I, guarding them, paced left, right, left, right… from one end of the wire fence to the other... marching along with my German shmaizer hanging over my shoulder, looking here and there, looking for God forbid, some enemy that might sneak up on them and upset their tranquility.

And those so-called 'public enemies' who actually built these villas with their bare hands, we had to move them away to a forest when the government people were there. People like me kept them there and regularly punished them... And here I was, the simplest of the simple, thinking to myself; am I a friend or an enemy? And who is my friend and who my enemy? The line was very fine and blurry at best…" concluded Iani.

"If you are an enemy of the people it is well-known what will happen to you... Up against the wall… bam… and in the ground. Isn't that right, eh?" piped up Argir.

"Come; don't be a fool, what do you know about the enemy of the people? Here, for example, is how the people's government created enemies of the people. It passed a law to execute goats..." replied Iani.

"To execute what?" asked Argir.

"To execute goats, stupid…" replied Iani.

“Goats? Are there such stupid people who are against goats? Are there, eh? Well, are there? Oh, God in what rotten times we live… Why goats? Why goats? …Were they out of their minds?” asked Argir.

“Be patient Argir, let the man speak!” snapped Traiko.

“A man hid his goat in the cellar so that he could have milk for his children. You know, these are difficult times… his goat provided milk for his babies. And because this man hid his goat he became an enemy of the people. But before they took him away, they killed the goat in front of his starving children… They slaughtered the goat and sent him to Oteshevo. His punishment; breaking, chiseling and polishing stones… And I, the fool that I was, like you people here, who think the way you think, held my shmaizer pointed at his head, making him work like an ass, pushing him to swing a 12 kilo hammer all day long, refusing to allow him to look down towards the lakeshore, where the government people were having their fun.

On Sundays and holidays, like I said before, party secretaries, commanders, commissars, etc., all came out to the beach. They wore their epaulettes on their shoulders, as broad as my palm, and the golden stars on them glowed under the bright sun. And when I looked through the wire fence, I felt like I was looking at Cavaliers. Some even had curved legs. Not because they rode horses but because they were plowman and their legs were bent from having to constantly walk in two grooves while working.

For example, you ... all your life you have been a plowman. You have walked with one foot in one ditch and the other in an adjacent ditch. The fact that you walked with your legs apart, with your head bent forward and with your back curved, has left you with curved legs and slightly bent forward. In other words, if someone looked at you more carefully, your appearance would give you away. But, among these men, there wasn’t a single one who was straight. They were dressed in German and Bulgarian officer’s boots and in tailor made uniforms but their curves showed… They did not stand straight... If you want an example of this, take a good look at our squad’s political commissar...” concluded Iani.

“Leave the poor man alone,” said Kolio. “We know he is a hunchback because life dealt him a bad card. Before becoming a commissar the poor man was milking sheep...”

“Well, let’s take the commander of the second platoon, first company, for example. A true Cavalier, wouldn’t you say? asked Iani.

“If you want to know, he was a hired hand, a labourer, a helper, a workman from the day he remembers... He is a survivor…” said Kolio.

“Yes… but he is no more than that, right?” asked Iani.

“No he is not because together with me, Kolio, he took a bunker. They said he was a hero but they never said that he washed his underwear in the brook right after the battle. After that they sent him to some kind of leadership course and here he was, made him into a commissar in the second unit, first regiment... Or should I say deputy political commissar. They said in Bulkesh he completed some course, he learned what he learned and when he came back he was deputy commissar. For example, count how many words he could speak and you wouldn’t count more than just a dozen. Just listening to him; war, party, leader, imperialism, monarcho-fascism, capitalists, revolution and enemy agents... That’s all he talked about, he used no other words. It’s all crap and dirt... I can do the same but does that mean I can be a deputy political commissar? A political commissar must have some brains, right?” asked Kolio.

“It is true, if you look at him, you will see that he has curved legs. It is more noticeable when he runs,” said Iani.

“No! His legs are not curved, his boots are. One time, when someone jokingly said to him that the German boots they gave him were crooked, in a serious tone of voice he said: ‘Those damn Germans… they distorted their boots from walking, running, marching and stomping too much… Lucky me, I happened to get German boots’...” replied Kolio.

“You people, why do you talk like that!? Why do you use hurtful words to describe your comrades? Isn’t it a shame? I say it is a shame. Whatever they are, they are, today they are fighters… Tomorrow, it is possible they will become important people, but today this is the kind of people the revolution breeds,” interjected Mita.

“You, over there, don’t be so smart. We know who we are. Here is what you will be good at... Make sure you don’t end up like our people ended up in the Asian campaign. My father, for example, went to Asia to drive the Turks out, not to help the Greeks create a Megali Elada (Greater Greece). But, as my father used to say: ‘All we did there was look after the horses the officers rode and wash dirty underwear’…” said Iani.

“My grandfather, the poor man, almost died in Asia. The officer he looked after was a major and a big womanizer, that’s what my grandfather told the men in my village. One day the major caught him talking to his mistress and for that he wanted to castrate him…” added another man.

Iani dropped his cigarette butt, stomped on it with his heel and resumed his narration:

“But, if you want to know, among the ploughmen there were also shapely men wearing officer’s overcoats and God, how they stood straight and tall!!! They wore their hats askew and they looked superb!!! Have you seen Postoli Graniti or Naso Garefi? Well, just like them... Tall and shapely!!! Even the mares they rode had an open eye for them… never mind the young ladies... Real men, not short screwballs like you...” said Iani looking at Kolio.

“Short screwballs like me eh?!” replied Kolio.

“Don’t let it bother you. Leave him alone… Let him tell his story!” interjected Mita.

“As I watched them I said to myself: ‘If in 1945 we had had an army and commanders like them, we would have screwed those who took

our country in 1913! The thought gave me pride, made me stick my chest out and scrambled my brain," said Iani.

"Wow… This is like the song... Wait, how does it go? You know the one that was sung by the girls in that village in Bitola where we entered in 1944? Do you remember?" interjected Kolio.

Iani tilted his hat, leaned back on the rock, took a puff from his cigarette, exhaled a cloud of smoke and, with a hoarse voice, began to sing: "I am not amazed my dear mother..." and after that he asked Kolio: "Is this the one?"

"Yes… that's the one…" replied Kolio and the two began to sing:

"I am not amazed, my dear mother,
Of the many soldiers,
My dear mother,
Of the many soldiers!

But I am amazed, my dear mother,
How the land can hold them,
My dear mother,
How the land can hold them!

"Ha-ha-ha..." Mockingly interjected the man whose grandfather had almost been castrated.

"What ha-ha-ha, you green and immature… so and so!" replied Iani with a raised tone of voice. "They were soldiers, a people's army... that's why it looked so big to the people. It was their army and it was numerous… they were so many fighters the people were amazed how the land could hold them… metaphorically… Look… Let me ask you something… Why didn't the people sing such songs for other armies… for foreign armies, eh? You have nothing to say? You are silent because you don't want to think... Perhaps there were not that many fighters; five or six partisans, but the people's desire was great and their joy was even greater because, well, they had their own army...

Well, you green and immature… so and so, when people sing, the songs they sing stay with them a long time... like this rock here, like, like... the scriptures. I am telling you this so that you know! And I don't want to hear you laugh again. Your laughter sounds like scorn and ridicule. I want you to know that there, in the Oteshevo prison, I guarded people who laughed at and made mockery of things, just like you did earlier... Do you understand? Remember this and never forget it. And those from our side (Aegeans) who joined OZNA and UDBA, collected personal information on all of us; who we were, where we came from, our political affiliations, where we served, where we have been, and learned more about us than we knew about ourselves…

After that, the people's government allocated living space and found work for these refugees. They were then told that they could not move or relocate without permission... If they wanted to visit relatives or friends they had to inform the people's authorities and get a pass. They were obliged to use the words "Death to fascism - freedom to the people" every time they greeted others, especially the authorities. They were obliged to carry this pass on them at all times… But there, in Oteshevo, we had three people who truly understood what freedom of movement meant... They left the place where they were living without permission and went further away than they were allowed to, so they quickly found themselves under my watch. One day they called them and me for a visit to the authorities. They who braved to venture outside of the permitted zone and me, responsible for keeping them inside the zone, were put in a room and we looked at each other suspiciously. They were dressed in rags and I in uniform, but without my shmaizer. The commander entered the room. He looking superb; clothes ironed perfectly, boots polished and wearing several belts; one on his waist and others on his shoulders.

After looking at us sternly for a moment he spoke up and said:

'Do you know that out there in the Aegean part of Macedonia our people are spilling blood because of those damn Greeks and you sit here, especially you,' he said to me, 'sitting here reading the newspapers 'Nova Makedonija' and 'Titov pioneer' making a spectacle of yourself?'

I looked at him and wondered: What's wrong with this man? He was fine yesterday…

'Shame on you!' he said, standing up and lifting himself up on his tiptoes.

I thought to myself: You can lift yourself all you want; I am still taller than you!

'Shame on you!' he again said. 'Our brothers down there are fighting a bloody war,' pointing towards Mount Bela Voda. Bela Voda was located above the village German, and further over, further from Otesheko was Mount Lunser and Mount Barba," said Iani and pointed in that direction with an open hand. "In the distance the mountains looked like you could hold them inside you palm…" he said.

"Then without asking him for permission I spoke up and said: 'Why am I here, Commander?' 'You are here because you waste your time… You pace left, right, in front of our people's enemies and wear down the leather on your boots for nothing. You receive three portions of bread daily for nothing… while there, in the Aegean part of Macedonia, our brothers…' he suddenly yelled, stood up, came over towards me and I thought for sure he was going to hit me. But he turned around and then sat down.

As far as I knew, I had done nothing wrong, so why was this man treating me this way? His abrupt move angered me. I could not contain my anger so I hit the table with my fist. A jug full of water sitting on it jumped up, tilted and toppled over, spilling the water into the commander's lap. He looked at me sternly with the eyes of a rabid dog, then leaned over and pushed a button. Two men entered the room looked at the commander and, without saying a word, grabbed me by the arms. The commander then stood up slowly, came closer and punched me several times all over my body. Then, after serving seven days in solitary confinement, they gave me a pair of wooden boots and a 12 kilo sledge hammer. Interestingly, the public enemies, who I had abused during my days as their guard, instead of hating my guts, felt sorry for me.

My punishment lasted a month. After that they sent me back to the line, gave me a long speech on how to behave, made an example of me in front of the others and then it was back to 'left, right, left, right', guarding the fence. One night I decided to do what I decided to do. I left my Shmaizer in my bedroom and beside it I left a piece of paper on which I wrote that I and so and so were leaving and going to our brothers who were bleeding. Then, early the next morning at dawn, we took the road to Albania. We spent the day in the woods near Stenie and crossed the border at night. We met up with our people in Nivitsi and now here I am... amongst you, alive and well.

Out here, while crushing lice between my thumbnails, I had a lot of time to think about what happened… So, let me tell you this… if we tomorrow, for a single goat, for a stupid laugh, like this idiot who was laughing earlier, send our people to break stones, eh, then… Then you, who will be building houses; for placing a single stone askew, or God forbid for making a crooked corner, or for allowing the sun to filter through a crack, then know this: you will be declared enemies of the people and you will be sent to break and chisel stones… And someone, say this guy or maybe that guy over there, will be put in charge of you and will be doing the 'left, right' while guarding you. I guarded the people's enemies when I was in Oteshevo; on one side I guarded those who broke stones and on the other I guarded those who drank cool beer and sang:

Get up, get up, let's get going,
To Bitola we will go,
Cool beer we will drink…

Beside the lake, under the shadows of the large white umbrellas, they drank cognac and wine. So I said to myself: 'Oh, this must be what freedom is like?!' As I watched them with their drinks in their hands and wooden clogs on their feet, I decided to flee their freedom and thought I would find my own freedom in the mountains. I thought I would find my freedom in the endless mountain chains; in the highest places under the sky; in the distance; in the green and wide forests; in the horizon as far as the eye can see… We were like eagles there, looking down from high above, our eyes full and

bellies empty... We tried to avoid death, hunger and lice. We lived day to day running from hill to brook and from brook to hill living on bread and cheese alone, yelling and swearing at each other while trying not to get shot and killed... Yes... That's the kind of freedom we found in the mountains... And I am telling you right now that I will never touch a trowel or a hammer again. All I want to do now is rest. But what are they telling me? Now that I am here they are telling me that I will be a real hero if I fight with my last drop of blood… I will be a great hero if I die holding a rifle in my hand..." concluded Iani, silently staring into the distance.

In the long silence a cricket, rustling in the singed grass, began to shyly sing its song. It was barely audible. Iani broke the silence and in a voice that was almost not his own he said: "They all perished…"

When they realized that he was talking about yesterday's battle no one attempted to intervene in his conversation, so they allowed him to continue to talk while they listened:

"The resin from the wounded pines flowed like tears, dripping on the pine leaves, sticking them together. The wind picked them up, whipped them around and turned them into wreaths which then dropped on the burning ground… The speech that our commander gave was picked up by the wind and carried into the gorge. It was forced through the cracks of the rocks and hauled away to the brooks like sand between toes... We cast branches upon them with a promise that we would crown their altar... the bloody soil between the branches we covered with rubble. We added rocks on top to record their place of eternal sleep which the rain forever would wash, the wind would dry, the sun would warm and the white dawn would shine upon them making them glitter like pearls on the chest of a young maiden... And above all that we added our own wishes: May the winds blow all fires burning on the hills and tilt them to bow in honour of the fallen. May the crosses on their graves be made of black pine and white birch and shine in the purple light of dusk. May each fire burning in Gramos be a crown and each grave be that of a king…

In time, orchids would sprout and bluebottles would mourn over them in early dawn: Young saplings of white birch would spring up and grow branches like long braids flying over them and gleaming like silver... Fresh summer dew would cool them at dawn and golden leaves would cover them from fall to spring. A flock of nightingales would cluster over them and sing a song for them... And without pause the pine trees would rustle quietly over them. And in their everlasting memory, the stones and the trees under which they lay; the pine, the oak, the maple, the stone, the hill, the pieces of rusted shrapnel, the broken knife blade and everything else that was then wounded, would keep a record of their time... And in place of flags, singed branches would rustle over them; and in place of a somber salvo, lightning and thunder would echo for them...

Raven do not crow, lightning do not strike, nightingale do not sing; keep silent for a moment; for as long as the soil resting upon the youth it has taken, has not settled… And say nothing… let the mothers weave garments for a wedding, let them gather the dowry in wooden chests, let them knead loaves of bread and send gifts and invitations for a wedding. Let them make diapers and prepare cradles… Let them wait.... Let them wait and wait and wait… because in wait there is hope... In the eyes of a young maiden the stars have not yet extinguished… not everything has withered… and she has not ceased to breathe… It is a good thing that churches are in ruins and the bells are broken… let mothers pray...

They have all perished... they are all gone... The top has shrunk by a hand or two… They were left for eternity to guard Kopanche, Sveti Ilia, Koteltse, Gupata, Gorusha, Bel Kamen and Krusha… those who were boldly brave yesterday and pledged to be crowned in front of the altar before they were even born… are now resting... resting under wounded pine trees which cry tears of resin over them. Resin that binds leaves together… Leaves that the winds whip up… circles around and weaves into garlands… garlands that drop on scorched soil... And the flames that burn over Gramos must have crowns and each and every one of the graves is a grave of a king... May the bells ring and oil lamps burn bright for all eternity...

Well, this is what I have for you; this is my advice to you. It would have been nice if I were a poet...” concluded Iani.

Iani suddenly lost his voice, he went silent. Everyone thought he was choked up by some deep emotions and that was why his voice had withered. No one wanted to interrupt his silence. Each in their own mind entertained their own thoughts; thoughts of pain and anguish; thoughts that squeezed, gripped and tormented them. Thoughts that were deeply private, best thought of in silence! It seemed like everyone was standing on the side of the road and, in their own minds, were watching his or her blossoming youth pass them by. They stood there sober and collected, immersed in thought, thinking of yesterday and of what the near future might bring. A bee flew by and landed on a flower in a nearby Ianovo flower plant. It extended the diameter of the flower cup with its wings and entered deep into the flower, gobbling up its aromatic nectar…. Then, at a moment when no one expected it, Iani began to talk again:

"Now I would like to go home and be in my own yard, in my own room, in my own field, under the thick shade of my cherry tree. I wouldn't even mind if I was sitting on top of my compost heap, if I could only be home… I will lay in it like this… my head tilted back… I will stare down the valley, up at the sky and into the eyes of my beloved... I would reach and die of old age doing just this... What I don't want is to go with a 'bam' on the forehead or in the chest, or from a grenade going off and blowing up my body. Not by fire falling on me from the sky and turning me into ashes and smoke to be blown away by the wind... where not a trace of me is left to find. Is there an end to killing and hatred? Why does man surrender to killing with such zeal? I, you, he, we here and they there are mutually wounded… we kill each other. And tomorrow someone will say to me 'you killed my brother' or I will say to him 'you killed my brother', meaning that I and he are both killers. And what is he who gave me the gun? What is he who keeps guns in stock, who every day writes in his notebook how many guns, grenades, machine guns, mines, bullets, swords… he gave out...

What is he? What is he who took count of how many were killed and how many were wounded and wrote those numbers down, just the numbers, in his notebook? What is he? What is he who issued weapons under orders? What is he who invented the gun, the cannon, the machine gun, the mine, the bomb? What is he, who

produced, who packed, who kept things well oiled and who issued orders to do all that? All these people, an entire chain of them, are killers… killers who, from near and from far, cry out 'freedom!!!' They cry out loud 'we are fighting for freedom!' Both sides fighting each other cry out loud 'we are fighting for freedom' while killing each other... And freedom, if it ever existed, it lay seated between the two front lines, drunkenly suffocating both sides. In the name of freedom we slaughtered each other; we indiscriminately killed, wounded, maimed, took eyes out and tore each other apart… we created unbelievable horrors… in the name of freedom…

For that desired freedom we loved so much, we dreamt about, on its behalf, and on behalf our own desires, yearnings and dreams, we lost all decency and reality and fought each other like monsters, as if not out of our own will, killing and mutilating each other like two bucks fighting for dominance of the herd, like two stallions fighting for possession of the mares… deceived with moving desires, hopes and aspirations we blindly fought to the death… our prize? Freedom!!! In the name of freedom, on both sides, we also fell forward, our faces hitting the bloody ground, biting it in hopes of alleviating our pain and before taking our last breath we had our final cry…

With our eyes locked in the sky, stinking in the hot sun, we were free of everything... caught between two fronts, on the hill, in the trench, in the bunker, in front of a rifle barrel, a sword, a knife, a dagger… well… that was our freedom... Like a bone, tossed away… waiting to be chewed… that was our freedom... Their freedom… their desire was to see us defeated and humiliated... Our freedom… our desire was to see them defeated and humiliated… Their freedom, our destruction and our loss of liberty, our freedom, their destruction and their loss of libery... To whom does freedom belong? Freedom from there hatred from here... And someone, watching all this from the sidelines, is rubbing his hands, monitoring things carefully and filling the hatred with more hatred... And maybe at a different time, a hand will be given to cover our bones. Graves will be dug and leveled, and thoughts of us will fly high in the sky... And a day, in the many days, will come when someone will ask and someone will answer: 'Why and with whom did they go, and on whose name did they die?'

Which human trait is most valued today? The trait, of course, which will turn your life into ashes… Be a hero and just charge against a bunker and see what happens… you will remain there forever… Tell me, has anyone taken inventory of how many charged a bunker and lived to tell about it? I didn't think so… For those who tried and didn't make it, they will sing songs so that their deeds will remain in the memories of the survivors, and they, those brave souls who gave their lives, for them there will be a hole in the ground, dug with a dagger or a sword… and on top, if they are lucky, there will be a stone to mark their grave, their resting place… and perhaps someone will cut a marker in the bark of a nearby tree trunk to commemorate their sacrifice...

Yesterday is gone, our platoon has disappeared and we are only this many now, as many as we are here... We are as many today as we lost yesterday... we are that many now plus those who perished on the hill to keep the hill from falling. The hill did not fall but they did... They fought to the last gasp, to the last bullet! They fought until the last drop of blood was squeezed out of them… They fell heroically in the name of... because they had nothing to lose except their own stupid heads… devoid of thought...

There, in Oteshevo, amongst the enemies of the people, there was a man similar but distinctly different from them. He said: 'Continue telling them the truth, tell the ones who are slightly different than you, even though they are small and humiliated, unlucky, but slightly different than you, but close company and similar thinkers like you, but you being slightly smarter than them. If you were to do that, then you can be sure that they would hate you and would snitch on you until they destroyed you. The most dangerous people are the ones who have tasted a bit of education and have eaten crumbs from the tables of the wealthy... The government desires those kinds of people the most…' I still do not comprehend what this poor man wanted to tell me… I don't have the cognitive capacity to figure it out… Maybe one of you will explain it to me? Argir, oh Argir! Perhaps you can?" said Iani.

"Be quiet and stop babbling!" replied Argir, turning his back and covering his face with his hat.

Mita adjusted herself slightly, looked into Iani's face, leaned her head on her hand and, after a long silence, said: "Such is our fate. We have been caught by the wheel of time and it has pulled us under it; tossing us here and there, holding us and keeping us down. It will let us go only when we are burned, cut down and dispersed… Only then will the wheel drop us off and stop spinning. Otherwise it will spin and roll and collect and shatter everything that comes under its treads... It asks no one, has no remorse and cares for no one..."

Bitterness flowed from Mita's mouth and every word she spoke had a vile taste. Woven in her words were all her thoughts and faces of those close to her, of those who she had left behind and who, all the time; be it during a march, a short rest, a stolen moment of sleep, in a trench, in a bunker, during a charge, on the stretcher and underground; appeared before her eyes... Mita bowed her head down and silently, looking like a frightened deer, looked back at her trodden path, at what was hers yesterday and said:

"The wheel has scooped us all. It has taken us under it, and with every revolution it squeezes out our lives, taking a piece of it at a time, bleeding us drop by drop… draining the blood out of our veins… How many of us will go, will disappear… never to be seen again, each time the wheel turns? Who and when will they contact our loved ones… waiting for us… when we are dead and gone? Will they give them the devastating news in the field, in the garden, in the vineyard, during lunch, or during dinner time? How will our loved ones react? Will a glass of wine never touch their lips? Will a mother's arms ache from being held up… raised in prayer? Who will cry the loudest? Who will tear their hair out the most? Whose heart will harden with pain? Whose pain will be the strongest and most severe? Who will cry the most and whose heart will ache the longest?

And when I think about them… my family… I love them more, so much that my heart aches… I long for them and it hurts… Every time I think of them I melt, I freeze and I lose myself in my thoughts which brings me closer to them, close to our home and to our life the way it was; the orchard, the vineyard, the garden, the happiness and

laughter, the joy and pain and, thank the Lord, for everything we had!

And why do we deserve what we received… the fate we were handed down… the fear, the beatings, the machine guns, the rifles, and Zoia's heavy machine gun. Why was Zoia handed that damn heavy killing machine? Was there no thought given that the poor girl might be too small… her shoulders might be too tiny to carry such a big gun? Did the Lord not consider her fate when he gave Zoia her height… her build? Or was it a different God that determined Zoia's fate? Was Zoia's destiny cast in stone… to carry that damn machine gun, to shoot and kill, and to keep the enemy under fire? Did God know that Zoia's life was taken over by a different God and that this God changed the thread of her life? Well, did he?

I have said this before and I will say it again: She is very fortunate she was wounded yesterday and they took her away. She cried and moaned… she was in a great deal of pain… it could have been worse… I stood over her and winked at her… she could barely find the strength to smile... I kissed her forehead... I just hope she made it to the hospital, the doctors there will know what to do... Pop Vasil, our neighbour, used to say 'God loves his children equally'. I wish he was here in front of me so that I could ask him: 'If God loves his children equally then why did he reward them with unequal bravery, strength, endurance, courage and cowardice? Why did God make the world in which Zoia… and many others like her… had to be disfigured?" continued Mita.

"To better rule over us!" piped up Argir, who since Mita had known, had never had anything good to say about anybody.

"Everyone is at fault but no one wants to admit it…" added Argir.

"Amen!" replied Mita with a tiny smile on her face.

"You, Mita!" said Iani pointing at her with his finger. "Where is your part in this wheel of yours, which you mentioned so many times… the biggest and most fateful part built into this new Holy Trinity…"

“Which Trinity?” asked Mita.

“Go to hell, you!” yelled Argir with an angry voice. “You constantly yap and nobody can get shut-eye around here. Enough! No more talking! Not a single word…”

“As if I care…” added Mita.

After a short pause, Iani, in spite of Argir’s threat to yell at him, resumed talking. In a serious tone of voice, demanding respect and attention, he said: “I want you to know that our entire human mind is engaged in inventing better weapons to destroy people like ourselves. People are strange in this way… doing everything they can to destroy people just like themselves and then… celebrate about it… And I, no matter what, I love my sweet imagination fulfilled: when I go somewhere I want to have a jug full of water and a plate full of food beside me. And you, stupid idiots, you can put on your aprons, grab your trowels, hammers, measuring tapes and go to work. But before you leave, do me a favour and measure me a well-ventilated nice patch of green under the thick foliage of a tree, maybe on top of a hill somewhere, from where I can watch the sunset, listen to the birds sing and spend my long summer days laying in the shade…

Take a measure of those who were left lying on the hills and in the brooks. Take a measure of the young men and women who were buried in a shallow pit yesterday. For them we dug a shallow pit without measurements… we measured them only in pain... We did not measure anyone… not a young lady… not a young man… we lumped them all together, covered them up, leveled the soil over them and shed a few secret tears for them. And if I die tomorrow… toss me in a pit and cover me with soil… treat me no better and no differently that I would treat you… than I treated those who perished yesterday… because I am no better… Just because you and I have survived the day and may live another day or perhaps ten more days… it makes us no difference and no better…

And you, when you are sent out to build buildings, you had better take accurate measurements… you had better pay careful attention. Beware of how you measure, because the slightest defect… the

slightest crooked line… the slightest crack… will send you to Oteshevo… there will be no escape for you from Oteshevo… mark my words… Now is the time to think… carefully… and find out what you are fighting for… your justification for spilling blood, leaving wounds, scars and causing a lot of suffering...

The Party makes no mistakes… even when it makes mistakes… it will acknowledge its mistakes and continues to sin. And you, if you make a mistake, you will not be given the time to justify it to the Party, because errors such as yours turn people like you into enemies of the people. So do not make mistakes… not even one. Because you don't know who is watching and listening… some louse, nit, flea… will inform on you... Beware, be very wary and remember what you did, two, three or more years ago… to whom you said what and to whom you made promises… When and if the Party comes to power all will be revealed. And who knows, if I am still alive, I may have to pay for what I did in Oteshevo and for what I am telling you now about Oteshevo... Who knows? Things may change. Just like what happened to his grandfather... A couple of words spoken to the major's mistress… and, oh my dear, almost no more nuts…" Iani paused and took a long puff from his cigarette. There was silence but only for a moment. When Iani felt the burning cigarette between his fingers, he shook the ashes off it and, looking sad, he said:

"We are used to the mud, the rain, the cold, the hunger, the thirst, the fog, the lice, the dirt… We are used to bombs exploding and being shot at… We are used to the suffering, the blood, the pain… We are used to being wounded and crippled… We are used to watching our friends and enemies die, and we are used to killing and being killed. How will we overcome or even justify to ourselves all these things when we go back to plowing, hammering and living normal lives... How will you handle the silence, the dark under our warm bedcovers, when you begin to feel happy; you know; when you watch the stars, count the seeds in your hand, romp in the hay, run your fingers through your sweetheart's hair, take a deep breath… and generally feel good because you are still alive?

And you Mita and Tsilka and all the others like you, will you ever get used to wearing a dress again? I hope that time comes sooner

than later, when you shake off your lice and lice infested shirts and trousers and replace them with a dress which will make you look like girls... Let that time come as soon as possible so that you can be girls again, and we the fools here can go nuts about you. Do whatever you do, but I want one of you to pick me before I choose another...” concluded Iani.

There was silence again. The wind picked up slightly and blew on the scorched grass making it rustle. There were many thoughts and desires going through the minds of those standing there staring into the distance with eyes wide open, mesmerized. The day was coming to its end. The sky above Bel Kamen was turning purple and the sun was setting. There, beyond those hills, it looked like a fire was burning… Further down the waters of the river Bistritsa ran, washing, scrubbing, rolling and pushing sand and pebbles to the shore. And when more water built up, it picked up the same sand and pebbles and washed them, scrubbed them and pushed them along once more… This had been going on for centuries; but no one knows for how many centuries; they do know, however, that it happens every day. In the past few days and today, the river water has been a bit muddy... and on its coast black leeches prowl, swollen with human blood...

# The Great Decline – Chapter 10

“Vane!” yelled the commander, “It’s your turn to fetch water.”

Vane came out of the trench, collected all the canteens and, one by one, hung them on his belt. He then picked up his shmaizer, checked it and left, disappearing into the forest. The ferns were tall and thick and under them grew wild strawberries which were small and dark, red in colour, hanging like pearls from their stems, and giving off an intoxicating aroma. Vane knelt down on his knee and began to pick. For each one he put into his hand he tossed one into his mouth. They were sweet, ripe and soft. Vane preferred not to bite and chew them but put them on his tongue and pressed them against the roof of his mouth, squeezing the sweet juice out. When his mouth was completely full he closed his eyes and let the strawberries glide down his throat, swallowing slowly with much pleasure. The sweet and fragrant juice made him feel good all over. His lips turned red and his fingers became sticky. Two or three steps in front of him, the patch was carpeted with more ripe strawberries. He took a step but the rustle of his foot masked the shot and he fell face down in the strawberry patch. Blood gushed out of his wound and covered parts of the patch. He looked small in the shade of the ferns and between the tree trunks. And the ferns, the strawberries, the stream trickling down the hill at his side, all looked large, vast and endless. The shot had come from one of his own people. Engrossed in picking strawberries he had not heard the voice of the guard… Vane was buried in a shallow grave among the tall ferns beside the patch of strawberries...

In the evening Mita and Tsana covered the freshly dug grave with Ianovo flowers. The Ianovo flower grows on Mount Kopanche, on the bare slopes of Gorusha and Krusha and on other nearby hills. It does not like the shade. It grows from seeds on its own and does not like to be transplanted. It chooses its own places where to grow and how much light it likes. It does not like to grow in grass or with other flowers. It does not want any more moisture than the morning dew it receives. It attracts the most beautiful butterflies with its invigorating aroma, most of which is released at dawn and when it’s very hot. It adjusts its aroma three times a day: in the morning from dawn and for as long as its leaves are moist with dew, at noon when

the heat is baking hot and at night after the sun sets and before dew first appears on its leaves. From dusk to dawn it closes its petals and its flowers take a nap in the dark...

The commissar entered the commander's trench and said: "We captured an agent. He was telling our fighters that the government troops eat white bread, boiled and roasted meats, and chocolates every day. In the morning they drink milk, tea with rum and coffee."

The commander rotated the handle on his Polish telephone and, after being connected, gave the mouth and earpiece to the commissar and said: "Go ahead, contact the Regiment Headquarters."

The other side then ordered: "Send us the offender. We will judge him here and if we find him guilty we will execute him."

"Commander," said the commissar, "I don't agree with having to send him to Headquarters. We found him, we caught him and it should be us who judge and execute him… in front of all the fighters... He paused for a moment and then continued: "Today I listened to one of them. Do you know what he said? 'Listen,' he said, 'I am always hungry. The ration of bread I get is not enough.' And then he said 'We will not win the war if Russia does not help us or if World War III does not start. Being Partisans,' he said, 'for us Greeks, is not good. It is good for the Macedonian Slavs because they defend their language...' So, what did I do? I tied him up and put him together, in the same trench, with the other guy. Then I went and listened to the conversations in the second line and do you know what I heard? I heard fighter Vangel tell the others: 'You know? I am always hungry. At Vicho,' he said, 'our people had plenty to eat. There,' he said, 'we had eggs, roasted chicken and lamb and as much bread as we wanted.' Then I see Todor shaking his head in approval... 'In Psoderi,' he said, 'we had it good. We ate a lot. The women from the villages brought us bread, zelniks, cheese, fried eggs and fried pork.' Then another guy, I think his name was Mitre; he never stopped complaining. He said: 'I used to go from here to Vicho overnight.' Then someone else said: 'Were you not afraid?' And he said: 'Yes, I was afraid but only from our own people. If I got caught leaving without permission there would have been a bullet with my name on it. They would have accused me of

deserting…' I am telling you commander, there is bad talk in the trenches. One of my own guys from the same line told me that some of them pretend to be sick to avoid going on guard. He also gave me this note. This is what's written on it: 'My dear cousin! You are fighting for foreign interests and against mother Greece. In the end you will lose. No one will help you. Come here and I will help you find a job and will convince the authorities to pardon you...' Of course, I told my guy to keep an eye on him in case he tried to escape and kill him if he did." The commissar paused again, stared into the commander's face and waited to hear what he had to say.

The commander again picked up the telephone, turned the handle and gave the commissar the mouth and earpiece.

The earpiece was silent. The commissar listened to the line and noticed that it was not working. "Never mind…" he said.

"Yes, it's not working!" confirmed the commander and then picked up his officer's briefcase, pulled out a notebook, tore out a sheet of paper, handed it to the commissar and said: "Write down what you want to say and I will send it to Regiment Headquarters by courier."

The commissar placed the sheet of paper on top of the briefcase and wrote: "We have captured two agents in our regiment. Stop. We will pass judgment on them today. Stop. We will execute them in front of a line. Stop. The fighters are complaining they have too many lice. Stop. What should we do? Stop. Death to fascism, freedom to the people. Stop. All to arms and everything for victory. Stop. Unit political commissar. Stop."

The regiment commander read the telegram and wrote the following on the back of the piece of paper: "To the unit commander. Stop. Transfer the prisoners to another line. Stop. Arrest and execute the lice. Stop. Tie up the commissar and place him under guard at the regiment headquarters. Stop. Execute the order now. Stop."

The commander did as ordered and then called Mita and Iani to his trench and said: "You two go down to the village and see who this woman is and why she has been yelling and crying for two nights."

It was already dark when they arrived in the village. As they walked around they heard a sad voice yelling, pleading, praying and crying. It came from the back of the ruins.

“Hey! Hey there!” Mita called out. “Who are you?”

“A woman...” she replied.

“Why are you yelling and crying?” asked Mita.

“I am afraid…” replied the woman.

“Come out now!” ordered Mita.

“I am afraid…” replied the woman.

“Of who?” asked Mita.

“Of everyone…” the woman replied.

“Are you alone?” asked Mita.

“I am with my cat… I am hungry… My cat is hungry…” replied the woman.

They returned to the unit, reported to the commander and then stood in a queue in front of the black cauldron. There was an odor emanating from the pot as the chef stirred its contents with a large spoon. He scooped some up and poured it right back.

“Hey, you good for nothing…” Iani addressed the chef. “Throw some more beans into the mix… don’t just mix and mix… This is the best meal…”

“So it is… so it is…” replied the chef. “You should think about your food…”

“I should think about what? Look at it! Here is my portion! What do I see? A few beans in a bowl full of lukewarm water…”

“Well exactly, those beans you see swimming in your bowl, imagine them to be a large chunk of meat... You idiot, all you think of is food, you greedy bastard. You are behaving exactly like a dog and not like a person. Like an ox grazing but not knowing what it’s eating. If it knew what it was eating it would not be an ox, but...” replied the chef.

“It would be a chef!” snapped Iani interrupting the chef.

“Really??!! Stop, you are killing me…” replied the chef sarcastically.

“Well, maybe not a chef but a chef’s assistant, right?” added Iani.

“I asked you to stop!” the chef yelled angrily. “And let me tell you something you… you hungry and greedy bastard. I am telling you, you will ruin your stomach. So listen to me… enough is enough… understand? What do you think you understand? Do you think the food will be both plentiful and delicious? What do you say to that? Not enough bread? Well, when I give you this piece of bread think of it as an entire loaf. When you are holding a loaf in your hand, think of it as an entire batch of bread… freshly baked in a large oven. Can you do that? Of course you can’t. You can’t because you are not smart enough. To use your imagination you need to be smart. The bean you saw, think of it as a lamb on a spit turning over coals, slowly turning red, giving off an aroma of barbecued meat being roasted over those rocks over there. Do you smell that?” replied the chef.

“Yeah...” replied Iani with a suspicious look on his face.

“Well, now you are starting to think... And that’s how you should be thinking of your food before you eat it, particularly of this Partisan food here and not just slurping it up as fast as you can and then still feeling hungry. Here,” said the chef, knocking on the side of his head and then pointing at his stomach, “and not here. You should eat your food like you drink your wine… with love and delight... These things you should and must do with every meal, not slurp, slurp, slurp... like an unfulfilled greedy drunkard. Your food, I say, must not just go into you stomach, it must also go into your brain. Those

who just put food into their stomachs are constantly hungry and their stomachs hurt. And those who put their food into their stomachs and into their brains...” said the chef before he was interrupted by Iani who yelled out: “Are great liars just like you…”

“Look at this guy…” said Iani, “he is trying to sell me nut shells and rose hips. Eat like this, eat like that... Just fill my bowl with my portion of bean soup and sell your ideas to someone who wants to buy them. You are a complete idiot. You let your mind swim with the beans…”

“I will, I will… And what a great swim it will have. Imagine the beans are large fish… Look… look here,” the chef lifted the big serving spoon up above the cauldron and dripped its contents into Iani’s bowl and said: “Eat, eat, you ox… Oh… how good it tastes… And what do I see? Every bean is a lady. Ladies and more ladies for you… To your good heath… cheers…”

The commander came close to Iani and said: “Here, take my portion and go to the village with Mita. Take it. Now go…”

Iani and Mita left the bread and soup on the stone outside the destroyed house.

“Dear lady, please come out. We brought you something to eat… Come out…” yelled Iani

“I am afraid… Go away…” replied the woman.

So every evening, every person donated a spoonful of soup and a small chunk of bread for the lonely woman and her cat. One of the fighters was sent down to the village to deliver it. To let the woman know, the fighter knocked two stones together and left. The woman emerged from the rubble and her cat followed...

Clouds were blowing in from Morava, heavy black, ominous clouds. They were carried by the cool wind which had the smell of a bad storm brewing... Suddenly, lightning lit the sky and loud thunder followed, echoing in the deep gorges. More lightning bolts flashed in the sky, hitting the earth, splitting trees, breaking rocks and

always followed by loud thunder, whose echo took a long time to die out. Then, without warning, heavy rain began to fall, spilling much water over the dry soil, turning it into knee deep mud. The commander came out of his trench, looked around, estimated that the storm would last a long time and headed towards the nearest machine gun nest. The gunner sat on a stone huddled in the corner, sleeping, with his feet buried in water.

"Are you napping? Stand up… on your feet… you will drown in here!" said the commander in a raised tone of voice. "Grab a shovel and dig here to drain the water…" he yelled while pointing at a spot with his muddy boot. "The trench is filling with water. Now, do as I say. Grab the shovel and dig until all the water has drained out!"

There was another strong flash of lightning followed by loud thunder. The rain storm gained strength and poured even more water on the muddy soil. A strong wind began to blow, carrying the large raindrops sideways.

The telephone rang loudly in Chetirok, in the artillery battery commander's tent.

"Major, what is going on there. Is it raining?" asked the Brigadier General.

The major recognized the general's voice. "Yes Sir, General, it's raining," he replied.

"Now look up. What do you see?" asked the general.

"Up above, General, Sir, I see lightning flashes and I hear constant thunder, which sounds like the bombardment of heavy artillery..." replied the major.

"And what is your artillery doing? Major, why have you not joined the bombardment with your cannons? I order you, Major, to fire all your cannons in quick rounds, for half an hour. Let us see who is stronger, the thunderstorm or us? The heavens or us? Fire, Major!" ordered the general.

Iani felt a strong blow and burning in his left thigh. A burning piece of cannon shell hit him and wounded his left leg above the knee up to his hip. Stuck between two stones, he waited for the shelling to stop. He took off his shirt and tried to tie his wound himself but was not able to stop the bleeding. He yelled for help. He got the attention of a field medic. The field medic ordered a stretcher which carried him to the large trench located on the other side of the brook. Two older women carried him on the stretcher downhill all night long... He was exhausted and constantly begged to be given water.

The sky looked far away from under the tall pines where the main hospital was located. The rocky mountains and forests were close, about half a day's walk. That's were the first front line and death were also located. One could not see beyond the steep hills and no one was allowed to venture beyond the shadows of the tall pines and past the banks of the two rivers. Movement was forbidden during the day; the nights however, were alive. A string of horses, mules and stretchers walked the narrow path that led to and from the compound. The heavily wounded were taken to the barracks inside. Those who were severely wounded and could not be treated there were taken to the hospitals in Albania. The place was so busy no hospital bed was ever left empty or cold.

The dead were taken out of the hospital barracks only at night. They kept the cut body parts such as arms, legs, feet, hands, fingers, broken teeth and missing eyes in large bowls wrapped in blankets. They were all buried in a common pit. Those who did not make it alive to the hospital and those who died in the hospital barracks were buried on the other side of the stream, one beside another. At least here they had their own grave with a name marker.

Giorgi was among the older men who until May had been employed to dig trenches and build bunkers in Aliavitsa, Amuda, Nikoler and Charno, and had been recently brought here to dig graves and bury the dead. Giorgi, who at the time was recovering from a broken leg, was out carefully cutting wood. He cut dry pine logs and split them into kindling with his axe. He then used his knife to trim the kindling into equal sized sticks which he bundled into small bundles. Pine kindling, up in the mountains, was a substitute for candles

which, when lit, gave off a nice shiny, flickering, mesmerizing flame.

The hospital barracks was hidden inside the pine forest and always lay under its shade but the work done there gave off a strong smell of blood, pus and chloroform perforating the entire area. A breeze originating in the Dolna Arena meadows carried the putrid smell along the two river valleys and into the lower plains. The wounded sat around dazed, moaning, crying, yelling, cursing, praying, swearing and suffering from their pains.

Iani was lying on his back and was still feeling the effects of being wounded. His thigh still felt like it was baking. An older man wearing a white coat entered the jam-packed room which housed about twenty wounded. He went from bed to bed spending very little time with each patient. Iani stared at his thick, curved eyebrows, and he, who Iani assumed to be a doctor, unwound his bandages, looked at the cut and touched it with his fingers in several places along the thigh until he felt something hard. He nodded with a serious reaction. Iani opened his eyes wide open and yelled out: “Don’t you dare cut it off!!! Understand?!”

The doctor said something in Hungarian, then in Russian. He then pointed at Iani and sharply said: “Take this patient to the operating room!” and left the room.

After surgery Iani lay in another room. The burning feeling in his thigh had gone. This was the first time, in a long time, that he had a good sleep and he wondered why no one was yelling, no orders were barked, there was no shooting and the only noise he heard was the river’s water rushing down the mountain… Everything was quiet and peaceful... The same doctor entered the room. He was holding a toothed metal instrument in his hand.

“Nu, kak?” the doctor asked in Russian.

Iani understood, or thought he understood the words to mean “how is your leg?” so he quickly answered and said: “Good, good, very good. I can move it now and it doesn’t hurt,” while pointing towards his leg with his eyes.

“Well,” said the doctor in Russian, “you are another person I can communicate with. I, comrade, understand you very well, you’re Macedonian, right?”

“I am Iani. Yes, I am Macedonian. I am from Visheni. And you?” replied Iani with a smile on his face.

The doctor removed the blanket, untied the bandages, looked at the sewn up wound and, looking satisfied, said: “Horosho, horosho ... Molodets.” and then stepped back.

When the doctor and the nurses left the room, Iani turned to the wounded person lying next to him and asked: “What was this ‘hoshosho’? What does it mean?”

“He told you it was good in Russian.” replied the person.

“Is he Russian?” asked Iani.

“No,” replied the person. “He is Hungarian. They say he fought in Spain...”

“Really?” Iani murmured sounding amazed.

“Are you surprised?” asked the person.

“No! Should I be? So he fought, I too have fought, but I don’t want a monument raised...” replied Iani.

“Yes, but he fought in Spain! In aid of the Spanish republic!” said the person.

“Well, I am fighting in Macedonia for the Macedonian cause and no one has told him that I want a larger piece of bread...” replied Iani.

Out of curiosity, two weeks later, Iani removed his own bandages. His wound had healed nicely and all that remained was a long crusted scar with red dots where the stitches used to be. When the nurse came to see him, she gave him an angry look and rushed out to

tell the doctor. During his next visit, the Hungarian doctor looked at his wound very carefully, poked it with his thick and soft finger, smiled and said: “Horosho, horosho... Molodets, molodets... Zavtra na front... Tak reshili komandari… Greki… (Good, good… you are fine… Now you can go back to the front… As ordered by the Greek commander…)”

Iani left the hospital at nightfall and reached Gorusha at midnight. Two days later he was back in the hospital with a deep wound in his chest and a ripped out leg. He did not survive the operation. He was taken to the cemetery before dawn in the same sheet he was lying in on the operating table. The sheet was returned and thrown into a pile of laundry...

# The Great Decline – Chapter 11

Sharko the dog despised the political commissar. Wherever it ran into him, in a trench, in the line in front of the cauldron, Sharko always barked, growled, looked at him with hatred in his eyes and showed him his teeth!

“Leftera!” the political commissar yelled. “Take this mutt out of here. Take it to the brook and shoot it… then bury it so it doesn’t stink.”

“I can’t!” replied Leftera. “I don’t want to waste a bullet.”

“No? Then take this wire here, make a noose, wrap it around its neck and hang it from a tree, if you don’t want to waste a bullet,” ordered the commissar.

Leftera looked away, ignoring the commissar who by now was getting frustrated and again yelled: “Leftera! How many times do I need to tell you to get rid of this dog?”

Leftera turned her back to the commissar, knelt down, wrapped her arms around the dog and hugged it. Sharko, grateful of the show of affection, licked Leftera’s face and forehead. It then, looking over her shoulders, gave the commissar a grimacing look, showing its big teeth. After that the dog hid its snout under Leftera’s armpit.

“Comrade Political Commissar,” Leftera said in a soft voice. “Look how nice he is, pat him at least once and he will love you, you will see. Here, give him a piece of bread, he will get your scent and he will love you...”

“Leftera, you must be crazy! A dog loving me? You must be nuts. I told you to get rid of the dog!” replied the commissar.

“Yes, I heard what you said, but no one has ordered it!” replied Leftera.

The entire platoon loved Sharko. The dog had grown up with them. It followed the platoon wherever it went. But when the dog ran into

the political commissar it barked a strange, whiny bark. Occasionally the dog ran from trench to trench, digging with its paws here and there while looking at the fighters and reading their facial expressions. The dog would look people in the eye with a quizzical look and if a person did not look back and smile, the dog would bark at them with an angry bark. It was comical watching it perform its act. Everyone wanted to pat it, scratch it under its ears and give it a crumb of bread just to see it show a cheerful expression, wag its tail and try to lick them on their face. The dog knew how to act, how to get their attention and how to make them laugh. It also knew what to do when the shooting started. When shots were fired or when shells were coming down, the dog would run into a trench or into a bunker and hide in a corner close to Leftera. In time it became used to cannon, mortar, machine gun, and rifle fire. When the shooting ended the dog would run from trench to trench and bark at the fighters.

The next morning the dog was gone. Leftera kept calling it and calling it but nothing. Others joined in and began to shout the dog's name and still no dog. Stavre, a fighter next to Leftera's trench, suspected that the political commissar may have had something to do with the dog's disappearance.

"Leftera," Stavre said with a sarcastic look on his face, "it would appear that your Sharko may be six feet under..."

Leftera did not like Stavre so she ignored him. His co-fighters could not stand him either. He was always making his rounds in command, whispering, secretly looking around and pointing with his eyes… He was also sick all the time. He always wore a scarf around his neck and complained to everyone about his sore throat and about his teeth hurting.

"Leftera… Did you hear me? I said that your Sharko…" Stavre said before he was interrupted by Leftera who hissed "be quiet!" at him and mentioned the day, last year in June, when Stavre was mobilized.

His grandmother, a short and stooped over old women, went on the stage and the first partisans she met she asked: “Hey, sons, who here is your superior?”

“That guy over there,” one of them replied and pointed at a man in an officer’s uniform.

“You mean the guy wearing all those belts?” she said and walked over towards him.

“Are you the one, my son? Are you the Captain? The leader?” she asked the uniformed man.

The man looked at her strangely from head to toe and said: “I guess I am. Why?”

The old woman looked around and when she saw that no one was looking, she whispered: “Down here, down here, let grandma tell you something… Please don’t take my grandson…”

“And why not?” asked the man.

The old woman raised herself to her tip toes, put her hand on her mouth and whispered in the man’s ear: “He pees… He pees his bed…” She then quietly looked around to make sure no one heard and again said: “He pees you know… he pees his bed…” and then wiped her tears.

The man suddenly stood up straight, looked at her sternly and said: “What??!!”

“He pees… he pees his bed, he pees his bed covers… everything…” she replied.

“So what if he pees!” replied the man angrily. “The mountains and forests here are large and wide. Let him pee wherever he wants... As long as he does not pee on my carpet?!

The old woman told her neighbour about this in confidence and then her neighbour, in confidence, told everyone else in the village...

Stavre was no hawk that flew high. He was always grounded even before his first combat experience. But he was good at singing and dancing and was always willing to do favours like fetching a canteen of water, lighting a cigarette, especially for the higher ranks like the commanders and the political commissar. But they too could not tolerate his antics. One day, when they were returning from combat, while taking a rest, Mita approached him, sat next to him and said: "I have never met a stranger person than you, Stavre, in my entire life."

She paused for a moment, looked him in the eye and said: "Why can't you understand Stavre what's happening all around you? The grass is getting greener, the flowers are blossoming, the leaves are shaking in the wind, the swallows are flying all around you, the nightingales are singing, the brooks are flowing with crystal clear water, the bees are buzzing everywhere, the mint is emitting aroma and you comrade Stavre, you continually inform on us to the political commissar, you tell him about who said what… spying and informing on your own people… bragging left, right and centre about how we are allegedly destroying the enemy… and all the while you are destroying us, your own people… like we shouldn't exist… Do you think we don't exist? Did you not see yesterday that half our platoon was left out there hanging on the barbed wire? Do you think that no one else but you is the hero in this unit?"

Iani, of course, never did tell anyone about what happened during the first battle. When the fighters returned from battle they could not find Stavre. They thought he had deserted. But he hadn't. When Mita went to relieve herself in the bush, she saw Stavre in the brook, washing his underwear. She told only Leftera and Iani about this and since then she had always avoided him.

"Hey, hey, people…" a man yelled, pointing with his hand. "Look, hey, look over there!"

There he was, Sharko, a hundred or so metres away, lying on the ground in wide open space.

“Sharko! Here Sharko. Come here boy. Sharko come here!” yelled Leftera in desperation. But all Sharko could do was turn his head and howl in pain...

“Leftera! Are you going to get Sharko?” asked Stavre.

“Me?” she replied.

“Now, go and get him!” said Stavre.

Bent forward as far as she could bend, to avoid being shot by the enemy in the open, Leftera jumped over the trench.

“Where do you think you are going?” she heard a voice yelling.

“Silence!” she yelled and crawled towards Sharko. She looked ahead and with her head bent down she kept going. She stopped. She was motionless. Many heads popped out of the trenches and anxiously looked on. Many heads popped out of the trenches on the other side of the hill and they too anxiously looked on. There was complete silence. Leftera raised her head slightly and resumed moving towards Sharko. Sharko made a sound, stuck out his tongue, lifted his leg and began to limp towards her. She grabbed the dog and pressed it against her chest. Sharko yelped slightly and stuck his head under her chin.

“Bravo! Bravo!” there was a lot of yelling and hand clapping from both sides of the hill. Some even fired a few rifle shots into the air in honour of Leftera’s bravery. Sharko hid his head under Leftera’s arm.

When the field medics and stretcher carriers came to pick up the wounded that evening they also took Sharko. They tied a rope around his neck and one of the women dragged him behind her while Sharko, hopped along limping behind her, looked back, as if wanting to say: “Who is going to lick your faces now?”

# The Great Decline – Chapter 12

During our first attack, we were told that the most important thing for us to do was to make sure our opponent bled a lot. To make sure he did not advance much and most importantly, he must not be allowed to take anything that had importance or significance; not a stone, not a bush, not a rock, not a tree, behind which he could hide. Let him approach, let him come close within reach of machine gun fire and then let him have it starting and ending with uninterrupted machinegun fire. The enemy infantry should not pose much danger to us. It would be exposed and it would suffer many casualties. The greatest danger to us were the flying aircraft, for which we had no safeguard... And, of course, their artillery. So, our solution to these problems was to dig deep trenches, cover them with as many rows of logs and stones as possible, of which we had unlimited quantities.

We were told to dig tunnels and connect all the trenches and bunkers together underground. We were told to also connect the reserve trenches with tunnels so that we could easily slip from one into the other. We were told to mine every approach, every path and every patch of land which simply was not in our hands. Each mine was separately set and each minefield served us well. We laid mines in the trees. Just one pull on a wire and our opponent would be blown to pieces. This way even the trees became a danger for our opponent. We let our enemies know that it would take them a long time before they saw these hills, which were about to become an even greater nightmare for them. We were about to test our enemy here on these hills, rocks and peaks. The day of the big showdown was near! Were we ready to defend Gramos? Was Gramos to become the grave of our enemy? Was Gramos an unapproachable fortress?

On June 16, 1948, at 5:30 am, the government army began their bombardment of the entire Pindus mountain range with hundreds of artillery batteries. Crossing over the hills, a line of six aircraft flew over the first line of defense, tilted their wings to the left, made a semicircle pass and, while flying low, began to fire rockets and machine gun fire at our backs. They made space for the bombers to approach. Their aim was to destroy the trenches and bunkers. Following right behind them were more waves of aircraft,

approaching wave after wave all day long with only a three hour break.

Leftera sat in a bunker with her back to the wall, crouching and trying to make herself as small as possible. She was waiting for her fate to be determined and was wondering when the crunch was going to come and when it did, was it going hurt a lot? The thick pine beams groaned and cracked under the heavy, exploding bombs dropped by the aircraft. Soil and rocks fell with every blow, filling the bunkers with dust. Crushed stones were falling inside the bunker and hitting Leftera on the back. The bunker became increasingly filled with burning rock and soil and the air smelled of gunpowder and phosphorus. Warm and strong air waves gushed by and pieces of bomb shrapnel fell, striking the bunker. Leftera felt a hot sensation on her right shoulder and burning on her fingers. There was blood on her palm...

“Am I wounded?” she murmured as fear began to overcome her. She turned her head. Her helper, kneeling and leaning his head on the wall, looked like he was praying. Leftera extended her good arm, grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him. She yelled but no sound came out, only silence. She yelled again but all she heard were the explosions outside. It felt like her throat was dry. She licked her teeth and gums and then her lips in an attempt to moisten them. She felt weak at her knees and cold sweat swept all over her body. Suddenly everything went dark… She felt a great blow on her head. After she regained consciousness she jumped to her feet. The thunder and earth-shaking taking place outside had stopped but long bursts of machine gun fire could still be heard. Then, suddenly she heard the angry calls of the squad commander yelling: “Machine gunner! Fire!!! Fire!!! Fire!!!”

Leftera grabbed her machine gun with her good arm, aimed it in the direction of the enemy and let out a long burst. She reloaded and began to fire short bursts. From her gun hole she could see government soldiers further down fleeing downhill. The shooting had subsided. The opponent’s first attack was repelled. Leftera shook the soil and dust off her head and shoulders and just then she felt a strong pain. The field medic bandaged her wound, and the

commander assessed that she had received only a light wound and she did not need to go to the hospital.

The women with mules and horses arrived at night, brought ammunition and food and took the wounded back with them. The dead were all collected and buried in a single mass grave, quietly and in a hurry, without a priest or church bells. Green branches were then laid over the grave.

General Zafiropoulos, on the Greek government side, was observing part of the front with his binoculars. He was loudly swearing and cursing. He was surprised by the unexpected resistance. It was the same for the next few days; his attempts did not produce the expected results. Kopanche, only about two hundred metres away from him, fell into enemy hands even after putting up a fierce resistance. The sector Amuda - Nikoler - Petrepeleni - Buf was a total failure. Not even a step forward. The number of casualties was huge. He sent a ciphered telegram to inform higher command. A reply came back ordering him to withdraw from that part of the front and return to his initial position.

The general calmly received and executed the order. He looked surprised as he watched his long column of soldiers, most of them wounded, withdrawing from the front line and felt fear as he watched the trucks leaving, loaded to capacity with the bodies of those killed in battle. He was indeed amazed by the tenacity of his opponent and with his opponent's bunkers which withstood his fiercest bombardments. His soldiers kept moving, single file, confused, exhausted and afraid. Those in top command repeatedly assured him that he only needed two or three days or up to five days maximum, to break and defeat his opponent. They were convinced that their bombs dropped from the air, their shells propelled by their artillery and their tank support would do the job to annihilate the enemy. All his soldiers had to do was just comb the terrain and collect the Slavo-communists. This is what those at the top were telling him.

Six days earlier the well-fed, well-dressed, full of cheer and sure of themselves Greek government soldiers were ready to take the offensive and attack their enemy face to face. They laughed at their

enemy, made fun of him, told jokes about him and called him a bandit; Greek gangs and Slavo-Macedonian communists. Now, after facing him in close proximity in the hills and in the mountains, especially after the fierce bombardments he had to endure, they were forming a different opinion of him. Now they were looking up at the mountains and praying to God, being thankful that it was not them up there in the mountains being pounded to dust; and that they never had to go up there and fight again. They were hoping, and with some certainty expecting, that the planes and the artillery would do their job for them and annihilate their enemy and all they had to do was go up there and plant their flag.

Given the firepower they had, they often wondered why they had to do all those marches, drills, running, jumping and crawling? We have planes and cannons, they said, let them do their work. They also complained of how hot the weather was. Now, cut to pieces, broken, scared and surprised, they returned to their starting position. They sat lying in the shadows of their tents and looked up at Amuda, Nikoler, Petre Peleni, Buf, Aleksova Cheshma, Oreskata, Ostri Vrv, Aliavitsa, Sveti Ilia and Gorusha and wondered what was going to happen. The planes and artillery were still active, burning the entire terrain and evoking shivers in them. They kept asking themselves: "Will we be going up there again?" and whispering "Theos filaksi! (May God protect us!)..."

The next day, after the airplanes and the artillery had bombed the front to dust, like it was an exercise, the infantry battalions went on the attack. Standing in front of the command post, their General observed their activities with his binoculars. The resistance yielded a bit at the right-wing and the government troops, walking over their fallen, pushed ahead. The first wave of assault reached the foot of the hill. There was a long wall of green, cut branches and barbed wire underneath them. They attempted to cross it by jumping over the wire but without success. They backed up for a moment and threw hand grenades at it.

"Forward!!!" their commander yelled. They were ordered to move forward… They entered a minefield... The first line triggered the mines… There were many explosions. The wounded began to scream and yell for help. The rest hit the ground and, with their

portable shovels, began to dig trenches, deep enough to hide their heads. Those on the opposing side kept silent well-hidden in their trenches. They kept their machine gun barrels cool and ready. They were waiting for orders.

The squad commander took the envelope from the courier, opened it and read: “It is forbidden to act without being given an order. Your orders are to defend your positions to the last man, to the last bullet and to the last gasp of air. If the enemy attacks in the middle, then allow him to come as close as possible, then attack him from both the left and right wings. Anyone who dares step back, retreats even one step, no, one centimetre, will be court marshaled and shot in front of a firing squad. Do not wait for help to arrive. There is not a single person to spare. The fate of Krusha and Gorusha is now in your hands!” At the bottom of the page there was a scribble resembling a signature.

The squad hidden in the trenches and bunkers was waiting for orders. The commander looked through the gun hole and counted: “Five hundred... four hundred...” as sweat built up on his forehead and began to run down his face. There was silence… no one was allowed to fire before the order was given...

The opponent stood still and was burying himself about four hundred metres ahead. It was the middle of the day. It was hot and quiet. Thunder was heard in the plains of Kostur.

“To the bunkers and trenches!” ordered the squad commander.

After fifteen minutes of artillery fire there was a charge by the government soldiers and gunfire came from above.

Mita kept switching back and forth from firing single shots to bursts of gun fire with her machine gun. This was what they had taught her to do during training last year. She closed her eyes, clenched her teeth and pressed her lips tight before pulling the trigger. The proximity of the enemy was determined by the density of her gun bursts. The closer the enemy, the more frequent the gun bursts. At a distance of about fifty metres she could see helmets moving and could hear a lot of swearing and cursing. Her machine gun went

silent for a moment. She had to reload. She began firing again. Another machine gun began to fire from the left wing. It was firing long bursts. More guns joined in and forced the charge to stop. The charging government soldiers dropped to the ground and then slowly retreated with the support of heavy machine guns and light mortars.

“General! It was a complete failure... What a humiliation!” reported the brigade commander on the government side. “We have been butchered by a bunch of ignorant peasants, herdsmen and shepherds. Screw the academies and...” the commander stopped cold and fear began to grip him as he watched a long column of wounded passing by him, wrapped in bandages dripping with blood, being carried on stretchers exhausted and eyes filled with hatred. “Scary…” he murmured quietly to himself.

The messages coming from government Division Command were threatening at best. The top commander was calling for court martial and executions of personnel if the battalions did not renew and resume their attack. The brigadier general, holding the earpiece in his hand could only imagine the anger of the top commander on the other side of the wire, as he listened to him yell loudly, in a distorted voice, threatening him with all kinds of painful things. He also imagined him, far away from this hell, staring at a large military topographic map, moving red and blue flags like chess pieces back and forth over a line. He could not see the people, the dead, wounded and bleeding people. He could not hear their screams of pain and horror… All he saw were flags, lines and arrows…

On the tenth day since the beginning of the “great battle” for Gramos, with the approval of General Van Fleet, head of the U.S. military mission in Greece, the air force renewed its attacks, this time with napalm bombs, thus unleashing a new, never before seen horror against the Partisans... And still the front could not be broken… It did not even move...

All these fierce and bloody attacks carried out by the government battalions, supported by aircraft and artillery, rained havoc on the Partisan squads. From having 98 fighters before the battles began, this commander’s squad was now reduced to 15. After sending his wounded to the hospitals the squad commander sat on the floor of

his bunker and nervously turned the handle on his Polish telephone. There was only static. He turned the handle again and again until finally he got a connection. He reported his situation to headquarters and asked for reinforcements.

“You what?” shouted a voice on the other side. “Have you gone mad? Where am I supposed to find them? From whom should I take them?” He then heard a lot of swearing and cursing before he was ordered to: “Fight alone if you have to, just don’t let the hill slip away. Do you understand?!” Headquarters then abruptly hung up.

As the squad commander looked at the dead earpiece he was reminded of a few days ago when he was yelling: “Is there anyone still alive?!”

He slammed the telephone on the ground, called the courier and asked him to invite everyone to a meeting. They all gathered around him in the dark… all 15 of them.

“Form a line!” he ordered. After they formed a line, in a soft voice he said: “We are the remnants of our entire squad.” He then read the order: “The hill must be defended to the last person. That is all. Now take your positions!”

Gorusha and Krusha remained alive for as long as there were fighters to charge and fight over them. After that they became obscure places, hiding and silent… waiting...

A tree, hit by shrapnel on its lower trunk, shook first then tilted, but only for a moment, as if considering whether to stand back up or fall down, and then slowly tilted more and more until it fell to the ground. The fall caused a roar in the forest; first a crack then a howl and eventually a crashing bang. Sometimes trees are cropped and rather than tilting and falling, they just drop to the ground standing up. If a tree is hit above the middle, its top is damaged and dies but its bottom still lives on… What about a person?

# The Great Decline – Chapter 13

“This is my squad…” he complained. He opened his left hand and one by one he curled his fingers. “Eight have tuberculosis... Five are spitting blood... Twelve have wounds that haven’t healed… Are the doctors in those hospitals blind?” he asked. “I am telling you they sent them back here too soon. Most have open wounds. I can’t do anything with them. They are no good for lifting logs, building bunkers, digging trenches… I don’t think they are even capable of carrying a shovel… Eighteen old men are holding the position on the left there, on that hill. They have been here for a while… most of them are frail and waiting for their time… Some were brought here from Albania; from the refugee camps… they were forcibly mobilized. They spent most of the winter and spring digging trenches and building bunkers. The bunkers are covered with five to eight layers of wood and stone. They are thick, built with ten metre long beech and pine wood logs. Where did these men find the strength to do this, especially in the winter, in the cold, in snowstorms and in avalanches, working long hours? We have endured this long mainly because of their sacrifices and the effort they put into building these deep and strong trenches and bunkers. These poor guys are now so weak they can’t even hold their own urine. And you know what’s sadder than that? I ordered them not to pee inside the trenches. You see that guy over there? He is coming back from urinating… Now he is going back… He must have forgotten something.... Even before their eyes are closed some of these guys begin to snore… you can hear them snoring all the way here... I ask you, is this a squad? And to think that a few days ago command sent me orders that read: ‘To strengthen the fighting spirit of the newly arrived fighters, who voluntarily joined the Democratic Army of Greece, the officer responsible for cultural and educational work, during their leisure time, must teach them to sing revolutionary and combat songs. For that purpose we are sending you a book of songs, included in which are many songs from the famous Red Army repertoire.’ What songs! What free time? We have barely enough time to sleep… with all the planes flying and dropping bombs on us, the artillery shelling us, the infantry attacking us all day long and then having to repair and rebuild trenches and bunkers all night long… day in and day out… who has the time to learn new songs? In conditions such as these there is only

one order: ‘Work fast!!!’ And you see my fighters, I feel sorry for them... I feel sorry for them because I have to order them around in their condition… But I am their commander… some commander. You see that guy over there? Do you see him? The guy who is leaning… who is now yawning… yes that guy… that poor guy constantly naps. He naps and snores. Snores with his eyes open. And you don’t know if he is actually sleeping or snoring in defiance... Give him a minute and see what happens. See? What did I tell you?”

“What is he doing?” the other man asked the commander.

“He is peeing. He is peeing inside the trench, that’s what he is doing. He is not allowed to pee inside the trench, yet there he is peeing inside. I told him he could pee outside, without exiting the trench, but not inside. I ordered them for their own good… Not that they will stay in the trenches forever, but… I should not be saying that because some, may God forgive their sins, have been killed inside those trenches. One time a bullet or piece of shell struck one of the fighters on the head and killed him instantly inside the trench… We buried him right there and then… inside… do you think we had enough time to take him outside… and sing hymns for him? Fighters frequently remain where they fall... sometimes forever. If it is snowing their dead bodied get covered with snow and are difficult to find. If there is an interruption in the battle and we are ordered to suddenly move we leave the dead behind. This happens more frequently that you think! It’s as simple as that. The mountains are littered with the dead bodies of our fallen. When we fall, we fall. Glory to our fallen! Some day in the future we will say something good about them, about their sacrifices… about their lives… Just to give you an example, yesterday I ordered these guys to inspect the defense line, there was absolutely no movement, but still they disobeyed my orders. Even with no activities on the line, several days ago two of my men were wounded… Now they won’t go out at all… It must have been some trigger happy bastard who did this… who doesn’t like us. He probably watched us with his binoculars and when he saw a bunch of old men loitering around the trench he decided to use them for target practice. And my fools here decided to go do their business just outside the trench in open space. As they were squatting, unfortunately one of them was hit in an embarrassing spot on his body... The poor man was screaming at the

top of his voice. After we bandaged him his pain subsided but he still cried and cried. Later he got mad and began to yell:

'Oh, that bastard, may he rot in hell... why did he have to shoot me there? Why did he not shoot me in the head? At least he would have saved me from my misery... Where am I going to go now with a bare ass, eh? Why did he not kill me, why did he have to shame me?'

All of us tried to console him. One of the guys even promised to take revenge. He said: "Don't fret my friend, I will go out there, find the guy and avenge your ass…"

You know something…" continued the unlucky commander, "in our vocabulary for whatever wrong our opponent does to us, the first word we say is 'revenge'... I am telling you, I have two sick people. They were burned in a fire... I reported their condition to command by telephone yesterday. I told command that they were badly burned and needed to be treated in a hospital. And do you know what they told me? They said: 'Only the wounded get treatment, others do not… they will be okay…' That's what they ordered. You see the guy sitting under the tree? He is another sick person. He sits like that all day long… He has been lying there for two days now… in a daze… He ate something green, immature… probably poisonous and it is making him sick… keeping him under. I called command about him too and they told me to leave him here, at his post… A few days ago another guy died on me. He roasted some mushrooms on the coals and ate them. Next thing you know he was in pain, terrible pain. Before he died, he cried and cried and begged me to hold his hand… Imagine, a person dying from eating mushrooms!

Why don't we now go to his grave and say a few words and then you can write something for that report of yours and let everyone know how heroically he laid down his precious life before the altar of freedom. How about we let them know how he messed up the entire trench with vomit and... with other kinds of smells… The place still stinks to high heaven. So, since you are so clever, then tell me what should I write to higher command? That everyone in my unit is a hero? That they heroically… What kind of hero would dirty my trench?

Look friend, I feel like I am being punished here, but I don't know why, I just do not know... The position?! Well, we held this precious position for twenty-six days. Once in a while they send me one or two new fighters from the refugees in Albania and I am telling you, I am running out of the originals I started with. Day by day they are numbering less and less. We are in trouble… big trouble. They don't follow my orders… What am I to do? Yell at them? Yell at men with tuberculosis? Yell at men with open wounds and with puss running out of them? Should I be forcing the sick to dig and carry boxes of ammunition? Should I be forcing those who piss blood to go and repair bunkers? Should I be sending those who are spitting blood to fetch water? …No one wants to know my problems… my pain…

While I am at it, let me also tell you that I have seven young women… girls… in my squad. I have not heard a single complaint from them. Amongst them there is one who is still a child, I swear to you... A few days ago one of them wanted to leave but the guard spotted her and so did some others from the other side. We took shots from this side and they took shots from the other side. I ordered my men to go after her. Two of my fighters went after her and half an hour later they reported: 'We caught the deserter but she is wounded…' What was I to do? I ordered her to go to the hospital. When high command found out, I got a phone call and a lot of yelling, screaming, cursing and swearing. They threatened me with court martial and to shoot me if I did not execute her. How do I execute an eighteen year old girl? Please tell me… how?

My reply to those yelling at me on the telephone was: 'Comrades, there is always time for executions, do you think I am going to forget this incident?' And their reply was: 'You should have executed her there and then, in front of the entire squad, to remind the rest of them of what happens to those who are caught deserting.' Then they said: 'Listen and listen good, when she returns from the hospital you are to execute her... You understand?'…"

# The Great Decline – Chapter 14

Mount Kleftis fell into enemy hands on August 2. News of its fall was received in silence at the Democratic Army of Greece (DAG) Headquarters. General Markos stood in front of the large topographical map hanging on the wall. His thick neck muscles tightened and his veins swelled up. His left cheek began to twitch uncontrollably. He turned towards the staff behind him and asked for a cigarette. He lit the cigarette, turned towards the map and stared at the jagged red line. He then looked at the red circle marked Kleftis. He clenched his fist and loosened it again. His fingers were trembling. He walked over to the table and picked up a black pencil. He slowly, as if not wanting to do this, walked back to the big map and scratched an "X" inside the red circle marked Kleftis. He sighed deeply, as if wanting to rid the discomfort he was feeling inside. For forty five days Kleftis was the only thing on his mind, the only thing he cared about on which he had placed all his hope. All this time his entire attention was focused on this hill. There was a special telephone line connecting his trench directly to Tamboulidis's trench. Tamboulidis was commander of the 105th Brigade, the man in charge of defending Kleftis. Kleftis was the only name that came up in all their conversations, assessments and exchanges of ideas. They had both been preoccupied with Kleftis for the last forty-five days. The battle for Kleftis was the precursor for all the battles for possessing Gramos. Now, standing in front of this huge military topographic map, Markos was reminded of the unpleasant words Zahariadis had spoken only a few days before:

During an inspection of the front lines, "Markos," he said, "you are obsessed with Kleftis. I believe every hill in the Pind Mountain Range is like Kleftis."

Markos had nothing to say. He just looked at Zahariadis sideways and said to himself: "There is only one Kleftis!" Then he remembered that Kleftis has been taken before but then was re-taken by DAG's 105th Brigade. Markos remembered what he had said then: "I am filled with enthusiasm now that you have re-taken Kleftis. Now you need to hang on to it at all costs. Holding Kleftis in your hands is the key to holding on to the entire southern front. Defend it heroically; defend it with your lives. I will tell you again,

Kleftis must be held to the end. Kleftis is the backbone of Gramos; Kleftis is the fist of Gramos."

The taking of Kleftis by the government forces was a great relief to the government General Headquarters and to Athens. Churches rang bells to commemorate the victory. The next day all the newspapers were filled with big headlines announcing the great victory. The fall of Kleftis not only raised the morale of the First Corps, whose units fought bloody battles for forty-five days and nights, but gave encouragement to the entire Greek government army. Kleftis, in the hands of the government army, now opened the doors to the southern front. The key, firmly held by DAG up to now, was taken and was about to unlock the door to the north.

Markos turned toward the staff behind him and quietly, barely audibly, almost disappointed, said: "For all practical purposes, the southern front is gone. It no longer exists. The door to the north for our opponent is now practically open. The next line of defense will be the Golio – Kamenik – Tamburi defense line. My orders, with emphasis, now are: "To focus all attention on Tamburi… If Tamburi falls we are indeed done for," He knew very well what would happen if Tamburi fell. He then said, "It will also be tragic if Kamenik (elevation 1957) were to fall into enemy hands. "Comrades," Markos addressed the staff, "we have dire days ahead of us..."

Then, suddenly, Zahariadis's voice was heard speaking. "It is not so bad," he interrupted. "Don't be so hard on yourselves. You wait and see. We are yet to give our enemy a bleeding lip and some busted teeth. Look," he said and moved closer to the topographic map, "see how big our fortress is? Comrades, the struggle has not even begun. To the west," he pointed at the map with his hand, "is the line Gorno-Kamenik and to the north is the line Gramos – Skirtsa – Kiafa – Tsrni Kamen – Gorna and Dolna Arena. These are tall hills, over two thousand metres above sea level. To the east we have the line Pirgos – Gorisha – Gupata – Bel Kamen and on the other side of the River Bistritsa we have Buf – Aleksova Chesma – Petre Peleni – Amuda – Alevitsa and a little to the inside, we have Charno and Krastavets. This, Comrades, is the unbreakable Gramos fortress." Zahariadis paused for a moment, turned to Markos and said:

“Markos, don’t beat your head against the wall over this...” but in his voice there were tones of ridicule and threat.

Another person to detect the tone of sarcasm in Zahariadis’s voice was General Kikitsas, a close friend of Markos since their youth, since their school days in the military academy in the distant thirties, who significantly helped Markos establish DAG Headquarters. Even before speaking to Markos, Kikitsas found Zahariadis’s reliance on the tall mountains as resistance against the enemy, funny and reckless. He did not intend to participate in this discussion. Kikitsas thought that this, first informal exchange of view between the top leadership on the fall of a strategically very important place, was very odd. But whatever else Kikitsas thought, based on his facial expression, it was a dire thought… perhaps the beginning of the end? Indeed that’s exactly what he thought… defeat was imminent... He leaned on his wooden staff, which he never separated from himself (even when he slept, in a trench, in a bunker, he always placed his staff under his pillow, under his head), and turned to listen to Zahariadis’s report.

“The battle for Gramos, Comrades,” Zahariadis continued, “has not only strategic, but also political international significance. If we manage to hold onto Gramos, even one small part of it, then that will definitely strengthen our position internationally. Gramos, Comrades, has become a symbol of our struggle. And its meaning is not just whether we win the battle on the battlefield or not. The fact that we held on to it for forty five days shows resilience, dignity and unprecedented courage. It shows that our fighting spirit and will are unbreakable. We have proven this to ourselves, to our opponent who is attempting to subdue us and to the entire world. We are holding on bravely. And you Markos, in front of all these people… you are saying that because we have lost the front, the road has been opened? How can you lose your head, as you said yourself, in these dire days, yes, dire, how can you lose your head? Yes, Markos how can you lose your head?”

Zahariadis, it seemed, was waiting for the right time, for this critical day, to say what he was always thinking, what he had harboured in his mind for a long time. With his sarcastic tone of voice, with a barely visible smile at the edge of his lips, with his narrow glaring

eyes, with the pronounced movements of his hands, with the frequent changes of tone in his voice, Zahariadis left a strong impression on everyone in his presence. Barzotas and Gusias, his closest associates and cronies, looked on with agreement. Markos, standing tall and straight with all his height, kept taking long drags from his lit cigarette and stared at the map. First he looked at the entire map. Then he spent a long time looking at Konitsa, where last year, just before the new year, he had received his first military defeat, which was a failure for the entire movement.

All the small partisan successes achieved in 1946 and during almost all of 1947, except for the bloody battle for the town of Grevena, were consumed by the eight-day battle for Konitsa. All hopes and reliance on the Democratic Army of Greece and its ability to become a regular army and attack cities and fight on open fronts were destroyed on the battlefield in front of the enemy trenches and bunkers near Konitsa. At the very moment, while looking at the map, Markos, was reminded of this and of what he had said at the conference after this tragic battle:

“Today we are changing paths and, in a transitional sense, we are switching from fighting guerrilla campaigns to fighting on fronts like a regular army. The first thing we need to do is train and prepare our cadres... Every day we must strive to change our consciousness and knowledge, that is to say we need to master our knowledge of military techniques and arms... We have learned how to fight like partisans and we understand partisan tactics well and that, thus far, has given us great success...”

Markos also remembered what else he had said: “Comrades, while government troops are embracing partisan style battle tactics we want to give them up...”

They failed to convince the political leadership that Markos was right. Partisan tactics were tailored for the mountains and delivered results. The command composition consisted of battle hardened fighters who had fought during the Italian and German occupation, non-commissioned officers with a bit of officer education and the rest had only primary or secondary education but they led warfare against colonels and generals. Their first introduction to frontal

warfare now was not about courage and heroism but about knowledge and strength of arms.

Markos also said the following during the conference: “The crossing over into a regular army must come naturally, without any hurry, by learning the various methods of fighting and not by changing the schedule...” At one point he added: “Partisan cadres who cross over into classic warfare will ultimately collide with strategists and military specialists and this, I hope, does not prove to be a disaster to our movement...”

Markos was a practical man. The only military education he had was what he had learned in school, which amounted to what a non-commissioned officer would have received in the thirties when he completed his education. He was a lieutenant during the Italian war and rose to captain or “Kapetanios” during the resistance. This was what the detachment commanders in ELAS were called in those days. They were all “Kapetanios” in small and large detachments which eventually grew into brigades, divisions and corps. And when Markos commanded the Macedonian divisions in Macedonia, even then he was “kapetanios”. The legendary Sarafis and Velouhiotis, main commander of ELAS who even before the war carried the rank of general, were also called “kapetanios”.

Zahariadis had a dislike and no tolerance for all these “kapetanios” who actually carried the burden of the war and the resistance on their shoulders. Zahariadis was in the camp at Dachau during the entire war. In the meantime the new Greek government, aided by the British, hunted down, jailed and killed participants of the resistance movement. Zahariadis returned to Greece on an English airplane in May 1945 during a time when white terror had gripped all of Greece. His arrival was announced on May 29, 1945 by the morning edition of the newspaper “Rizospastis”, with the headline “Zahariadis is back!” which sold out as soon as it came out. The news also brought long awaited hope for the people. The streets, squares, bars, taverns, etc. were buzzing with news of Zahariadis’s return to Greece. The news spread across Greece like a wild fire, raising the hopes of those jailed in camps and in prisons that the time for their release was nearing. The tortured and tormented

masses expressed their feelings with tears of joy, hugging and excitedly yelling: “Zahariadis has returned! Zahariadis is back!”

Zahariadis’s return to Greece gave new hope to the resistance fighters and opened new paths for the Party and for the struggle. During the occupation Zahariadis’s comrades, communists and resistance fighters, all sang about him, their great leader:

“To boudroumi den ton liga
I skeptsi tou fevgi gorga
Stous sindrofous pou polemoun…”

For them, Zahariadis’s return meant opening a new page. They had waited for a long time for someone to lead them back to hope. They had waited disappointed, living in uncertainty… Those in jail, those abducted from their homes in the dark of night and those facing a judge or the noose, also waited. They all believed that his return would wash away all these things; everything would be restored as it should be and the people would live happy and free.

“Zahariadis is back!” echoed the streets, squares, towns and villages. And they all yelled with one voice in his honour: “Zahariadis arhigos! Zahariadis arhigos!”

Markos had an article in his possession from the newspaper “Mahi” which he kept in his personal archives. It was given to him when he was up in the mountains living in a deeply dug trench in the forest of Mount Olympus. It was June 1946. Every time he remembered the days when he could only come out of his shelter during the night, he was reminded of what the newspaper said:

“Western Macedonia at the moment is a flash point in our country. There is wild terror everywhere... The gendarmerie and mobile military units are working closely with former gang members and occupier associates. The military mobile units are sowing fear among the residents. Their appearance today in the villages in Western Macedonia has caused much fear and terror... All men are fleeing to hide. God help those that fall into the hands of the gendarmerie...”

In those days news reports were more sympathetic to the villagers who had to post guards during the night in order to defend themselves from the terror gangs that roamed the various villages. The Macedonians suffered the most, not only because many of them had joined the resistance but simply because they were Macedonians. In those days Macedonians had no choice but to organize themselves into groups for their own defense. The first shots were fired by the partisans in March 1946 but it is unclear where exactly they were fired. To save themselves, those persecuted began to join partisan detachments. Then just as the partisan headquarters was established, the Party issued the following directive: "Do not come out, do not become active. Avoid the armed resistance even in cases of extreme danger…"

The directive was signed by Zahariadis himself. And it was not because the left had no means or did not know how to fight. There were all kinds of weapons and willing people. The Left in Greece had the means to go on the offensive; there was no doubt about it. But... its attitude was "self-defense only". Zahariadis journeyed completely unopposed from Solun to Athens, convinced that he was creating a national movement, calling for big rallies and doubling and strengthening the Party ranks and discipline, and during the nights he kept promising that: "If the Right continues on this path, the guns will roar again."

Zahariadis said this to three thousand ELAS fighters who had taken shelter in Bulkesh, north of Belgrade. Returning from Prague, Zahariadis stopped off in Belgrade and from there traveled to the camp in Bulkesh where, in front of a large gathering, he shouted: "I am going back to Greece with a gun…" Two months later he spoke at another rally in Athens attended by many demobilized ELAS officers during which he said:

"So far the Greek movement has received many blows from the British imperialists. But you should know that this situation has an end. From now on we will find ourselves in a straight line with the people's republics of Europe..." And then he personally prohibited their re-activation.

People who we able to put aside their emotions and thought for themselves, knew that Zahariadis's doing would have grave consequences and the rest interpreted the announcements simply as rhetoric and not as a call to start a war... What did Zahariadis bring from his trips to Belgrade, Prague, Bucharest and Moscow?

Markos was reminded of the bitter debates that he had had with his associates Blanas, Kikitsas and Lasanis, then sub-Lieutenants and Lieutenants in the pre-war Greek Army, during the resistance movement when they were "Kapetanios", now promoted to generals (but not by him), with whom he created the Partisan General Headquarters. They were not happy with the news that came from Athens, only a month after the formation of the General Headquarters when Vlandas, Zahariadis's most faithful associate, in a closed meeting in Piraeus announced that: "Those who wish to go to the mountains are cowards and are afraid of the real revolutionary struggle taking place in the cities and factories!"

Once again a special courier delivered the Party directive, which had orders not to recruit partisans into the units: "Partisan detachments are ordered not to receive any more volunteers. Send them home. In regards to government soldiers and officers, you are to confiscate their uniforms and shoes and send them home in their underwear..."

Party discipline did not allow people to question why Zahariadis did this. But Lord Balfour, head of Intelligence Service, knew why this was happening. In the well protected Athens office Balfour said to General Vendiris: "This is exactly what is needed. We should help Zahariadis do what he wants!"

He did as he pleased. No one doubted his wisdom and authority. To those closest to him and to the average party member, Zahariadis was infallible. Zahariadis in turn had only one authority and a single teacher; Stalin! So, who from the ordinary party members, from the lower, middle and top party membership and from staff had the courage to question the authority of Stalin? No one! Every time Zahariadis quoted Stalin he was right even when he was wrong. Those who were around him and those who were around those who were closest to him, even in the lowest party hierarchy, gave Zahariadis his undisputed authority. No one dared ask him about

anything and everyone always agreed with him. He was the Party and the last word belonged to him. They all believed him unconditionally...

Markos still remembered the meeting he had had with Zahariadis in July 1946. When, during a long conversation, Zahariadis had advised him on how to organize the partisans. Zahariadis advised:

"Mobilization should be carried out on a voluntary basis. Taking government units, which want to cross over into partisan detachments, should be avoided. All military activities should have a defensive character and adhere to military clashes only with paramilitary government organizations. Protect the 'twinning' line. Partisan detachments represent the only means of pressure against the government..."

Zahariadis did not allow Markos to ask questions or ask for clarification. Everyone listened to him and turned back thousands of volunteers who wanted to join the partisans. When these people returned to their homes, the Greek government authorities grabbed them and made them disappear. Some were executed and many were sent to prison in the dry Greek islands. And when the partisan leadership, General Headquarters, estimated that the movement needed to grow they decided to return to the Party Central Committee and ask as follows:

"Send us political staff, members of the Central Committee to come to the mountains. Ask the Party organizations to help the partisan movement. Send food, fighters and staff..."

Zahariadis's answer to that request was: "We support you with all the means we have. The most important thing to remember is that this is a daily struggle of the proletariat. And don't forget that we are fighting for 'twinning'..."

Markos still carries many things in his officer's briefcase, among which is included a newspaper clipping from the "Manchester Guardian" written in January 1947 by American journalist Robert Blake, in which Blake wrote:

“The best people mobilized by the partisans are the gendarmes. It does not matter to which village they go but when they do many of the youth in that village leave with them and join the partisans…”

In September 1947, after the Party had made its decision, Markos had already completed the mobilization. His recruiters entered houses during the night, took the young men from their homes and rallied them in the village square. Those who managed to avoid being taken the first time were later caught during the second round. The young men from Lerin Region were first sent to Prespa and from there to the Northern Pind recruitment centres where they had already taken the young men from Kostur Region. The young men from Voden Region were taken to Kaimakchalan. At the end of August they gathered all the young women and almost all were sent to Pind. After the mobilization, Zahariadis convened the third CPG Central Committee Plenum. He held a separate meeting during the Plenum during which made the following military suggestions:

“By the spring of 1948 the Democratic Army of Greece was to reach a figure of sixty thousand fighters. A reserve of fifteen thousand was to be created in the Vicho - Gramos corridor with which cities were to be attacked and occupied in the winter months...”

Following a Party directive without a military evaluation, Markos ordered an attack on the town of Grevena. He lost the battle. Markos did try to explain to the Party leadership that DAG was not ready and, at the time, incapable of such an attack, and that attempting such a maneuver was suicidal. He was completely ignored. Markos also tried to explain to the leadership that the opportunities for recruiting such a large number of fighters in such a short time, which Zahariadis requested, had passed. Again they ignored him. Zahariadis continued to insist and demanded that a geographic “Free Greece” be created and held.

Zahariadis wanted this “Free Greece” so that he could establish his government over it. He wanted to establish his institutions and afterwards seek international recognition. Markos, again remembered that his advice convinced no one at the top. Zahariadis, disregarded his advice and, for his own political purposes, ordered a new “imposed” strategy where the partisans came into “direct

clashes" with government troops. Markos followed Party directives but managed to avoid direct confrontation with the government army and disaster, until November 1947.

Markos broke down the detachments into small groups and ordered them to go south while the entire opposition force was moving north. The partisan groups eventually ended up in Thessaly where they were not welcomed because among them were those who spoke and sang a non-Greek language; Macedonian. Upon finding this out, the opponent promptly turned south and announced to the world that Markos was leading foreigners who did not speak the Greek language. But by then it was already too late. Markos took his forces back to the north. He won the battle with minor casualties, almost one hundred times less casualties than during the battle for Grevena. Over time, there was more and more pressure put on Markos to attack cities. Party generals and Zaharidis's faithful associates Gusias, Vlandas and Barsotas spied on and pressured Markos to engage his troops in major battles until Markos had no choice but to attack Konitsa. He lost the battle, a great tragedy for DAG. About this Markos wrote the following to the top Party leadership:

"In order to safeguard the regular army we just created to remove the Monarcho-Fascists, as determined by Party decision, like it or not, we will have to stick to the spirit of defense. We will have to determine the places where and the times when we engage the enemy as we see fit and not the other way around. We should also be using partisan tactics in our activities as required with all their consequences..."

Zahariadis wanted an army that could fight against Anglo-American imperialism, as had been customary to express, but for no particular reason, he wanted an army that would be defined solely on grounds that Zahariadis, even as a youth, had brought from Moscow... He openly used to say:

"And here among us, like in the international plan, there are two opposing forces: imperialism and monarcho-facism on one side and popular democracy and national independence on the other. A third possibility, a "third force" does not and could not exist..."

The Greek government had a similar viewpoint. “In Konitsa,” wrote a Greek government newspaper, “several men of Greek race were apparently in opposition. Here the two opposing forces, which had just begun to battle, representing the two conflicting worlds, east and west, were in collision...”

After winning many small battles and losing two big ones and after many and frequent theoretical lessons from Zahariadis, Markos, after marches and battles, had long talks with his closest associates, who were wondering if this war had been imposed on them. In the meantime Zahariadis traveled to Belgrade, Tirana, Budapest, Bucharest, Sofia, Prague, Warsaw and all of his travels led him to his ultimate destination; Moscow. There he sought and received many promises…

“Moscow,” Zahariadis said to his closest associates in the Party’s leadership, “will help us. Stalin personally told me: ‘You just proceed and we will afford you all the necessary assistance...’ Czechoslovakia, Comrades, will supply us with guns and cannons; they will also give us tanks. In Prague they told me that they will be the first to recognize our interim government. Poland will supply us with aircraft. The comrades in Warsaw are ready to receive our pilots and familiarize them with the aircraft. We need to build an airport in Prespa as soon as possible. Hungary and Romania will send us food, clothing, light weapons and ammunition. Romania will also supply us with mines and grenades. Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria will receive everything that is sent to us from those countries and then they will transfer it to our warehouses which we need to build as soon as possible. Our warehouses will be tunnels in the mountains. These countries (Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria) are also prepared to take care of our wounded and refugees...”

Markos learned about this by accident, but no one dared talk about it with Zahariadis. Markos heard from Zahariadis that DAG “in spite of being a revolutionary army, was a slave to bourgeois prejudices in the art of conducting war, which in its roots stretched to ELAS. And ELAS as an army had certain disadvantages which it acquired from the pre-war Greek bourgeois army...” Zahariadis, who did not participate in the resistance movement in Greece, could not stomach the role of ELAS, which led the resistance without him…

And exactly now, standing in front of the big military map, quickly going through his memory while Zahariadis was talking, Markos began to understand the game. And in it he realized that he was the party that was losing.

Zahariadis paused for a moment and then said: “It is true that the situation is serious, but that does not mean it’s hopeless. Make new plans to counter attack...”

To all the people in the audience, Zahariadis’s words sounded like orders. And for the first time, all those who knew Zahariadis, by his tone of voice and by the movement of his arm, recognized the order... A new man was at the helm of the army...

Markos, while retreating into his trench, signaled Kikitsas to follow him. They sat on a bench made from a split stump and each lit a cigarette. A battery powered flashlight lit the smoke-filled trench. They sat in silence, except for the echoes of artillery shells in the distance. The silence was interrupted by the ringing of the Polish telephone.

The One Hundred and Seventh was on the line.

“Hello, what can I do for you One Hundred and Seventh?” Marcos said quietly.

“My sector has been infiltrated with new forces. The enemy will charge at any minute now. What are your orders General?”

Markos, holding the handset with his shoulder, pointed at the map with his flashlight and after looking at the lines, said: “One Hundred and Seven, Kleftis fell today. It now looks like Amuda is next. You know what it means if this hill falls? It will be a rapid enemy penetration into Alevitsa, a breakthrough along the border and the closing of the northern exit. Your orders, One hundred and Seven, are to defend your sector at all costs. I repeat, your orders are to defend your sector at all costs. There will be no deviation from this order… Get in touch with all the units and personally inform the commanders… Those are my orders,” said Markos and hung up.

Then after he told Kikitsas what One Hundred and Seven had said, Markos asked:

“Do you remember what your plan was, at the Headquarters about a month before the conference, about a breakthrough in the south, if we were to find ourselves in a difficult situation?”

Kikitsas put down his cigarette and said: “In this situation the proposal has already been delayed and there is no real possibility for its realization, even for its mention. Its eventual realization would now mean the total destruction of the DAG forces located in Northern Pind. I, Markos, am now waiting for a rapid progression from the Ninth and Tenth enemy divisions,” said Kikitsas, got up, went to the military map and continued: “We should expect that in a few days these divisions will reach the Gramos - Kiafa – Arena line. If the enemy Fifteenth Division brings reinforcements to the front, to the Buf - Amuda - Alevitsa line, then it will be clear that we are done for...”

“What do you suggest?” asked Markos while staring into Kikitsas’s face.

“I suggest we leave the Gramos line and transfer to the region of Vicho. This will be a lifeline for DAG,” said Kikitsas calmly, as if it was a simple move or a small task. There was a long and painful silence after that.

Markos came closer, looked into Kikitsas’s little eyes, grabbed him by his officer’s belt and, in a high-toned, excited voice asked: “Are you prepared to explain your plan and convince Zahariadis and his generals and associates?”

“If you give me your support, I think I can…” replied Kikitsas.

# The Great Decline – Chapter 15

The commanders of the larger DAG detachments were gathering together in a large underground trench for a meeting in the late hours of August 18. This particular trench was reserved for use by Headquarters and by the Party Central Committee. Right beside the trench was a goat path that led straight into the dense forest. The only giveaway that this trench even existed and that something important was taking place in it was the presence of two armed guards; well-armed with automatic weapons. About fifty metres away from the trench entrance stood a senior DAG officer surrounded by several armed lower ranking officers who stopped the incoming attendants and asked them for the password. Then, one by one, they were allowed to continue walking down the path until they reached another armed guard who stood at the trench entrance. Here, under the blurry light of a battery powered lamp, their identification papers were checked and then they were quietly escorted to the trench entrance which was covered by several branches. The branches were lifted and they were asked to go into a tunnel leading into the trench. The tunnel was lit by two oil lamps.

There was a wider corridor at the end of the narrow tunnel guarded by two more guards. Each attendant was again checked before they were allowed to go inside the trench. The entire floor was covered with roughly carved planks and the walls were made of thick carved logs. The ceiling consisted of a series of wide wooden planks from which hung two battery powered electric lamps. There were silent, barely audible conversations taking place inside the darkly lit trench. On the wall to the left of the entrance was a large military, topographic map and under it, along the entire wall, was a long table. On both ends of the table were wooden benches made of long planks of wood. On the wall to the right was a map marked with the latest front activity details. In the right corner there was a table with several telephone sets. Each telephone set was labeled with the identification number of the detachment to which it was connected.

The trench was cool, wet and smelled of mold. The various commanders arriving in the trench shook hands, hugged and looked at each other with wondering eyes, wondering what this meeting was all about. Suddenly there was silence and they all stood still.

Zahariadis entered the trench. They all greeted him by a military salute. He began to shake hands with them. His firmly tightened his grip and looked them straight in the eyes. Once in a while he said a word or two, mostly joking around and quietly laughing. Following Zahariadis were his associates, generals and members of the Politburo, Vlandas, Barsotas and Gusias. A few minutes later General Markos entered the trench. He was a tall man with a moustache and an officer's uniform and with him he carried two officer's briefcases. Markos was followed by General Kikitsas. Kikitsas also had a moustache. Kikitsas several inches shorter than Markos's. All the brigade commanders welcomed Markos and Kikitsas. They were familiar with these two and cordial with them because they knew them from the field where they often ran into them in trenches and bunkers.

Zahariadis sat down on the bench near the military map and, supporting his double chin with his right hand, squinted his eyes and began to stare at the faces of all the commanders in front of him, all dressed in old worn out Czech officer uniforms. Their faces were darkened by the sun, by the wind and by the gunpowder from the many bomb and shell blasts they had had to endure... There was concern on their faces and they eagerly waited in deep thought. Some had noticeable graying hair even though they were at least ten or fifteen years younger than Zahariadis.

General Kikitsas approached the large map and, leaning on his shepherd's staff, began his presentation:

"Based on the latest reports that we received about an hour ago, fellow commanders, the situation at the fronts is as follows...." He paused for a long moment, looked at the faces in his audience and continued. "The 107$^{th}$ Brigade is holding its position in the Krastavets – Chrno Sector; the 14$^{th}$ Brigade is holding the Pirgos Kotili - Gorusha – Sinorite Sector; the 16$^{th}$ Brigade is holding the Gorna Arena – Tsrn Kamen Sector and the 103$^{rd}$ Brigade is holding the Kiafa - Skirtsa – Gramos Sector. A couple of units are defending Arena and the Officers' School has been put on reserve in Sufliaka. We also have three mountain artillery batteries in our possession."

He paused for a moment, looked at the map and resumed: “At the same time, our opponent on the other side has the following: In the Alevitsa Sector he has his 61st, 45th and 73rd Brigades from his Fifteenth Division composition. He is attacking the Gorusha – Pirgos Kotini Sector with the 51st, 77th and 3rd Mountain Brigades from his First Division. The Paliostrunga - Greco Sector is being attacked by the 21st, 22nd, 52nd and 53rd Brigades from his Second Division composition. The Likorahi - Petra Muka Sector is being attacked by the 35th and 37th Brigades from his Tenth Division. The Stavros Sector, elevation 2520, which is essentially Gramos, is being attacked by the 41st, 42nd and 36th Brigades from the Ninth Division. And the Konitsa - Doliani Sector is being attacked by the 75th and 76th Brigades from the Eighth Division. When put together, these forces add up to nine battalions belonging mostly to the National Guard, some to gendarmerie and territorial defense. These do not include military aviation, tanks and attack vehicles with which we are all familiar... Unfortunately we do not have any. As you can see, we have been surrounded… we are almost caught in a ring...”

He paused again, coughed into his hand, looked up at the map from end to end and continued: “If we are to compare our forces to those of the enemy, we will find that we are outnumbered ten to one. For example, the strength of one of our battalions, on average, numbers no more than 250 men...”

He was suddenly interrupted from someone in the audience who yelled out: “And women!”

“Yes. And women...” replied Kikitsas, continuing: “So, in terms of equivalency, we have to openly acknowledge and emphasize that our enemy has tremendous power over our military and that is before we take into consideration his Air Force, artillery and tanks, which, as I said earlier, are absent from my estimation and from which we have suffered major losses...”

He paused, looked up at the map and resumed talking: “After a generalized assessment of weapons we stand at 50 to 1 in our enemy’s favour. As you can see, and DAG General Headquarters has confirmed this,” he pointed at the red and blue lines on the map,

marking the positions of the two armies, “the way we are spread out it is impossible to hold all our positions. It is simply suicide. I, Comrade Commanders, based on consultations I had at our headquarters with the others, must ask the question: ‘What will we do if we get into a situation where we are attacked from Pind? And if that were to happen I would have proposed that we break up our brigades into small units, sneak back through enemy lines and attack them from behind. Imagine if seven to eight thousand of our fighters found their way behind the enemy?’ What would the enemy do? Would he continue to occupy the Pind rocks and hills? How would he exit from here with all his artillery and machinery and with that huge army?”

He paused again, looked around and then said: “Yes, Comrade Commanders, that was possible in the beginning of the enemy offensive. Now it would be suicidal... But the decisions made then were different and made by some other comrades who saw the rocks and hills of Pind as shelter, as forts, but now we have a new situation that requires a different approach to finding a solution... Therefore, I propose that General Headquarters, together with the Party’s Politburo, examine the entire situation carefully, in detail and then withdraw all our units from Gramos Region...”

He paused and looked at the commanders. There was concern showing on their faces. The tip of his stick, with which Kikitsas was pointing at the lines on the map, moved towards the top of the map where DAG’s forces were concentrated. He tapped on the number 1435, showing an elevation northwest of Alevitsa and continued:

“This is the place, Comrades, where we need to break the encirclement. We need to deploy our forces between Alevitsa and the border. Why here and why withdraw from Vicho? Here,” he said and held the point of his stick on top of Ginova Hill opposite the village Kalevishta, “because our enemy has not established rear support in this region. We have an opportunity to move our Vicho units overnight and gain control. Why from Vicho? Because we control the entire region there and the entire population has given us its support. Thousands of men and women, sons and daughters of these people are currently fighting in Gramos. With much effort and assistance from the local population we will quickly regroup and

arm our forces with weapons and start a new offensive. Our manoeuver, I don't want to call it withdrawal, will take place during the night of August 20th, 21st," he paused and looked at his watch and continued: "exactly two days from now."

He then tapped his watch a couple of times and resumed: "We have two days to make all the necessary preparations. Regarding this, the Politburo and General Headquarters have already made their decision and given the order. Comrade Commanders, while you were on your way here, your deputies were given orders to strengthen their defensive positions and to continue fighting while being ferociously attacked by enemy forces with almost no interruption. A special squad has already been formed which is monitoring enemy positions in the Alevitsa – Ginova Sector. At the same time, our special units are increasing their resistance along the Gramos - Skirtsa - Kiafa - Sufliakas - Skala - Chrno – Krastavets line with aims at holding back the opponent, as long as possible, from taking these mountain peaks."

He paused, looked at his audience with a concerned look on his face and then resumed talking: "In other words, to rob the enemy of the initiative to charge our units and to give him the impression that we are the ones charging him. According to the orders given by General Headquarters, deployment of forces and withdrawal of units will be done as follows: Over the course of the night, the 103rd and the 16th Brigades will each leave one unit at their current position with aims at providing as strong a resistance to the enemy as possible without concern for preserving ammunition. The General Staff Officers' School and the 670th Artillery unit, under a single command, will be concentrated in the village Slimnitsa and Belitsa Forest vicinity. The transfer must be completed by dawn tomorrow morning. Then, during the entire day, these units must remain immobile and hidden from view. There must be no evidence of them visible to aircraft or to possible hostile observers. Everything must be conducted in strict secrecy. Every move must be done quietly and any resistance must be handled with cold weapons only. Actions to pierce the enemy circle will begin tomorrow night at 20:30 hours here in Ginova, elevation 1435. Then, after breakthrough is achieved, our units are to rush, at a quick pace, towards the Kalevishta - Revani - Shak - Novo Selo - Krchishta - Labanitsa – Smrdesh Line."

He paused again, looked around making sure that everyone was giving him their full attention and continued: “The head of the column must reach the hills of the Labanitsa – Kosinets countryside by morning, on August 21st, where it is to connect with the 18th Brigade units from Vicho, whose command post is located on top of Orlovo Hill. Similarly over the course of the same night, the 107th Brigade, the bodies of the Western Macedonian Artillery Headquarters, as well as the 14th Brigade, under general command, are to concentrate in the Ginova - Pilikati - Krastavets – Chrno area in order to provide a strong defense along the Ginova - Slepetsmeno - Krastavets - Chrno Line until 21:00 hours on August 20th.”

He paused, looked around and resumed: “Tomorrow at 20:30 hours, a unit supported with the entire heavy weaponry of a brigade and a segment of artillery, will carry out a night attack on Stenichka and will continue to fight until the morning of August 21st. When the head of the first phalanx passes by the Ginova watchtower, the remaining units are to retreat from their defensive positions and immediately form a phalanx and connect at the tail of the first phalanx. At early dawn on August 21st, the phalanx is to take defensive positions in the hills surrounding the Goshovo - Boshkovets – the church Sveti Iovan Teolog (elevation 1017) Line...”

General Kikitsas paused for a moment, looked at the map and pointed with his stick at the hills he had just mentioned and continued: “After that the phalanx is to connect with the units of the 18th Brigade. If the phalanx comes under enemy fire, it is to continue on course with the units of the first phalanx. At the same time, during the course of the night, the Fourteenth Brigade must go in the Pirgos - Village Videlushche direction and press on towards Mount Siniachka, through the valley south of Kostur.”

Kikitsas spoke softly, but with conviction and every spoken word was perceived as an order by the commanders in attendance. There was rustling of pencils and paper in the brief silence that followed. The commanders, with notebooks on their knees, wrote down what was required of them for each of their sectors. They wrote down all the information and even though they knew every inch of the

topology, they again checked the names of the places on their maps for confirmation.

"The two units," continued Generals Kikitsas, "from the 670th detachment under joint command, must immediately be provided with large amounts of ammunition and supported with numerous machine guns and mortars. They must provide strong resistance throughout the entire day and night of the 20th and 21st regardless of their casualties. They must defend the Gramos - Skirtsa - Kafa - Sufliakas – Skala Line because if we lose it, the enemy will quickly penetrate the area along the border and will close off the rim and I don't need to explain to you what the consequences will be from that... Then, during the night of August 21st, the two units must move behind enemy lines and initiate guerrilla warfare... These are your orders as outlined by DAG General Headquarters. It is now up to you to execute them…" concluded Kikitsas, who took out and lit a cigarette and walked over to the table where Markos was sitting. At that point Barsotas stood up and said to Kikitsas: "General Headquarters Command decided…"

Kikitsas dropped his cigarette and squashed it with his thick boot heel and quietly, but loud enough for everyone to hear, sharply said: "I am a member of Command and there is nothing else, that I know of, that was decided other than what I said earlier…"

"Command," Barsotas continued, pretending he had not heard what Kikitsas had said, "decided that you, Kikitsas, have to leave for Vicho tomorrow night. Command believes that you will be the best leader to arrange all preparations for the success of our units crossing over from Gramos..."

Kikitsas pressed down on his moustache with the back of his hand and, with a tone in his voice sounding like he was insulted, asked: "In what sense?"

"First," replied Barsotas, "you are familiar with the terrain and then you have abilities to organize events that require taking serious steps in preventing the possibility of running into enemy forces from Kostur which may cut off our column... In other words we need you

to figure out the best option for this transition without losing Faltsata Hill to the enemy, right?"

"Well, it is understandable that this is a job for an ordinary soldier. I don't understand why it has to be me, why do I have to personally go there and provide instructions..." asked Kikitsas feeling insulted.

After making his remarks, Kikitsas looked around the trench seeking agreement and support from the commanders but when he received none he asked: "Do you have anything meaningful to tell me?"

"Of course I do… and you don't need to get angry..." replied Barsotas.

"Comrade Zahariadis," Kikitsas angrily replied, "is it necessary to remind me of what I explained a while ago and...

Zahariadis, without paying any attention to Kikitsas, said: "Barsotas… continue..."

"In other words, you will need to identify the places where the units are to be equipped with arms and ammunition and to make sure there is enough food for everyone... For everyone..." said Barsotas stretching his last words.

"Is it important," interrupted Kikitsas, "that I, personally do this?" and without waiting for an answer, continued: "Let me remind you that it was no other than I who studied the situation on the front and gave you the plan for these manoeuvers. Let me also remind you that it was I who foresaw the whole situation and came up with these measures… me! Markos knows about this and about all the times we discussed it before it was presented to you…" Kikitsas paused for a moment and then said: "before you were even aware of it! So, please spare me your frivolous instructions. The decision that General Headquarters made for me not to command this operation, but to be the first to leave Gramos and go to Vicho is, at the least, Comrades, offensive and disparaging..."

"Calm down Kikitsas…" interrupted Zahariadis. His voice was soft but carried a menacing tone. This was characteristic of Zahariadis

when he was simmering deep inside… and everyone knew it. “Don’t let your emotions overtake you. It is the least we all need in circumstances such as these. We all now need to be cold and determined. And you should know that just because General Headquarters decided something its does not mean it has the final say. On the contrary...” Zahariadis lowered his voice in order to focus the attention of his audience.

Feeling a bit confused and somewhat stressed by the situation he was put in, Kikitsas, while Zahariadis paused for a moment, took the opportunity and anxiously interrupted: “Who will then command the entire operation?”

“I will!” replied Markos.

Visibly surprised, Kikitsas calmly looked at Markos and, after a moment of silence, asked: “Are there any other orders?”

“No!” replied Markos, standing up and slowly approaching Kikitsas, stopping a couple of steps in front of him. The two men looked each other in the eyes and came to an understanding without exchanging words. They had known each other far too long and it was easy for them to know what the other was thinking. In defining moments such as these they always stood together, one beside the other. They rarely made mistakes. They also understood the others, especially those in the Party political leadership. But they in the Party did not understand them and always tried to sow discord between them.

“No, there are no other orders, General Kikitsas…” replied Markos breaking the silence.

“May I go now?” asked Kikitsas.

“I think we are done here...” replied Markos in a pleading voice. “You are dismissed.”

Kikitsas saluted Markos military style, turned and went to the exit.

The guard stood at attention. He was only a few steps away from the entrance and was looking up at the sky. Kikitsas spoke to him and

said: “Look down… in front of you… Now tell me, where are the couriers?”

“Over there, Sir!” replied the guard, pointing with his hand.

“Courier!” Kikitsas yelled and walked towards them.

One ran towards him and the General said: “You are coming with me. Call Markos’s personal couriers and prepare their horses immediately.”

The four couriers, who always followed in Markos’s footsteps and never openly deviated from him, carefully listened to Kikitsas who told them: “What I am about to tell you is a favour and a strict order. You are to constantly keep an eye on Markos. You are never, not for a moment, to leave him unattended. You go wherever he goes, even to the toilet. From now on you are responsible for his safety and you will answer to me with your heads if something happens to him. If something happens to the General… it will be execution with out a trial for you… When we meet again you will personally report to me!”

Kikitsas looked at his watch. It was one o’clock in the morning. He and the couriers stepped outside and, under the dark shade of the pine trees, could barely make out a silhouette that looked like Markos. There was a gust of wind. It was cool and moist. It shook the branches slightly, enough to make the leaves rustle. High above, the tops of the pine trees were playfully rocking back and forth. Further down, about ten steps down the hill, the Bistritsa waters ran like a torrent. It had rained a couple of days before. From time to time voices were heard speaking in the distance and horse hooves pounded the goat paths.

Kikitsas turned on his battery powered flashlight and so did the others. There were three short beams and one long beam of light shining in the distance.

“Let us go now,” said the General, again addressing the couriers: “You must not forget your orders! Keep Markos safe!” As they continued to walk in the dark they split up and Kikitsas and one of

the couriers took a different path. When they reached the outer circle of the protected zone, Kikitsas stopped walking and sat down.

“My foot has been hurting all day,” he said, “this damn boot doesn’t fit properly. I need to rub my foot. The pain is from an old wound.”

About ten minutes later, Kikitsas put his boot back on, stood up, stomped the ground several times as if testing its integrity and suddenly stopped. At that very moment, the silence was broken by a long burst of machine gun fire which echoed loudly in the mountains. Within seconds more machine guns began to fire.

“Alevitsa...” said Kikitsas quietly.

“No. I think it’s closer…” muttered the courier with uncertainty in his voice.

“It must be one of ours then. I have the impression that the enemy is trying to break through Pilikati. Let’s move a little faster. This damn boot! We lost so much time because of it!” said the General. “Let us not enter Slimnitsa, it will take too long to go through security. We don’t have that much time. Let’s bypass it. You know other paths that lead to Videhova, right?” asked the General.

“I know this place like the back of my hand!” boasted the courier.

“Then walk ahead of me,” said Kikitsas.

After about half an hour of walking they were stopped in their tracks by the loud and stern voice of a guard. They ran into a large unit. The courier asked for the commander. A short compact man approached them in the dark and, after introducing himself and the number of his unit, advised them not to continue. He said: “It is not a good idea, General, to continue on your trip. There are enemy scouts all over the place sniffing around...”

“You are telling me they are sniffing around?” the General interrupted sharply. “Why then aren’t you doing something to stop them?”

“Well, General, I have my orders… I received new orders. I must stay here and defend my position to the last man... Those are my orders. If you think I should be doing something else, then you will have to clear it with Command… in writing…” said the commander and abruptly stopped talking. After a long silence the commander asked, “Do you have other orders for me?”

“No! Execute your current orders!” ordered Kikitsas and then asked: “The machine gun bursts?”

“It was one of our units defending Ginova. It seems that the enemy intends to close the border,” replied the commander.

The general said goodbye to the commander and, while shaking his hand, asked: “How far is it to the border?”

The commander took out a map from his officer’s briefcase, turned on his battery powered flashlight and said: “We are here…”

“And Videhova is?” asked Kikitsas.

The flashlight circle moved north and the commander said: “Videhova is here… here… on the other side of the border. In Albania,” he explained. “The closest road to Videhova is here,” he again pointed with his flashlight. “You should turn left here. My units are still holding this road. I will give you two of my couriers to escort you to the border.

“And how far is that?” asked Kikitsas.

“About half an hour’s walk,” replied the commander.

“Commander,” said Kikitsas quietly, “I am going on a special mission…”

“I Understand...” replied the commander.

“Half an hour’s walk is too much for my wounded leg. Do you happen to have a horse?”

“I will find one for you Sir,” replied the commander.

The commander called on one of his couriers and said: “Go find two horses and bring them here. Then ask two couriers to escort the general…” He wanted to say to the border but realized that it was inappropriate and said: “To escort the general to his destination…”

The courier brought the horses and whispered to the commander: “We were told that Ginova fell.” The commander then quickly informed General Kikitsas.

“I expected that,” said the general. “You follow your orders and hold onto this place, we will hurry to our destination. You suggested we travel on this road, right?” he pointed to the map and then turned to his courier and asked: “Are you familiar with these places?”

“Like the back of my hand, General!” replied the courier.

“I also have a local here from Ianoveni and he too, General, knows these places well...” said the commander.

“Call him then… or better not. We can’t wait much longer. We lost nearly twenty minutes already. We need to go now. In the meantime, please call and inform your superior and Command that Ginova fell. Goodbye Commander!

The horses had no problem traversing the narrow path in the forest. It was dark in the dense forest among the tall trees and the only visibility available was that from the flashes of many flying and exploding rockets that scraped the sky above Alevitsa. They turned left as they were instructed and in almost twenty minutes, the escorting couriers stopped.

“General, this is the border,” said one of the couriers and, in the dark, pointed with his hand.

“Good. You go back now, we will continue,” replied the general.

The courier got off his horse, held out the flashlight in his left hand and, with his left arm stretched out, turned it on and off a few times.

This was the signal warning the Albanian border patrol of their presence. Three short, two long dashes of light was the signal for crossing the border. The horse hooves with an evenly rapid trot beat the rocky path.

“Stop!” a young man’s voice was heard echoing in the dark, followed by a metallic sound of a rifle being prepared to fire.

The courier turned his flashlight towards the direction of the voice and repeated the signal.

“Proceed!” commanded the same voice in Albanian, now a bit calmer.

They followed the guard, who with short flashes with his flashlight showed them the way. About one hundred steps later they were inside Albania and were joined by an Albanian military officer who spoke Greek. He said: “Comrade General a jeep is waiting for you. The horses will remain here. I have orders to escort you to the border where you are to exit near Smrdesh…”

The jeep was parked in front of Command at Videhova. The engine was running quietly. The driver, lighting his way with his battery powered flashlight, was testing the tires by kicking them with his heavy boots. A soldier took the horses and the three silently boarded the jeep: the Albanian officer and Kikitsas sat in the back seat and the courier sat with the driver in the front seat.

“Drive!” ordered the Albanian officer.

The jeep moved slowly through the dark streets of the border town, which due to the proximity of the front was completely dark. On the way out of town, Kikitsas turned to the officer and said: “I need to get to my destination as soon as possible…”

“I understand General,” said the officer. “Necessary orders have already been given to the patrols to let our vehicle pass. Unfortunately the road is bad all the way to Kiuteza. We will lose a lot of time because of that. The heavy rains and trucks traveling over it ruined it but soon we will get on the Bozhigrad – Bilishta

highway. Then the next thirty kilometres will be a breeze... If you can, please go ahead and rest a little..."

They arrived at the border at dawn. Kikitsas asked if they could continue without delay. He said: "Please instruct the driver to drive directly to Command in Smrdesh."

A truck appeared with lights off at the other side of the border. The jeep stopped and waited for the column of trucks to pass. They continued on their way. Further along they heard a sharp, squeaky voice yell: "Stop!"

A tall man came out from the two-storey house next to them, rushing to button his officer's shirt. He ran towards the jeep. Kikitsas slowly got out of the vehicle. The officer stood at attention in front of Kikitsas and tried to introduce himself as the commander of the People's Militia command post.

"No need!" interrupted Kikitsas, waving his hand. "Take me to Command!" he ordered.

The room was large and smelled of mountain tea boiling. To the left, near the window was an iron bed, unmade and visible by moonlight.

"It looks like you just woke up?" remarked Kikitsas. The commander looked grim and rushed to make the bed.

"Leave it! Leave it!" ordered Kikitsas with a tone of command.

To the right, next to the wall was a large table with several telephone sets resting on it. Kikitsas undid his belt and placed his officer's briefcase on the table. He then pointed at an empty chair with his eyes and said: "Sorry, young man, I did not introduce myself. I am…"

"General Kikitsas!" interrupted the commander. "I recognized you General... from the officers' school… Third class... and I was also informed by Headquarters that you were coming..."

“Well then let’s get to work... Sit... Find me the chief quartermaster first then find me the commander of arms and ammunition... Let’s go, start dialing!”

While the commander of the Smrdesh command was executing his orders, DAG General Headquarters was having a meeting.

“On the morning of August 20th,” continued Barsotas, “the units are to gather in pre-designated places as ordered by General Headquarters. Each one of you will receive your part of the detailed order which specifically relates to your units. I will only explain the general terms now. I must emphasize that the operation must be conducted with haste and in utmost secrecy. In other words at 23:00 hours our 16th Division units will charge and attack Ginova in total silence. They will approach their target quietly so as not to be detected and at the agreed upon time they with surprise the enemy by rushing it with the use of hand grenades, knives, swords and fists and, if necessary, with pancerfausts; they will throw everything at the enemy. The attack should not take more than fifteen minutes. I repeat, no more than fifteen minutes. The 17th Division will follow right behind the 16th. The battalion from the 107th Brigade and a couple of units from the Officers’ School, immediately after crossing, will open a front on the hills around the village Revani, to protect the right flank of the phalanx. The remaining forces from the 107th Brigade will be deployed from the village Ianoveni in the direction of the village Stenichka where they will engage the enemy through a surprise attack at 20:30 hours and continue until morning. This will give the enemy the impression that DAG is attacking the Nestpam – Kostur corridor and take enemy attention away from the Alevitsa – Ginova position.”

Barsotas paused for a moment, looked around and continued: “At 00:30 hours, on August 21st, I repeat, at 00:30 hours, on August 21st, remember this well, the opening of the enemy defense line will begin and the head of our units will start their exit. At 03:30 hours the head of our units must find its way into the hills of the village Krchishcha. The remaining units will follow. By 08:30 hours, the units in the vicinity of Krchishcha must create a strong defensive position in order to protect the phalanx which, by the afternoon hours, must find its way to the villages Kosinets and Labanitsa with

its head reaching the village Smrdesh. From there it must proceed towards Breznitsa, Rula and Zhelevo where it will be intercepted and supplied with food and ammunition by our units," he paused and looked at his watch, "because by this time Kikitsas, I believe, would have arrived and made the necessary preparations…"

Barsotas stopped talking, looked around at the sober faces and resumed: "I want to share my belief with you that we have abandoned Gramos but only temporarily, for strategic purposes. For that reason I want all our heavy weapons to remain there, hidden, buried underground. I want all warehouses with weapons and ammunition to be locked up and secured. You are to ask your fighters to take as much ammunition with them as they will need. I also have a special request for the commander of the General Hospital. All wounded must be transferred over the border, as soon as possible. The transfer must begin immediately. No wounded are to be left behind on the battlefields during the penetration and movement of the phalanx, not a single wounded. Even those near death, who will eventually die on the way, must also be taken. Comrades, commanders that is all! Now go back to your posts and prepare for the operation..."

It was 3 o'clock in the morning, August 19th. The meeting participants, one by one left the smoky trench. Outside, a cool mountain breeze caressed their faces and filled their chests with morning freshness and the fragrance of resin.

Kikitsas, while waiting for the commander to make contact with the chief quartermaster and commander of arms and ammunition, was getting tired and sleepy. He was snoozing, military style, while holding his head with his hands and resting his elbows on the table. He suddenly jumped and raised his head. He was surprised by the silence; there was no shooting...

"It's the commander of arms and ammunition," he heard a soft voice say after he felt a light touch on his shoulder. Kikitsas looked up and the first thing he saw was the handset of a telephone close to his face.

“General Kikitsas here!” he said abruptly, skipping the pleasantries. The most important thing at this very moment for him was to make contact and execute the orders. Kikitsas was surprised by the sharpness of his own voice and the strength it carried. Before that, while waiting for the connection to be made, he had thought about what to say and how to say it: Should he say just his name or his name and rank? He did not know the man on the other side of the line. The man on the other side was a noncombatant accustomed to sleeping in and working away from the front. He had contacts at the top of the organization and keys to the bread, meat, sugar, flour and who knows what else? So, the General wondered if the man on the other side of the line would even know him if he just said his name without his rank? He was not even sure if this man yielded to army discipline. And as such the General decided to present himself by name and rank and with a stern tone of voice. “General Kikitsas here!” he again yelled into the telephone mouthpiece. “Listen to me carefully...” the General interrupted before the man even had a chance to introduce himself.

“I am authorized by General Headquarters to immediately start moving arms and ammunition and deploy it along the road between the villages Breznitsa and Smrdesh. What does this include?! It includes rifles, machine guns, automatic rifles, mortars large and small and plenty of ammunition. Do you have all that?”

“Yes we do!” said the man on the other side of the line. “The warehouses are full. Packed...” he added.

“Good. Begin to empty them immediately! Deploy everything that we can carry. Order your people to go out and mobilize the peasants from nearby villages! Do you have any trucks available?” ordered Kikitsas.

“We have only ten,” replied the man.

“Get everyone ready and when darkness falls use the trucks, mules, horses, donkeys, oxen, people’s shoulders, etc., and begin the move. Get it done!”

The General did not wait for confirmation. He dropped the telephone handset and sharply yelled: “Find me the quartermaster!” He walked over to the window and looked up at the hillside near the village V’mbel. He saw sunlight. Dawn was breaking…

“The chief quartermaster is on the line,” announced the commander.

The general turned, stretched his arm out and with a quick step came over to the table, grabbed the telephone handset and in a loud voice said: “General Kikitsas here! What? You don’t understand?! What don’t you understand? You don’t understand when a general is talking to you? What? You are complaining to me that you were abruptly awakened? You went to bed late? Let me ask you, would you like to be sent to the front? No? Then wake up and listen to me! You hear me? Listen and remember well… These are your orders: This evening after sunset, along the Breznitsa - Smrdesh road all the way to Labanitsa… Are you listening or sleeping?!” the General angrily yelled into the mouthpiece, “I repeat! This evening… Yes! Today, I said today!”

A hoarse voice from the other side of the line said: “General, we have a bad connection… I can hardly hear you… I understood the part about today… By tonight you want me to acquire enough food for two days for ten to twelve thousand people… bread and other things that go with bread, right? Yes! I understand… especially bread and canned foods… Of course General, we have enough. Yes General, we will contact the ovens… understood. We will ask them to begin baking immediately. We will issue an order to immediately begin to knead and bake. If we need more we will order it from the warehouses in Korcha... Will there be enough? Yes there will be enough. I assure you. Goodbye General…”

“Along the road, I repeat, along the road. And don’t interrupt me, yes, along the Zhelevo, Breznitsa, Smrdesh road. Yes that’s what I said! All the way to Labanitsa! Leave the food there and make sure there is cooked meat and cheese... I asked you not to interrupt me... The line?! What line? The line is no good? Wait!” the general said to the man on the other side of the line and called the local operator. “Commander? Where are you? Oh, you’re here. Check the line immediately!” The General then transferred the handset to his left

shoulder and said: “Are you still on the line? I told you, don’t interrupt me! Yes, as I said! Yes! That’s an order! You want the order in writing? In writing??? Listen to me there! I have extraordinary powers today and tomorrow! Do you understand? Good! Now listen! After you execute my orders you are to report here immediately! You will come here! After you complete the tasks I gave you, you will report to me, here!” the General angrily yelled, hung up the telephone and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He then said to himself: “We put complete idiots in charge of important jobs...” Kikitsas then turned to the commander and said: “Connect me with the commander of the 18th Brigade.”

The commander turned the telephone handle several times and repeated the password. Finally there was a reply: “18th Brigade here!”

“Pandeli?” asked the General in a quiet and almost gentle voice, “Kikitsas here!” Yes, yes. In Smrdesh, at the command post. I will tell you later. Now listen to me carefully. What I am about to tell you are your orders. You are to separate some units from your brigade and rapidly march them to take position on the hills east and west of the village Kosinets. You are to do this immediately. You are also to supplement the Faltsata defense line with several strong squads which is now held with a single unit. Reposition one of the Faltsata squads to the village Trstika. Then send one unit from the 18th Brigade to take position in the hills above the village Krchishta. All positions are to be held regardless of casualties until the column from Gramos arrives. These orders cannot be altered until you receive new orders. Now go and execute them!”

The general sighed with relief, wiped the sweat off his forehead, turned to the liaison officer and said: “Take appropriate measures to establish a command post with telephones on top of the hill outside the Labanitsa forest. Make sure you set up direct telephone links with Faltsata and Kosinets. Now connect me again with the 18th Brigade.”

“18th Brigade is on the line, General,” replied the liaison officer.

“Pandeli? It’s me again… Kikitsas... Listen, put together some reserves and dispatch them to Kosinets immediately. These reserves are to protect the village Sveta Nedela in case of an emergency, in case it is attacked, to deter the adversary. Okay?” said Kikitsas, dropped the handset, opened his military map and studied it for a long time. He then stood up and said: “Call the militia commander for me.”

“You have a connection, General,” replied the liaison officer.

Kikitsas picked up the handset and without introducing himself said: “Listen to my orders! Get all available militia forces and position them on the hills above the village Blatsa. They are to defend them to the last fighter. The opponent must not be allowed to sneak behind our back. I order you to fight to the last man. Now go and execute my orders!”

The general again asked for a connection to the 18th Brigade to check if the positions in the Kostur – Pozdivishcha Line were secured. He then asked his courier: “Is there anything to eat?” Now, after all this time, Kikitsas began to feel hunger. The last time he had eaten something was yesterday, before the big meeting. Dry bread and mountain tea.

“We have some bread and some cans of meat, General,” replied the courier, taking a can and a knife out and then asked: “Should I open it?”

“What time is it?” asked the general.

“It’s nearing seven o’clock,” replied the courier.

“It will be dark soon. The day passed quickly…” said the general in a slow, low tone of voice. “What are you waiting for? Open that damned can!” he ordered in a brisk voice.

The general took a chunk of bread and a slice of meat and stepped outside. He stood on the steps of the staircase and stared at the gap between Karandzhova Glava and Prisoiot. He ate his food standing up, then shook the crumbs off his hands, walked back inside, took

the commander of the Command Centre aside and said: “Is it possible to travel to Labanitsa by jeep?”

“It will be difficult… the road is blocked by a rock slide...” replied the commander.

Kikitsas then angrily asked: “Are you waiting for the rocks to remove themselves? Find me a couple of horses! And… clear those rocks. You are to personally report to me! Understand?!

“Yes Sir! I understand!” replied the commander.

# The Great Decline – Chapter 16

There were long bursts of machine gun fire and hand grenade explosions. To the right, under Aliavitsa, flashing rockets lit the hilltop. It looked like the sky and the mountain top were on fire.

“They left!” said the duty officer loudly and looked at his watch. “One o’clock after midnight. They were one hour late. They need to hurry, hurry to get there before dawn. If they find themselves in the open after dawn, they will be spotted by the aircraft. They need to cross the flat area on Revani and Shak and after they reach the Novoseleni River, they should be okay, they would have passed the danger zone,” said the duty officer after he lowered his binoculars with which he was monitoring the lit sky. New glowing rockets went up keeping the terrain visible. It seemed like the enemy was monitoring the column’s movement after it broke through its encirclement and was now running for the village Revani. The enemy was firing long machine gun bursts and mortar fire from the nearby hills.

“There is a call from the Tumbite Command Post,” said the telephone operator. “They are informing us that the head of the column has arrived in the village Novoseleni.

“Should I wake up the General?” asked the telephone operator.

“Let him sleep a little longer. This is his third night without sleep,” replied the commander.

The telephone rang at two o’clock in the morning. The operator answered it and then said: “General Headquarters is asking for the general. I need to wake him up.”

The general shook his head and asked: “Did I sleep long?”

“Only 20 minutes,” replied the operator.

“That long? What time is it?” asked the general.

“It’s past two o’clock in the morning...” replied the operator.

“Report!” ordered the general.

“General Headquarters is on the telephone, they are asking for you Sir!” replied the operator.

Kikitsas lifted the telephone handset and heard Bardzotas’s voice on the other side say: “This is second in command. The column has left. We are already at our destination. Monitor the situation and report. That is all!”

“They are asking for you from Faltsata,” said the telephone operator and handed the general the handset.

“Report!” yelled Kikitsas while still thinking of what Bardzotas had said to him and wondering how in hell they had managed to get to Prespa so quickly.

“A column of trucks with headlights on is approaching the village Sveta Nedela. What should I do?” asked the voice on the other side of the line.

“Open fire on them with mortars!” replied the general.

Dawn was approaching. It was five o’clock in the morning. A courier that had just arrived from Krchishta reported that the tail of the column had left the village Kalevishta and was moving along without panic, but with severe losses.

“What?!” Kikitsas suddenly yelled out. “It has great losses and is running without panic? Who told you that, eh?”

“General, reports coming out of Faltsata show the trucks at Bei Bunar...” interrupted the operator.

“You fix the telephone line and you take my horse!” ordered Kikitsas. “Now ride as fast as possible and tell the commander of the 103rd Brigade to immediately send a battalion to cut in front of the trucks and destroy them. The rest of the units are to leave the hills above the village Labanitsa and take a position east of Kosinets.

It was seven o'clock in the morning. The head of the column had passed Shekarits, crossed over the river and had entered the Labanitsa field which was an open, unprotected empty space.

"I have the commander of the 103rd on the line, General," reported the operator.

"Kikitsas here, I am listening!" ordered the general.

"The enemy infantry, with an unspecified number of soldiers, supported by tanks, is attacking my positions. I have many wounded and killed..." said the voice on the other side of the line.

"Defend yourself! Hold onto your position to the last fighter. The head of the column is already on his way to the village Smrdesh. Within the hour I will have a company of fighters who I will take from the column and send to help you. Where is the Officers' School?" inquired the general.

"It is fighting a battle at Faltsata..." said the voice on the other side of the line.

The light in many eyes was dimmed that morning...

The next day and the days that followed, the vultures flew in circles over the paths the column had taken in the fields and the brooks...

# The Great Decline – Chapter 17

Vicho Region was the last stronghold and only hope. For months it seemed like the bunkers and trenches were going to live up to the slogan "The enemy will not pass Vicho". The main strongholds on the first line of defense stood on Iamata, Baro, Roto, Plati and Kulkuturia. To the east stood Bela Voda, to the north and south stood Malimadi and the hills between the villages Kosinets and Labanitsa. The second line of defense stood at Lisets, Chuka, Golina and in the valley below, closest to Lake Mala Prespa, it followed Preval, the low hills of the village Medovo all the way to the village Rabi. Rabi was the last stronghold before the crossing between the two Prespa lakes.

On August 10, 1949, at dawn, the heavens opened up and hell came to earth over Vicho. At five o'clock in the morning, seventy aircraft took off from the airports in Lerin, Kozheni and Rupishta and attacked all DAG positions. At five-thirty the same morning, 140 cannons and heavy mortars opened fire on the bunkers and trenches. Then, while the smoke was still hanging low, DAG positions were attacked by eight divisions, many independent battalions, tanks and armoured vehicles. Despite its strong defense and fierce attempts to counterattack for two days, DAG's positions on the first defense line were compromised and fell into enemy hands. In the meantime, the government army was attacking Lisets, where it fought a major battle. Before that it fought and won a heavy battle in Chuka where it was unknown if anyone from the DAG defenders was left alive. DAG Command running the Vicho campaign, seated in the village Vineni, located on the other side of Lake Mala Prespa, had just realized the strategic importance of the bare top of Mount Lisets. They came to realize that whoever controlled the top of Mount Lisets controlled all surrounding hills and, most importantly, opened the road to Preval which led directly into Prespa, the escape route to the north. From the south at the same time, from the direction of the villages Kosinets, Labanitsa and Smrdesh and from the north, from the village Klieshtina, along the Greek-Macedonian border in the direction of German, even though it was accumulating great losses, the government army was pushing hard to cut off the escape route to Albania and thus tightening the ring around the DAG units in Vicho Region. This was the place where DAG's Command should have

been paying greater attention. And while battles were fought day and night on the first front line, government troops attacked Lisets, the heart of the overall Vicho defense. Only now DAG Command realized the danger it was in and ordered the Officers' School, consisting of five hundred student reservists, based in the village Breznitsa, to run over and assist the 102nd Brigade comprised mainly of older men and many disabled.

They left in silence and, covered with beech wood branches, they ran upright in the dark.

"All sharpshooters move to the front!" a command was given.

They stopped running, readjusted their positions and began to walk. They took long steps and jumped over obstacles as they approached Lisets. The night was wild. Long bursts of machine gun fire was heard coming from all the hills. From what he heard, Kiro estimated that fighting was taking place in Iamata, Baro and Roto and that these places were still defended. But by the small number of machine guns firing, he estimated that resistance was weakening. Polenata was fiercely defended. The surrounding hills were on fire. Suddenly there were bursts of machine gun fire and hand grenades exploding in front of them. They had run into an enemy patrol. Kiro fell to the ground and hid behind the trunk of the nearest beech tree. It was only about a hundred metres from there to the slope of Lisets; unfortunately it was open space.

"Kiro…" a frightened voice was heard speaking silently, almost touching Kiro's ear.

"What is it?" replied Kiro quietly.

"The commander..." said the voice quietly.

"What about the commander?" asked Kiro.

"He is dead…" said the voice.

"You are lying…" Kiro said instinctively without thinking, paused for a moment and then asked: "Where is he?"

“There… He is lying under the beech tree…” replied the voice.

Kiro crawled to the dead commander. He felt for a pulse at his throat and then looked around. The officers were crawling closer towards the position from where the enemy was shooting at them. It was a furious firefight in the dark. Kiro stood up behind a large beech tree. He estimated the enemy patrol was not dug in. He heard branches breaking beside him. It was Lieutenant Kostas, a young boy from a village in Thessaly. Kiro leaned over and said: “Run over to the fourth line and tell the commander that two divisions are attacking our left wing. Run quickly…”

They crawled holding their breath. They had only one hundred metres ahead of them. Their eyes were fixed in front of them. Glow rockets were fired and the entire terrain became illuminated. They dropped their heads down into the singed grass. The rockets fizzled out. Bursts of automatic rifle fire came from the left wing. Two machine guns began to fire long bursts. This must be the fourth line firing, Kiro thought. Only fifty metres to go. At this point they could hear enemy officers and soldiers swearing and cursing. In the distance the mountain top started to become visible. It was almost dawn. Twenty metres to go. Kiro stood up and, at the top of his voice, yelled: “Charge!!! Knives!!! Knives!!! Knives!!!” Another command was heard from above ordering: “Forward!!! To knives, to knives, to knives!!!”

Just as Kiro reached for his sharp Finnish knife, he came face to face with an alert enemy officer from the special mountain units who pulled a pistol on him. At that instant Kiro dropped to the ground and heard the bullet whistle above his head. The “Lokadzhia” (special unit officer) then jumped on top of him, trapping both of his arms. Kiro felt his fingers around his neck and his entire weight on top of his waist. He was barely able to move his hips but did manage to loosen his left hand and grab the man’s groin. He felt the man loosening his grip on his neck. Kiro then abruptly bounced, retracted his knee and hit the Lokadzhia between his legs. With his arms now freed, Kiro grabbed the man by the back of the neck with his right hand and with his left fingers, squeezed the man’s groin like a vice. He then, with his head, butted the man between his eyes several

times. At this point the Lokadzhia released Kiro's neck and reached for his knife. Kiro, in turn, kicked the man's knife out of his hand with his right foot and grabbed him by the hair and threw him to the side. Kiro then kicked him in the ear with his left foot and sat up. While still in a sitting position, he grabbed his knife and was about to plunge it into the Lokadzhia's chest, when he heard, "Aaaah!". Kiro looked away towards the source of that awful sound and saw two Lokadzhii officers stabbing Kosta with their swords. Kiro suddenly turned away and, with a strong swing, tossed his Finnish knife at them. Kiro was the best knife thrower in the Officer's School. The Lokadzhia to his left, who was bent forward, suddenly stood up. His legs gave away at the knees and he slumped over and fell on top of Kostas. The other Lokadzhia suddenly turned. But Kiro, with long steps, charged at him and with a strong fist blow to his eyes rendered him motionless, long enough to hit him again and knock him down. But then, when Kiro was about to kick him hard, he turned a couple of times. Then, as Kiro plunged his knife into his chest, the Lokadzhia opened his eyes and in them, Kiro saw the first rays of the morning sun reflected on a sword. The first Lokadzhia, whom he had left alive, was about to plunge his sword into Kiro's back. At that very moment Kiro quickly rolled, kicked the man's sword out of his hand with his right leg and punched him in the face, once, twice, three, four times... He kept punching and punching him but the Lokadzhia refused to go down. Kiro then quickly took out his sword and, like they taught him in the Officer's school, stabbed the Lokadzhia under the collarbone. And, as tired as he was, with all his strength he thrust his sword downward. He felt the man's ribs breaking. When the man was down on the ground and dead, Kiro looked into his wide-open eyes and saw horror and pain. He also noticed that the shooting had subsided. The battle, it seemed had slowed down. Kiro looked up at the hill. He saw a man walking towards him, taking long, tired steps. It was the commander from the Fourth platoon. They both had dirty faces and blood-stained uniforms. They sat side by side.

"Did we take Lisets?" asked Kiro spitting to the side.

"We did!" replied the commander. "Get up. Let's go up there. We will regroup and go on the attack. Get up..."

They went up the hill and arrived about fifteen metres in front of the trenches and bunkers, passing by rows of dead bodies. The place smelled of blood and gunpowder. There were many wounded everywhere and they were yelling, crying and moaning. The sun had risen past the horizon. Kiro shaded his eyes with his hand as he looked down towards Iamata, Roto, Baro and Polenata. They were resting beneath clouds of smoke. He then looked south. Malimadi was on fire... Airplanes were circling like vultures over a carcass and shooting rockets, dropping bombs and firing their machine guns at anything that moved. Kiro stopped in front of a bunker and heard a hoarse voice calling. He recognized it. It was the voice of his neighbour Pavle.

“The young man may not have been very strong but he sure was tough. The poor guy had no idea who he was dealing with,” interrupted Pavle, showing the others his hands, looking like shovels. “I hit him between the legs with my knee. He saw stars. Well, I thought,” Pavle boasted, “hitting the young man below the belt was not allowed. But to whom was he going to complain? I turned him around and leaned him forward, that’s when the little son of a bitch pulled out his bayonet. I quickly took out my dagger and we began to dance around. I kept my eye on him and he never took his off me. Then he made a few strange moves so I jumped back. And then the little devil quickly lowered himself to the ground and threw a handful of soil in my eyes. I couldn’t see. Then suddenly I felt my arm go numb.” Pavle was interrupted by the paramedic.

“Oh, oh, oh, don’t you understand, it hurts? Don’t push so hard!” complained Pavle.

“Take it easy, take it easy, I am almost done,” said the paramedic. “You bleed like a slaughtered ox. Where is all that blood coming from? Your wound keeps bleeding and bleeding…”

“Let it bleed, let the bad blood flow out,” added Pavle resuming his story.

“And I am telling you the bastard stuck his bayonet in my arm. I got mad and grabbed him and broke his neck. Do you want to see him?” added Pavle.

“Let’s go,” someone ordered.

They left the bunker and went about ten metres downhill. A young soldier, about 20 years old, was lying dead on the trampled grass. There was a huge bruise under his right eye. Pavle bent down and, with his good hand, unbuttoned the soldier’s shirt pocket. He took out a number of photographs and an envelope. In one of the photographs was a forty year old woman wearing a black head kerchief with a tiny, hidden smile on her face.

“This must be his mother,” said Pavle. “My mother is like that too. Sad and always worrying…”

Pavle sat down and opened the envelope.

“Look, it’s a letter. Good handwriting too. Here, read it. You can read Greek, right?” Pavle asked the person standing next to him.

“Hm… ‘Dear mother…’ So, he is writing to his mother. ‘Today after sunset we went off to battle. The Brigade Commander told us that we would be done in three days and that would be the end of this godforsaken war. He also told us that those of us, who prove ourselves courageous, will receive a one week vacation. I very much want to be one of those getting vacation. I long for the day when I can see you. I know that you are waiting for me and that you pray for me to the icon of the Virgin Mary. Today is a good summer day. In the village where our brigade is stationed there are many pear and apple orchards. The branches are loaded with fruit and bent from the weight. When I look at them, they remind me of our lemon and orange orchards. You wrote me and told me that this year they were very productive. Let God grant that this be the last letter I write to you from this hell. Be patient my dear mother, I will be with you in your arms in a little while. I need to go now because the Sergeant is ordering us to prepare for the next attack…’”

Kiro, who for a while stood beside the others, quietly said: “Keep reading, why have you stopped?”

“There is no more to read… Here is the end,” said the man as he pointed to the bottom of the letter with his eyes.

During the day and until midnight, the position defended by the DAG Officer’s School was attacked nine times but the officers failed to repel the tenth attack. They were ordered to withdraw. They gathered together on the western side of the hill in Lisets and took the wounded with them and dropped them off at the road where vehicles with their motors running were waiting for them.

Just as they were about to evacuate, a courier arrived with a message from Command Headquarters. They were ordered to go back and counter attack the enemy. Without hesitation they returned immediately, taking long steps, reducing the distance between themselves and the enemy with every step. Bullets flew over them coming from short and long bursts of machine gun fire. With their heads bent down, hungry and thirsty and with red and swollen eyes from smoke and lack of sleep, they looked forward and moved on.

Then in a loud, piercing voice, the order to “Charge!” was given. They ran towards the first bunkers on the double. Quickly all machine gun and rifle fire died out. There was only cursing, yelling, heavy breathing, hitting, crying, sobbing and threatening now. The knives were out swinging and cutting. Flame and smoke bellowed from every crack. There was an unbearable stench of blood in the air. Dead bodies were everywhere…

Cut off hands, cut throats, pierced chests, pain, blood, bayonet on bayonet, knife on knife, gun barrel on gun barrel, fire, knife, swearing, pleading, lightning, blood, blood, blood, darkness, darkness… The opponent could not endure. This time Lisets, for the eleventh time, was passed on from hand to hand.

Dawn was breaking. High up in the sky there were pink clouds. Thunder was heard coming from the direction of Zherbeni where the enemy 6th Artillery Battalion was stationed. Mortars and cannon shells hit Lisets like hail. Kiro stuck his head in the corner of the bunker and faded away motionless like he did not exist.

After twenty minutes of pounding, the opponent regrouped and went on the attack again. Kiro raised his head and looked through the gun hole. Hiding behind the shrubs and rocks, like in an exercise, he could see soldiers coming closer. Kiro prepared his machine gun.

“Do not fire until the order is given,” said the Commander, ordering Kiro to go across to the next bunker and take over the heavy machine gun.

“They are coming!” a quiet voice was heard saying.

The Government troops were approaching; bowed low and taking short leaps. Heavy mortar fire was heard coming from Chuka Hill from where they were bombarding Lisets… Roar of cannons, echoes of machine gun fire and explosions of mortar shells were heard coming from Bigla. Low flying aircraft swooped down on Polenata, Baro and Iamata. Kulkuturia and Golinata were silent. The resistance there had died out. The shelling lasted ten minutes and after the last mortar had exploded the order to “charge” was given.

“Open fire,” the Commander yelled out loudly in a piercing voice; its echo lost in the bursts of machine gun fire. There was continuous and fierce fire from both sides. There were volleys of machine gun fire on both sides of Kiro’s bunker. There was smoke and the stench of strong scented gunpowder coming through the gun hole. A little further from the bunker a long and ripping squeal was heard. A man was heavily wounded and was bleeding profusely. Kiro’s legs became weak. Hand grenades exploded in front of his bunker. He came out of the bunker and, one by one, threw two hand grenades. The soldiers hiding in the bushes suddenly went quiet in their helmets. He jumped over the wounded man, took two hand grenades from a dead soldier’s belt and, lying in the trench, without looking, he threw them. He knew the enemy was only ten metres away.

To the left of him, in a loud voice, the Commander yelled out: “The machine gun! The machine gun! The machine gun! Get the machine gun! Do it!”

Kiro returned to the bunker in a hurry and turning the barrel to the left and to the right sprayed the area with long bursts of machine gun fire.

A nurse (woman carrying the wounded) brought a wounded person into the bunker. He was panting and a pool of blood was flowing from his mouth onto his hands.

“Charge with hand grenades!” yelled the Commander.

The Government soldiers were running downhill. They were being hounded by hand grenades, shorts bursts of machine gun fire and by the screams of the wounded.

The Commander ordered everyone to withdraw to the second line of defense. The three nurses gathered all the wounded. They left the dead where they lay. Hoards of flies were gathering over the congealed blood. The enemy artillery began shelling the bunkers at the first line of defense. There was a short pause. The fighters dashed to the second line of defense but before they could reach it, the enemy artillery began to shell the area. The opponent, with new and more troops resumed the attack in waves. Kiro left his heavy machine gun and began to fire with an automatic rifle belonging to a dead gunner. After firing his first burst he changed positions. He lay down behind the tall rock waiting for the helmets to arrive. Automatic rifles crackled behind his back. He turned, looked and yelled out: “Leave them, let them get closer!”

He pulled out two hand grenades from his belt and placed them in front of him. Bullets hit the stone behind which he was hiding. There was a strong grenade explosion. Bits of rock pierced his face. The gunfire went dead.

“Hey, you down there! Are you alive?!” Kiro yelled out.

There was no answer.

Twenty metres away from his position more helmets appeared. Soldiers with sleeves rolled up, wearing short pants were coming closer; they were yelling, swearing and threatening. Kiro threw a

hand grenade at them and, at the moment that he was about to throw the second one, a black cloud burst in front of him, covering him in hot air, causing his ears to ring like a hundred bells. He did not hear any gunshots, just voices swearing. He felt something burning him, he tried to stand up, but the darkness became denser. He felt strong blows of rifle butts and his ribs breaking. He realized what was happening. He extended his hand to the side. He opened his eyes for a moment. He felt something warm and salty in his mouth. With the last ounce of strength he reached for his handgun. He felt new blows on his body and heard a short burst of gunfire. His arm felt hot and it slowly became numb up to the shoulder. He could see stars before his eyes. He could not feel his legs and one arm. There was now only darkness and red before his eyes. He went silent…

The promised reinforcements never arrived. Lisets fell at noon. Kiro, crushed and full of holes, was left to lie dead behind the stone...

Thunderous and fateful sounds covered the villages on the other side of Lisets. People piled, filling all the empty spaces along the highway, to the left and to the right.

“The front has been breached! The front has been breached!” voices called out, bringing fear and spreading it among the people. The horror grew. People were frightened and panic filled the air. It was time to flee, to run away.

Messengers on horseback were running around everywhere warning people, telling them to leave, showing them which way to take and where to go. Irritated, they spurred their horses to run through the village streets while they yelled: “Leave! Leave! The Greek army is coming! Leave now!”

With the pounding of horse hooves, for as long as the warnings lasted, like echoes repeating again and again, was the message: “Leave! Leave! The front has been breached! The Greek army is coming! They will beat you, rape you and kill you! They will hang people and burn everything! Leave now!”

The horsemen who had orders to sow the seeds of fear and horror into the people crossed over Preval and split up at the crossroads, one ran to Bukovik, L'k and Drenovo and the others took the road to German.

People in Prespa were gathering their most important things from what remained and packed them in sacks. There was yelling, screaming, pleading and crying. The roads were packed with people leaving. A woman was wailing at the top of her voice looking up and cursing the sky. Winds of fear hovered over the people, spreading panic and horror, making them run. The people who passed Perovo, the narrow passage where the water flows between the two lakes, and took the road to Vineni could see the rising smoke and flames behind them. They could also see the same horsemen who had warned them to leave, burning the wheat fields. Flames were now consuming the mature grains from which bread was made…

* * *

An unfamiliar man, a stranger, walked beside her. He adjusted the shmaizer (rifle) hanging over his shoulder, took a look at her and stepped up his pace. The two walked along the uneven road covered with twisted and tangled roots, sticking deep into the dry dusty ground. Two people walking, one quietly, gently, finely, lovely, carefully and barely audibly, making her way with a slight bounce. The other, hesitant, uneven, stretched out and slack on the right foot and dignified, flat and heavy on the left foot noticeable by the large military boot he was wearing. His left wooden leg squeaked with every step. Fastened under the bleeding knee were thick leather straps. The woman slowed down, straightened up, untied her black kerchief, closed her eyes and wiped the sweat off her face. He slowed down too, adjusted his shmaizer, brushed his unshaven face with his left hand and with tears in his eyes looked at the sun and said:

"Only courage… only courage…" he tore every word, as if chewing them. He turned towards her but she had already moved on. He gave her a measured look and continued talking, "You too will reach your destiny the way it's ordained…" He paused with a gaping

mouth as if he had forgotten something. He unbuttoned the canteen from his belt, took a couple of sips, straightened himself, looked at the old lady again and followed her at an increased pace. When he caught up to her he said: "Only courage and because the road is dusty, you sister, go ahead and don't look back… Only courage… In a few moments the sun will disappear behind the mountain… And tonight the night will be peaceful…" attempting to distance himself. "Yesterday's, and the day before and the day before that, sound of machine guns, bombs, explosions, blasts will only ring in our ears and not in the hills and mountain tops... Courage and only slowly," he muttered, "and even though the woolen blanket you are carrying with you is heavy, go on, continue walking on the dusty road for as long as the heat does not subside and for as long as the first drops of dew do not fall. And if it happens that the night shall fall quietly, then you too shall fall, alone, among strangers and surely those strangers will pay their last respects and steal your woolen blanket. They will toss some burned and trampled soil on you or they will cover you with some dry twigs or green branches which they will gather in a hurry or they will toss some stones on you… Well, you are not a soldier, but if you happen to fall on this dusty road, which the soldiers soiled, you will have a military burial, our type of burial, a Partisan burial… Those passing by will look at you without care, cold and will continue walking towards the unknown on this or on that dusty road of no return…"

He slowed down a bit but continued walking. He unbuttoned his canteen and gave the old woman a drink. She moistened her lips and soaked one edge of her black kerchief. Walking, from time to time, she moistened her parched lips with the wet cloth to slow the burning and cut down her thirst; just enough to ease her pain.

The man shifted the shmaizer to his other shoulder and, as if his words weighed more, sighed deeply and unreserved tried to encourage his walking companion:

"There will be no more explosions coming from these mountains and from these hills. Oh mother, squeeze your soul and endure a bit longer… Courage, just a little longer and the sun which bakes us will disappear, dusk will soon be here and then the night will be peaceful… Come, follow me. The heat will subside and soon the

dew will fall and until then don't turn and don't pay attention to the explosions. There they only bring death. Look, here the soil is the same, the rocks are hard and the road is dusty, trampled and it seems like there is no end in sight… Only, here, I the fool, I mumble away, I don't know, poor me, if anyone where you are going will know why you have brought the woolen blanket?"

He stopped talking. There was complete silence except for the silent sound of their feet walking. In front of them, like a black cloud, a wave of refugees was fleeing. Sounds of babies crying, cows mooing, people yelling could be heard coming from their direction.

"If I may ask you, mother. What do they call you?" asked the man.

"Krstovitsa…" she answered softly and continued to walk ahead without engaging in the conversation. At one time they walked beside one another, ever so slowly, it seemed like they were shadows on the go. And as they continued to walk along the long dusty road, she fell behind, the further they walked the more behind she fell, and to him it seemed like someone or something was touching her from some remote distance, choking up and breaking her words. He listened quietly, walking in front of her, hardly ever turning to look at her.

Some distance later he stopped, sat down and leaned against a tree stump. He took his shmaizer off his shoulder and braced it on his knee. Eventually she caught up and stopped beside him. They both stood there in silence. "So," he broke the silence, "we walked and walked and we ended up in this place. I am saying 'in this place' because this here is our place. Only a few steps in that direction, that's all that remains of what was once ours. This much is also left of our great hopes and aspirations… Look and have your fill; be happy and ecstatic, as long as we are in our place, our place, we are still on our land and please don't cry. If you cross this band of land, you will have no reason to be happy and you will have plenty of time to cry, feel horrible, swear and curse, that's why dear mother now you should be happy as long as we are in our land, for as long as we are in our place, for as long as we are still on our land. Over there it is not ours. With a single step you will cross this narrow band and you will enter, dear mother, into foreign land…

Sit down, take a break… Sit dear mother, sit down and let us both catch our breath. The road under our feet will not go anywhere… That too is our fate and it will be done as it is written… Please sit, so we can have a conversation sitting down… so we can have a few words while we rest… Sit, rest, the road is not going anywhere; it is our fate to take it to where it will lead us… They say it will be done as it is written… It is called fate… destiny. Come, sit and let me see what you are hiding there in that spool. Let us open it up together. Don't hide it, let me see it. Let us put that reddish black string behind us, let us tie it to this rock or to that oak tree and along it, like blind people, tapping and feeling our way with a stick, we can find our way, hold on to the string so that we can both find our way to the source from which we were uprooted…

Come, take that sack off your shoulder, the rope is cutting your shoulder, take the sack off and open the woolen blanket wide. Come, sit and let us talk. Where are we? We are at the end of our road but still on our land and over there, look, is the road to alien lands leading away from our homes. Here, take it, hold on to the string of memories, don't let them fall into the wrong hands, hold on to them as though you are holding on to your most cherished wishes. Oh dear mother, I can see that the string in the spool is coming to its end.

Now unfold the memory leaves and tighten your soul, tighten your heart, as our old people always used to say, those poor people, they turned their pain into songs. Sit. Your chin is shaking and a tear is being squeezed out of your eye. The wrinkles on your forehead are tightening and your lips are quivering. Why do you look angry and restless? Do you want to say something? Do you want to pray? Do you want to curse? Let the ravens crow and let the vultures circle and find their carcass from up high. We are not the first from our race and God let us be the last to share this fate.

Where are we? On the road? On whose road? Is it taking us home or away from home? Give it to me, give me the spool so I can let some string out… Perhaps tomorrow we will follow the string back and it will lead us to our home? Here, hold the string, don't let anyone tear it… If someone tears it you will never find your way back, you will

never be able to return home. All you will have then is your dismal desire and your great worry.

Oh, dear mother, the spool is small and the cord and golden silver thread on white and black is weaving like our yesterday's and today's destiny. Let some string out, unfold the old yellowed memory pages and in place of prayer – curse, because the truth and memories are protected in the curses. And what are memories if not desire for survival, if not a shade drawn from the past…? Let the ravens crow and the vultures search for carrion with a sharp glance from the sky…" he spoke the last words with a deep sigh.

He lost his voice and threw his head back. Krstovitsa looked at him with fear in her eyes. She felt his forehead. It felt hot. She unbuttoned the canteen from his belt and poured a handful of water onto his face. "He is burning… he has a fever…" she said to herself. "He is burning up…" She took the black kerchief off her head, poured some water on it and placed it on his forehead and face. He was hot to the touch. "He is burning up," she repeated and looked around helplessly. Apart from the dust that remained from the people who had passed by them in a hurry earlier, she could see nothing and no one. She felt his forehead again. The kerchief was dry.

The stranger moved and as if nothing had happened, lifted his head, took the kerchief off his face and with a tired, exhausted and sleepy voice asked: "Did I, dear mother, fall asleep?" He did not expect a reply. He looked up at the blue sky and then looked around, wrapping his eyes around the scorched earth and dust and, while attempting to gather his thoughts, said: "We released some string from the spool and with it we found our way here. The spool was small, the string ended here, who knows how long the road ahead is, in what valleys and hills, forests and brooks… Unstitch, dear mother, unstitch some more string from the woolen blanket and with it we will trace our way back home, our footsteps will be covered by dust; water will wash the road, unstitch string from the woolen blanket so that we can find our way back home…"

His throat became hoarse and he stopped talking. As if lost, he looked at the sky, took a deep breath and said: "Unstitch dear

mother, unstitch some thread from the woolen blanket so that we can mark…" He was unable to complete his sentence. The old woman interrupted with a sharp tone of voice:

"Take your dirty hands off the woolen blanket and don't even dare look at it! The road has already been marked… by you and those..." She did not finish saying who 'those' were. The curse got stuck in her throat. She stood up, put her woolen blanket over her shoulder and without saying a word, stepped away. Without looking, she crossed the barrier that so many uprooted people before her had crossed. She did not look back. She continued walking down the dusty road and he, without saying a word, stood up and followed her.

They walked slowly, one beside the other. Once in a while the old woman paused to wipe the sweat off her face, catch her breath and adjust the woolen blanket on her shoulder. They kept going. Not used to the slow pace, he tried to stay with her and catch her when she stumbled and she, with a choked voice, with broken words began to tell her story… She spoke, unfolding twists of her experience, of what was hers yesterday. He listened silently, moving forward, rarely looking at her. The sun was about to set. The heat began to subside… He stopped and sat down. He took the shmaizer off his shoulder and braced it on his knee. The old woman, leaning forward, put down her woolen blanket, wiped the sweat off her face and stood there. She looked at the crowd of people gathering under the trees… He pulled out a small bag of tobacco, ripped a small piece of paper from a newspaper, twisted a cigarette and lit it. He inhaled a deep puff and slowly exhaled the smelly smoke. He spat to the side, puffed and spat again. He looked up at the blue sky and with eyes closed, asked:

"Did you say the woolen blanket was a gift and that you brought up your children and grandchildren on it? Did you say you left your house open and that you covered the burning coals in the fireplace with ashes? The coals will smoulder in the hearth for a long, long time. They will smoulder and wait. Look, the grove is emptying. The people are leaving. Let's go, let us take the road that awaits us. Just like this, put the woolen blanket on your other shoulder so that your arm, holding the black copper jug, does not become numb. And

when I tell you to stop, pause to catch your breath. And now, let's go and don't turn back, don't look back. I will say it again, if you fall your people or strangers will surrender you to the earth and will steal your woolen blanket. Did you say we will return to our homes, to our old houses, we will uncover the smouldering coals and light a fire? Did you say that then you will lay down the woolen blanket on which your children and grandchildren grew up… Did you say, dear mother, your oldest lies under some stone on Ivan Mountain? And do you know where Ivan Mountain is? Look to your right. Over there, the one standing high, that's Ivan Mountain… Is this where an Italian grenade cut him to pieces? And about your two grandsons they told you that last year they were left resting on Bel Kamen and that they saw your granddaughter at Charno resting beside her machine gun? And did you say she had blond hair, big blue eyes and a beautiful face with a sweet smile? Oh, dear mother, many at Charno blackened and turned to coal, burned by the living fire… At Treskavets, Aliabitsa and on every hill in Gramos…"

The man, as if wanting to ease the old woman's pain and anguish which she carried with her, repeated again and again the words the old woman had spoken and, after moving a few steps ahead, would not look back. He knew very well what was happening there. And if some commander stopped in front of him, who now like him roamed the roads of the bordering country, if he stopped in front of him and told him: "Back you son of a bitch, back! Back to your post!" then without hesitation he would circle back and continue on the dusty dirt road back to the place where he would be ordered to die.

Eight years with a gun over his shoulder he formed the habit of listening and doing as he was told. In his younger years he did not even want to think for himself. What soldier is a soldier if they think for themselves? In what army do they teach soldiers to think for themselves? A soldier is trained to obey orders without asking questions. To listen, to do and not to think, it was drilled into their heads, it was in their blood. But later, when he matured, first in the Partisan ranks of ELAS, then in the Aegean Brigade, after serving in the Yugoslav People's Army, and after that in the People's Militia, he began to think and his thinking was sometimes not on the same level as the orders given to him to carry out. He never had officer's epaulettes on his shoulders. He was a regular soldier for eight long

years, always hungry and the host of many lice. In 1937 they made him wear a Greek uniform; drilled him, taught him how to kill and, as in every army, taught him it was honourable to kill and assured him, like they do in every army, that his life was the most important thing that he had and must be sacrificed for his ‘patrida’ (country).

The following year, 1938, he made a mistake about his ‘patrida’, for which his ‘patrida’ took his military uniform and exchanged it for a prison uniform. And why? Because in the unit where he was serving there were several ‘endopi’ (indigenous Macedonians) with whom he spoke in his Macedonian mother tongue. That’s right! He was sent to prison for speaking the language he had learned from his mother! The sergeant, who was also Macedonian from the same region, warned him twice to watch himself and that speaking the Macedonian language was prohibited. He knew that it was prohibited but, being angry at something, he swore in his mother tongue and having drunk a little too much he and his friends sang the Macedonian song, “I hear the rustling of the beech wood trees” in the café. The song was sung quietly but loudly enough for others to hear. For that he was put in jail for six months, which he served on one of the dry islands in the Aegean Sea.

Those six months meant a lot to him. He met many older, thoughtful and educated people. And each one of them, in their own way, explained to him the wrongs that Greece (which some called the anti-people regime) was committing against its people and made it clear to him why people were poor, hungry and dressed in rags. They explained to him that everyone had the right be treated fairly, as an equal. Everyone had the right to have a job and to be paid, and not in the way things were done at that time; you having to work and someone else becoming rich and having a rich life.

He had difficulties understanding the concept of ‘society’ and a ‘proletariat revolution’, but it seems that hiding in his misunderstanding was this mysterious power from which sprang his conviction. In the simple and still unpolluted soul of this ordinary Macedonian villager, exactly those unrecognized words created confidence and faith. What he liked most about this was that in this new society, every day and night would be distributed evenly: eight hours work, eight hours sleep and eight hours learning and fun. And

because he was very interested in learning he accepted the last part with mixed feelings. Of course this was understandable, but ultimately and unquestionably he accepted the truth that in this society everyone was going to be equal.

“What more could I want than being equal?” he often thought to himself. “Is there anything better than being equal, for example, to a general? Congratulations to the person who thought of such a society. A nice society.”

After six months, those who sentenced him, convinced that he was rehabilitated, returned him to a unit in which many like him also served. With their eyes fixed into the future and their heads filled with righteousness, which they barely understood, enthusiastically and trustingly they preached their ideals to others.

In the spring of 1939 they took his rifle and his uniform and sent him home to his village, wearing his old worn out rags. It was Easter and after church service, in the town square, the music band began to play. He took a one thousand drakma bill from his pocket, spit on the king’s face, slapped it on Duro’s forehead and said: “Bajracheto, play the Bajracheto!”

He was first, leading the dance. He started out lightly, hopping gently, swinging his kerchief up high in the air when suddenly the music stopped. There, beside the bandstand, stood the chief of police with his whip, gently tapping in his open left palm. The man lowered his leg with which he was about to take the next step in the dance and stood up straight. His right cheek began to tremble and his eyebrows furrowed. He crumpled his open kerchief in his hand and with a measured steady step walked to the bandstand. With an angry but quiet voice he said: “Continue to play!”

The old clarinet player, Duro the Gypsy, looked at the police chief for approval.

“I paid you for this dance, not him!” said the man.

“If it’s about the money, take it back…” said Duro quietly. He then went close to the man and whispered in his ear: “This police chief is

a bastard and he will take away my right to play my instrument. Speak with him."

The man turned. The police chief was rhythmically tapping his left palm with his whip. He could see a challenge in the reflection of the man's eyes. The man came close to the police chief and asked in Greek: "You sir, did you order this dance to stop?"

There was silence. The whole place went quiet. Anticipation. There was a breath of fear in the air…

"Sir," now in a calmer tone of voice, "Mr. Police Chief, today is Easter. If you want to and if you can, celebrate Christ's resurrection with us and share with us that happiness," said the man.

"And if I don't then what?" asked the police chief with a slight smile on his face, beginning to tap his hand harder with the whip.

"Then gather your constables and get the hell out of our village!" replied the man.

"Is that so?" asked the police chief. "And do you know that we know everything about you? For example, we know that you are a communist and that every day you speak in that prohibited language, which means you disrespect the law and you show contempt for the great and clever wise man, Yoannis Metaxas. And besides that, a while ago you spat on the king's face!"

The man wanted to say more but did not get the chance. With lightning speed the police chief hit the man across the face, with his policeman's whip. It felt as if his entire face had been fried in hot oil. Without thinking, the man butted the police chief in the face with his head and at the same moment yanked the whip out of his hand and with it, hit him twice over the head.

His fellow villagers cursed the man for a long time because that Easter day they were all beaten to a pulp. As for him, they took him to Kostur and after a short trial found him guilty of speaking the forbidden language at home and in public places, of swearing and of attacking the government. He was sent to prison.

The man loved his fatherland but he was unable to make the commander understand which and whose fatherland he loved. The man left and went to defend his fatherland. He was enlisted in the 28th Regiment of the Fifteenth Division. The entire regiment was made up of young men from the Kostur and Lerin Regions.

He received a light wound at Ivan Mountain and was sent to Pogradets. And since then he had not put his rifle down. Since then he had no epaulettes on his shoulders to weigh him down. The only things that weighed him down were the belt of the cold metal barrel and ammunition which cut his shoulders and turned him into a hunchback. He went to the mountains with the first detachments and fought against the Italians. And when "Lazo Trpovski" the first Kostur battalion was formed, in which all the fighters and commanders were Macedonians, he left ELAS and joined a Macedonian Partisan detachment.

He used to get angry, swear and fight bitterly with his friends when he heard that those "up there, above" the superiors, as they used to call them, argued among themselves, blamed one another and vilified each other, dividing themselves and taking this side or that. He stayed clear of all that and held his own side, the side that fought for a free, united and independent Macedonia.

He cried with tears of joy and hugged the Macedonian fighter from across the border, from Vardar Macedonia, when they arrived in Kostur Region. He spent several days with them wandering around, talking and singing revolutionary and patriotic songs about Macedonia. But soon after that he became angry and remained angry and very disappointed when he found out that the army command in Vardar Macedonia had refused to allow the Kostur Region youth to join its movement and since then wondered, asking himself and others, why no one wanted to create an all Macedonian army?

One of the commanders told him that it was up to the Parties and the Parties had some kind of understanding and things were done according to this understanding. He quickly realized that the Parties wanted a war of liberation with everyone fighting inside their own

border. Anyone who did not follow those conditions would be labeled a separatist and prosecuted accordingly.

The young people who took to the mountains to join the struggle were turned back, returning home embarrassed and mocked.

When the war was over the Aegean Brigade, after the battles against the Balisti, was disbanded outside of Gostivar, the fighters were then dispersed to various services and he thought to himself, 'The time has come when no new graves will be dug on Macedonian soil.' And every day new refugees arrived from the Aegean part, bringing bad news, saying that a new armed resistance had begun. He often wondered whether he should go or not? He was unemployed, living off the municipal cauldron. He reported to the People's Militia and found work there. They told him his task was to continue the struggle against the People's enemy.

He continued to walk in front of the old woman, something made a strange sound as he stubbornly paced on the dusty road, baked by the summer heat. He looked, there between the branches of the old oak tree the sun blinked and for a very short moment his eyes stared at the burning sky. A heavy, stifling and dry heat fell all over his face taking his breath away. They reached the summit. To the left was a forest. There were masses of people and livestock under the thick and tall oak trees and all over the entire long and wide meadow. Above them there was a lot of shouting and a cloud of dry dust. The crowds arrived and rose, they thickened, they roared, they babbled, they pushed and swarmed and they filled the meadow and the woods. And from another wilderness new crowds poured, women and men driven to run at the last moment after taking their belongings with them.

Without order, without supervision the immense angry crowd was pushing, swarming, growing, gathering, squeezing, breaking, swelling, cowering, yelling, cursing…

People and livestock mixed together, drawn here by the evil that had befallen them, pushing them deeper into alien lands… Someone yelled at the top of his voice, the sound put the crowd on edge, some ran downhill crying in panic and bewilderment. The surge was

pounding, squashing, rolling, stampeding, pushing and no one could calm it down. Screams and cries of women and children filled the air; children who hung on tightly to their mother's skirt.

A horse got loose from its harness, loose and unbridled it ran high up the hill, hitting and running over everything and everyone in its path.

And as many times as the man wanted to say, he did not mention the dreadful, painful, terrible, frightening, sickly, sad, distressing sight which was now unraveling before his eyes.

He stood there straight and dumbfounded; looking down at the large mass of people all red and black. His eyes were blurred, feeling as if darkness was about to overtake them. His mouth was shut tight giving the impression that he was keeping something somewhere deep inside him, preventing it from boiling out. Slogans buried in him a long time ago were about to bust out; slogans that called for the people to have faith and termination. Slogans telling people to look forward to a better tomorrow, to a better future; slogans which in time grew, ripened and matured.

His mentors told him and all those around him and beyond, that life would be as sweet as honey and he, stupefied, listened with an empty salivating mouth. Perhaps he was this way because the situation was so hopeless and he was caught up in the whirlwind without considering the consequences.

Obedience, faith and trust in the leader and the Party were his road signs. From top to bottom his mentors had taught him that there was only one person who was wise and clever enough to lead and only he had the right to do the thinking and to run things.

Up to now he had imagined this thought of a future with semi-educated Party secretaries, deeply rooted in the Party, running his world. Now, with desperation in his eyes, he looked at the hopeless situation they had created. He was confused and it seemed to him that he had not yet seen the light, the entire picture, and was about to realize what was really going on.

And now he was beginning to wonder where the unshakable, unconditional, unwavering, blind, huge and unbreakable faith had gone? He looked at the mob yelling and crying with foggy eyes. He saw a vast canvas lying there covering the entire place. Again and again something was gnawing inside him, it seemed to him that some mysterious voice of reason, conscience and conviction, down from his heart and from the thick age-old oak trees standing across from him in the grove, was attempting to communicate; asking the question: "WHY? WHOSE VOICE HAVE YOU BEEN LISTENING TO AND OBEYING?"

He was incapacitated, bare, torn and eroded. He felt empty, lost and deceived. To believe in what and to have hope in what?

He isolated himself and felt abandoned. Had he made a mistake? Had he gone to the wrong side? Had he taken the wrong road or a wrong turn? He could not shake off these feelings from his conscience; he felt them like an open wound, like blow after blow and the pain, the suffering and the anguish, collected in him in layers and layers. The lost hope was hurting badly. He felt sluggish, lost, alone, bitter, mixed up. No longer afraid of what had happened but from what was going to happen. He stood on top of the hill defaced, naked and without courage. He understood now that there was nowhere to go, that there was no one to come to the rescue. In front of him there was desolation, behind him destruction and abandonment! Everything was burned, destroyed, turned to ashes. He stood there mute looking at the destruction as the sun slowly began to set.

In the grove, hidden away from the winding road, under the branches of the old oak trees, they were laying down the wounded. On the other side of the hill DAG fighters were pouring, coming down the hill. Some walked at a quick pace, others ran. They were all tired, cursing and swearing. A young Albanian lieutenant, speaking poor Greek, ordered them to go to the right. He said there they would find their own units. On a flat place near the road about ten freight trucks were parked and waiting. Another Albanian officer took some men and ordered them to load ammunition. He yelled and swore in Albanian at those who did not understand his orders. Some tossed the ammunition in piles and others onto the trucks. When

they were done they stood to the side. They whispered suspiciously to each other, their eyes bloodshot from the smoke and lack of sleep. Some were tearing, tears which they wiped with their black hands, blackened from gunpowder.

It was hard, difficult and shameful for them to accept defeat. They were ready for anything, to stay in their bunkers to the last one, bunkers that had taken months to build, bunkers that covered the entire Vicho terrain. They were ready to die but it was others who had made mistakes in their calculations. Perhaps deliberate?

Suddenly there was the sound of a motorcycle approaching and a man wearing a uniform without markings, ordered:

"Comrades! Everyone go to your own units. Prepare yourselves and follow that man! March!" He waved and left.

The vultures stopped circling when the sky started to glow purple just before nightfall. The red disk of the bright sun slowly disappeared behind the mountain. In the clearing beyond the border, under a clear starry sky, the multitude was quietly crying, cursing, swearing, moaning and praying. The full moon began to shine from beyond the hill. Krstovitsa spotted an unoccupied spot and went to it. She took the woolen blanket off her shoulder. She leaned her shoulder on a rock which was still warm and radiating heat. A cloud blocked the moon and everything went dark.

In the dark, beside her, as if she was not there and did not exist, strangers were passing by, carrying heavy loads on their backs, tired and exhausted, quiet, mute. People were passing by guiding their livestock, shouting at one another, infants crying and elders choking with emotion. A woman's voice was heard cursing in the dark and drowning in the convulsions of her sobbing…

Krstovitsa extended her hands, touched her feet and then the soil. It was easier to breathe now. She took a long breath and then wiped the sweat off her forehead and face and then put her black kerchief back on her head. She looked up. High up in the sky the stars were flickering. Occasionally the crowd went quiet, but just for a moment, that's when the quiet roar of thunder could be heard in the

distance with slight vibrations felt in the air. She slumped on the woolen blanket using it as a pillow and imagined that she was at home in her own house, in the dead of night beside her hearth in which she was sure the coals she had covered up with ash were still burning; she imagined that she was in her colourful guest room in which she had spread her worn out woolen blanket and thought about her children and her children's children who had grown up on this woolen blanket.

And now, where are they now? She knows that her oldest son is lying dead somewhere under a rock on top of Ivan Mountain. She knows that her second son is working in some mine somewhere in Canada and Kotsa, her daughter, she knows that she was exiled to Egina Island in the Aegean Sea because her husband left with the Aegean Brigade. She knows that since last year the remains of her two grandsons have been resting in pieces somewhere in Gramos. She heard that her granddaughter had been shot in the back when she was returning from Negush and was left to bleed in the snow. She was told, and she still believes, that her granddaughter recovered from her wounds and took the road to Vicho.

And in her thoughts she again returned to the beginning, remembering everything that had happened, feeling the pain over and over again, and what hurt the most was her inability to get over her unhealed pain. Her heart had broken when she found out that Pavle, her eldest son, was left dead on Ivan Mountain. Her heart had broken when she received the dreadful letter with the king's seal telling her that her son had died heroically in the Albanian mountains; heroically defending the Greek 'patrida' (country) against the Italians.

Broken hearted, Krstovica did not have the courage to ask the man who read her the Greek letter with the king's seal why they had sent him to prison in 1936. Why had they sent her son, the hero who died on Ivan Mountain for Greece, to prison for six months on one of the dry Aegean Islands, for simply saying "good morning" in his Macedonian native language? And why did they have to give him castor oil to humiliate him?

When they read her the Greek letter about her two grandsons, who only last year had lost their lives and left their bodies on the rocks on Kleftis in Gramos, they said they had died heroically for the glory of Greece. They said they had died as Greeks for Greece. Those words gave her no comfort, no pride and no dignity in her heart. In fact they insulted her and gave her sharp pains in her gut. Macedonians have their own country and their own roots soaked in the blood of so many of their own heroes.

In their letters they write about Greece and Greeks and at the same time despise her for not knowing how to speak the Greek language, for not understanding the priest in church and for not knowing how to pray to God in Greek.

And when Krsto, her husband, did not return from the Asia Minor campaign, then too they read her a letter telling her that he, Stavros, had died admirably at Ali Veran for the greatness, for the glory and for the honour of Greater mother Greece. And before that when they made him wear their uniform, they called him "neznamitis" ("ne znam" in Macedonian means "I don't know" or I don't understand what you are asking") because to every question they asked he replied with the words "ne znam" (I don't know).

The Greeks sent letters stamped with a Greek royal seal to the families of the "neznamites', even to those who had died in foreign lands, giving the impression that now even the most beloved sons of Macedonia care for Greece and are dying for the glory of Greece. But the Greeks say this only when the "neznamites' serve their interests, when they fight for Greece, when they kill on behalf of Greece and when they spill their own blood to glorify Greece. It has always been this way with the Greeks. They like the "neznamites" and glorify them as long as the "neznamites' march to the tune of their military drums and trumpets. But even then, they rob them of their speech. Even then, they do not allow them to cry, moan, or speak of their problems in their Macedonian language. They won't allow their mothers, wives and sisters to cry and pray for them on their graves in their native Macedonian language. They won't even allow their Macedonian names to be written on the crosses standing at the head of their graves.

And God, as we are told through the force of Greek law, does not recognize any other prayers besides those spoken in Greek. All mighty God, through the mouth of the all Greek Patriarch, obliges some to be happy and others to suffer in silence and to be sustained not by kindness and God's love, but by bitterness and humiliation. So, in times of prayer, even though all people celebrate the One and same Christian God, not all are allowed to pray to him and glorify his name in their native language. And every week and holiday when church bells ring loudly, for some prayers are mute, recognized only by the expression in their eyes, foreheads, cheeks, low bows, foreheads touching the ground and by the barely visible movement of lips.

People know to say "amen" loudly and "Christ has Risen" or "For Many Years" (Live a long and prosperous life) silently and away from inquisitive ears. And when they received a letter from the battlefield with bad news, they set aside their fears of castor oil, the whip, the dry islands in the Aegean Sea and began to scream and wail in their own language because only through it can they find the deepest, most meaningful, most significant and most caring way to express their feelings and lighten their pain over the loss of a loved one.

Krstovitsa had to set aside her fears many times, on three separate occasions over the years. She wailed and wept aloud, in her Macedonian language, many times; during a holiday, on a weekday, during a celebration, during a burial and during a wake. Before the Greek-Italian war broke out, learning Greek in the night schools, she had barely managed to learn the first verse of the Greek version of "our father" but quickly afterwards when bad news began to arrive, prayer in Greek did not help her, not even when the priest and the teacher tried to convince her that God wanted to hear prayers whispered in Greek only. In her memory there was no place for forgetting, not the good and not the bad.

Sitting there leaning against the cool rock, Krstovitsa, through her teary eyes, struggled to gaze into the distance from which, through her blurred vision, she could see her house. But she sensed that it lacked eternal warmth and brightness, the goodness and the sad view of the Virgin Mary in front of which burned an oil lamp every day

and night. Now that too was gone. The eternal and serene beauty seen from the porch above was also gone. The vine that once thrived and climbed above the porch was gone. All that remained now were the dry grapes hanging there burned by the heat wave. The old apple tree in the yard was burned too. It had been a shelter for all kinds of birds including swallows that constantly flew under it. It was now blackened by smoke and smelling like marigolds and basil of which there was so much in the yard. Desolate… Everything was desolate...

She raised her arms and touched her face with her hands. She wiped her tears… For a moment she felt weak and as if something in her had just broken. She began to weep… very quietly, silently, without quivering, without loud sobbing, but from the bottom of her heart. Then after she had wept for a while she felt something lift out of her, she was relieved by a long awaited calm. She tried to stand up, but in spite of all her efforts she still could not. She squatted down, looked around and attempted to identify the nocturnal noises around her. It seemed as if she was all alone. A step or two away she heard a cricket chirping quietly in the grass, then go silent. It stopped chirping as if wanting to listen and started up again; short chirps as if frightened from a firefly that flashed several times as it flew by near the road. It stopped again. It jumped a step further and renewed its chirping, this time it was more intense, louder; it filled the darkness with its sound.

Krstovitsa turned her head and then felt a shiver as the night air from the distant mountains made its way past her. There were sounds of thunder in the air. She listened. The leaves in the trees all over the vast wilderness rustled, spreading their sound all around her. The wind blew gently on this hot August night, softly caressing her cheeks. She felt something awaken; come alive inside her, something that had been trampled on, crushed, by the severity of life. “Oh God, am I dying or going crazy?” she asked herself quietly feeling calm, peaceful and relieved of her fears. Squatting by the rock she finally became aware of her knees hurting. “Am I cowering? From whom? Why?” she asked herself and slowly stood up.

Under the cover of darkness people, together with their possessions, were arranged in columns. And when those in the woods and those in the hills were combined together, as one, a thunderous voice behind them ordered them to move in the dark. Above them in the vast sky, in this penetrating deep darkness, the stars seemed to be moving, taking steps with them, slowly, step by step, moving above the columns…

Dawn was breaking. A frowning, reddish dim brightness was beginning to descend from the direction of Bela Voda. Beyond there, lazily lay the waters of Lake Prespa. Krstovitsa packed her woolen blanket, tossed it over her shoulder and began to walk on the dusty desolate road, bent forward as if walking into a strong wind. She was walking straight following in the footsteps of those who had passed here before her. She did not look back. The night she had spent in the meadow beside the dusty road, it seemed to her as if death had passed her by, looked at her tears and left, went behind the hills, towards the lake, towards the reeds that grew in the wide valley of Mala Prespa.

Two columns of tanks, one from Lerin over Psoderi, the other from Kostur over Gabresh, met at the intersection in Oshchima, a small distance from Zhelevo and took the road towards Prevolot where the Government infantry was leading a battle. They hurriedly rushed uphill anxious to reach the Rabi plains and occupy Peroo, the straight between the two lakes, and thus close the road to Albania and cut off the escape route of the units leaving Bela Voda and Bigla. Before entering Orovnik, three powerful explosions were heard. Three bridges were blown up at the entrance to the village. After that the earth shook and the air was filled with smoke as detonation specialists destroyed the stores of weapons and food buried in the bases in the hills between Orovnik and Popli.

Government troops moved their artillery batteries closer to Prespa, to new positions and opened fire. They were bombing the paths of the left over fighters fleeing into Albania. In the morning fighter planes, approaching from the south and following one another, bombed Vrba and then flew low and with rockets and machine gun fire, attacked the hills above Medovo and Rabi. Trucks were offloading infantry troops at Shtrkovo who immediately engaged in

battle. Two DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) battalions were fiercely defending the region. The tanks turned left and plunged onto the plains around Peroo. Anti-tank mines kept erupting under them. The escape path was now closed. DAG units leaving Bela Voda now joined the defenders in Rabi but at noon they were fiercely attacked by Government forces, which appeared from the Kleshtina-Rakovo-German direction. Leaving their dead and wounded behind, the defenders withdrew towards Peroo along a clear corridor but the opponent used every arsenal in his possession to target them.

Anyone who could still run, walk, or crawl left and hid in the high, thick reeds in order to save themselves. DAG fighters, including civilians, who did not get a chance to escape through Peroo, hid here in the sand and reeds. Most of those attempting to escape were shot at. The valley was filled with bodies of the dead and wounded. Most bodies were run over by tanks as they circled around the plain. Two tanks penetrated the straights. A powerful explosion took place at the embankment separating the two Prespa lakes. A rush of water flooded part of the Lake Prespa basin. This calmed down the fury of the tank attacks. The tanks stopped moving and shortly after withdrew to the road that passed below the villages. Low flying aircraft, originating from Rupishta and Kozheni, flew in a formation of three, pounding the plain and the lake reeds. They tilted their left wing, turned in a semicircle, pounded Suva Gora and disappeared behind Mount Vrba. They did this in five minute intervals and then the planes from Lerin came. They flew from the direction of Bela Voda, in a horizontal formation, covering and pounding the entire expanse near little Lake Prespa. The water flew high, the lake boiled and the reeds burned as bombs kept coming down. People attempted to swim away to save themselves but none made it to shore alive.

The telephone rang loudly at Division III command post located on the hill above the village Popli. The commander picked up the headset and quietly stood still while he listened.

“Yes, yes, General, Sir. We are making progress. We already have control of the entire area on the eastern side of the lake. No, yes, there is only sporadic, almost single fighter resistance. Where? They are hidden in the lake reeds and are defending themselves there. Yes, of course, they will be overpowered by dark and during the

night our troops will occupy the so-called Africa, west of the lake. What? Are you asking how our brave air force is holding out? In the plain and in the lake it is sowing fear and terror from the sky… It has brought hell on earth from the sky, General, Sir… Yes, everything is under our control… Yes, yes, General, Sir. Today is August 14th. Tomorrow we will be celebrating the Virgin Mary in peace. Yes, thank you. General, Sir, if you allow me, I want to tell you that what is happening here now, is no longer fighting, but pure murder, slaughter, not to say criminal. Order this hell to stop… the lake is red with blood… Yes, of course, General, Sir. As a soldier and chief I will do my military duty, but as a man…"

The telephone went dead. There was no voice on the other side.

It was August 15th and all over Greece the Virgin Mary holiday was being celebrated. News of the great victory arrived in Athens by radio but all night it was celebrated by the launching of glowing rockets and the firing of glowing bullets. Gunfire was relayed from hill to hill, from city to city, all the way to Athens.

Villagers from the surrounding villages, who had failed to cross the border and escape, were gathering the bodies of the dead. The stench of death was spreading rapidly in the heat of August. Bulldozers arrived from Lerin in the afternoon and began to dig deep trenches in the sandy soil. And in them they tossed the dead bodies of DAG fighters one on top of another and after, when the trenches were filled, the bulldozers covered them with soil, carefully leveling them so that it looked like the land had just been ploughed.

A column of military trucks was waiting in Rabi. Wounded and dead government soldiers were being collected, from all over the battlefield that stretched from the Prespa plains to the other side of the lake all the way to the Albanian border, and transported in jeeps. The dead were loaded on trucks and taken to Lerin. They dug special graves in the Lerin cemeteries and buried them in the presence of the Lerin Bishop and official military and civilian authorities, with trumpets playing and the singing of the Greek national anthem. They were buried with all military fanfare that included gunfire salutes with every burial. Their first and last names were then inscribed on a cross that stood at the top of the grave. The

citizens, with their heads uncovered, gathered together at the cemeteries with every burial and among them stood those who had deserted, surrendered and collaborated with the enemy. They stood there in silence, mute, with their hands crossed and held just below their navels.

When the church bells rang citizens came out on their balconies, hung their flags and brought their radios with them. The commemorations taking place in Athens were carried all throughout Greece, transmitted over the radio waves.

Here in Prespa everything was quiet as the sun was about to set over the shimmering, peaceful lake waters. Here at the large Prespa mass grave, a single white-bearded priest, whose shadow was elongated by the setting sun, stood on top of the freshly ploughed soil, carefully smoothed over by the bulldozers, and with a broken and trembling voice whispered:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God…”

The priest ended his blessings and walked ahead, stepping over the soft soil. In Lerin the church bells were ringing and, before ending the commemoration, the bishop said:

“Blessed are those who fulfill their commandments, to have the right to life and to enter the city through the gates. And outside are the dogs, the damned, the prostitutes, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who wants to lie and deceive…”

The frowning citizens led by Gypsy musicians, laid flowers and wreaths on the graves of the fallen Government soldiers.

And here at the Prespa mass graves the only thing heard was the lake water splashing against the shore. There was no crying, there

were no flowers and wreaths, the church bells in Orovo, Popli, Shtrkovo, Medovo, Rabi, German, Nivitsi, Grazhdeno, Vineni, Lak, Bukovik, Drenovo… were not ringing.

The north wind, however, carried distant sounds. A church bell tolled from Dolno Dupeni, from beyond the border… It was quiet but the extinguished voice of the old priest could be heard in the silence:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world…"

He paused, took a long breath, sighed and from his hoarse throat he squeezed the word "Amen!"

"Amen," repeated the darkness and the hills. "Amen," repeated the desolate villages and wounded trees. At least that is how it seemed to the old priest, since there was no one around to cry or mourn. Here and there the lake soil hollowed out, settled down on the dead, it hugged them, it filled the gaps and empty spots between them. The day came to a close. In the night when the first stars appeared in the sky reflected by the lake water, candlelight could be seen on Sveti Ahil shimmering in the dark, lit by someone's hand.

The long and humble prayers delivered by the priest were welcomed like a long awaited emergence to life from a coma.

The priest took the road to Rabi. He walked slowly and without pausing continued the funeral service and when he came to "the last rights" his voice began to shake. "The last rights," he said, but there was no one alive in the Prespa fields to hear the last rights. He stopped on the uphill on the side of the road, turned towards the valley where the mass graves were located, raised his arms towards the sky and whispered:

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied…"

He crossed himself three times, then knelt and with his forehead he touched the ground several times. He got up slowly as if all the hardship, suffering and anguish in this world was resting on his shoulders, crossed himself three times and left for German.

The choppy water of Lake Mala Prespa, whose blue mirror was broken by two days of aerial bombs, cannon and mortar shells and cut by thousands of hot bullets, was slowly calming down and surrendering its corpses to the shore.

Giorgi did not make it to Peroo and failed to cross the strait between the two lakes so he found himself in the whirlpool of fire. He did however manage to hide in the tall and dense reeds. He dug a hole with his hands and covered himself with sand. From here he watched the struggle for life take place on all sides of the lake and inside the lake. He watched it boil wildly, blindly, angrily, stubbornly, passionately, madly, persistently like a controlled stanza. And as the struggle for life heated up, so did the hatred and spite. While one side rejoiced the other defended itself with the last bullet and when it had used up the last bullet, then a knife, a dagger, a bayonet flashed in the hands of the women fighters…

The next day everything calmed down; even the lake waters. Giorgi watched from his hiding place as they collected the dead and wounded. In the night, not too far away he heard a quiet, tired cry. Crouching low he went to investigate. A boy was lying in the reeds half submerged under water. He had a huge glob of dried blood on his forehead and a swarm of flies on his left shoulder. Giorgi pulled him out of the water and laid him on dry land. He washed his shoulder and with a piece of his shirt he tied his wound. The frightened boy sobbing and shivering looked into Giorgi's eyes.

Giorgi knelt and at the moment that he was about to stand up, a little to the side, only about ten steps away, he saw a woman's body lying in the reeds. He left the boy and went to her. And even though her face was swollen he could tell that the woman was young. Her cheeks looked beautiful and she had big blue eyes. Her chest was wide. She had a ring on her finger. Swollen from drinking blood the leaches were detaching. The waves were splashing, caressing the

unknown woman's dead body, splashing her gently then returning, then splashing her again. There was a machine gun beside her. Giorgi checked its chamber, it was empty. In her clenched hand, oddly tucked under her left shoulder, it seemed as if she was hiding something. He opened it and in it he found two cartridges. It looked like the poor woman, thought Giorgi, had never had the chance to use them. He stayed by the young woman a little while longer and then returned to the boy who now was lying between the reeds, like a frightened bird looking at the sky. Giorgi took him and carried him to the willow grove at the side of the lake. He then collected some green branches, carried them under his arm and went over to the young woman. He pulled her out of the water and placed her on dry ground. He dug a hole in the sand with his hands and buried her. On the pile of sand he then arranged the green branches. He placed rocks all around the grave and bowed and crossed himself. He then returned to the boy, sat beside him and waited for nightfall.

When a sickle moon appeared in the sky he helped the boy up and, while holding him by his arm, they walked through the huge cemetery and then only for a moment without having to stop they looked up at the sky and it seemed to them that the stars were walking with them.

This is not the end.

## 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 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).

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.

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.